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An Auden Letter about The Orators

by JOHN MIZNER

THE ORATORS, writes John Fuller, "is still surely the most significant and disturbing long poem of its era."¹ Other critics are more restrained. Though many of them view the poem as interesting and important, they argue that it is obscure, diffuse, and contradictory in structure, theme, and viewpoint. Most recent readings, trying to explain and reconcile these contradictions, are ingenious and provocative, but none of those I've seen is thoroughly convincing.

Many readers doubtless still agree with Daiches' early judgment: "The shifting point of view, the ambiguous symbols, the hero fading into the villain and back again to hero . . . , the abrupt transitions from one sort of fable to a different kind, all contribute to the reader's confusion."² Many years later Spears still admits the poem's "notorious obscurity";³ Duchêne speaks of its "almost Sordello-like reputation for obscurity";⁴ and Buell, who argues cogently that the "Journal" is "one of the more lucid sections of *The Orators*," still insists that it is "characteristically difficult to interpret in any definitive way."⁵

Though most critics seem to agree that the poem's informing ideas are essentially derivative—owing most, perhaps, to Freud and D.H. Lawrence—they can agree on little else. The poem's politics, for example, have puzzled and exercised critics from the first. *The Orators*, some thought, was proof of Auden's leftist leanings, if not of his commitment to Marxism. Savage finds that the poem fails as a political statement, as "a radical criticism of middle-class manners and morals." Auden's dilemma

1. "The Orators," in *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 74. Comment on the poem consulted, but not cited, includes: Joseph Warren Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1957), pp. 16–20, 77–98; Herbert Greenberg, *Quest for the Necessary: W.H. Auden and the Dilemma of Divided Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 14–58; Richard Hoggart, *Auden: An Introductory Essay* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1951); Edward Mendelson, "The Coherence of Auden's *The Orators*," *ELH*, XXXV (1968), 114–133; Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 98–112; W.H. Sellers, "New Light on Auden's *The Orators*," *PMLA*, LXXXII (1967), 455–464; Stephen Spender, "The Airman, Politics and Psycho-Analysis," in *The Destructive Element* (Philadelphia: Saifer, 1953), pp. 251–277; ———, "W.H. Auden and His Poetry," in *Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Monroe K. Spears (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 26–38.

2. David Daiches, "W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender," in *Poetry and the Modern World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 221–222.

3. Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 45.

4. François Duchêne, *The Case of the Helmeted Airman: A Study of W.H. Auden's Poetry* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), p. 70.

5. Frederick Buell, *W.H. Auden as a Social Poet* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973), p. 10.

is that of the "bourgeois intellectual," who cannot reconcile his "hostility to middle-class society with his actual position as a member of it—a member who has neither the personal power to rise above the category of class nor the will to leave his own class and share the life of another."⁶

More recently, Replegle, assessing Auden's debt to Marxist thought, concludes that nothing in the canon "suggests that Auden ever felt any serious commitment to Marxism as either a political weapon or a political-economic ideology."⁷ Perhaps Fuller's judgment is most nearly representative of the current view. *The Orators*, he argues, "is certainly about the need for revolution according to Blake, Baudelaire or Homer Lane, not according to Marx, whose insistence on its proletarian character is effectively denied both by Auden's messianic mythologizing and (in the third Ode) by his direct Skeltonic sneering at the working class."⁸

Auden's own deprecating, apologetic remarks about *The Orators* are familiar. In the brief Preface to his *Collected Poetry* (1945), acknowledging the shortcomings of *The Orators*, he speaks of the poem as an example of "the fair notion fatally injured" by "incompetence" or "impatience." More than twenty years later, in the Foreword to *The Orators* (1966), Auden is surprised that he could have written such a poem. Perhaps prompted by G.S. Fraser, who had said that the poem's politics are those "of a romantic radical of the Right" displaying "the sentiments of an idealistic Fascism,"⁹ Auden writes: "My name on the title-page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the borders of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi" (p. 7).

Shortly after *The Orators* was first published, however, Auden's view was quite different. Writing to Henry Bamford Parkes on 6/12/32 from the Downs School, Colwall, near Malvern, Auden is unusually detailed and explicit:

The Orators is too bloody obscure I know. The theme is the failure of the Individualistic life, of the Heroic idea, which leads inevitably to paranoia as crucifixion.

The airman's fate can be suicide or Rimbaud's declination. The book is, as I didn't realise when I was writing it, a stage in my conversion to Communism[.] England is pretty bad as you say, but worse for a visit than a life. When you know the outside of the Englishman you do really know the worst and that is a little comfort.

England will get worse and worse till there is an utter defeat and then its possible I think that as we have often done before we shall shed the [word illegible]¹⁰

Perhaps both this letter and Auden's other comments about the poem are

6. D.S. Savage, "The Strange Case of W.H. Auden," in *The Personal Principle: Studies in Modern Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1944), p. 166.

7. Justin Replegle, "Auden's Marxism," *PMLA*, LXXX (1965), 595.

8. Fuller, p. 52.

9. "The Young Prophet," *New Statesman and Nation*, 28 Jan. 1956, p. 102.

10. This is one of a number of letters from various correspondents to Henry Bamford Parkes recently given to the Colby College library. See Appendix.

merely further proof—if indeed such proof were needed—of another Lawrentian dictum: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”¹¹

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11. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), p. 13.

Appendix

Checklist of letters to Henry Bamford Parkes in the Colby College library:

<i>From:</i>	<i>Date:</i>	<i>From:</i>	<i>Date:</i>
W.H. Auden	6/12/32	Mary McCarthy	1/18/72
Jacques Barzun	7/21/42	Perry Miller	1/27/48
” ”	11/2/43	Upton Sinclair	4/21/61
R.P. Blackmur	12/29/53	Allen Tate	3/18/42
Lincoln Kirstein	2/27/33	” ”	3/26/42
Lewis Leary	12/12/54	” ”	7/12/44
F.R. Leavis	10/12/38	” ”	12/14/51
” ”	12/17/38	Mark Van Doren	4/10/40
” ”	8/19/39	Mike Weaver	9/3/69
” ”	1/2/40	W.C. Williams	4/15/32
” ”	10/27/40	” ”	4/25/32 (?)
” ”	12/8/40	” ”	11/13/32
” ”	6/3/41	Yvor Winters	11/1/39
” ”	9/16/42	” ”	2/28/51