

# W. H. AUDEN'S WISDOM, FAITH, AND HUMOR

Walter G. Moss

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# W. H. AUDEN'S WISDOM, FAITH, AND HUMOR<sup>1</sup>

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"I draw breath; that is of course to wish / No matter what, to be wise."

W.H. Auden, "Horae Canonicae" (1949-1954)

"Each of them [Blake, Lawrence, Freud, and Marx] brought to some particular aspect of life that intensity of attention which is characteristic of one-sided geniuses . . . and such comprehension of Christian wisdom as I have, little though it be, would be very much less without them."

W. H. Auden, Contribution to *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* (1956)

"Christians who believe, Muslims who submit, Jews who trust—all in or to God's will—have their own criteria for wisdom, yet each needs to realize those norms individually if the words of God are to enlighten or comfort. Secularists take on a different kind of responsibility, and their turn to wisdom literature sometimes is considerably more wistful or anguished, depending on temperament."

Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004)

"The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure."

W.H. Auden, "Balaam and His Ass," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (1962)

"Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh."

W.H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (1962)

"A laugh's the wisest easiest answer to all that's queer."

W. H. Auden, quoting *Moby Dick*, in "The Enchafèd Flood" (1949)

In his mature years the English poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973) tried to combine wisdom, religious faith, and humor. "Not easily done," some would say. But Auden's attempt indicates it's possible and also sheds light on the nature of wisdom itself.

He was brought up in the Anglican faith, left it as a young man, and returned to its U. S. Episcopalian branch in 1940. The previous year, he had moved to New York. There, in the early 1940s, he became a good friend to Reinhold Niebuhr, sometimes considered the greatest twentieth-century U. S. theologian. During this period Niebuhr and the nineteenth-century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard were probably the greatest religious influences on him, but Auden's return to Christianity predated his friendship with Niebuhr and occurred mainly due to his own internal struggling.

For the remainder of his life, Auden's religious views permeated his poetry and other writings (mainly essays) and affected his quest for wisdom, a quest seldom articulated but present nevertheless. But what sets him apart from most Christians—besides his great poetic talent—is that in seeking to live a wiser life, he emphasized and articulated the importance of humor, which is defined here (following the Oxford Dictionary) as the quality of being amusing or comic. As Auden said during the last few years of his life, "I have always thought of myself as a comic poet."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In another essay soon to be posted on The Wisdom Page, I will treat "Wisdom, Humor, and Faith" more generally.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 496.

Auden's spiritual quest also demonstrates how a full understanding of wisdom must be grounded in individuals and in everyday reality. The German historian Wilhelm Dilthey wrote, "How can one deny that biography is of outstanding significance for the understanding of the great context of the historical world?" The same could be said for the understanding of wisdom. After briefly touching on Auden's wisdom and looking a little more closely at his faith, we will turn to his thoughts on humor. Finally, in the Conclusion we will see how Auden fulfilled what Bloom wrote about in one of the epigraphs above—realizing "the norms [of wisdom] individually," in his own unique way. In turn, that will reveal how he solved, at least for himself, the puzzle of integrating wisdom, faith, and humor.

## Wisdom and Auden's Character

One way to approach wisdom is by definitions or statements such as the following by Robert Sternberg: "People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God."<sup>3</sup> Or one could look at what values wise people hold, as has been done by various wisdom scholars. That Auden displayed many of the characteristics of a wise person is attested to by many who knew him. Perhaps the most glowing tribute came from Joseph Brodsky. This Russian poet, persecuted by the Soviet government, emigrated to America in 1972 and went on not only to gain a Nobel Prize for Literature (1987), but also to become the U. S. Poet Laureate in 1991-1992. Brodsky wrote of Auden's "autonomy, sanity, equipoise, irony, detachment—in short, wisdom." In this same essay, he said he considered Auden "the greatest mind of the twentieth century," and that "he went among the world's grave, often terminal cases not as a surgeon but as a nurse. . . . And I marveled at that love." Stopping at Auden's summer home in Austria before going to the United States, Brodsky recalled that Auden looked after him "with the diligence of a good mother hen."<sup>4</sup>

Love or compassion is a central value displayed by wise people,<sup>5</sup> and Auden's love or compassion was demonstrated in many ways. Brodsky quotes the lines "If equal affection cannot be / Let the more loving one be me" from Auden's poem "The More Loving One." And Brodsky thinks that the lines capture well his "main precept."<sup>6</sup> Although the homosexual Auden does not seem to have been especially wise in his choice of a life partner—but then no one is always wise in all things—he appears to have been more loving than the man he chose, the much younger Chester Kallman. Their relationship began not long after Auden came to New York, and by late 1939 Auden considered themselves a "married" couple. But it turned out that Kallman resented Auden's wish for a strictly monogamous relationship. In 1941 he refused any longer to have sex with Auden and subsequently had numerous other sexual partners. This personal catastrophe left Auden shaken, and "long private talks with Reinhold Niebuhr" may have helped him through

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sternberg, "It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html> (all web sites accessed in December 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Brodsky, "To Please a Shadow," in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 357, 372, 377, 382.

<sup>5</sup> For a list of values associated with wisdom, see Copthorne Macdonald's "Values that Various People Have Associated with Wisdom," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Brodsky, 359.

this crisis.<sup>7</sup> It still, however, left a permanent mark on him and his faith, which we will explore more later. Yet, despite the sexual break and frequent separations, Auden and Kallman shared an apartment in New York for more than a decade and summer homes in Europe during the last twenty-five years of Auden's life. Despite other Auden sexual relationships, including one with a woman in 1946-1947, Kallman remained "a focal point of his existence."<sup>8</sup>

Auden had many friends including famous ones like composer Igor Stravinsky, for whom he co-authored the words for *The Rake's Progress*. Another friend, Monroe Spears, wrote about him, "He was a wise and good man. . . . wholly devoid of self-importance or pretentiousness, and he often revealed a genuine and deep humility." Spears also wrote of his "special gift for friendship," and added that "he was, and took pleasure in being, funny in both senses—*peculiar* and *amusing*—loving jokes, songs, puzzles, and word games, and always happy to entertain."<sup>9</sup>

After Auden's death, many of his friends contributed to a tribute book about him. One of them recalled that to him sex "was essentially peripheral to love. And he loved profoundly." A few other friends mentioned that when the anti-Nazi Erika Mann, daughter of the great German novelist Thomas Mann, was seeking a way out of Hitler's Germany, Auden said he would be "delighted" to marry her (even though he had never met her). This was so she could obtain a passport to leave Germany. This "marriage of convenience," which occurred in 1935, was never consummated and the "couple" went their separate ways after the marriage, but they remained technically married until her death in 1969. His friends also recalled Auden's many small acts of kindness. Niebuhr's wife, Ursula, recalled, for example, that after reading in the paper about a \$250 fine being imposed on Dorothy Day, the "saintly Catholic friend of the poor," he wrote a check to her for that amount and stood unrecognized in a "group of derelicts" before thrusting the check into her hand as she left the court. Ursula Niebuhr also wrote that "whether in casual conversation or action. . . [he] always was kind and generous."<sup>10</sup>

Auden's compassion is also evident in his many works, which included poems, essays, reviews, and plays. To take just one example, there was the haunting poem he wrote shortly after coming to New York about a German Jewish couple unable to obtain the right to stay in America. It begins,

Say this city has ten million souls,  
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:  
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

And later on it includes the stanzas,

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
It was Hitler over Europe, saying: "They must die";  
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,  
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews. (*CP*, 263)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mendelson, 179, footnote.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur C. Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 172.

<sup>9</sup> Monroe K. Spears, "In Memoriam W. H. Auden," *The Sewanee Review* 82 (Fall 1974), 672-73.

<sup>10</sup> *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 110, 114-15, 175.

<sup>11</sup> *CP* refers to W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007), and all future quotations of his poems, unless otherwise indicated, will be to this edition.

Besides love or compassion, Auden displayed many other wisdom traits or values that scholars have emphasized including humility, tolerance, empathy, creativity, generativity, gratitude, passion, positivity, self-awareness, self-discipline, open-minded curiosity, and a rich sense of humor. One young man, Oliver Sacks, who knew Auden best during his final years, wrote that Auden “understood me better than I understood myself.” Sacks commented on his “extraordinary powers of sympathy and empathy.” And he added: “He became a living mirror for me—someone who could detect and encourage the perception of new vistas, images, and trains-of-thought long before I myself was conscious of them. And if he did this with me, he did it with a hundred others. He showed us ourselves, he drew us into greater possibilities of being—‘self-actualization,’ to use the current trendy word—by being himself wise and tolerant and affectionate as Socrates, completely devoid of censoriousness and moralizing, yet deeply, purely and passionately ethical.” His friend Hannah Arendt said “he was the least vain of all authors I ever met.”<sup>12</sup>

A recent study of Auden’s Christianity by Arthur Kirsch, a self-described “agnostic non-Christian,” states that “the most remarkable feature of his remarkable intelligence may have been its generosity. Auden was hardly a saint but . . . he was a kind man, whose compassion was ‘rooted,’ as he said compassion must be, in a delight in existence, and in thankfulness, ‘in wonder, awe, and reverence for the beauty and strangeness of creation.’” Kirsch writes that “perhaps the most compelling characteristic of Auden’s thought is the sense of the comic that informs his dialectic of faith and doubt,” and that “Auden was remarkably free of religious prejudice.” Kirsch criticizes “academics and intellectuals who assume that one cannot be a religious and a thinking person at the same time,” and writes that “Auden stands as an eloquent example of the joining of the two, a modern instance of a person in whom thought and faith not only co-existed, but nourished each other. His faith expanded the horizons of his mind as well as his heart, and his formidable intelligence, in turn, probed the nature and limits of his Christian belief.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet, although the agnostic Kirsch clearly views the Christian Auden as a wise man, we must not ignore that the poet sometimes did not seem so in his private life. To take just one example, his young friend and literary executor, Edward Mendelson, later wrote that Auden “had at the age of sixty-six used smoke and drink to force his body (as his New York doctor had warned him he was doing) into the condition of an eighty-four-year-old man.”<sup>14</sup>

A more complex question regarding his wisdom is, “What relation does it have to faith?” In the New Testament’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote that “it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise.’ . . . Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” A little later he added, “If any of you thinks he is wise in the ways of this world, he must become a fool to become really wise. For the wisdom of this world is nonsense in God’s sight.” And still later, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” In his Epistle to the Colossians, Paul wrote that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” were hidden in Jesus Christ. From this type of thinking a long tradition of “holy fools” emerged, and Auden’s thinking on faith,

<sup>12</sup> *Auden Tribute*, 183, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Kirsch, xi, xix, 176, 179.

<sup>14</sup> Mendelson, 515.

wisdom, and humor should be analyzed mindful of this background.<sup>15</sup> In this essay's Conclusion we will examine more closely the similarities and differences between Auden's Christian wisdom and "worldly wisdom."

### Auden's Renewed Faith

It was no accident that Auden returned to Christianity shortly after Hitler attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, thus beginning World War II in Europe. The attack and Auden's thoughts on it furnished the subject of one of his most famous poems, "September 1, 1939." (Many years later Brodsky wrote a long essay on it, and after our own tragedy on 9/11/2001 one New Yorker recalled that the poem, along with another slightly earlier one, "Musée des Beaux Arts," "sprang to renewed life . . . as the embodiments of our mood, posted on Web sites and subway walls."<sup>16</sup>) Before coming to the United States in early 1939, Auden's varying leftist political convictions included a belief in the natural goodness of humans and the power of reason to bring about a better world. But the mounting aggression of Hitler and his followers shook that belief. Auden himself later recalled how a few months after the invasion he went to a theater in a German-American district of Manhattan and saw a German newsreel depicting the attack. He was shocked when "quite ordinary, supposedly harmless Germans in the audience. . . [began] shouting 'Kill the Poles.'"<sup>17</sup> This experience fuelled his already gnawing doubts about the sufficiency of the liberal philosophy that had sustained him earlier in the 1930s. In an article that appeared in January 1941, he wrote, "But the whole trend of liberal thought has been to undermine faith in the absolute: in its laudable, and often successful, efforts to expose and remove particular irrationalities and injustices, it has tried to make reason the judge of whether a pact should or should not be kept."<sup>18</sup>

A decade and a half later, Auden reflected further on his leftist thought of the 1930s.

We assumed that there was only one outlook on life conceivable among civilized people, the liberal humanism in which all of us had been brought up, whether we came from Christian or agnostic homes. . . . To this the theological question seemed irrelevant since such values as freedom of the person, equal justice for all, respect for the rights of others, etc., were self-evident truths. However, the liberal humanism of the past had failed to produce the universal peace and prosperity it promised, failed even to prevent a World War.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On "holy fools," see John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> For an online version of "September 1, 1939," see <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15545>. Despite its fame, Auden himself later came to dislike it and omitted it from his later collected poems. Brodsky's essay on it is entitled "On 'September 1, 1939' by Auden," and can be found in *Less Than One*, 304-56. An online version of "Musée des Beaux Arts" exists at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mus-eacute-e-des-beaux-arts/>. See Adam Gopnik, "The Double Man: Why Auden Is an Indispensable Poet of Our Time," *The New Yorker*, September 23, 2002, at [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/23/020923crat\\_atlarge?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/23/020923crat_atlarge?currentPage=all), for his post-9/11/2001 reflections on Auden.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Mendelson, 89; see also Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1981), 282-83.

<sup>18</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, vol. II: 1939-1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 105.

<sup>19</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, vol. III: 1949-1955, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 577-78.

In the liberal magazine *Nation* at the beginning of 1941, with the United States still debating what to do about Nazi aggression, Auden reviewed Niebuhr's *Christianity and Power Politics*. For some time Niebuhr had been arguing, as he did in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), "against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives." Niebuhr still believed, as he had in 1932, that American culture was "still pretty firmly enmeshed in the illusions and sentimentalities of the Age of Reason."<sup>20</sup> In Niebuhr's new collection of essays that Auden reviewed, the theologian continued his criticism of what he considered a naive approach to Christianity and one that encouraged pacifism when the United States should be giving "all aid to the Allies short of war."<sup>21</sup>

Auden's review was generally favorable, but he did suggest that Niebuhr was perhaps not as mindful as he should be of the spiritual dangers, as Kierkegaard put it, of "always being out alone over seventy thousand fathoms [of water]."<sup>22</sup> This cryptic comment is less important than is the indication of how far Auden had traveled from his rational optimism of the 1930s to a religious view closer to that of Niebuhr and Kierkegaard—the writings of theologians Saint Augustine, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich also influenced him during this period.

Still another comment he made in his review was that "Dr Niebuhr suggests here and there that he would agree with me, that man cannot live without a sense of the Unconditional: if he does not consciously walk in fear of the Lord, then his unconscious sees to it that he has something else, airplanes or secret police, to walk in fear of."<sup>23</sup> Auden now thought, following Kierkegaard, that he had to take a "leap of faith." As he wrote in 1952, in an introduction to a collection of Kierkegaard works he edited, "[men] cannot live without faith in something, and that when the faith which they have breaks down, when the ground crumbles under their feet, they have to leap even into uncertainty if they are to avoid certain destruction." He also wrote "that in all other spheres of life they [men] are constantly acting on faith and quite willingly, so that they have no right to expect religion to be an exception."<sup>24</sup>

In 1950, in another essay, he wrote that "every co-ordinated pattern of human thought or behavior requires a faith." He gave as an example the scientist's belief that a world of nature exists. Nevertheless, Auden added that "one must distinguish between faiths and Faith." By the later he meant "a Faith by which a man lives his life as a man, i.e. the presuppositions he holds in order that (1) he may make sense of his past and present experience; (2) he may be able to act toward the future with a sense that his actions will be meaningful and effective; (3) that he and his world may be able to be changed from what they were to something more satisfactory."<sup>25</sup>

In the essay "Criticism in a Mass Society" (1941), Auden sketched out some thoughts on the relationship of faith and politics. He stated that "we cannot live without believing certain values to be absolute. These values exist, though our knowledge of them is imperfect, distorted by the limitations of our historical position and our personal character." And he concluded that

<sup>20</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960), xii, xxv.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography, with a New Introduction and Afterword* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 193.

<sup>22</sup> Auden, *Prose II*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Auden's "Introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*," in *Prose III*, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Auden, *Prose III*, 170-71.

“because the existence of absolutes implies the unity of truth, the truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict.”

At the same time, however, he predated some of Karl Popper’s ideas expressed in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) by making an extensive comparison between open and closed societies. In the former, Auden believed “no individual or class . . . , however superior in intellect or character to the rest, can claim an absolute right to impose its view of the good upon them. Government must be democratic, the people must have a right to make their own mistakes and to suffer for them, because no one is free from error.” But Auden also believed that modern technology had “destroyed tradition in the old sense and the refusal to replace it by absolute presuppositions deliberately chosen and consciously held is leading us to disaster. In the first place when tradition disappears so does popular taste; in saying that he can sell anything, the advertiser is admitting that there is no such thing as the taste of the man in the street: and in the second, the centralization of an industrial society places the dictatorship of taste in the hands of a very small group of people.”

Auden hoped that in such a mass society critics could help lead people toward higher values than those advertisers wished to foist upon people. He thought that critics should realize that their esthetic values were, or at least should be, connected to their other values and that they needed to communicate these values to the public. As Auden put it, “If I am to trust a reviewer’s judgment upon a book I have not read, I want to know among other things his philosophical beliefs.” At the same time, however, the reviewer should convey something like this to the public: “Remember that like you and everyone else I am a weak fallible creature who will often make false judgments; and therefore you must not take everything I say as gospel. I as a reviewer promise to do my best to overcome my natural laziness and wooly-mindedness, and you who read me must try to do the same.” But in keeping with an open society, Auden insisted that he did not “mean to suggest that the State or anyone else should decree an orthodoxy to which all critics must conform or forever hold their peace.”<sup>26</sup>

In another essay of early 1941, he spoke of a civilized society as “one in which a common faith [or belief in a set of shared values] is combined with a skepticism about its finality,” and “orthodoxy can only be secured by a cooperation of which free controversy is an essential part.” Conversely, in a “degenerate society, that is, one with no standards, orthodoxy becomes an arbitrary succession of fashionable fads, frequently manipulated for profit by individuals.”<sup>27</sup>

Auden believed that in religion an institutional dimension was necessary, partly because he valued the rituals and sacraments provided by religious institutions. And he believed in prayer, but not especially the type that asked God for various things. “To pray is to pay attention or, shall we say, ‘to listen’ to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—be it on a landscape, or a poem or a geometrical problem or an idol or the True God—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying.”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, as Mendelson wrote in a review of Kirsch’s *Auden and Christianity*, “His version of Christianity was more or less incomprehensible to anyone who thought religion was about formal institutions, supernatural beliefs, ancestral identities, moral prohibitions, doctrinal orthodoxies, sectarian arguments, religious emotions, spiritual aspirations, scriptural authority, or

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<sup>26</sup> Auden, *Prose II*, 96-98.

<sup>27</sup> “Note on Order,” in *ibid*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Kirsch, 159.

any other conventional aspect of personal or organized religion.” Mendelson quotes Auden as rejecting the common notion of hell as “morally revolting and intellectually incredible because it is conceived of in terms of human criminal law, as a torture imposed upon the sinner against his will by an all-powerful God.”<sup>29</sup> Auden was also not unduly worried about reconciling his homosexuality with his religion. When the wife of his friend fellow-poet Stephen Spender asked him “how he reconciled his religion . . . with his sexual practices,” he responded patiently, “OK. I sin. OK.” Apparently, he “trusted the ‘Good Lord’ would forgive him.”<sup>30</sup>

In a 1946 talk on novelist Henry James, Auden said, “One thing, and one thing only, is serious: loving one’s neighbor as one’s self.”<sup>31</sup> Mendelson writes that “Auden thought of religion as derived from the commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’—an obligation to other human beings despite all their imperfections and his own, and an obligation to the inescapable reality of this world, not a visionary, inaccessible world that might or might not exist somewhere else.” And he adds that Auden “valued his church and its doctrines only to the degree that they helped to make it possible to love one’s neighbor as oneself.”<sup>32</sup>

Besides the institutional dimension of religion, Auden also thought that a prophetic dimension was needed, defining a prophet as one “through whom God speaks to awaken the Church to a consciousness of its contemporary historical mission.” He stressed that modern-age prophets need not even be Christians, and added that most of the recent “great prophets, e. g., Voltaire, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, have been actively hostile to Christianity.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus, although Auden valued his Christian religion and institutions and believed Christianity had a unique gift to offer the world, he by no means thought that the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, or any other Christian denomination was always right. While living in New York, he actively participated in an ecumenical discussion group, and in his last years in New York often attended Russian Orthodox services rather than Anglican (Episcopalian) ones that had become too modernized for him. In the Austrian village where he bought a cottage in 1957 and often summered, he attended a Catholic church, no Protestant one being available. He also had a positive view of various non-Christian sources including specifically the Chinese *Tao Te Ching*, some words of the Muslim mystic Al-Qushayri, and the Jewish thinker Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1923)—the greatest love of Auden’s life, Chester Kallman, was also Jewish. Auden quoted the nineteenth-century Cardinal Newman’s belief that “it is as foolish to try and argue a man into belief as it is to try and torture him into it.” And he believed that “every other religion was a revelation, partial or distorted but real.” He valued an “open society” and believed that Marxist states restricted science much more than any hypothetical modern Christian state would.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Edward Mendelson, “Auden and God,” *The New York Review of Books* 54 (December 6, 2007), at <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/AudenAndGod.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in John Sutherland, *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 388.

<sup>31</sup> Auden, *Prose* II, 302.

<sup>32</sup> Mendelson, “Auden and God,” at <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/AudenAndGod.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> The quotes are from *Prose* III, 175, and taken from a 1950 essay on “Religion and Intellectuals,” which Auden wrote for the *Partisan Review*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-76; for his ecumenism and appreciation of non-Christian faiths, see also Ursula Niebuhr’s memories in *Auden Tribute*, 116, 118; a letter he wrote to her in the early 1940s at <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/niebuhr-rediscovered/a39.shtml>; and Auden’s “Introduction,” *The Protestant Mystics*, ed. Anne Fremantle (New York: Mentor Book, 1965), 33.

Through the early and mid 1940s—war or early Cold War years— many of Auden’s developing religious ideas were reflected in four long poems he wrote during this period: “New Year Letter,” “For the Time Being,” “The Sea and the Mirror,” and “The Age of Anxiety.” Although not as long as the others, his “Horae Canonicae,” which he wrote in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was another substantial poem (containing seven parts) reflecting his religious thinking.

During the last few decades of his life, Auden’s religious focus and the works that mirrored it shifted somewhat. Kirsch writes that his “work is characterized by an increasing acceptance of himself, and a corresponding religious sense of gratitude.” He generally wrote “more genially of his body” and “the domestic circumstances of his daily life.” And “he becomes increasingly interested in forgiveness, thankfulness, and prayer.”<sup>35</sup> Mendelson thinks that by 1950, Auden was already thinking more “about religion in its shared and collective aspects—in terms of the “sacred importance of the body,” of the social relations and public obligations of those who belong to a church.” And then “in the 1950s and 1960s his religious views began to coincide with those of the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose letters from the Nazi prison where he was eventually murdered had expounded an adult, ‘religionless’ Christianity that had left behind all childish fantasies of a protective, paternal God.”<sup>36</sup> Auden had met Bonhoeffer, earlier an exchange student who studied under Niebuhr, in 1939 before he returned to Germany to become active in the anti-Nazi underground; Auden later dedicated his poem “Friday’s Child,” to his memory.

In that poem were the following lines referring to God and the resurrection of Jesus:

We have no means of learning what  
Is really going on,  
  
And must put up with having learned  
All proofs or disproofs that we tender  
Of His existence are returned  
Unopened to the sender.  
  
Now, did He really break the seal  
And rise again? We dare not say. (*CP*, 674)

This mixture of doubt with his faith was indicative of Auden’s understanding of Christianity during the last decades of his life. So too were his remarks in a 1966 sermon he delivered at Westminster Abbey—in 1956 Auden accepted a five-year position as Professor of Poetry in Oxford and subsequently divided his time primarily between England, the United States, and (after 1958) his summer home in Austria. In his sermon at Westminster Abbey he said “Those of us who have the nerve to call ourselves Christians will do well to be extremely reticent on this subject. Indeed, it is almost the definition of a Christian that he is somebody who *knows* he isn’t one, either in faith or morals.”<sup>37</sup>

Auden’s Christianity remained a humble one, constantly aware of mankind’s fallibility, but retaining hope. As he wrote in his “New Year’s Letter”:

No route is truly orthodox,  
O once again let us set out

<sup>35</sup> Kirsch, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Mendelson, “Auden and God,” at <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/AudenAndGod.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kirsch, xvii.

Our faith well balanced by our doubt,  
 Admitting every step we make  
 Will certainly be a mistake,  
 But still believing we can climb  
 A little higher every time. (*CP*, 222)

## Auden's Humor

Auden's wisdom and religion were both related to his humor. Poet and critic Mark Van Doren, noted that "Thomas Carlyle once remarked that the presence of humor in a poet—he meant Shakespeare chiefly—enables him to see what is beneath him and about him as well as what is above him. . . . The real poet studies the world as it is: lovely, terrible, sensible, grotesque; and would ask for no other one in its place."<sup>38</sup> And a prominent wisdom scholar writes that "wisdom involves . . . seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are . . . deeply understanding the human/cosmic situation."<sup>39</sup> Thus, as Van Doren, Carlyle, and many wisdom scholars recognize, humor can aid wisdom and be a sign of it.

### In the 1930s

In the 1930s Auden was primarily known for his serious poetry. Such a poem was "Spain," which he wrote after going to that country during its civil war. Nevertheless, one Auden expert has written, "Auden's Marxist tendencies in the thirties, one might say, owed as much to Groucho, as to Karl."<sup>40</sup> The pre-WWII work that most clearly reflected his humor was his long poem "Letter to Lord Byron," which he considered "light verse." This "letter" to the dead poet originally appeared as part of *Letters from Iceland* (1937), a book he co-wrote with fellow poet Louis MacNeice, with whom he travelled to Iceland in 1936. Auden's light, humorous tone is indicated from the start of his poem when he apologizes to Byron for bothering someone, a lord no less, who must be "peppered" with "fan mail." A little later, Auden explains that he had, "at the age of twenty-nine" just read Byron's *Don Juan* and "found it fine / I read it on the boat to Reykjavik / Except when eating or asleep or sick." And he tells Byron why he brought the book with him:

In certain quarters I had heard a rumour  
 (For all I know the rumour's only silly)  
 That Icelanders have little sense of humour.  
 I knew the country was extremely hilly,  
 The climate unreliable and chilly;  
 So looking round for something light and easy  
 I pounced on you as warm and civilisé.

Later on in the poem, he tells Byron:

<sup>38</sup> From Van Doren's "Introduction" in Carl Sandburg, *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co, 1960), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Copthorne Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way to Inner Peace, Love & Happiness*, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Stan Smith, "Auden's Light and Serio-comic Verse," *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106.

I like your muse because she's gay and witty,  
 Because she's neither prostitute nor frump,  
 . . . . .  
 Neither a preacher, ninny, bore, nor Brownie. (*CP*, 83, 97)

During the same year that *Letters from Iceland* appeared Auden began preparing *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (hereafter *OBLV*), for which he wrote the "Introduction." In it, as well as in the selections he chose, he amplifies his thoughts on light verse and humor. Among the verses he selected were not only those of known and unknown poets from at least Chaucer's day forward, but also from "oral tradition, broadsides, and tombstones, a tradition that comprised ballads, limericks, nonsense verse, sea chanties, barroom songs, nursery rhymes, epigrams, spirituals, and the songs sung by soldiers, laborers, criminals, and tramps."<sup>41</sup> Most of the verse came from the British Isles, but Auden also mentions sources like American folk song collectors John Lomax and Carl Sandburg, and he includes such popular American folk songs as "Cocaine Lil and Morphine Sue," "Foggy, foggy, Dew," "Frankie and Johnny," "John Henry," "Stagolee," and "Sweet Betsy from Pike."

In both his letter-poem to Byron and in his *OBLV* introduction, he makes clear his view of the relation of the poet to society. He admired the way pre-Romantic poets like Alexander Pope had been able to write light poetry about people's everyday concerns. But the industrial revolution and the Romantic poets' adverse reaction to it led them to become more "introspective, obscure, and highbrow."<sup>42</sup> Auden's poetry, however, generally reflected his desire to remain in the "civil tradition" of Pope and to avoid the Romantic temptation of cutting oneself off from the general public or thinking of oneself as a superior prophet.<sup>43</sup> Auden had little use for Romantic heroes, thinking that they usually consisted of "neurotic stock."<sup>44</sup>

But if Auden wished to avoid the "heavy" sense of self-importance that he believed many Romantic poets exhibited, he also realized that lightness had its drawbacks and that the type of it once displayed by such poets as Pope was more difficult in the twentieth century.

Lightness is a great virtue, but light verse tends to be conventional, to accept the attitudes of the society in which it is written. The more homogeneous a society, the closer the artist is to the everyday life of his time, the easier it is for him to communicate what he perceives, but the harder for him to see honestly and truthfully, unbiased by the conventional responses of his time. The more unstable a society, and the more detached from it the artist, the clearer he can see, but the harder it is for him to convey it to others.<sup>45</sup>

After coming to America, Auden struggled with the question of exactly what the role of a poet should be in modern times. In his early 1939 poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden wrote, "For poetry makes nothing happen," yet later that year he wrote his influential poem "September 1, 1939."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Edward Mendelson, "Light and Outrageous," *The New York Review of Books* 51 (August 12, 2004), at <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/LightAndOutrageous.pdf>. A version of this essay also appears as the "Preface" in W. H. Auden, *W. H. Auden's Book of Light Verse* [hereafter *OBLV*] (New York: NYRB Classics, 2004), vii-xxi.

<sup>42</sup> Auden, *OBLV*, xxvii.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), xx.

<sup>44</sup> Auden, "The Enchafed Flood," *Prose* III, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Auden, *OBLV*, xxv.

<sup>46</sup> The poem on Yeats is in *CP*, 245-47 and is available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15544>.

## Faith and Humor in the 1940s

Only after returning to Christianity did his view of the poet's role begin to crystallize; and as it did, so too did a clearer sense of the significance of humor for literature and for leading a wise life. In his long poems of the 1940s—"New Year Letter," "For the Time Being," "The Sea and the Mirror," and "The Age of Anxiety"—various lines reflect his humor and his thoughts on comedy and laughter. To take just one example, in "For the Time Being" he depicts a doubting Joseph after being informed that Mary had miraculously become pregnant without having sex. A chorus feeds these doubts.

*Joseph, you have heard  
What Mary says occurred;  
Yes, it may be so.  
Is it likely? No.  
.....  
Mary may be pure,  
But, Joseph, are you sure?  
How is one to tell?  
Suppose, for instance . . . Well . . . (CP, 362-63)*

In this period, we also see the influence on him of Kierkegaard's and Reinhold Niebuhr's thoughts on humor.<sup>47</sup>

A professor of theology who has put together an anthology of Kierkegaard humor has written: "Bundle together any other ten philosophers who have made a major impact in the history of philosophy. I challenge any reader to assemble a selection of humor from all of them put together that is funnier than what you find in this volume of Kierkegaard. But "laughter as such is not his [Kierkegaard's] major objective but rather the understanding of laughter within the stages of development of the human spirit. Nonetheless, while writing intricately dialectical philosophy, he is often not only funny, but keenly aware of just why something is funny."<sup>48</sup>

Kierkegaard saw humor as a path toward a higher consciousness or true faith-based wisdom—"humor is the last stage of existential inwardness before faith."<sup>49</sup> It helped people—though ultimately faith was necessary—to cope with the absurdities and contradictions of human existence, especially between our bodily time-limited existence and our aspirations toward the eternal.

Niebuhr shared the Danish thinker's appreciation of humor and also his belief that faith was necessary to deal with the "ultimate incongruities of existence." Niebuhr's thoughts on humor and faith are most clearly spelled out in an essay "Humour and Faith," in his 1946 book *Discerning the Signs of the Times*. But he probably earlier shared with Auden some of his

<sup>47</sup> On the influence of Kierkegaard and Niebuhr on Auden's humor, as well as on other aspects of it, especially as reflected in his 1940s long poems, see Timothy Eugene Green, "The Comic Art of W. H. Auden: Theory and Practice" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1974), at <http://etd.lib.ttu.edu/theses/available/etd-04102009-31295000823392/unrestricted/31295000823392.pdf>. I am indebted to Green's work not only for his insights, but also for calling my attention to many other useful primary and secondary sources.

<sup>48</sup> From Thomas C. Oden's "Introduction," Søren Kierkegaard, *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton University Press, 2004), available at <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i7746.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 259.

thinking on the subject. Like Kierkegaard, Niebuhr thought that humor was primarily a response to the incongruities that surround us and that it could help us become humbler and wiser. He especially stressed the necessity of laughing at ourselves, seeing it as a prelude to contrition for our faults and sins. He also thought that a sense of humor was in many ways “a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy” because it did “not make the mistake of prematurely reducing the irrational to a nice system.”

To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom. Such laughter does not obscure or defy the dark irrationality. It merely yields to it without too much emotion and friction. A humorous acceptance of fate is really the expression of a high form of self-detachment. If men do not take themselves too seriously, if they have some sense of the precarious nature of the human enterprise, they prove that they are looking at the whole drama of life not merely from the circumscribed point of their own interests but from some further and higher vantage point.

Nevertheless for Niebuhr “not humor but the cross” was the answer to dealing with the greatest evil. “There is no humor in the scene of Christ upon the Cross.” Facing the truly evil, only faith could square mercy and judgment. Only it was an adequate alternative to despair.<sup>50</sup>

Believing that one had to reach beyond humor to faith in order to achieve the highest wisdom did not mean that Niebuhr thought the person of faith could then dispense with humor. “The saintliest men frequently have a humorous glint in their eyes. They retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others.” Faith, he thought, could bring about a new joy, one that “expresses itself in an exuberance of which laughter is not the only, but is certainly one, expression.”<sup>51</sup>

The same year that Niebuhr’s essay appeared, Auden recited his poem “Under Which Lyre” at Harvard’s postwar Victory Commencement, and his poem reflected the same appreciation for humor found in Niebuhr’s essay. The words “Which lyre” referred to the choice graduates had between following the ways of the Greek gods Hermes or Apollo—the first a trickster, the second labeled by Auden as pompous. Auden summed up the followers of the two:

The sons of Hermes love to play,  
And only do their best when they  
Are told they oughtn’t;  
Apollo’s children never shrink  
From boring jobs but have to think  
Their work important.

When a follower of Apollo “occupies a college,”

Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge;  
He pays particular  
Attention to Commercial Thought,  
Public Relations, Hygiene, Sport,  
In his curricula.

<sup>50</sup> See [http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt) for an online version of Niebuhr’s book containing the essay; the relevant pages for the material cited here are 116-19, 121, 126-27.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-23.

Two stanzas of advice, Auden gives are:

Thou shalt not do as the dean pleases,  
 Thou shalt not write thy doctor's thesis  
 On education,  
 Thou shalt not worship projects nor  
 Shalt thou or thine bow down before  
 Administration.

.....

Thou shalt not be on friendly terms  
 With guys in advertising firms,  
 Nor speak with such  
 As read the Bible for its prose,  
 Nor, above all, make love to those  
 Who wash too much. (*CP*, 335, 337, 338)

Auden also appreciated Niebuhr's point about being able to laugh at ourselves. Never caring much about his appearance, he once said that he was "one of those persons who generally look like an unmade bed." Friends of his also recalled that he liked to refer to his "prematurely wrinkled face as looking like a wedding cake left out in the rain."<sup>52</sup>

## Shakespeare, Christianity, and Humor

In 1946-1947 Auden gave a series of lectures on Shakespeare at New York's New School for Social Research. Later, in the 1960s, he included a section of more than 100 pages on him in his *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [hereafter *DH*]. Auden believed that Shakespeare's plays reflected much wisdom, as well as Christian values. In one of his lectures he said, "You can argue for hours as to what Shakespeare believed, but his understanding of psychology is based on Christian assumptions."<sup>53</sup> In one of his later essays on Shakespeare he wrote:

Comedy . . . is not only possible within a Christian society, but capable of a much greater breadth and depth than classical comedy. . . . Christian comedy is based upon the belief that all men are sinners; no one, therefore, whatever his rank or talents, can claim immunity from the comic exposure and, indeed, the more virtuous, in the Greek sense, a man is, the more he realizes that he deserves to be exposed. Greater in depth because, while classical comedy believes that rascals should get the drubbing they deserve, Christian comedy believes that we are forbidden to judge others and that it is our duty to forgive each other. . . . In Christian comedy the characters are exposed and forgiven: when the curtain falls, the audience and the characters are laughing together.<sup>54</sup>

In a 1954 piece in the same collection Auden stated: "The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure, for he is not the Christ only an ordinary man, yet he believes that the command, 'Be ye perfect,' is seriously addressed to himself. . . . In proportion as he takes the command seriously . . . he will see himself as a comic figure. To take himself seriously would mean that he

<sup>52</sup> Kirsch, 29; Spears, 673.

<sup>53</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xiii, 312; for a good overview of Shakespeare's wisdom, see Alan Nordstrom, "Shakespeare's Take on Human Wisdom," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> "The Globe," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (hereafter *DH*) (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 177.

thought of himself, not as an ordinary man, but as Christ.”<sup>55</sup> If incongruity is essential to presenting comedy, what could be more incongruous than we humans, with all our flaws, trying to be perfect?

In several other essays in the same book, Auden adds other insights. Sometimes accused by critics of writing frivolous poetry, in an essay on the frivolous and the earnest he wrote, “A frivolity which, precisely because it is aware of what is serious, refuses to take seriously that which is not serious, can be profound.” And, “Christianity draws a distinction between what is frivolous and what is serious, but allows the former its place. What it condemns is not frivolity but idolatry, that is to say, taking the frivolous seriously.” And finally, “My duty towards God is to be happy; my duty towards my neighbor is to try my best to give him pleasure and alleviate his pain. No human being can *make* another one happy.”<sup>56</sup>

In one of his Shakespeare essays, Auden indicated that he preferred humor that reflected Christian charity and humility rather than hatred. He wrote that “laughing and loving have certain properties in common. Laughter is contagious but not, like physical force, irresistible. A man in a passion of any kind cannot be made to laugh; if he laughs, it is a proof that he has already mastered his passion.” He added, “Real laughter is absolutely unaggressive; we cannot wish people or things we find amusing to be other than they are; we do not desire to change them, far less hurt or destroy them.” He found Shakespeare’s Falstaff especially appealing because in his “untiring devotion to making others laugh” he was “a comic image for a love which is absolutely self-giving.”<sup>57</sup> A similar Auden sentiment is found in his attitude toward satire. In an essay on Byron’s *Don Juan* he wrote: “Satire and comedy both make use of the comic contradiction, but their aims are different. Satire would arouse in readers the desire to act so that contradictions disappear; comedy would persuade them to accept the contradictions in good humor as facts against which it is useless to rebel.”<sup>58</sup>

This did not mean, as we see from his poems and essays, that he was quiet about the evils he saw around him. The essay “Postscript: The Almighty Dollar” (in *DH*), contains phrases like “poor Mother Earth [in the USA] and her creatures who were ruthlessly plundered.” Around 1970, he wrote in an unpublished essay of “the threat of environmental disaster caused by plundering, poisoning, and possible nuclear contamination of the earth.” Another essay, “The Poet & The City” (in *DH*), states: “What the mass media offers is not popular art, but entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish. This is bad for everyone; the majority lose all genuine taste of their own, and the minority become cultural snobs.” He added, “In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous members.” Later on in the essay he objects to an “unreality in which people are treated as statistics,” and he ends it with the thought that “among the half dozen or so things for which a man of honor should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity, is not the least.”<sup>59</sup> Around 1970, he stated, “Yes, a Society so obsessed with rabid consumption stinks” (*CP*, 860).

<sup>55</sup> “Balaam and His Ass,” in *DH*, 135.

<sup>56</sup> “Postscript: The Frivolous & the Earnest,” in *DH*, 429-32.

<sup>57</sup> “The Prince’s Dog,” in *DH*, 206-07.

<sup>58</sup> “Don Juan,” in *DH*, 388.

<sup>59</sup> In *DH*, 83, 88-89, 335-36; Kirsch, 155.

Although he sometimes faulted Western societies, he praised them for their general openness and was much more critical of “closed” communist systems. After the USSR sent troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush a reform movement, he responded with his poem “August 1968.”

The Ogre does what ogres can,  
Deeds quite impossible for Man,  
But one prize is beyond his reach,  
The Ogre cannot master Speech:  
About a subjugated plain,  
Among its desperate and slain,  
The Ogre stalks with hands on hips,  
While drivel gushes from his lips. (*CP*, 804)

Other criticisms, like faulting those that lacked reverence for all forms of life or were guilty of environmental poisoning, were applicable to various societies, whether communist or not. His satiric poem “The Unknown Citizen” (1939) was relevant to varied modern bureaucratic societies. It began with the lines,

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be  
One against whom there was no official complaint,

and ended with,

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (*CP*, 250-51)<sup>60</sup>

But when it came to individuals, not societies or governments, Auden tended to shy away from satire, at least in his final decades. But even as early as 1932, long before he had returned to Christianity, fellow poet Stephen Spender noted that his satire was not the bitter kind. “Auden’s satire is most original in that it is hardly at all embittered. The strength of it does not seem to be derived from any feelings of spite, or even of very strong moral resentment, but from a most tremendous sense of fun, fun with a sting in it like the saltiness of the sea.”<sup>61</sup>

In his 1949 work “The Enchafed Flood,” Auden wrote that “the comic is a contradiction that does not involve suffering, either directly in the subject or indirectly by sympathetic identification with those involved in the contradiction.” But there was also “a particular religious form of the comic in which suffering is involved, i.e. a man may laugh at suffering on one condition that (1) it is he who suffers, (2) he knows that, ironically, this suffering is really a sign that he is in the truth, that he who suffers is really blest.”<sup>62</sup> A few years later in an essay later reprinted in his *The Dyer’s Hand* collection, he wrote that “when we really hate someone, we cannot find him comic; there are no genuinely funny stories about Hitler.” And he ended his essay with the reflection that “satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering. . . . In public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the only possible kind of attack is prophetic denunciation.”<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> An online version is available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15549>.

<sup>61</sup> Spender’s essay was entitled “Five Notes on Auden’s Writing,” and it appeared in *Twentieth Century* (July 1932); it is reprinted in *W.H. Auden*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge, 1997), with the quote being on p.104.

<sup>62</sup> Auden, *Prose III*, 78-79.

<sup>63</sup> “Notes on the Comic,” in *DH*, 372, 383.

Thus, by the time *The Dyer's Hand* essays were published in 1962, Auden had developed a clear idea of how Christianity should affect humor and vice versa. The Christian, he believed, should realize that we are all sinners however much any of us might strive for perfection. The best response for the incongruity between our heavenly aspirations and our all too-human failings is a humble, tolerant, charitable humor. Because Christianity is an incarnational faith based upon the idea that God became flesh in the person of Jesus, Auden did not reject the material world but believed Christians should work to help perfect it, primarily by loving other humans as well as all creation. When we humans forget love, we often act in a frivolous or comic way and our behavior becomes a fit subject of laughter. A good sense of humor, Auden believed, helped people maintain a proper sense of detachment and perspective. It helped keep them from taking themselves too seriously, while at the same time reflecting a certain mental balance.

## The Spirit of Carnival and the Holy Wise Fool

As Edward Mendelson indicated by the heading "The Concluding Carnival" for his final chapter of *Later Auden*, the poet's sense of humor during the last five years of his life is best captured by the symbol of the carnival. In late 1968 Auden received a copy of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, in which the Russian philosopher and literary theorist wrote that

the Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious *standpoint*. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the universe are accessible only to laughter.<sup>64</sup>

Bakhtin included the Frenchman Rabelais, the Spaniard Cervantes (author of *Don Quixote*), and the Englishman Shakespeare as the three great writers of this early era when humor often reflected wisdom. In addition, he mentions the Dutchman Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1509) as "one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature."<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin also wrote at some length about J. W. Goethe's depiction of carnival in his *Italian Journey*, which Auden and a friend had earlier translated into English.<sup>66</sup> But it was only after reading Bakhtin that the full significance of carnival struck him.

In "Epistle to a Godson," the first poem he wrote (in April 1969) after reading this book, Auden said that in writing advice to the younger generation the "dominant mood should be that of a Carnival" (CP, 835). In 1970-1971 he indicated his thinking on carnival in a long unpublished essay, "Work, Carnival, and Prayer." In it he stated, "Carnival, a celebration known equally well to Paganism and to medieval Christianity, but now, at least in industrialized and Protestant cultures, largely, and in my opinion, disastrously forgotten."<sup>67</sup>

In 1970 Auden wrote a review that was later included as an introduction to Loren Eiseley's *The Unexpected Universe*. In it he spelled out some of the ideas on carnival that he had been thinking about since reading Bakhtin's book.

<sup>64</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; *The Praise of Folly* in various formats is available in the John Wilson translation at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9371> (all subsequent quotes from it are from this translation).

<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, 134, 246-52.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Kirsch, 164-65.

He [Eiseley] recognizes that man is the only creature who speaks personally, works, and prays, but nowhere does he overtly say that man is the only creature who laughs. True laughter is not to be confused with the superior titter of the intellect, though we are capable, alas, of that, too: when we truly laugh, we laugh simultaneously with and at. True laughter (belly laughter) I would define as the spirit of Carnival.

. . . Carnival celebrates the unity of our human race as mortal creatures, who come into this world and depart from it without our consent, who must eat, drink, defecate, belch, and break wind in order to live, and procreate if our species is to survive. Our feelings about this are ambiguous. . . . We oscillate between wishing we were unreflective animals and wishing we were disembodied spirits, for in either case we should not be problematic to ourselves. The Carnival solution of this ambiguity is to laugh, for laughter is simultaneously a protest and an acceptance. During Carnival, all social distinctions are suspended, even that of sex. Young men dress up as girls, young girls as boys. The escape from social personality is symbolized by the wearing of masks. . . .

. . . The world of Laughter is much more closely related to the world of Worship and Prayer than either is to the everyday, secular world of Work, for both [Worship and Prayer] are worlds in which we are all equal. . . . In the world of Work, on the other hand, we are not and cannot be equal, only diverse and interdependent: each of us, whether as scientist, artist, cook, cabdriver, or whatever, has to do “our thing” . . . .

A satisfactory human life, individually or collectively, is possible only if proper respect is paid to all three worlds [Work, Laughter, Prayer]. Without Prayer and Work, the Carnival laughter turns ugly, the comic obscenities grubby and pornographic, the mock aggression into real hatred and cruelty. (The hippies, it appears to me, are trying to recover the sense of Carnival which is so conspicuously absent in this age, but so long as they reject Work they are unlikely to succeed.) Without Laughter and Work, Prayer turns Gnostic, cranky, Pharisaic, while those who try to live by Work alone, without Laughter or Prayer, turn into insane lovers of power, tyrants who would enslave Nature to their immediate desires—an attempt which can only end in utter catastrophe, shipwreck on the Isle of the Sirens.

Carnival in its traditional forms is not, I think, for Dr. Eiseley any more than it is for me. Neither of us can enjoy crowds and loud noises. But even introverted intellectuals can share the Carnival experience if they are prepared to forget their dignity as Dr. Eiseley did when he unexpectedly encountered a fox cub.

Auden then goes on to quote Eiseley’s description of the cub—“a vast and playful humor in his face”—and his reaction to him. “It was not a time for human dignity. . . . On impulse, I picked up clumsily a whiter bone [than the one the cub had in his mouth] and shook it in teeth that had not entirely forgotten their original purpose. Round and round we tumbled for one ecstatic moment. . . . For just a moment I had held the universe at bay by the simple expedient of sitting on my haunches before a fox den and tumbling about with a chicken bone. It is the gravest, most meaningful act I shall ever accomplish.” Auden’s reaction was, “Bravo!”<sup>68</sup>

In carnival celebrations, an important part was played by the fool. Bakhtin had written that “folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has the negative element of debasement and destruction . . . and the positive element of renewal and truth. Folly is the opposite of wisdom—inverted wisdom, inverted truth. It is the other side, the lower stratum of official laws and conventions, derived from them. Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness.”<sup>69</sup> Other modern writings have dealt with the long tradition of “holy fools,” both in real life and in literature, in the Western and Eastern Orthodox world. Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* is just one example. Still

<sup>68</sup> W. H. Auden, “Introduction: Concerning the Unpredictable,” in Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*, Harvest Book ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979), 21-24.

<sup>69</sup> Bakhtin, 260.

other works have noted that the equivalent of “holy fools” have also existed in other parts of the world, especially within the Buddhist tradition.<sup>70</sup>

Long before he read Bakhtin, Auden had appreciated the European tradition of fools and foolery, a fact that probably helps account for his enthusiasm over Bakhtin’s book. In his “The Sea and the Mirror,” written in the early 1940s, Auden’s reimagining of Shakespeare’s Caliban represents “his first fully realized embodiment of the wise fool, a persona that was to dominate much of his later poetry.”<sup>71</sup> And, as we have already seen, one of his favorite Shakespearean characters was Falstaff. In his Harvard Commencement poem of 1946, he stated, “Falstaff the fool confronts forever \ The prig Prince Hal,” and made it clear he preferred Falstaff (*CP*, 335). In one of his 1962 essays in *The Dyer’s Hand*, he wrote, “Overtly, Falstaff is a Lord of Misrule, parabolically, he is a comic symbol for the supernatural order of Charity.”<sup>72</sup>

The term “Lord of Misrule” was associated with what was known as the Feast of Fools. Bakhtin frequently mentioned it and theologian Harvey Cox, who begins two of his chapters in *The Feast of Fools* with quotes of Auden poems, gives the following description of it:

During the medieval era there flourished in parts of Europe a holiday known as the Feast of Fools. On that colorful occasion, usually celebrated about January first, even ordinarily pious priests and serious townfolk donned bawdy masks, sang outrageous ditties, and generally kept the whole world awake with revelry and satire. Minor clerics painted their faces, strutted about in the robes of their superiors, and mocked the stately rituals of church and court. Sometimes a Lord of Misrule, a Mock King, or a Boy Bishop was elected to preside over the events. In some places the Boy Bishop even celebrated a parody mass. During the Feast of Fools, no custom or convention was immune to ridicule and even the highest personages of the realm could expect to be lampooned.

Like Auden, Cox also lamented the decline of that festival’s spirit, writing “we are the poorer for it.”<sup>73</sup>

In his 1954 essay “Balaam and the Ass,” Auden wrote that in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* “the only individual who can speak to the King with authority, not as a subject, is the fool,” and that sometimes “God uses him as a mouthpiece.” And earlier, in his 1949 prose work *The Enchafèd Flood*, he asserted that the mad Don Quixote “is a representation, the greatest in literature, of the Religious Hero.”<sup>74</sup> Auden also wrote the verse narration for the medieval musical drama the *Play of Daniel*, which premiered in 1958. Scholars have established that this drama was a Feast of Fools play demonstrating the theme of misrule that characterized such plays and other Feast of Fools merriment.

What Auden admired about wise or holy fools was that despite often reflecting physical deprivations they focused on what really mattered most, love and the celebration of life. And because such fools were unconcerned about social status, power, wealth or other such typical human concerns they were freer than most to say and do what they liked. His 1947 poem “The Duet,” contrasts a rich lady in a big house singing a sad song versus a sort of wise fool, “a

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<sup>70</sup> Besides the book by Saward mentioned above in n. 15, see various books by Conrad Hyers, for example his *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), especially Ch. 6, which deals with holy fools.

<sup>71</sup> Green, 136 (note that the page number refers to the actual page number on Green’s dissertation and not the pdf page number).

<sup>72</sup> “The Prince’s Dog,” in *DH*, 198.

<sup>73</sup> *The Feast of Fools* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970), 3-4.

<sup>74</sup> “Balaam and His Ass,” in *DH*, 125; *Prose III*, 64.

scrunty beggar \ With one glass eye and one hickory leg, \ Stumping about half drunk” in the freezing air, playing happy music on his barrel-organ (*CP*, 340-41).

But it was not until reading Bakhtin in 1968 that many of his separate reflections came together concerning faith, humor, carnival, and the celebration of life and material existence. As Mendelson wrote, “When Auden found unity and energy in Carnival’s anarchic noises, everything came of it.”<sup>75</sup> Another Auden scholar summed up the impact of Carnival this way:

Carnival laughter, the laughter provoked by Auden’s celebration of the human body, reveals that the problematic nature of the human condition is not something to be ashamed of or to be distraught over but something to revel in. Carnival laughter is ethical and Christian in its demonstration that it is possible to love those we laugh at, as well as those we laugh with. Carnival laughter, moreover, is the free, spontaneous laughter of those released from the bondage of fear, alienation, and despair. As a wise fool in his poetry, Auden knows that a dignity based on sublimity is not the ideal Christian attitude. Great laughter, Auden believes, releases man from the aridity of social dignity and self-righteousness and allows him to celebrate his biological existence and bring a catharsis to his discontent.<sup>76</sup>

Prior to 1940, Auden had always been concerned with bureaucracy’s attempt to depersonalize people (see, e.g., his 1939 poem “The Unknown Citizen”), and this continued after he sometimes adopted the facade of a wise fool—”In his role as wise fool, Auden strives to be a gadfly to all worldly attitudes that would depersonalize, dehumanize, and enslave.”<sup>77</sup>

Despite all of his enthusiasm for the spirit of carnival and laughter, Auden realized (as we have seen above on p. 18) that such enthusiasm had to be balanced by work and prayer. Many writers on wisdom, like Robert Sternberg, also emphasize the importance of balancing in one’s life, and others, like Ken Wilber, have stressed how important meditation, which bears some resemblance to Auden’s concept of prayer (forgetting one’s ego and listening), can be for achieving wisdom.<sup>78</sup>

Flawed human that he was, and as he himself well knew, Auden did not always maintain the proper balance that he sought. Mendelson suggests that in his last few years he sometimes went too far in playing the fool and “jettisoned much of his own public dignity.”<sup>79</sup> But part of Auden’s appeal and long-lasting influence is that when we read his poetry or prose or about his life, we can identify with him. We do so just because he was so human, so down-to-earth, so full of the contradictions and incongruities of the human condition.

## Conclusion: Solving the Puzzle

In 1940 Auden wrote a favorable review of poet and biographer Carl Sandburg’s four-volume *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. Auden wrote that Lincoln was a great man and that such men share a common trait.

The one infallible symptom of greatness is the capacity for double focus. They know that all absolutes are heretical but that one can only act in a given circumstance by assuming one. Knowing themselves, they are skeptical about human nature but not despairing; they know that they are weak but not helpless: perfection

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<sup>75</sup> *Later Auden*, 497.

<sup>76</sup> Green, 188.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>78</sup> Sternberg at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>; for Wilber’s comments on meditation, see [http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/formation\\_int\\_inst.cfm/xid,8287/yid,9296268](http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/formation_int_inst.cfm/xid,8287/yid,9296268).

<sup>79</sup> *Later Auden*, 498.

is impossible but one can be or do better. . . . Conscious of achievement and vocation they are conscious of how little depends on their free will and how much they are vehicles for powers they can never fully understand but to which they can listen. Objective about themselves with the objectivity of the truly humble, they often shock the conceited out of their wits. . . . Knowing that the only suffering that can be avoided is the attempt to escape from suffering, they are funny and enjoy life.<sup>80</sup>

Although Auden was too humble to consider himself a “great man,” he shared the “double focus” of which he spoke. He saw well and often emphasized the dualities and paradoxes of our existence—the material and the spiritual, reason and faith, seriousness and humor, the tragic and the comic, and folly and wisdom. And yet, perhaps indicating that Marx’s dialectic had some lasting effect on him, he believed that out of supposed opposites a higher synthesis could be created. This leads us back to the question of reconciling wisdom, faith, and humor, as Auden tried to do.

Most atheists regard religious faith as contrary to wisdom, and St. Paul and many Christian thinkers after him agree that in the person of Jesus Christ, “God made foolish the ‘wisdom’ of this world.” But faith and wisdom, or faith and reason, are only irreconcilable opposites if defined too narrowly, and Auden did not think narrowly. Rather than disqualifying one from being wise, faith, as long as it is not intolerant or too dogmatic, can be an aid to wisdom. As we have seen above (p. 6), Auden distinguished between faiths and Faith, but defined them both broadly and thought the latter was necessary to make sense of one’s life and act most effectively. Wisdom scholars generally agree that being a religious believer, as long as one is tolerant and open-minded, is not a hindrance to wisdom, and can indeed promote its values like love and compassion and provide insights that reasoning alone does not furnish.<sup>81</sup> Even for atheists and agnostics who are wise, some sort of faith (for example, in the future or in Progress) seems necessary.<sup>82</sup>

This usage of faith in a broad sense does not deny the unique features of Christianity or of any other religious faith; or that followers of various religions, like the Christian Auden, believe that their own faith offers something to them that no other faith could. But most wisdom scholars believe that wise people can be found among various faiths, and even among people who express their doubts about the existence of God. And who is to say that a compassionate agnostic humanist cannot be wise?

If, as Auden believed, “the existence of absolutes implies the unity of truth, [and] the truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict,” then Faith is not necessarily opposed to reason. It just cannot be proven. Whether a God exists, whether Jesus Christ was resurrected and is part of a divine Trinity is beyond scientific reasoning. Such beliefs require, as Kierkegaard and Auden perceived, a “leap of faith.” It also follows that if the truths arrived at in different fields cannot conflict, then one of the wisdoms that St. Paul writes of, worldly or Christian, must contain falsehoods. And if we examine carefully the “worldly wisdom” that Paul

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<sup>80</sup> *Prose II*, 56-57; the American edition of Auden’s collection first containing his “New Year Letter,” was entitled *The Double Man* (New York: Random House, 1941). Like Auden, both Sandburg and Lincoln had a rich sense of humor; see my “Carl Sandburg’s Wisdom through Humor,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgHumor.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> See, e. g., Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom*, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>. I have previously dealt with the relation of faith and wisdom in “The Wisdom of E. F. Schumacher,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/SchumacherEssay.pdf>, 22-27.

<sup>82</sup> Two such men I have written about are the Russians Anton Chekhov and Andrei Sakharov; see “The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/ChekhovEssay.pdf>, and “The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/SakharovEssay.pdf>.

wrote of, we see that he did not consider it real wisdom at all, but a pseudo-wisdom held by those who lack humility and are “puffed up.”

Just as some deny the compatibility of religion and wisdom, others deny the compatibility of religion and humor. For example, the novelist Milan Kundera in his *Testaments Betrayed* has written, “Religion and humor are incompatible.” But again the problem here is too narrow a meaning, in this case for both “religion” and “humor.” He narrows “humor” down to a “particular species of the comic” that came into being during the Renaissance, especially with Rabelais and Cervantes; and he says that it is an “*invention* bound up with the birth of the novel.” Such humor, he writes, “renders ambiguous everything it touches.”<sup>83</sup>

The religion that condemned the books of such authors as Rabelais and Erasmus for what it considered their irreverent approach was Catholicism with its Index of Prohibited Books.<sup>84</sup> But as the Protestant Harvey Cox recognized the Protestants of the Reformation era were also intolerant of the Feast-of-Fools’ disrespectful humor. And Kundera also criticizes Muslims who attacked Salman Rushdie’s novel *Satanic Verses* for being blasphemous. When Kundera writes that religion is incompatible with humor, it is these types of dogmatic religious behavior that he has in mind.

As he recognizes, however, it is not just religion that can be dogmatic but also political systems like Communism or Nazism that are intolerant of any humor not supportive of its tenets. Dogmatism is unwise for many reasons including its failure to exercise humility, which is necessary for the most developed wisdom. Thus, Kundera is correct in thinking that humor is on the side of wisdom when it recognizes that we live in a world of moral ambiguity, where we are all sometimes foolish and no one possesses absolute truth, including religious believers.

But such believers need not be dogmatic, and Auden was not. Nor are many other religious believers. And there is a long and widespread tradition of religious believers who have valued humor. Even before the Renaissance era, when Kundera believes humor was born, one of the great medieval mystics, Meister Eckhart, displayed an appreciation for humor when he wrote that in understanding God, humor could help divert our minds from too much emphasis on the individual ego and attempting to understand God only by logical-rational approaches. A more dogmatic papacy, however, did not appreciate the wide-ranging ideas of Eckhart, and in 1329 condemned some of his writing as heretical.<sup>85</sup>

In the centuries that followed many Christians combined religious faith with humor. As we have seen, Auden believed that Shakespeare’s wisdom and humor were based on a Christian perspective. The same could be said of Kierkegaard and of Niebuhr, who maintained that “the saintliest men frequently have a humorous glint in their eyes. . . . [and] retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others” (see above, p. 13). Auden was also an admirer of G. K. Chesterton, a convert to Catholicism, about whom Paul Johnson devoted a chapter in his recent book *Humorists: From Hogarth to Noel Coward*. Auden wrote an introduction to a book of Chesterton’s prose and also stated, “I cannot think of a single comic poem by Chesterton that is not a triumphant success.”<sup>86</sup> In his autobiography Alan Watts, who helped popularize Zen

<sup>83</sup> Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 5-6, 9. See also Benjamin Letzler, “Towards a Metahumor, or, Kundera, Thick Glasses and Anchises’ Piggyback Ride,” at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/lithum/gallo/humor.html>.

<sup>84</sup> See <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/indexlibrorum.html> for an article on the Index.

<sup>85</sup> C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Cobb, CA: Frog Books, 2008), xxiv, 14, 188, 249.

<sup>86</sup> *Chesterton’s Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. and intro. W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 11-18; W. H. Auden, “The Gift of Wonder,” in *G. K. Chesterton—A Centenary Appraisal*, ed. John Sullivan (London: Paul Elek, 1974), 78.

Buddhism in America, praised Chesterton's humor and found his essay "On Nonsense" the "most profound and provoking" of all the essays that the prolific Chesterton wrote.<sup>87</sup>

Mention of Watts reminds us of the emphasis on humor in Zen attested to by some Zen practitioners and scholars. According to Conrad Hyers, who has studied humor in various religious traditions, Zen has "self-consciously employed and developed humor: (1) humor as a technique for reversing and collapsing categories, and (2) humor as a technique for embracing opposites," and within Zen, humor can be viewed "as an expression of enlightenment, liberation, and inner harmony."<sup>88</sup> Hyers also quotes the following passage.

The Buddha's sense of humour—which is so evident in many of his discourses—is closely bound up with his sense of compassion; both are born from an understanding of greater connections, from an insight into the interrelatedness of all things and all living beings and the chain reactions of cause and effect. His smile is the expression of one who can see the "wondrous play of ignorance and knowledge" against its universal background and its deeper meaning. Only thus is it possible not to be overpowered by the misery of the world, or by our own sense of righteousness that judges and condemns what is not in accordance with our own understanding, and divides the world into good and bad. A man with a sense of humour cannot but be compassionate in his heart, because his sense of proportion allows him to see things in their proper perspective.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, we come to perhaps the greatest difficulty: how to reconcile wisdom with the spirit of folly so prevalent in carnival celebrations like the Feast of Fools. Both St. Paul and Bakhtin express the basic paradox. Paul's statement "If any of you thinks he is wise in the ways of this world, he must become a fool to become really wise" compares with Bakhtin's "Folly is the opposite of wisdom" and "Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness."

In trying to square folly and fools with wisdom a good place to start is Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*. He quotes St. Paul on folly and wisdom, but goes much further in depicting folly as part of the human condition that we all share. Erasmus ticks off follies found among all classes—like those of lovers, spouses, money-seekers, nationalists, warmongers, and the old trying to look young—but he targets mainly the folly of the upper classes like kings, courtiers, popes, and bishops, and the most pretentious and would-be wise, like writers, lawyers, scientists, philosophers, and theologians.

Thus, Erasmus's Folly, who is depicted as a goddess speaking to her followers, develops more fully what St. Paul had stated in his epistles: the "worldly wise" are not really wise at all. Whereas Paul had indicated that they were self-satisfied, pretentious, and crafty, Folly unleashes a much longer list of their negative traits: austere, cold, unfriendly, proud, vain, blind to their own faults, impractical, timid, and bookish. Perhaps, the most important of their defects is a lack of compassion and humility because without possessing these it is difficult for anyone to be truly wise. In the end Erasmus endorses Paul's advice, "If anyone among ye . . . seem to be wise, let him be a fool that he may be wise."

Falstaff and Don Quixote seem to be following the advice of Paul and Erasmus to become "holy fools," and we have seen how Auden admired these characters of Shakespeare and

<sup>87</sup> Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography, 1915-1965* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 259.

<sup>88</sup> Conrad Hyers, "Humor in Zen, Comic Midwifery," *Philosophy East and West* 39 (July 1989), 270; "The Ancient Zen Master as Clown-Figure and Comic Midwife," *Philosophy East and West* 20, no. 1 (1970), 3-18; and for religion and humor more broadly, his previously mentioned *The Spirituality of Comedy*.

<sup>89</sup> "Humor in Zen," 276, quoting Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (London: Hutchinson, 1956), 177.

Cervantes.<sup>90</sup> About the same time that Auden was praising Bakhtin's emphasis on Carnival, theologian Harvey Cox's *The Feast of Fools* appeared. Its last chapter was entitled "Christ the Harlequin," and, unlike two of its earlier chapters, it did not start off with an Auden epigraph, but with a variation of St. Paul's words quoted earlier, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Yet the question of how "the foolishness of God" can be higher than man's wisdom still is not solved. Nor is the precise nature of why Auden praised so highly Falstaff and Don Quixote. We need to look still closer at Auden's writings. In his poem dealing with the first Christmas, "For the Time Being," he has the star guiding the Three Wise Men to Jesus say, "I am that star most dreaded by the wise, / For they are drawn against their will to me." One of the Wise Men, like Erasmus's "wise men" in *The Praise of Folly*, is depicted as previously being too much head and too little heart. He now confesses that his learned philosophizing was not enough.

But arriving at the Greatest Good by introspection  
And counting the Greater Number, left no time for affection,  
Laughter, kisses, squeezing, smiles:  
And I learned why the learned are as despised as they are.  
To discover how to be loving now  
Is the reason I follow this star. (*CP*, 368-70)

After arriving at the manger where Jesus is born the Wise Men say,

Love is more serious than Philosophy  
Who sees no humour in her observation  
That Truth is knowing that we know we lie. (*CP*, 383)

Later in the 1940s one of Auden's poems included the lines

I draw breath; that is of course to wish  
No matter what, to be wise,  
To be different, to die and the cost,  
No matter how, is Paradise  
Lost of course and myself owing a death. (*CP*, 626)

The words are uttered by one waking from sleep and regaining consciousness. In doing so, Auden indicates that he is like Adam in Eden eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The newly awakened regains his will (his "I") and wishes, like Adam did, to be wise and unique (different). In these lines, Auden is suggesting that the desire to be wise, whether individuals realize it or not, is part of the human condition. And in a sense he is correct, for we all wish to make wise decisions even if the words "wise" or "wisdom" never occur to us. But for Auden, as for Paul, Erasmus, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, there is a difference between worldly wisdom and Christian wisdom.

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<sup>90</sup> Besides Bakhtin, numerous others have examined this tradition of praising holy fools. See, e.g., Walter Jacob Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Cathleen T. McLoughlin, *Shakespeare, Rabelais, and the Comical-Historical* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); and Eric J. Ziolkowski, *The Sanctification of Don Quixote: From Hidalgo to Priest* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1991), 207-14; and "The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue," *American Studies International* (Feb. 1, 2003), at [http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi\\_0199-2771832/The-holy-fool-in-Russian.html](http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-2771832/The-holy-fool-in-Russian.html).

In 1956, when he wrote “such comprehension of Christian wisdom as I have, little though it be, would be very much less without” Blake, Lawrence, Freud, and Marx, he was suggesting a uniqueness about “Christian wisdom.” That uniqueness follows from what he had written previously about love being more serious than philosophy. The worldly wise that St. Paul and Erasmus had written about had not placed love first. In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul had written, “If I speak in the language of humans and angels but have no love, I have become a reverberating gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all secrets and every form of knowledge, and if I have absolute faith so as to move mountains but have no love, I am nothing.”

We have already seen that for Auden the commandment of Jesus that “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” was the core of his religious belief and that fellow poet Joseph Brodsky thought that the lines “If equal affection cannot be / Let the more loving one be me” formed Auden’s “main precept.” The type of wisdom he sought, therefore, emphasized love above all other values. Most definitions of wisdom do not do this. The Oxford Dictionary definition—“the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgement; the quality of being wise—does not, for example, mention love or compassion. Even treatments of wisdom values very seldom prioritize them. But surely it makes a difference whether in such a list creativity, serenity, love, or some other values comes first. In an insightful essay on Shakespeare’s wisdom, one scholar displays this insight when he writes that “wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head,” with “a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness.”<sup>91</sup>

But if placing love above all narrows down the type of wisdom Auden sought, it still does differentiate Christian wisdom from the wisdom of many other religions, or even some secular humanistic philosophies, that would place love first. What Auden’s life and thinking illustrates, however, is not the superiority of the Christian way of wisdom, but Harold Bloom’s statement that “Christians who believe, Muslims who submit, Jews who trust—all in or to God’s will—have their own criteria for wisdom, yet each needs to realize those norms individually if the words of God are to enlighten or comfort.”<sup>92</sup>

Christian wisdom is what made sense for Auden because, as he wrote in 1950 about Faith, it should provide a person with presuppositions that help him to “make sense of his past” and act meaningfully and effectively in the future (see above, p. 6). Both St. Paul and Erasmus had written about “the foolishness of the cross” being part of Christian wisdom, and in 1954 Auden had written that one who takes seriously Christ’s words about taking up the cross must “see himself as a comic figure” (see above, p. 14). Hence, for Auden, as for his Christian predecessors, the love that he championed entailed a willingness to “take up the cross,” to be willing to suffer. But such suffering need not be regarded as an indication of a masochistic temperament. Rather, the cross symbolizes that great love entails self-sacrifice and a willingness to undergo suffering in order to practice that love.

In his attitude toward suffering and a writer’s depiction of it, Auden once again resembles Shakespeare. In one of his essays about the great dramatist and poet, he wrote that

suffering is an inescapable element in life . . . to be accepted, not as just in itself, as a penalty proportionate to the particular sins of the sufferer, but as an occasion for grace or as a process of purgation. Those who try to refuse suffering not only fail to avoid it but are plunged deeper into sin and suffering. Thus, the

<sup>91</sup> Nordstrom, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.

<sup>92</sup> *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 1-2.

difference between Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies is not that the characters suffer in the one and not in the other, but that in comedy the suffering leads to self-knowledge, repentance, forgiveness, love, and in tragedy it leads in the opposite direction into self-blindness, defiance, hatred.<sup>93</sup>

As we have seen, Auden suffered for his own great love, Chester Kallman. As one commentator observed about Kallman's unwillingness to establish a monogamous relationship with Auden, "This fundamental unhappiness at the heart of his [Auden's] life shaped his whole understanding of faith. In short, he came to believe, through great pain and grief, that his vocation was to love, even if he was not loved in the same way in return, and to be a poet."<sup>94</sup> Auden's first response to Kallman's ending of their sexual relations in 1941, however, was not love, but hate—he felt like killing Kallman. Only later did he come to "interpret the episode as the discovery, not the loss of a morally coherent world."<sup>95</sup> No doubt Auden hoped that in his response to Kallman's 1941 diktat he was taking the comic path that led to "self-knowledge, repentance, forgiveness, love," not the tragic one that led to "self-blindness, defiance, hatred."

In dealing with Auden's religion, Kirsch maps out the complex relationship between his sexual tendencies and his faith, and he indicates that part of Christianity's attraction to him was its emphasis on the incarnational, which helped deal with the spirit-versus-matter dichotomy he strove to overcome. In 1940 he wrote in a poem that he later revised so as to read,

With the Duchy of his mind:  
 All his lifetime he will find  
 Swollen knee or aching tooth  
 Hostile to his quest for truth;  
 Never will his prick belong  
 To his world of right and wrong,  
 Nor its values comprehend  
 Who is foe and who is friend. (*CP*, 294)<sup>96</sup>

One of the reasons he later welcomed the spirit of Carnival was that despite humans' spiritual dimension it also celebrated their bodily existence. The Carnival answer for this dual spirit/animal nature "is to laugh, for laughter is simultaneously a protest and an acceptance" (see above, p. 18).

At a memorial services for Auden in Oxford, poet Stephen Spender said about his long-time friend, "Throughout the whole development of his poetry. . . his theme had been love: not Romantic love but love as interpreter of the world, love as individual need, love as redeeming power in the life of society and of the individual." In the Tribute book edited by Spender, another friend of Auden's, Hannah Arendt, wrote about him, "Now, with the sad wisdom of remembrance, he seems to me to have been an expert in the infinite varieties of unrequited love." Others commented that despite his many friends and his loving nature, he seems to have suffered from an "essential loneliness."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> "The Globe," in *DH*, 175.

<sup>94</sup> Rt. Rev. Lord Harries of Pentregarth, "Christianity and Literature: The Christian Reticence of W. H. Auden," at <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?PageId=45&EventId=820>.

<sup>95</sup> Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 175-76.

<sup>96</sup> The main change between his earlier poem and this revision, included as part of a series entitled "Shorts," is his substitution of the word "prick" for the earlier "sex."

<sup>97</sup> *Auden Tribute*, 183, 205, 246, 247.

Still others in this Tribute book wrote of his faith, his wisdom, and his humor. About the time Auden returned to Christianity in 1940, he wrote “Shepherd’s Carol,” which his friend composer Benjamin Britten put to music. At a second 1973 memorial service, this time in New York, a choir sang it, and at its refrain Auden’s friends’ laughter mixed with their tears. It captured so well his spirit.

O lift your little pinkie,  
and touch the winter sky.  
Love’s all over the mountains  
where the beautiful go to die.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 176; Kirsch, 177. I have touched on Auden’s continued relevance for today in “W. H. Auden, Humor, and the Politics of Today,” at <http://hnn.us/articles/134653.html>.