

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 2 (1985)

Artikel: W.H. Auden's "Sonnets from China" : poems in search of a context
Autor: Forster, Jean-Paul
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99836>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

W. H. Auden's "Sonnets from China": Poems in Search of a Context

Jean-Paul Forster

Our century has been one of experimentation in all fields. What has characterized the modern need for change, as opposed to that of other periods, is its spirit of freedom and its absence of reverence towards the past. It amounts to a rejection, which must not, however, be confused with neglect or ignorance. In poetry, W. H. Auden is a good example of this need to experiment with forms. At a time when other poets were perfecting new rhythms and forms under the *étiquette* of *vers libre*, he chose to display his virtuosity in putting various inherited forms to new uses, always with an acute sense of historical perspective. Of few poets is it truer to say, to paraphrase John Wain, that writing a poem in a particular form was to stand in some relationship with previous writers who had expressed themselves in that form.¹ For Auden forms were a challenge to "make it new," as well as a stimulus to his inspiration. Of all forms, the sonnet seems to have been a favourite with him. His *Selected Poems* in the Faber edition opens with a striking adaptation of the form, an unrhymed sonnet, "The Secret Agent." His *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* contain no less than three sonnet sequences.² There are many other sonnets as well, mainly sonnets of places and people.

The sonnet sequence "Sonnets from China" is a good illustration of the nature of Auden's experimentation and of its relation to tradition. This is particularly clear when the reader comes across the sonnets out

¹ "On the Breaking of Forms," *Encounter* 45 (August 1975), 50. Reprinted in *Professing Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

² "A Voyage" and "Sonnets from China" from *Journey to a War* (1939), and "The Quest" from *New Year Letter* (1941). An earlier sequence of love poems had also included several sonnets, most of them later discarded.

of their original context. When the cycle first appeared under the title "In Time of War" in *Journey to a War*,³ it formed the natural emotional climax of an experience of disillusion and a poetical summing-up of the travel book. To the authors it must have looked somewhat inevitable to use the denser medium of lyrical verse to catch the deep impression left by their visit to China at war and by a direct experience of modern warfare. Without the support of the prose diary, which gave them a background of concrete facts, the sonnets read less like a lyrical summing-up and more like poems in a particular form. The fact is further underlined by a slight change in typography: in the verse collections the stanzas are printed separately, so that the form stands out. Read as poems, the sonnets lose their exclusive relevance to the thirties and claim the attention due to such compositions on their own.⁴

Although the primary purpose of the following pages is not to evaluate the achievement of "Sonnets from China," but to relate it to a tradition, it may not be useless to recall that there exists wide disagreement as to its significance. Auden himself thought highly enough of them to include them in every selection of his verse. Two critics at least share the author's high estimate of them: one has called the cycle "Auden's *Essay on Man*" and the other says that it is "perhaps the greatest English poem of the [thirties]."⁵ A third critic, on the other hand, describes it as a "low point in Auden's career," finds the voice "lifeless, tired, prosaic" and deplores the excessively conversational syntax of the sonnets, their "forced cleverness and plethora of allegorizing."⁶ The one thing not called into question is the handling of the verse form.

The qualities of the sonnet and its attraction for a poet are well known. Whether in its Petrarchan or Elizabethan form, its quatrains are

³ The book was a travel book, like *Letters from Iceland*, and the fruit of a collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. It opened with Auden's sonnet sequence "A Voyage." Then came the central section, Isherwood's "Travel-Diary." It was followed by the second sonnet sequence "In Time of War" and a long "Verse Commentary," both by Auden. The book was a report of the authors' visit to China at the time of the Sino-Japanese war.

⁴ The following discussion is based on Auden's final version, printed in all recent editions of the Collected Poems and of *Journey to a War*. It includes twenty sonnets, to which a twenty-first about E. M. Forster has been added as a coda. All references are to this easily available, revised and shortened version.

⁵ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 125. Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 348.

⁶ Justin Repogle, *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 128-9, 131, 205.

compact and the overall rhyme pattern harmonious, so that the form lends itself to expressing intense feelings. Sestet or couplet makes little difference to the capacity of the sonnet to rise to epigrammatic concision. In this respect it combines antithetical possibilities. The imbalance between octave and sestet, or the three quatrains and the couplet, gives a jolt to the intensity of the utterance and introduces a note of doubt. This made it for a long time the ideal medium to celebrate the vicissitudes of human love, intense and imperfect as it is. But the history of the sonnet does not end with the vogue of the love sonnet. In European literature, the sonnet can be said to resurface with the Romantic movement. It is a different sonnet, more often Petrarchan than Elizabethan. It has undergone the evolution of all poetry from language gesture (address to some real person), first to fictitious address, and finally to vignette. If complimentary sonnets and what the French call *vers de circonstances* are left aside, the Romantic poets can be said to have found the sonnet form adequate to celebrate, instead of love, intense aesthetic or physical experience (the two are often intimately connected) or (and this has not always been duly underlined) political experience or views.⁷ The alternation of private and public concerns had indeed been a feature of the genre from its modern beginnings in the *Canzoniere* of Petrarch. Everyone knows what Keats made of the sonnet and how he came to use its specific character to forge an original stanza form. The Keatsian achievement gave birth to a whole descendants of sonnets that Marxist criticism would describe as typical of the middle-class reverie about, and interest in, the body, its pleasures and pure sensations.⁸ Belonging to this tradition are Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, as well as the early Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne.⁹ This tradition leads directly to Rainer Maria Rilke's "Sonette an Orpheus," which Auden mentions as embodying a spirit diametrically opposed to that of his own verse.

The other use of the sonnet, namely to express a public, political or historical consciousness of the world, develops more timidly during the

⁷ The nineteenth century did not, of course, abandon the love sonnet: two major examples are Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" and Meredith's "Modern Love."

⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 316-319.

⁹ See Rossetti's "Sonnets for Pictures" and the sonnets from "The House of Life" and Swinburne's "Sonnets on English Dramatic Poets (1590-1630)."

Romantic period.¹⁰ The political or historical sonnet is usually a sort of vignette of people or places. Coleridge's "Sonnets on Eminent Characters" are an early example of this type of sonnet:

Thou, Fayette! who didst wake with startling voice
 Life's better Sun from that long wintry night,
 Thus in thy Country's triumphs shalt rejoice
 And mock with raptures high the Dungeon's might:

 For lo! the Morning struggles into Day,
 And Slavery's spectres shriek and vanish from the ray.

Of a different nature is Shelley's "Ozymandias," which shows the historical vignette brought to perfection; it is too well known to need quoting.¹¹ Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" combines the two types. Basically the sonnet is about a moving aesthetic experience, but the "stout Cortez" simile offers a historical vignette within the sonnet. The historical vignette enjoyed a considerable vogue in France with José-Maria de Hérédia and François Coppée. The former's sonnet about Hannibal "meditative and triumphant" listening to the heavy tread of the Roman legions at the battle of "The Trebbia" has thrilled generations of boy readers. Sonnets about the glory of the past can be found side by side with sonnets about present evils in nineteenth-century anthologies of short lyrics. To this tradition belongs Rimbaud's cruel sonnet "Le Dormeur du val," which is in fact about a dead soldier:

Les parfums ne font pas frissonner sa narine;
 Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine
 Tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.

In English literature, the only great historical sonnet written between Shelley and Auden is Yeats's "Leda and the Swan."¹² Rimbaud's and Yeats's sonnets are interesting cases, because they present historical expérience merging into private experience, and private experience into public experience, indicating that there never existed a clear-cut division between the two sorts of sonnets.

The sonnet of intense private aesthetic or physical experience and the sonnet evoking people, scenes or places each develop one of the specific

¹⁰ Milton and Tasso were, after Petrarch, the primary predecessors.

¹¹ Another example would be Shelley's "England in 1819."

¹² Tennyson's "Montenegro" is interesting because it is more akin to *vers de circonstances* than to the historical sonnet. Like other Victorian poets, Tennyson preferred more sprawling forms when dealing with social and political subjects.

features of the sonnet mentioned above: the former its capacity to give shape to intense feelings, the second more frequently its capacity for epigrammatical statements. They form the double tradition to which Auden's "Sonnets from China" and all his other sonnets belong or refer: the cycle and the sonnets of people and places belong to the tradition of the historical vignette, but the reference to Rilke in sonnet XIX of "Sonnets from China" situates the two trends with respect to each other and suggests that their evolution has been different. As for the other sonnet sequence, "The Quest," it takes up Rilke's theme.

The reference to the German poet sounds as though Auden felt that their respective sonneteerings were the last of their kinds and marked the end of the double tradition issuing from Petrarch and the Romantic movement. Rilke he describes as the representative *par excellence* of the poet pursuing an intense private aesthetic experience, which seems at times to open for him the gates of a sort of transcendence, but which at the same time isolates him, so that the sonnet becomes the lonely and ineffective protest of an individual who has withdrawn from the world of men.¹³

To-night in China let me think of one
 Who for ten years of drought and silence waited,
 Until in Muzot all his being spoke,
 And everything was given once for all.
 Awed, grateful, tired, content to die, completed,
 He went out in the winter night to stroke
 That tower as one pets an animal.

The allusion of course is both to the "Duineser Elegien" and to "Sonette an Orpheus." In these two infinitely subtle, complex and magical works, Auden selects for particular emphasis Rilke's search for fulfilment and plenitude, for some total experience satisfying the whole being of man. Fulfilment is made possible, for the German poet, in the fullness of song, of the poem:

Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehr,
 nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;
 Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes.¹⁴

¹³ Auden's early work suggests that he must have been particularly sensitive to this isolation: see Mendelson, pp. 10 ff.

¹⁴ "Sonette an Orpheus," Erster Teil, s. III. Auden has also written a poem about "Orpheus," in which he characteristically stresses the poet's failures and those of his art.

On the level of form, Rilke's sonnets achieve this effect of fullness by breaking away from the traditional patterns in a way reminiscent of a whole line of English poets from Milton to Keats, who were similarly impatient with the restraints of the sonnet and felt it necessary to improve on the pattern to make it convey a maximum of intensity.

Auden makes it strikingly clear that his own sonnets, on the other hand, are about the opposite of all that Rilke stands for or chooses to dwell upon. The beginning of the sonnet about the German poet speaks of "Violence pandemic like a new disease, / And Wrong a charmer everywhere invited" (sonnet XIX).¹⁵ For private concerns he substitutes public ones, the world's affairs and ancient and modern evils. Instead of self-fulfilment, his theme is the necessity of freedom and its difficulty, man's incapacity to achieve a satisfactory experience of life, unfulfilment – in a word, man's ignorance of the possibilities of his being. Although Auden is indebted to Rilke technically as well as for some ideas,¹⁶ it is hardly the similarities that draw the attention, but rather those features that relate Auden's sonnets to the tradition of the historical and political vignette. However, even on this point, it must be added that the British poet does not present social and political experience as a positive, fulfilling alternative to personal aesthetic experience either, as Shelley and Hérédia had done. He views political and social experience as an obstacle to any sort of self-fulfilment.¹⁷ For him then the sonnet is no longer able to express the faith in man and history of a hundred years ago. It can only express the loss of that faith. Technically brilliant, as might be expected from a century of expertise and systematic experiment, the sonnets use their brilliance to bring out the lack of faith, energy and hope of modern man. When Auden's sonnets break away from the

¹⁵ Rilke does not dwell much on modern man except to insist in passing, like so many liberal intellectuals of his generation, that the invention of machines has not extended our domination over the universe, but wasted our energies, that we are like swimmers who have dared too far from the bank (1st part, s. XVIII), that we know neither the world nor ourselves and are poor masters who empty things of their substance instead of listening to their teaching (1st part, s. XXIV).

¹⁶ A fact demonstrated by Frederic Buell, *W. H. Auden as a Social Poet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 172–7.

¹⁷ "The Quest" soon after runs counter to the tradition of the sonnet of private experience, which it claims to continue in the same way as "Sonnets from China" does with the tradition of the sonnet of political and historical experience.

traditional patterns, it is not to convey intensity and plenitude. With him, the historical sonnet breaks down to become a weak reflection of what it once was, and the reference to Rilke draws attention to the gap that has developed between the sonnet of private experience and that of public experience.

* * *

How Auden uses the tradition of the sonnet-vignette and how "Sonnets from China" reflect and transform the tradition to which it belongs remain to be examined. In the sonnet sequence can be found most of the features that characterize the earlier poems, such as "The Secret Agent." A few years ago, a reviewer, imagining the response of a reader of the thirties to these early poems wrote:

"Much of [their] thrill ... derived, one imagines, from [their] tough knowing voice. Whoever this young Mr Auden might be, he certainly wasn't mistily mystic like Yeats or Eliot. He knew about communication systems and industry and power stations and troop movements and espionage and big European cities. He sounded battle-hardened and ascetic – addicted to moorland crouching behind sheep-pens. And of course he must be deeply involved in politics."¹⁸

This indeed described the poet of "The Secret Agent," "The Watershed" and *Paid on Both Sides*, written half a decade before; but the general import of the remarks remains true of "Sonnets from China." War and revolution need only be substituted for espionage, fascism for industry, cities for European cities, and the description hits the mark. The main difference is that the preoccupations of the sonnets are wider, the vision more international or even universal.¹⁹ The change goes some way towards accounting for the often mentioned greater abstractness of Auden's verse, but so, for that matter, does the tradition of the historical and political sonnet noted above. The tone is as urgent as in the poems of the early thirties and argues for the same real commitment as before, though it is now of a less personal sort. The "tough knowing voice" is an extreme development of the public or prophetic voice that sounded in "Ozymandias." What Auden had written before "Sonnets from Chi-

¹⁸ John Carey, "Inferior Soap," *The New Review* 2 (April 1975), 59.

¹⁹ The new breadth of the vision is not unrelated to the journeys to Iceland and China which Auden undertook at that time and to the two travel books that resulted.

na" had in a way predisposed him to the writing of the sonnet-vignette with respect to the choice of voice and handling of tone. Owing to the nature of the sonnet, its conciseness in particular, the poet's denunciations have simply become more laconic:

History opposes its grief to our buoyant song,
To our hope its warning.
(sonnet XI)

They are and suffer; that is all they do.
(sonnet XIV)

It is as though varieties of ellipsis and compressed statement had replaced the clipped diction of early poems with their characteristic dropping of articles and substitution of pronouns for nouns. The latter made for passionate dramatic statements, but was unsuited to larger reflexions. By favouring epigrammatic concision, the sonnet form intellectualizes the lyric and facilitates the transition to a larger theme: a diagnosis of what is wrong with the world and man, and an analysis of the symptoms of the world's evils, such as violence, horror and hopelessness.

However intellectualized the sonnet is, it remains a lyric, an emotional rather than a philosophical statement.²⁰ Therefore, to rely too exclusively on the discursive elements to elucidate the meaning of "Sonnets from China" can only be misleading, even though it is true in a sense that the sonnets present man in a state of "Becoming,"²¹ forced to control his universe lest he should be its slave,²² "a creature to his own creation subject" (sonnet III), living "in freedom by necessity" (sonnet XVIII). In fact such statements as these are only details in a more general picture whose import is altogether different. Also questionable is the view of the cycle as a "history of man from the creation to the present" with the first three sonnets resorting to the Darwinian, biblical and Marxist creation myths to explain the origin of man and society, the

²⁰ John Bayley, in *The Romantic Survival* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969, p. 132), rightly says that, in general, Auden's poetry is more passionate than controlled as some would have it.

²¹ Fuller, p. 125.

²² Replogle, pp. 42-3. See also Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Oxford, 1963), pp. 132-3. What has often happened is that critics have used the "Verse Commentary" of *Journey to a War* to explain the sonnets.

following six retracing such episodes as "the unprogressive life of the Noble Savage" or the progress of "Enlightenment in terms of capitalism, democracy, science and paper credit," and the second half of the sequence referring to contemporary features of modern life like war, the fate of the citizen-soldier and the future of modern man.²³ This description is attractive because it is intellectually satisfying and because, on a purely grammatical level, it seems to meet the requirements of Benveniste's distinction between history and discourse. The grammatical evidence, however, is far from being solid. If the first ten sonnets are conspicuous for the predominance of the past tense and third person pronouns, and the last ten for their use of the present tenses and first person pronouns, so that they seem to form two articulated groups referring respectively to the past and to the present, it must be granted that the past tense in the first case can neither be said to refer to events that can be dated with any certainty nor seen as completed actions. As to the pronouns, they do not refer specifically to people of the past. On the contrary, certain figures evoked are felt to belong as much to the present as to the past, like the "conquering hero" and leader of the "horde," in sonnet V, who turns out to be one who "sat in offices and stole" in later life. In fact the poem links ancient warrior-heroes and modern fascist leaders. An even greater indeterminacy pervades the second half of the cycle, which freely mixes first, second and third person pronouns, present and past tenses, and words suggesting the past, the present and the future, as in the sonnet which speaks of "our huts" and of "balls of the Future" (sonnet XVIII). To this must be added the fact that there is no absolutely clear chronological link between the sonnets. Even in the case of sonnet X, which begins: "So an age ended," the connection with the preceding sonnet must be allowed to be uncertain. On close inspection, most of the sonnets are found to refer as much to the past as to the present.

The vagueness with which pronouns and tenses are used indicates, if anything, that the mode of discourse is lyrical, and not historical or discursive, and that it is at times reminiscent of the "riddle."²⁴ The

²³ Fuller, p. 126. Mendelson agrees with this description but notes that the original version he discusses is architecturally different (p. 349).

²⁴ In fact, the shift of tenses and pronouns has another role, in which we recognize another form of a strategy Auden uses in other poems. The strategy consists in gaining the reader's confidence the better to shock him. Here it is the impersonal beginning which entraps the reader's sympathy by making him

general impression is that the sonnets deny and blur the distinction between history and discourse, past and present, rather than underline it.²⁵ As is customary with sonnet sequences, "Sonnets from China" is not organized according to a consistent pattern. It presents a juxtaposition of pictures. This juxtaposition of what are for the most part portraits and scenes does, however, offer a fairly systematic survey of social and political life. If there is any order in the way the sonnets are arranged, it is social and not chronologically historical. The division into two groups of poems of equal length would rather correspond to a distinction between sonnets dealing with ruling ideologies, masters and profiteers (sonnets I-IX) and those dealing with the victims and manipulated (sonnets X, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII).²⁶ The sonnets consider in turn farmers, tyrants, soothsayers, poets, politicians, religious leaders, soldiers, wounded men in a hospital, gardeners, chauffeurs and exiles, as well as different aspects of life and social institutions. Add to this the fact that each sonnet tells the story of a failure and there remains no doubt that the sonnet cycle is but an impressionistic survey of social and political life, made up of independent vignettes in the tradition of "Ozymandias," "La Trebbia" and "Le Dormeur du val." The sonnets form a loosely-knit sequence. The reader is less likely to respond to the philosophical implications of their message than to their more emotional aspects: the cumulative effect achieved by the repeated picture of failure, and the pervasive tone of disillusion.

As in his other poems, Auden here pushes as far as it will go the modern aesthetics of the poem/object, as opposed to the poem/language-gesture of earlier times. He once remarked that real books read us. This he wants his historical vignettes to do. There was an oblique sententiousness in Shelley's political sonnets. He seems to be saying, look what happened and be wiser. Auden's sonnets stare us in the face and question us with their riddles. What constitutes the riddle? Auden uses the conciseness and compactness of the sonnet form to present caricatures: striking, distorted pictures in which the distortion becomes

believe that the sonnets are about others. In other poems, the reader is attracted by a superficially traditional lyrical quality.

²⁵ This can hardly be a surprise when we remember that in the early poems Auden had usually presented history and the past as a mere dead weight in the individual's life (see Mendelson, pp. 50-52).

²⁶ It is interesting that the former are referred to as *they* or *he*, and the latter as *we* as well as *he* or *they* (see note 24).

denunciation. As suggested above, the vignettes are made up of material from different periods. The poet combines past and present, ancient and modern features to create composite pictures of different sorts of life and types of men. The result is ahistorical. The first sonnet is a caricature of the Darwinian evolutionary myth, but it also shows that man escapes Darwin's determinism, though he is incapable of making use of his freedom. The fifth and eighth sonnets are caricatures of the tyrannical and liberal leaders of all times, and the twelfth of war as lived by the private soldier, who never fully understands what is really happening. The sonnets do not claim to describe the real thing, but only to give gross oversimplifications, like that of the militiaman "Abandoned by his general and his lice" who "joined the dust of China, that our daughters / Might keep their upright carriage" (sonnet XIII). Composite pictures, simplifications, exaggerations or distortions, the use of the deictic definite article or demonstrative adjective to refer to what should correspond to shared experience, the use of unspecified "he," "they" or "we," and the vagueness of general statements help to set off the pathetic and the grotesque features of the lives described. Vagueness combines with a tendency to be elliptical or impressionistic. Synecdoches are a significant rhetorical figure of the cycle, in which they outnumber the typical Auden similes and metaphors of the type "Anxiety / Receives them like a grand hotel" (sonnet XVI). All these features can be found in the caricature of the Marxist conception of man. It offers a picture of man exploiting others and, at the same time, yearning for what materialism will never give him:

Only a smell had feelings to make known,
 Only an eye could point in a direction,
 The fountain's utterance was itself alone:
 He, though, by naming thought to make connection

 Between himself as hunter and his food;
 He felt the interest in his throat and found
 That he could send a servant to chop wood
 Or kiss a girl to rapture with a sound.

 They bred like locusts till they hid the green
 And edges of the world: confused and abject,
 A creature to his own creation subject,

 He shook with hate for things he'd never seen,
 Pined for a love abstracted from its object,
 And was oppressed as he had never been.

(sonnet III)

As this sonnet shows, myths, portraits and scenes are abstract mainly in the sense that they pay less attention to the coherence in the details and realism of the picture and in the sense that the caricature aims at an epigrammatic formulation. On this point, the sonnets turn away from the early expository lyric influenced as much by Eliot as by Hardy and Robert Frost. The result is that when the reader tries to remember "Sonnets from China," he tends to think of isolated lines or flashes of the imagination, and not of whole sonnets.²⁷ If the cycle gives the impression of being formed of strongly intellectualized lyrics on "the will of the unjust" (sonnet XI), "evil" (sonnet XII), "pain" (sonnet XV), "anxiety" (sonnet XVI) or "freedom" (sonnet XVIII), they owe it not so much to any special recourse to abstract formulations²⁸ as to the relentless process of criticism resulting from juxtapositions and an accumulation of examples of caricatures of failures. The vivid concrete details that convey the idea are more memorable than the ideas themselves:

Here war is harmless like a monument:
 A telephone is talking to a man;
 Flags on a map declare that troops were sent;
 A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan
 For living men in terror of their lives,
 Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
 Who can be lost and are, who miss their wives
 And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.

(sonnet XII)

These failures of all sorts, it is time to add, are inward failures leading to the breakdown of the personality, like that of the leader of the horde, turned dissatisfied technocrat or bureaucratic fascist governor in sonnet VI.²⁹ The opposition to Rilke, whose whole being "spoke" in his sonnets, makes it clear that political leaders and, more generally, man as a

²⁷ This Arnoldian conception of poetry is in keeping with Auden's practice as a poet of lifting phrases from discarded poems, or books he had read, to insert them in other pieces.

²⁸ Auden himself found plain abstraction in poetry immature, and as he puts it, he wanted instead a poetry with "plenty of news" ("In Defence of Gossip," *Listener*, 22 Dec. 1937, p. 1372).

²⁹ Sonnets VII, VIII, IX, and X are other vivid instances of the portrayal of failures. Failure is the theme of other poems of the same years, like "Miss Gee" and "Frankie and Johnny."

political animal fail because they are selfish and want to change the world instead of themselves.³⁰

If the public tone of the voice and the portraits and scenes (the myths are also vignettes of people) show Auden to be working within the tradition of the historical and political vignette, it is the use of the sonnet form that marks the contrast between "Sonnets from China" and "Sonette an Orpheus" most clearly. The expressive use of the form extends the point made by the sonnet about Rilke in its opposition between the picture of the destructive chaos reigning in public spheres and the limited but real achievement of the German poet. Auden's sonnets are mimetic of failure, as those of Rilke are mimetic of the intensity of their search for fulfilment. "Sonnets from China" shows the handling of the form to be of a debased sort.

In most of the sonnets, the first two quatrains follow the Elizabethan pattern and rhyme a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d. The exceptions are sonnets I, X, XIII, XIV, XX, and XXI, five of which serve as introduction, articulation and conclusion to the rough grouping of the sonnets in the cycle. The rhyme pattern of these six sonnets, however, is not strictly Petrarchan either, although they use embraced rhymes, three or four and not two. As for the sestets, it is possible to find any arrangement of the e-f-g, e-f-g basic Petrarchan model. Here again, what is immediately noticeable is the careful avoidance of anything that might strike a full note. The sonnets are hybrids. In most, the emphatic regularity of the progressive alternating rhymes is in keeping with the predominantly narrative or descriptive structure. The octave frequently evokes the picture of a life which begins hopefully. Of the born fascist leader, Auden writes:

His care-free swagger was a fine invention:
 Life was too slow, too regular, too grave.
 With horse and sword he drew the girls' attention,
 A conquering hero, bountiful and brave,
 To whom teen-agers looked for liberation:
 At his command they left behind their mothers,
 Their wits were sharpened by the long migration,
 His camp-fires taught them all the horde were brothers.

³⁰ Auden underlined the point when he added the sonnet "To E. M. Forster" as a coda to the revised sequence. This sonnet and the one about Rilke are the only ones dealing with positive values.

The impression of weight is not as strong as in the case of the Petrarchan sonnet owing to the greater number of rhymes and the less monolithic development of the quatrains. These imperfections work like early signs of degradation. The opposition octave-sestet corresponds to the turning point between expectations and disappointments. When the relatively more compact octave gives way to a relatively loose sestet, the transition creates an impression of collapse and dissolution. The impression of looseness is conveyed in various ways: through the use of shorter lines, or through syntax (by punctuation and run-on-lines), or through imperfect rhymes. The sestet of the sonnet whose octave was quoted above reads:

Till what he came to do was done: unwanted,
Grown seedy, paunchy, pouchy, disappointed,
He took to drink to screw his nerves to murder,

Or sat in offices and stole,
Boomed at his children about Law and Order,
And hated life with heart and soul.

(sonnet V)

Two sonnets even derive their particularly complex effect from a partial reversal of this structure. In the sonnet about Rilke (XIX) and in sonnet XVI, the allusion to a better world or life coincides with the loose sestet, so that the very belief in a better existence and humanity is made to sound remote and hopeless.

The form of the sonnets in Auden's cycle is remarkable for its lack of plenitude. It is hardly more than the pale reflection, a vague remembrance of the heights to which some poets have risen with it. As it combines with an excessively simple syntax, the use and abuse of "and,"³¹ the exaggeration of the triple epithets and nouns,³² and the poverty of an often strikingly prosaic style, the form seems to hang loosely like a garment too large for its wearer. The effect is to sharpen our sense of inadequacy. It is jarring, unexpected and unpleasant, not just bad poetry as some have argued.³³ Nowhere can the urgent tone be mistaken for fullness. Its intensity is merely breathless and feverish. One

³¹ Repogle, p. 205.

³² Richard Hoggart, *Auden: An Introductory Essay* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), pp. 44-5.

³³ This is, among others, Repogle's view, pp. 128-9.

critic has spoken of the humanization of Auden's style in the thirties.³⁴ In "Sonnets from China" it is pursued to the point of trivializing both style and form, while the vision shows a tendency systematically to "diminish, even trivialize, large, potent concepts or images by comparing them to something everyday or banal."³⁵ The use of juxtaposed sonnets to present recurrent patterns of failure, added to that of a debased form, has an aggressive quality about it which is as effective, if not more so, than the ominous tone of the early poems like "The Watershed," or the manipulation of other traditional forms to shock readers into attention in poems like "As I walked out one evening."

* * *

"Sonnets from China" is one of Auden's ambitious projects and typical creations in the second half of the thirties. The masterly execution commands respect. Neglected as it has been, Auden's recourse to the sonnet form and sonnet sequence once more proves his inventiveness in the handling of strict forms and the ease with which he moves within literary traditions, rejecting nothing, turning everything to account. He has found a new way of using the sonnet form. With their style and tone akin to those of reporting, the individual poems are like hasty magazine snapshots or political cartoons: this is what the historical and political vignette has become in the cycle. The very looseness of the form becomes expressive comment when it shows that man has lost his true nature as the sonnet has lost its true character. Auden's poetry has been said to run directly counter to the modernist belief of Eliot's generation, that a chaotic age prevented poets from using formal patterns. The collapse of the sonnet's traditional qualities, the art of juxtapositions, the reliance on associations, the use of synecdoches of bodily members to dehumanize experience show him on the contrary to be deeply indebted to the modernism of the twenties. In the cycle, the breaking down of a form takes the appearance of a purposeless virtuosity.

The sonnet sequence also commands respect because of the scope of its views. With it Auden asserts that he is, or has become, a social poet

³⁴ Robert Bloom, "The Humanization of Auden's Early Style," *PMLA* 83 (May 1968), 443-54.

³⁵ Bernard Bergonzi, "Auden and Audenesque," *Encounter* 44 (February 1975), 67.

in the largest sense: the voice and conscience of a civilization. His social and political vignettes implicitly reject the idea of a better past or of a past that can explain the present, or help to change it, in favour of a vision of life and man as basically "unprogressive." For him as for Stephen Dedalus, history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake.³⁶ His sonnets are concerned with the present, even when they allude to the past. In form and vision, they mark a break from the past. The theme of inner fulfilment, which is stated negatively in vivid pictures of inner emptiness, is a recurring one in his poetry of the second half of the thirties,³⁷ but nowhere else does the image of man's march towards an ever-receding goal and the ensuing feeling of anxiety link it so clearly with the larger issues of progress, civilization and society. On this point his reflexion, like Rilke's, is heir to that of the nineteenth century and its dichotomies between culture and society, individual and species. It reveals his kinship, not with historians, but with the enemies of traditional history, social philosophers and scientists. He echoes Ernst Bloch when he insists that man does not know what he wants to do with his life and feels longings for what is completely different.³⁸ He also anticipates another German social philosopher, Max Horkheimer, who suggests that "under the pressure exerted by today's pragmatic approach to reality the consciousness that man has of himself has become identical with the role he has to assume in the predominant system."³⁹ In a word, Auden's intellectualized lyrics sing of both man and literary tradition as in danger of being shipwrecked.

Why is it then that "Sonnets from China," being an impressive achievement as it is, has not received that spontaneous acceptance from readers that all great poetry gets sooner or later, and that other poems of Auden have won him? My analysis suggests two reasons which could not have been perceptible to readers of the sonnets in their original context of *Journey to a War* because of the support of the diary. One reason, which has already been put forward, is the indecisive character of the lyrical utterance. In the composite bogus portraits, pathos and contempt are sometimes at odds. They express antagonistic values, and the effect is ambiguous. Nothing could be more detrimental to the short

³⁶ This is also the theme of the well-known "Paysage Moralisé."

³⁷ The idea is central in "A Bride in the 30's" and "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

³⁸ Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1923).

³⁹ M. Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie* (Berlin: Fischer, 1968).

intellectualized lyric, in which sureness and transparency are requisite qualities to precipitate the crystallization of the vision and insight. This uncertainty of tone is not such a fatal flaw in larger compositions. There is here and there in the cycle a disturbing inconsistency in the manipulation of the connotations of crucial words. Mountains are associated in one sonnet (sonnet VI) with imprisonment and in another with freedom (sonnet XIII). Sometimes approval and disapproval cohabit in the same sonnet, as in the case, already mentioned, of the lines about the militiaman "Abandoned by his general and his lice" who "joined the dust of China, that our daughters / Might keep their upright carriage."

Moving and impressive as the sonnet sequence is, it perhaps also falls a prey to the very trivialization of life it denounces: when the poet tarnishes what he portrays, he dulls the vision. This formal degradation, corresponding to the ills the poem denounces, used as a shock tactic, has in fact been the cause of other imperfections in the poems of the thirties. It seems to indicate that the breaking of forms in art has limits which cannot be transgressed and that to write against the grain of a form is risky. "Sonnets from China" does not possess, except in places, that redeeming intensity that the early poems had when they expressed the full force of the poet's fascination with the England of the slump, nor the haunting quality that a modernist sense of contrasts gives to "Fish in the unruffled lakes," "Musée des Beaux Arts," and later to "The Shield of Achilles." This is why the cycle does not rank among Auden's and modern poetry's undisputed masterpieces; but the sonnets are more than impressive failures, whether taken individually or collectively. Finally, it is necessary to add that the sonnet sequence has not a little suffered from the critics' desire that the poems should mean, rather than be. On this point at least, it is hoped that presenting the sonnets in another context than that of Auden's work has restored them to a little more "Being," be it only that of the human imperfection they celebrate.