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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 fascists 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

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