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"An Auden Letter about The Orators": A Correction

Cambridge, Massachusetts
18 February 1978

To the Editor:

In your issue of December 1977 you printed a transcript of a letter from W. H. Auden about his book *The Orators*. Examination of a reproduction of the original letter suggests two corrections to the version printed. In place of "paranoia as" read "paranoia and"; and, in place of the suggested reading of the end of the letter, "shall shed the [illegible word]," read "shall stand the winner." The first part of the last word is obscured by a stain, but "winner" seems the most likely reading.

Auden made many other comments on *The Orators* in addition to the one in the letter printed in the *Quarterly*. In my preface to a new edition of Auden's early work, *The English Auden* (New York: Random House, 1977), I cite a few of them. While working on the "Journal of an Airman" that is the center of the book, he wrote to a friend: "In a sense the work is my memorial to Lawrence; i.e., the theme is the failure of the romantic conception of personality." This was in August 1931; about seven months later, shortly before the book went to press, he wrote a preface that was not in fact used. In part, this preface reads: "The central theme is a revolutionary hero. The first book describes the effect of him and of his failure on those whom he meets; the second book is his own account; and the last some personal reflections on the question of leadership in our time." After the book appeared, Auden wrote to a reader in August 1932 that *The Orators* was "far too obscure and equivocal. It is meant to be a critique of the fascist outlook, but from its reception among some of my contemporaries, and on rereading it myself, I see that it can, most of it, be interpreted as a favourable exposition." The letter to Harry Bamford Parkes, printed in the *Quarterly*, was written some four months after this.

EDWARD MENDELSON
Literary Executor of the Estate of W. H. Auden