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Dancing with Boatmen, or the Retirement of the Spy: Espionage and Community in W.H. Auden's Poetry

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Abstract

This article questions and complicates the argument previously made by critics of W.H. Auden's work—including myself—that Auden's early poetry participates in the discourse of espionage through encryption, concealment, or masquerade, and that it is therefore peculiarly difficult in a way that Auden's later work is not. In this piece I pinpoint Auden's 1936 collection *Look, Stranger!* as the publication in which the trope of espionage is first turned to a new and different purpose, and then virtually abandoned for the rest of Auden's life, and argue that there is greater thematic and political continuity between Auden's pre-war and post-war poetry than I and others have previously suggested.

Keywords: W.H. Auden / spies and spying / homosexuality / poetry / "The Chimneys Are Smoking"

For decades critics have discussed the significance of W.H. Auden's obsession, in his early poetry, with espionage as both theme and motif.[1] I devoted a chapter of my book *Double Agents* (2013) to the topic, suggesting there that, among their other functions, tropes of spies and spying provided a way for Auden to represent conflicts, affordances, and vulnerabilities specific to his position as an upper-middle-class gay English poet on the political left. The status of the ruling-class homosexual Englishman as both insider and outsider, I argued, is analogous to the liminal status of the spy, who crosses perilous borders, feigns identities, and conceals his true political or national loyalties.

In Auden's early publications, the spy also navigates the topography of *paysages moralisés* and dangerous frontiers as metaphors for sexual identities and sexualized bodies. Furthermore, because spies can work on behalf of numerous State and non-State entities, the trope of espionage is flexible enough to allow Auden to move between a political reading of the homosexual as persecuted victim of prejudice, and a psychological reading of the homosexual as self-hating or self-surveilling. And finally, with its in-jokes, its dense allusiveness and its impenetrable syntax, Auden's early poetry often appears to be itself a kind of secret code, destined to be deciphered only by a trained readership "in the know."

Despite their ubiquity in the work of the late 1920s and early 1930s, explicit references to espionage and spies thin out and then disappear almost entirely from Auden's verse in the mid-1930s, at the same time that the highly compressed style typical of his early poetry becomes increasingly syntactically normalized. In *Double Agents* I attributed these shifts to the poet's growing

concern with the meaning of civic participation and obligation, and his effort to move beyond the paranoid, alienated mood of his youthful productions to an emphasis on responsibility and community. Summarized very briefly, my hypothesis was that for Auden, over the course of the 1930s, The Spy becomes The Citizen, who is trying to communicate more openly and with a wider polity than the spy could.

In a general way I still stand by this reading, but it omitted certain details and nuances that seem to me important to a comprehensive analysis of the central role "espionage" played, for a short time, in the work of one of the twentieth century's major poets. My aim in this piece is to continue to expand on that analysis by revisiting two issues to which I devoted insufficient attention in *Double Agents*. First, I want to examine more closely the idea that the early poetry participates in the discourse of espionage through encryption, concealment, or masquerade, and that it is therefore peculiarly difficult in a way that Auden's later work is not. And second, I pinpoint Auden's 1936 collection *Look, Stranger!* as the publication in which the trope of espionage is first turned to a new and different purpose—and then virtually abandoned for the rest of Auden's life.

The penultimate poem of the thirty-one pieces included in *Look, Stranger!* is "August for the people" (1935), where Auden ruefully reminds Christopher Isherwood of their adolescent interest in the "spies' career" and claims that "all the secrets we discovered were/Extraordinary and false" (*Look* 64). This poem is Auden's most explicit farewell to the spy, and I take it as the terminus of his "espionage period," as have others. Less obviously but equally significantly, though, *Look, Stranger!* also includes one other poem—and only one—that makes an overt reference to spies, "The chimneys are smoking," written in 1932, the same year in which Auden published the spy-obsessed *The Orators*. In "Chimneys," in distinction to other poems Auden wrote that allude to espionage, the spies are neither the speaker (or aspects of his psyche), nor his friends, nor his political enemies; rather, they are trees, a feature of the natural landscape.

What makes this poem interesting to me is that it does not fit at all with my own earlier description of the spy as a representation of the homosexual's political and psychological *agon*. Instead, the close reading of "Chimneys" I offer in the second part of this essay suggests that as early as 1932—at what some consider the height of his Marxist phase—Auden was already seriously engaged with the themes of comity and love, in the form of *agape*, that would come to dominate his postwar, explicitly Christian poetry. If this is so, then there is greater

thematic and political continuity between Auden's pre-war and postwar poetry—or, to put it another way, between the English Auden and the American Auden—than I and others have previously suggested.

Poetry as Espionage

The idea that Auden's poetry is itself implicated in espionage has yielded some intriguing readings of his work, as well as frustrated or baffled ones. Certain poems have themselves been read as spies, interpreted in terms of their covert or occluded identities, particularly "Control of the passes" (1928), in which Auden first introduced the figure of the secret agent. Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves propose that "Control of the passes" is passing as something it is not, a conventional sonnet; they write that "the poem's sonnet form also has a familiar air without being quite what it seems, for, along with the assonance and consonance, it gives the mistaken impression that the poem rhymes" (9). Along somewhat similar lines, Daniel C. Remein argues that "Control of the passes" is so deeply indebted to the Old English poem "Wulf and Eadwacer" that it constitutes a covert translation; he asks, "Is 'woken by water' a double agent, a translation masquerading as an original line?" and concludes that Auden's "poem is a secret agent insofar as it works to assist in the covert infiltration of the modern by the medieval" (819, 820). That an entire poem should be taken to operate under the sign of deception and boundary-crossing—not in the form of a trick or a riddle but as an agent insinuating itself into genres or periods under false pretenses—indicates just how strongly Auden's own investment in espionage-as-trope provokes in his readers a hermeneutics of unmasking.

Another, more common manifestation of that suspicious critical tendency is to focus on the difficulty of Auden's work as evidence that it is meant to be decrypted only by an elite audience defined by social class, personal acquaintance, gender, and/or sexual identity. Valentine Cunningham interprets the obscurity of Auden (and other writers in his circle, like Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender) as a reflection of the unselfconscious privilege of the ruling class, their assumption that anybody who was anybody would get it: "The Old Boys simply did not worry about letting the familiarities of the coterie, the first name terms of their private lives, spill over into the more public domain of the published work" (137). This was a criticism launched by many of the group's peers, as well; in the 1937 special *New Verse* put out on Auden, George Barker wrote: "I sense [...] a sort of general conspiratorial wink being made behind my back to a young man who sometimes has the name Christopher, sometimes Stephen, sometimes Derek and sometimes Wystan. Briefly I criticise

its snobbery of clique" (qtd. in Spencer 23). Feminist critics like Shari Benstock have decried the poetry's misogyny, writing that the "experience of [Auden's] generation of writers was masculine" and describing their work as "coterie literature constructed according to secret codes that purposely excluded from the readership all but those already initiated to its practices [….] an […] exclusive and elitist practice that employed political metaphors to mask private concerns" (407, 410). Even fans of Auden's, like Richard Hoggart, have complained that "at its worst," Auden's style "may leave the reader feeling, among other things, that he does not belong to the right set" (19). In all these readings, Auden's *mise-en-scène* of secrecy both thematically and formally is interpreted as a way of asserting and reinforcing already-existing power, the equivalent in verse of the secret rituals that cement masculine bonding and reinforce a sense of privilege in men's clubs from the House of Lords to the Bohemian Grove.

More recently, critics emerging from the fields of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory have identified obscurity or encodedness in Auden's early work as a queer discursive strategy. He himself thought his early style owed something to his homosexuality; in a letter to a friend written in 1927, he described self-consciousness and introversion as faults of his work and said that in this regard, "Perhaps the bugger is always the worst offender" (qtd. in Carpenter 158). Others, though, weigh the social pressures and fear of censorship constraining gay writers at the time and sympathetically assume that a poetics of concealment —using gender-neutral pronouns, for instance, or landscape metaphors for body parts—was simply an understandable defense mechanism, albeit one that impeded or marred the fluency of his poetic expression.

For instance, in one of the first critical articles on Auden to acknowledge his homosexuality, Clive James wrote in 1973 that the poet's particular gift was for "luminous statement" that could make concrete things particularly poetic or magical, but also claimed that the need for indirection about sexuality "was the first technical obstacle to check the torrential course of Auden's unprecedented facility" (53). In this account, if the early work is in code, it is because the speaker inhabits the halls of power only under false pretenses and in the knowledge that at any moment he may be discovered and imprisoned—or shot. Obscurity would then read, not as a poetics of exclusivity and self-assured power designed to keep the riff-raff out, but as the self-protective dissimulation of the subaltern speaker who is trying not to get thrown out himself.

While this theory has produced useful readings of individual poems, it presents a number of difficulties, as do the earlier and less sympathetic complaints about

Auden's alleged snobbery. The first and simplest is that even Auden's closest friends didn't always understand the references and supposed "in-jokes" in his work, which makes it harder to argue that his goal was to signal an encoded meaning to an exclusive coterie of upper-class homosexual men (see Carpenter 127). We can also debate whether, or to what extent, Auden did actually feel constrained in writing about sexuality, in view of the fact that he rewrote some early verses before he published them, like "I chose this lean country," in such a way as to make them more explicitly homoerotic.

A more nuanced way to contextualize the early poetry's difficulty in terms of the poet's, or the speaker's, illicit sexuality is to view the work not as covert and "closeted" itself, but as an overt representation of the experience of the closet. That is, its opacity could be a symptom: a measure of the unremitting discomfort, but also of the capacity for resistance, of the sexual deviant forced to learn the linguistic codes of a heteronormative culture, on penalty of being unmasked as an alien intruder or spy. Indeed, in his reading of "Control of the passes," Richard Bozorth views encoding as a form of queer empowerment, of thumbing one's nose at heterosexual outsiders:

> *The poem is, paradoxically, a kind of anti-closet, exposing its self-enclosure so as to exploit a situation of weakness—of silence enforced from without—for power in the refusal to let outsiders in. The censorship of the closeted subject is thus transposed into a prohibition of the reader's desire for a consummation of understanding. (Bozorth, "But Who" 724)*

Finally, in discussing how and why Auden's poetry is difficult, we need to remember that the formal features that make it difficult changed over time. Rather than simply describing all the pre-World War II work as "obscure," I prefer to ask specifically what motivates its hermeticism at different stages, what form that takes, and what effect it has. The function or effect of Auden's formal techniques kept changing from the late 1920s on, and grouping all the pre-World War II work together is too crude a classification for poetry whose thematic, political, and stylistic preoccupations were in such rapid evolution.

I would like to suggest, however, that the pre-war work does share, with the rest of Auden's *oeuvre*, a desire to communicate. Even during the period in the 1920s when Auden was composing his most impenetrable and apparently solipsistic verses, he was fundamentally an anti-Romantic, rejecting the Romantic pose of the solitary and alienated poet and viewing the reading and writing of poetry as

forms of communication, "a rehearsal for human interaction" and so something that can "contribute actively to successful human community" (Deane 33–4). However abstruse his experiments with prosody, syntax, and authorial voice, Auden's work is always trying—even if unsuccessfully—to speak to and with its readers, a point I will elaborate on in the pages that follow.

The Late 1920s

Much of the work Auden published between 1927 and, roughly, 1930 is influenced by Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic verse and "distinguished," in Richard Hoggart's words, "by its omission of articles, relatives, connectives, personal, demonstrative and other pronouns, and auxiliary verbs" (18). Hoggart also proposes that "the demands of alliteration," which Auden used liberally during this phase, "tend to the creation of a special poetic language, especially through the use of synonyms and formulæ for periphrasis" as well as the "dislocation" of verbs (198-99). This is the style Louis MacNeice referred to as "telegraphese," claiming that the effect of Auden's "ellipsis of grammatical and logical connectives" was to create a "dream parataxis" in the manner of Surrealism (see Spears 22)—a paralogical juxtaposition of images deliberately invoking the processes of the subconscious, which would reflect Auden's interest in psychology, particularly the theories of Freud and of Homer Lane, at this time.

Of course, these techniques have other effects as well. One of the greatest challenges the pre-1930s work poses to the reader lies in its inversions and warpings of syntax, and particularly in that "dislocation" of verbs (or participles) from subjects to which Hoggart alludes. Consider, for example, these lines from "Under boughs between our tentative endearments," written in 1929: "None knows of the next day if it be less or more, the sorrow:/Escaping cannot try;/Must wait though it destroy" (*English* 29). Grammatically speaking, "try" and "wait" have no subject here, although we can infer that they belong, in a vague way, to the "none" who "knows" in the previous line. (The antecedent of the second "it" is almost equally unclear, though logically it must be "sorrow.") Another passage, from "It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens" (also 1929) poses a series of comparable challenges, offering us nouns with no verbs and participles with no subjects: "Is first baby, warm in mother,/Before born and is still mother,/Time passes and now is other,/Is knowledge in him now of other,/Cries in cold air, himself no friend" (*English* 38), and so on.

The near-impossibility of matching subjects to verbs in these lines hints at a

crisis of subjectivity itself, a reluctance to assume, or assign, agency. We might speculate that the technique reveals an unwillingness to assert the ontological and epistemological confidence more typical of Western heterosexual male writers. Thus, Auden's syntax could reveal an underlying tension and insecurity —the grammatical counterpart of the paranoia that so many of the poems also treat thematically and embody in the figure of the spy. Admittedly, the vatic, declamatory meter and diction of much of Auden's work, which can sound so authoritative, work against that interpretation. Perhaps, instead, the mismatch of subjects and verbs should be taken as a provocation, a queer interrogation of dominant ontologies and epistemologies; that reading would square with the fact that this early style is so often in "the idiom of Stein, with its gerunds, dropped articles, and absent subjects" (Bozorth, *Games* 81). Certainly no one ever accused Gertrude Stein of being unwilling to assert confidence; rather, her experiments with grammar and syntax have been read as a challenge to patriarchal or heterosexist norms of relationship and hierarchy, an approach we might also take to Auden's early syntactical oddities.

Yet another way of framing the late 1920s work is to consider what it conveys about gendered identity. The language Richard Hoggart uses to describe the style of this period is revealing: he complains that "it grates badly except when very well-handled, and is likely to sound like nothing so much as the draft of an executive's report, jotted down by headings. If it avoids that, it may issue as a sort of muscle-bound mutter" (19). Indeed, "muscle-bound mutter" seems an apt description for lines like "Yet sometimes man look and say good/At strict beauty of locomotive" which, as one of my students once observed, is curiously reminiscent of "Me Tarzan, you Jane."[2] In his analysis Hoggart gives as an example a representative passage from the 1928 play *Paid On Both Sides* ("Can speak of trouble, pressure on men/Born all the time, brought forward into light/For warm dark moan" [*English* 2]) before going on to say that this "is the verse of a young man prepared to experiment widely with forms and manners of expression, but particularly suspicious of lushness, and anxious to evolve a hard, cerebral style: at its best it is taut, bare and cogent" (19).

It is noteworthy that all the terms Hoggart uses to describe Auden's technique evoke, like my student's comparison to Tarzan, powerful masculinity: "executive," "muscle-bound," "hard," "taut." Was this perhaps what Auden was aiming for, motivated by a fear of or hostility to "lushness," ornament, feminine gush? If so, then the elliptic style of this early work could suggest that he was trying, as it were, to butch it up. In 1972, François Duchêne complained that "Auden's work is masculine in a limiting way, which suggests a certain rigidity in his nature or at least in his conception of himself" (6), and it is not hard to

perceive in the starkness of the work from the late 1920s a manifestation of excessive (self) control, a lack of fluidity in the line perhaps corresponding to an anxiety about the volatility of the queer subject matter, if not the writer's own queerness. Indeed, Auden later described his own formal severity as a campy performance of masculinity, writing to Spender in 1942 that "you have to get over your camp of pity and accept your strength, I over my camp of tough aggressiveness, and accept my weakness, ie your poetry has to lose its whiff of the yearning school-girl, and mine its whiff of the hearty scoutmaster" ("Eleven Letters" 83).

As we evaluate the uses and effects of these forms of obscurity in Auden's verse, it is worth observing that there was one source of difficulty common in much modernist writing but almost absent from his early work: the use of neologisms or nonce words. In the later poems the most obscure words Auden employs are typically authentic archaisms, dredged out of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and even these are largely absent in the earlier work. Almost the only words he invented during this period are all in a single piece of nonsense verse that he first sent in a personal letter to Isherwood (probably written in 1929), in which a "Doctor Plastic" proclaims that "I prescribe for Mastammation/A Copotomy or Sodulation/Drastic/But the pemeldy for this disease" ("As for" 2). This Carroll-esque vocabulary conflates medical and juridical treatments of deviant sexuality (e.g., "pemeldy" melds "remedy" and "penalty"): Auden is clearly mocking both the two disciplinary regimes to which homosexuals were most rigorously subjected in the 1920s, and the multiplication of medicalized categories of perversion, ideas that Isherwood would have grasped straight away. So these nonce words are intended not to confuse, but to communicate; indeed, when he wrote them out Auden took care to print each letter separately and distinctly, allowing no possibility of misreading, whereas his crabbed scrawl is usually much harder to decipher.

I emphasize this point because Auden's failure to use neologisms except in this specific and personal context weighs heavily against claims that he relished opacity for its own sake. Furthermore, the contrast between his standard—if historically and regionally particular—diction, and his distorted syntax, suggest that Auden's negotiations with his material in the pre-1930s work are not taking place primarily at the level of semantics. His technique suggests, not the desire to invent new language, as, for instance, Joyce aspired to do, but rather a revolt against the institutional form of language per se: not so much the playful invention of imaginary worlds as a determined, engaged struggle with the world as it is.

The 1930s

I have argued above that the particular obscurities of Auden's pre-1930 period have little to do with elitism, cliqueishness, misogyny, or a desire to conceal homoeroticism as such. Instead they are more productively read as resistance to and/or insecurity about hegemonic formations of sexuality and gender, to which Auden responds defiantly with a sometimes tortured, sometimes harshly beautiful poetic syntax. After 1930, while the Anglo-Saxon-Nordic telegraphese continues to crop up from time to time, there is a noticeable shift in Auden's style, which poses new difficulties while smoothing out old ones. Obscure allusions and personified abstractions remain, as do the tropes of espionage and frontiers, the landscape of northern England, and other identifiably "Audenesque" features. But the syntax begins to straighten itself out while definite articles, so frequently omitted in the earliest poems, now become ubiquitous, along with demonstrative pronouns.

Many critics, most emphatically Cunningham, assert that Auden's use of deictics during this period corresponds to a quasi-authoritarian impulse in his and other 30s poetry, particularly where it is informed by Marxism: a desire to assert absolute certainty.

> *The period's widespread deicticism was undoubtedly an effort to assert authority, knowledge, command of experience, the capacity to muster typologies… [Auden's is] a confident rhetoric of pointing out, of showing and telling, and inviting readers to see and consider and know, that sharply rebuts and reverses the epistemological doubts about man's ability to descry and describe that settled heavily about modernist fiction with the works of Henry James and Joseph Conrad. (10, 195)*

In a similar vein, Bernard Bergonzi proposes that "Auden's use of the definite article arises from his sense of reality as known and charted and intelligible, where all elements are potentially at least capable of classification" (43).

Yet as Justin Replogle observes, if Auden's tone is confident, it is sometimes less clear what it's confident about: "The voice most high, filled with diagnostic precision and epigrammatic assurance, suggests that here is a man who knows

what he is talking about…What the voice actually said, though, was far from clear" (16). A highly unflattering image of the poet's persona could emerge from all these readings, as a combination of hectoring schoolmaster and dogmatic Marxist who is still as obscure as he was in the late 1920s, but now also firmly persuaded that he is right. In this account the poet of the early 1930s, as much as the one of the late 1920s, would still be standing at a remove from his audience, alienated from his readership by virtue of his didacticism if no longer by his peculiar syntax. The relation between poet and reader would thus still be one tinged by the suspicion, defiance, and paranoia that accompany the trope of espionage in the earlier work.

But there are more generous readings of Auden's use of deictics, as well, which focus on the way definite articles and demonstrative pronouns can suggest shared experience and understanding between writer and readers. Bergonzi admits that "The definite article points to the recognisable if not to the already known. It recalls an actually or possibly shared experience," although he remains skeptical towards Auden's tendency to "present bafflingly private experiences" in these terms (41-2). And Hoggart argues that the "group feeling which can be induced" by the technique, "suspect though it may sometimes be, is partly inspired by the wish to create a community in some things—in analysis if not in affirmation" (69).

In a 2009 article on Auden, Edward Quipp takes a new angle on these disputes by asserting that reading Auden's poetry aloud allows for both individual befuddlement about Auden's meaning, and also a commonality of experience. Because anyone who can read English fluently will tend to pace and emphasise metrically regular lines in more or less the same way, regardless of whether she understands their content, Quipp argues that "In uttering the difficult poems, the reader is alerted to the manifold points of contact with Auden's textual speaker that underlie his or her frantic reconstructive activity—points of correspondence that work against the effect of Auden's often estranging, even hermetic, poetic language" (304). In reading Auden aloud, then, we can experience both perplexity about his meaning, and a kind of reassurance in the confident tone that, rather than being directed at the passive reader by a dictatorial poetic voice, becomes our own affect, embodied in our own voices. As an example, Quipp points to "Sir, no man's enemy" (1929), writing that

> *the reader keenly senses the uncanny disparity between the haste of his or her attempts to establish a literal meaning or recognisable basis for the poem's address, and the contrary, steadying effects of Auden's finely balanced trochaic cadences (power, sovereign, neural, weaning, quinsy, ingrown). [….] The lengthy harangue that the reader often endures in a silent engagement with the early Auden in full oracular mode (suggesting a hermeneutic that tends to fix the poems as premeditated intellectual workouts, to which the reader is purely subject) becomes the basis of something more supple in a spoken engagement. (304-5)*

Thus, when we read the work aloud, we become the one exhorting, not the one being exhorted; rather than being cold-shouldered by the snobbish queer or lectured at by the Communist schoolmaster (to respond to two of the more hostile caricatures of Auden), we participate in articulating audible meanings that unfold in a conversation between writer and readers.

While Quipp's theory could apply to any of Auden's poems—or, for that matter, to any metrically regular verse at all—it works better the less metrically and syntactically problematic the work is. Not surprisingly, Quipp devotes most of his article to an analysis of Auden's light verse, which poses very few problems of scansion. In contrast, the syntactical quirks that make it so difficult to attribute agency in the pre-1930s poems can also make some of those lines hard to scan because of the uncertainty about what part of speech a specific word is. As one example, take the phrase "coming at last to love/Lost publicly, found secretly again," where "love" could at first glance be either a direct object or a verb (*Paid On Both Sides* [1928], *English* 8); if these lines are read aloud, the degree of stress on that word and the length of the pause between lines will both depend on the reader's split-second decision about which it is. Or, even more obviously, in the line "Be no accessory content to one," from "Who stands, the crux left of the watershed" (August 1927) (*English* 22), the word "content" could be either an iamb or a trochee depending on whether we read it as adjective or noun. There are not hundreds of these syntactical stumbling blocks, but there are enough of them intervening between those "points of contact with Auden's textual speaker" to which Quipp refers to make the sense of shared dialogue and shared experience harder to sustain.

After 1930, though, and especially after *The Orators*, as Auden begins writing the verses that were ultimately collected in *Look, Stranger!*, fewer questions arise

about how to parse his lines. Quipp's suggestion that reading aloud enables us to overcome the sense of alienation that might otherwise be produced by Auden's exhortatory tone is an extremely useful one in approaching the work from this period; it helps us to reconcile the poetry's increasing and evident emphasis on themes of community and love with its use of that voice that Cunningham and others have perceived as authoritarian.

Many of the poems in *Look, Stranger!* are trying to work out questions about community—what constitutes it, how we participate in it, where its boundaries are. Nicholas Jenkins aptly describes the volume as "strangely patriotic," and there is no doubt that on one level the community Auden envisages is a national one, England, portrayed as "a harmoniously interdependent island" (Jenkins 41) where people are aware of, but as yet immune to, the violence and unrest roiling the Continent in the 1930s. Concerned with class as well as nation, Auden also has questions—Bozorth says "fundamental uncertainties"—"about how a bourgeois homosexual poet might identify with the working class" (*Games* 138). One strategy, used by many other bourgeois leftists besides Auden, is to insist on the alienated status of all wage labor, including white-collar work, to remind even privileged professionals like themselves that they too are subject to the ravages of capital. Thus we see that the "Brothers" of "Brothers, who when the sirens roar" pour into the streets out of "office, shop and factory" (*Look* 34)3—suggesting, Benjamin Kohlmann writes, "that these different types of work are equivalent at the deeper structural level of Marxist critique" (295).

But Auden was an ambivalent patriot and a non-committal Marxist, and neither "nation" nor "class" accounts sufficiently or stably for the complicated, provisional forms of community envisaged in *Look, Stranger!*. The volume includes, for instance, "Out on the lawn I lie in bed," Auden's ecstatic vision of *agape* shared one evening with a mixed-sex group of colleagues at the school where he was teaching—a community defined by temporarily shared employment and simple mutual affection. Responding to the volume as a whole, Bozorth expresses skepticism about whether "love," in the form of either *eros* or *agape*, actually constitutes a "saving force" or can motivate useful action; he points to the fact that the line "Look, stranger, at this island now," from the fifth poem in the volume, is addressed to a stranger as evidence that "poet and reader lack a common 'view'" (*Games* 141).

The question of whether "love" has any political efficacy is obviously one Auden continued to wrestle with—we think of the revision and then suppression to which he subjected the famous line "We must love one another or die"—and not

one I intend to try to settle here. I would take issue, however, with Bozorth's response to the title, and point out that once the stranger has looked at the island, then—whether "we" are the stranger addressed or, reading aloud, are ourselves addressing someone else—the speaker and the stranger are in fact looking at the same thing. By the time we finish the poem, with its exquisite depiction of summer light falling on England's fields and beaches, we do share a common view. The poem creates a temporary community, of delighted spectators.

This desire to create community, and the recognition that communities may be constituted by elective affinities as well as national, class, or sexual identity, inform the lone and atypical appearance of the spy in "The chimneys are smoking," the fifteenth poem in *Look, Stranger!*. As I mentioned above, the brief reference to spies in this poem is one of only two in the entire thirty-one-poem volume, so the word is not even introduced until halfway through the book. This is, again, surprising when we consider the prominence of espionage in the work published in the period between "Control of the passes" in 1928 and *The Orators* in 1932. After all, commenting on the work collected in *Poems* (1933)—which represented Auden's own choice of his most important pieces from his previous six publications—Monroe Spears wrote that "The chief figure [in the poems] is the Spy, the Secret Agent" (34). Yet that figure was already making his exit from the poems Auden was writing by 1933, the work later collected in *Look, Stranger!*.

To account for this change we need to remember that the spy was always, in Auden, a figure for liminality: not (simply) an outsider, stranger, or exile, but someone both outside and inside, navigating surreptitiously across frontiers. In *Look, Stranger!*, and particularly in "The chimneys are smoking," the poet finds grounds (or, less charitably, invents a pretext) for solidarity between bourgeois homosexuals and working people and is thus released from the false or doubled identities that in earlier work would find embodiment in the figure of the spy. The speaker of the poem is not trying to pass as a proletarian, or as a heterosexual; rather, he seeks connections with others that do not rely on shared class or sexual identity, at least not entirely.

"The chimneys are smoking"

In "Chimneys," Auden places the private fears and pleasures of a love affair against a backdrop of both natural beauty and political revolution, trying to

assess what place the lovers can find both in the natural world and among the "masses." The first stanza asserts that, preoccupied as he is with his separation from the beloved, the lover is indifferent to the beauties of Nature as well as politics:

> The chimneys are smoking, the crocus is out in the border;
> The mountain ranges are massive in the blue March day
> Like a sea god the political orator lands at the pier
>
> But, O, my magnet, my pomp, my beauty
> More telling to heart than the sea,
> Than Europe or my own home town
> To-day is parted from me
> And I stand on our world alone. (*Look* 38)

Quickly abandoning this pose of unconcerned isolation, however, the speaker soon admits to a very different relationship with Nature, not of indifference but of fearfulness; the (implicitly "unnatural") lovers are at odds with Nature (see Woods 181), perceiving the trees they walk among as spies potentially antagonistic not only to the couple but to a larger community, a "beloved group" with whom they identify—perhaps other homosexuals, or the "millions" who appear a few stanzas later:

> Last week we embraced on the dunes and thought they were pleased;
> Now lakes and holes in the mountains remind us of error,
> Strolling in the valley we are uncertain of the trees:
>
> Their shadow falls upon us;
> Are they spies on the human heart
> Motionless, tense in the hope
> Of catching us out?
> Are they hostile, apart
> From the belovèd group? (*Look* 38-9)

Interestingly, one of the other poems in the collection, "Now from my window-sill I watch the night," also takes a standard figure from the earlier work—the conspirator—and assigns that role to a plant: "Under the darkness nothing seems to stir;/The lilac bush like a conspirator/Shams dead upon the lawn" (*Look* 28). To perceive these representatives of Nature itself—trees, lilacs—as agents of secrecy, surveillance, and treachery might seem to double down on the paranoia of earlier poems like "Control of the passes," in which the speaker is unsure whether he has been betrayed by the enemy or his own side. But I would argue

that the displacement of espionage and conspiracy away from the human, social realm actually indicates a movement towards a less fearful, less alienated relationship to other people. After all, the speaker's uncertain question about the trees—"Are they hostile?"—is addressed to us, involving the poem's readers as his allies, rather than sources or targets of hostility ourselves.

In fact, Auden specifically distinguishes the perspective of the speaker in "Chimneys" from the hawk's-eye view so characteristic of earlier work, a voice that, as Quipp writes, "could insist on its prior separation from the people it described" (301). That was the perspective of "From scars where kestrels hover" (1929), for example, where the point of view is detached, looking down on the world along with the airborne kestrels; Cunningham refers to Auden's "confident loftiness of vision" in this and other poems of the period (196). In contrast, in "Chimneys" the hawk is not part of the human, social world of the speaker; the bird is identified with abstraction and surfaces, not with depth and emotions like "kindness":

> Over the town now, in for an hour from the desert
> A hawk looks down on us all; he is not in this;
> Our kindness is hid from the eye of the vivid creature;
>
> > Sees only the configuration of field,
> > Copse, chalk-pit, and fallow,
> > The distribution of forces,
> > The play of sun and shadow
> > On upturned faces. (*Look* 38)

Auden's rejection of the hawk's-eye view is essential to the moves he makes in the poem's last two stanzas. In the penultimate stanza, Auden writes

> And since our desire cannot take that route which is straightest
> Let us choose the crooked, so implicating these acres,
> These millions in whom already the wish to be one
>
> > Like a burglar is stealthily moving,
> > That these, on the new façade of a bank
> > Employed, or conferring at health resort,
> > May, by circumstance linked,
> > More clearly act our thought. (*Look* 40)

Responding to these lines, Gregory Woods reads the poem as a "dismissal of the myth of a cure for homosexuality, and a recommendation of self-acceptance"

(182). That is, the speaker responds to the anxieties and concerns of the earlier stanzas by suggesting that he and the beloved embrace their homosexuality ("Let us choose the crooked") and take it as a position from which to engage, or "implicate," both the natural world (or at least part of it—"these acres") and workers, whether blue collar laborers or professionals ("on the new façade of a bank/Employed, or conferring at health resort"). This is presumably possible because the experience of the closet gives the homosexual something in common, first with those aspects of Nature that are underground or concealed (think of Auden's lifelong fascination with the underground caverns of the Pennines); and secondly, with the secret desire for unity of the masses. Thus, in the poem's last stanza, the speaker's voice swells into a triumphant and joyous call for a diverse community to "dance" together:

> Then dance, the boatmen, virgins, camera-men and us
> Round goal-post, wind-gauge, pylon or bobbing buoy;
> For our joy abounding is, though it hide underground,
>
> > As insect or camouflaged cruiser
> > For fear of death sham dead,
> > Is quick, is real, is quick to answer
> > The bird-like sucking tread
> > Of the quick dancer. (*Look* 40)

Hiding underground might sound like the response of the persecuted and fearful, and certainly Cunningham associates the underground with the themes of conspiracy, espionage, criminality, and slumming so characteristic of Auden's earlier work: "'Going underground' could include the agent's illegal double life, and the overtly law-abiding homosexual's lawbreaking excursions into the underground cottage, as well as the Orwellian dive into society's lower depths" (260). True, if we wanted to split hairs, we could point out that it is not the speaker and his community that hide underground, but their "joy"; at most, they conceal their feelings, not their actions. Perhaps more importantly, despite the metaphor of concealment in the last stanza of "Chimneys," and the analogy between the speaker's joy and an insect that fears death, there is nothing cringing or covert in the stanza's invitation to gleeful and abandoned dance, emphasized by the galloping pentameter of the tercet. Woods thinks that the dominant analogy here is in fact pleasurable sexual intercourse, suggesting that to "hide underground" is to beat "the spying flora at their own game…To escape the landscape-spy, we go 'underground'; which is the loving penetration of the landscape-lover" (182). Indeed, if the homosexual can escape the threatening spies of a hostile environment by penetrating that environment and "implicating these acres," it might appear that he does not merely accept himself, but

succeeds in making Nature homosexual as well, in a literally global recruitment campaign.

In analyzing the image of "hiding underground," we also need to consider Auden's abandonment of the hawk's-eye view. The hawk sees only surfaces, but the depths were what Auden loved. Jenkins describes the mining landscape of the Pennines as Auden's "bleak personal version of the Garden of Eden" (44). Furthermore, in the context of "Chimneys," we could associate the underground with a whole series of emotions and themes that contrast with the remote and abstract hawk: not just sexual connection but pleasure and unity more generally, "kindness," the material and sensual world; possibly, even, if we wish to impose a Freudian or Marxist framework on the poem, the id or the base. The underground is real, and to use Auden's term, "quick" (both "rapid" and "living"); it is also, emphatically, communal. The solitary, superior hawk "is not in this."

Richard Bozorth has raised strenuous objections to "Chimneys," arguing that it is both poetically and politically incoherent. Describing the piece as "the most syntactically tortured poem [Auden] included in *Look, Stranger!*", Bozorth further argues that the attempt to create a logical unity between the closet of the bourgeois homosexual and the false consciousness of the working classes is, to say the least, something of a stretch:

> *The questions at stake here are these: What political connection does a bourgeois male homosexual as such have with the proletariat? Is there a politically meaningful identity between his own desires for erotic connection and progressive working-class solidarity? To be sure, Auden dodges—as middle-class leftists often did in the 1930s—the matter of whether the masses actually felt "already the wish to be one"; his answer is, in essence, "They do but don't know it": they are latent leftists. This elision allows him to pose the closet as an asset for the homosexual who would be a political radical. (Games 146)*

These are important criticisms, but my own view is that neither the syntax nor, relatedly, the politics of the poem are as problematic as Bozorth claims. The poem's fifth stanza, which he singles out for its incoherence, was admittedly fairly cryptic and tangled in the first published version of "Chimneys," although nowhere near as syntactically perverse as some of the pre-1930s work. And

Auden's revisions to the 1936 publication clarified those lines to the point where they seem to me to be relatively easy to parse. That effort to untangle, to strive to communicate more clearly to more people, is also consonant with Auden's representation of a diverse community dancing together at the poem's end.

For contrary to Bozorth's reading, the poem does not stage an encounter between just two groups of people, bourgeois homosexuals and proletarians; white-collar professionals, "boatmen, virgins, [and] camera-men" are also called to the dance of joyous revolution. If that concatenation of descriptors seems a little silly in its eclecticism, that may be exactly the point: these people are not unified by their status as wage laborers, since "virgin" is not usually a job description. And while they may all be English, there is no indication that their affiliation is a tribal one. Instead, Auden appears to name people who have literally nothing in common except "the wish to be one." This is a vision of community as elective, emotional, and heterogeneous, based only on trust.

It is true that in the first published version of "Chimneys," Auden wrote, in the seventh stanza, "*Because* of our trust we are free," whereas when he reprinted the poem in *Look, Stranger!* he amended the line to a more cautious "*if* we can trust we are free" (emphasis added; *Look* 39). Nonetheless there is much less ambivalence about the possibility of trust, kindness, and unity in this poem than in a good deal of the other work of the early-to-mid-1930s, and in this regard, as I claimed at the beginning of this article, the poem anticipates Auden's post-conversion, post-expatriation treatment of the bases for the *civitas*.

"The chimneys are smoking" is not a flawless poem, prosodically or conceptually. At times it does seem confused about its own argument: the triple repetition of "quick" in the final stanza, for instance, clearly evokes speed and life, and yet these lines also seem to recommend "playing dead" as a mode of homosexual survival. Furthermore, the eighth stanza shifts uneasily back and forth between unity and separation, stringing together the words "together," "separate," "single," "linked," "apart," and "sundering" in a way that suggests it has not quite achieved the harmony between private and public, *eros* and *agape*, that it is striving for. Nevertheless, we can surely admire the poem's attempt to find a place of "abounding joy" for homosexuality within both the natural world and the realm of politics, and to envision forms of social life that overflow the imaginative bounds of Marxist theory and even identity politics.

But the most significant feature of the poem, for the purposes of my argument here, is the fact that its "spies" are neither forces of social oppression, nor a

representation of psychological conflict, but instead an aspect of the natural world. Since even Nature may be partially reconciled with the homosexual lovers in the end—via their implication of the "acres" and their imitation of the insect—the poem offers the hope that the conflicts and dangers that the spy evokes can be quelled through trust and solidarity between lovers and among human groups. This, then, is the reason that Auden formally retires the spy fifteen poems later, in "August for the people." For if the hawk "is not in this"—this, the messy and joyous muddle of emotion and social interaction—then neither is the spy. From "Chimneys" onward in Auden's oeuvre, the poet is no longer hovering above others, nor lurking around the edges of communities, observing. He's down here with the rest of us, dancing.

Notes

[1] Other important treatments of espionage in Auden's poetry include works by Richard Bozorth, Richard Davenport-Hines, and Monroe K. Spears.

[2] From 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens' (May 1929) (*English Auden* 38).

[3] In its first appearance the line was "Comrades, who when the sirens roar."

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