“A Secret System of Caves and Conduits”
Patterns of Thought in W. H. Auden’s Poetry About the Natural World

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................................................. i

Introduction: The Rural Auden....................................................................................................................................1

Chapter One: Auden’s Fixation with the Mines of Rookhope...................................................................................9

   *The importance of place and exclusive knowledge in Juvenilia*

   *The inhospitable land in “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed”*

   *Desolation and discovery in “New Year Letter”*

   *Love and isolation in “Amor Loci”*

Chapter Two: Landscape, the Human Body, and Anxiety.......................................................................................25

   *Landscape as filtered lens in “Musée des Beaux Arts”*

   *The personality of geology in “In Praise of Limestone”*

   *The landscape of the imagination in “Under Sirius”*

   *The bodily ecosystem of “A New Year Greeting”*

Chapter Three: Auden Goes “Howling to his art”: Writing on Places Unknown....................................................41

   *Loneliness and the search for connection in “Journey to Iceland”*

   *The misery of the city in “Brussels in Winter”*

   *Corrupting the countryside in “The Capital”*

   *Romanticism of the moon and distrust of technology in “Moon Landing”*

Conclusion: “Howling” Again....................................................................................................................................57

Works Consulted..........................................................................................................................................................61
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**Introduction: The Rural Auden**

W. H. Auden would not have wanted his poetry about nature to be analyzed extensively in its own right. In a 1929 journal entry, he writes, “The progress of man seems to be in a direction away from nature. The development on consciousness may be compared with the breaking away of the child from the Oedipus relation. Just as one must be weaned from one’s mother, one must be weaned from the Earth Mother”¹. When a civilization progresses, it transgresses farther away from nature. Auden writes that the world should progress even farther from nature if it is to change and improve, resisting the idea that the natural can advance mankind in any way.

Auden’s poetry, however, negates these conclusions. By coming back to nature repeatedly as a theme throughout his work, Auden meditates frequently on the natural world. Throughout his entire poetic career, unlike his career as a prose writer, Auden remains transfixed by the idea of nature, the natural world, and how humanity and nature affect one another. Whether Auden writes about the mines of Rookhope, where he spent time in his childhood; a small town in Italy where its inhabitants mimic the limestone embedded in its shores; or the moon upon man’s first travel into space, the poet keeps coming back to nature as a fruitful, perplexing, and rewarding topic for poetry. For convenience, I refer to “Auden” and the speaker of Auden’s poems interchangeably, but I do not equate the actual, historical W. H. Auden with his speaker in what has been called the “biographical fallacy.” Instead, I use these two terms (“Auden” and “speaker”) to identify the consistent speaker that appears throughout Auden’s poems.

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Auden’s poetry often appears to begin with one subject and then, later in the poem, instead focuses on something else, a subject less easily accessible or more sensitive. This quote from his 1929 journal reveals this same trait in Auden’s writing, where the poet writes one opinion, but his work shows another. Nature appears as a theme laced with latent undertones of emotion.

In his introduction to Early Auden, scholar Edward Mendelson writes, “In childhood, before he wrote a line of poetry, Auden imagined himself an architect and engineer, the maker of a fictional landscape” (Early, xiii). This statement combines many scholars’ view of Auden with the view of Auden that I want to advocate in this thesis. While many critics see Auden as rational and calculating, I argue that the element of his poetry that is not rational and calculating comes through in his appreciation for the “fictional landscape,” for the more emotional and affective parts of his poetry that address nature. Mendelson’s opinion about Auden’s biography also applies to his poetry in that, while the poet often seems to have a stiff, calculated style of writing, beneath the surface of the poem exists a rich landscape, real or imagined, that contributes immensely to Auden’s success as a poet.

While Auden’s body of work includes poetry, prose, plays, and non-fiction, for this thesis I narrow his work to poems that include the natural world. What interested me about Auden initially was his nature poetry, particularly “In Praise of Limestone,” which is canonical but also concerns the natural world. Analyzing this poem brought up, for me, the question of how Auden discusses nature, and especially nature in relation to the people that inhabit, affect, and are affected by their environments. Auden writes poems set in different towns, countries, and continents, and his diversity of places as well as the large number of his poems that prominently feature place and nature led me to want to analyze the topic further.
When I chose the rest of the poems to discuss, I loosely adhered to this standard—poems that concerned nature and were somewhat well-known in the canon. I have included a couple of exceptions, such as “The Capital” and selections from Auden’s juvenilia, but the main focus of this thesis is canonized poems as they fit into Auden’s larger work. Studying canonized and non-canonized work allows me to make generalizations, too, about his work as a whole. I also took care to discuss poems that were written in the wide range of Auden’s poetic career. I made these decisions for two reasons: firstly, I wanted to argue something about Auden’s work as a whole, which required me to examine poems from his juvenilia to those from his final decade of life; and secondly, Auden’s canonized poems have not been discussed together in the manner in which I analyze them. As a group of thirteen, the poems fit into a chronology of Auden’s lifelong thoughts about nature.

In looking at existing critical work, I focused mostly on the work of Edward Mendelson and John Fuller, two prominent Auden scholars. The way that Fuller dissects Auden’s poetry in his book of commentary is to “encapsulate the publishing history, paraphrase difficult passages, explain allusions, point out interesting variants (including material abandoned in drafts), identify sources and influences, look at the verse form and offer critical interpretation”\(^2\). In short, Fuller focuses on the details in this commentary, picking apart each individual poem. He categorizes the collection by breaking down each individual poem into its own miniscule pieces. In analyzing these poems I will use the same tools Fuller does to employ what I have learned as “close reading,” or paying attention to small details in the poem to make larger extrapolations about the work as a whole. These subtleties are important to the argument, which focuses largely on the unsaid.

Mendelson, on the other hand, writes more a more general overview of all of Auden’s work, as “history and interpretation”\textsuperscript{3}, making more generalized statements, such as whether Auden should “treat the poem as a \textit{myth}, a statement or imitation of some overarching necessity that no one can evade or control, or as a \textit{parable}, a statement or imitation of acts and feelings that both writer and reader are free to choose or renounce, free to treat as an example or a warning” (\textit{Later}, xv). By describing the large issues with which Auden grapples, Mendelson allows his readers to have a more overarching view of Auden’s work. While Fuller works from the ground up, Mendelson’s viewpoint is more top-down.

In this thesis, I meld these two approaches, using this method of breaking down the small details in Auden’s poems, but also looking beyond to the larger scope of these small details, combining them with the greater arc of Auden’s nature poetry in general. Essentially, I link the small, minute details of close reading with my own insights into Auden’s nature poetry, especially his frequently canonized poems. In combining these two strategies I analyze Auden’s work in an original way.

Fuller and Mendelson both categorize their collections of Auden’s work chronologically, a method which emphasizes the changes in Auden’s work from his early to late stages of writing. Although Auden’s work certainly changes, especially with regard to style, I organize the poems first in terms of their content (in each specific chapter), and then, within each chapter, chronologically. This grouping contradicts the traditional way of organizing Auden’s poetry and asserts that it is important to look at Auden’s work in the context of its subject rather than its chronology.

Literary criticism in the past has seen Auden as a poet that changes immensely from his early work to his late work, and while undoubtedly the poet does use a huge range of styles, words, and uses of language, tracking the nature of his change has been done well before. Examining what stays constant in Auden’s work, rather than what changes, yields a different understanding of the poet. In looking at the constants in Auden’s poetry, one can see the neuroses and concerns that populated the poet’s mind throughout his entire poetic career, concerns that were not necessarily resolved or conquered but rather stayed with him, consciously or unconsciously.

With both well-known poems and well-known scholars, I choose to argue an unexpected and unexplored realm of Auden’s poetry. Rather than focusing on his political poetry or his longer poems, I analyze Auden’s nature poetry, a topic that critics have covered in much less detail. Even when Monroe K. Spears discusses Auden’s *paysage moralise*, he writes, “Since Auden has no interest in external nature for its own sake, virtually all his landscapes are moralized”⁴. Critics even view Auden’s landscapes as opportunities for moral and rational thought, rather than as meditations on nature itself. Spears views Auden as more urbane: “The dominant symbol in most of Auden’s shorter poems since 1945 has been the City. Signifying civilization, man’s social achievement, the City has always been a feature of Auden’s moralized landscape” (Spears, 413).

Moreover, Auden’s voice is often generalized as being urbane and metropolitan, focused on wit and rationality. When describing “New Year Letter,” Patrick Deane writes that the voice of the poem is “very familiar from Auden's shorter poems: urbane, witty, outrageous—and for all

that, remarkably consistent”⁵. Auden is viewed as being left-brained, as far as poets go: scholars tend to focus on his form, rhythm, allusions, wit, and rationality, rather than his raw creative power or the imagery that reappears in poem after poem.

The topic of nature is often overlooked in favor of his other poems or in favor of looking at the change between his earlier and later works. While Mendelson describes Auden as “the most inclusive poet of the twentieth century, its most technically skilled, and its most truthful” (Early, xxiii), he does not praise Auden for his emotional appeals or depth of thought so much as for his rational truthfulness. The common misperception about Auden is that his work is unemotional because it often seems so calculated.

In this thesis, I divide Auden’s poetry about nature into three distinct categories, the poems in which are then discussed in chronological order. The first chapter discusses Auden’s poetry about the mines, located in an area of England that he knew well. The second chapter concerns poetry about Auden’s landscapes and the human body. The third chapter looks at places Auden writes about that are somewhat unknown or places to which he has travelled. These three chapters all analyze different ways in which Auden interacts with the natural world around him.

In the first chapter, I will talk about Auden’s fixation with the mines of Rookhope, a place in Northern England where Auden spent a lot of time in his childhood. I analyze two poems from Auden’s Juvenilia, as well as “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” “New Year Letter,” and “Amor Loci.” I conclude that the mines for Auden are a key (akin to a map’s key) for reading his writing—one must dig beneath the surface to find the most meaning beneath the formal crust of the poem. In addition, this chapter illustrates that Auden, throughout his entire poetic career, keeps coming back to the mines as a topic for writing, as though Rookhope is a

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sort of neurosis for him. The mines offer a sort of consistency for Auden throughout his life, and the memories later in his poetry seem just as fresh with new insight as do the poems written in his youth.

In the second chapter, about landscape and the body, I argue that when Auden writes about these two topics, he brings forth an anxiety that is not present in one’s first reading of the poem. In this chapter I analyze “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “In Praise of Limestone,” “Under Sirius,” and “A New Year Greeting,” a mixture of well-known and canonized poems as well as lesser-known ones. When Auden talks about nature, specifically about landscape, he references the human body, either as a complement to or an opposition of the natural world. Auden uses the natural world to reference the body, and then the body to refer to anxiety. This chapter looks at Auden as a poet with a compulsive impulse to consider his own neuroses rather than a purely intellectual poet, grounded in ideas. If we look at the landscape poems and mine them for meaning, anxiety emerges.

In the final chapter I argue that, in writing about unknown places, Auden tends to romanticize the familiar and be distrustful of the unfamiliar. I write about “Journey to Iceland,” “Brussels in Winter,” “The Capital,” and “Moon Landing.” When Auden writes about places where he himself is the stranger, he still looks for familiar things, whether it is the light of a faraway farm that can be seen from the city, or the image of the moon as it is seen in poetry and artwork. Auden still seems to hold a love for the pastoral and farm-like environments of his youth, even well into his old age.

In conclusion, I argue that throughout his entire poetic career, Auden keeps coming back to the same concepts and ideas, circling back to his same neuroses and concerns. He uses nature to express his anxieties, his fears about the world, and his concerns about aging and becoming
irrelevant. While this view of Auden is different from how critics typically portray him, it does not imply that Auden repeats himself needlessly—instead, he meditates and develops a small number of experiences and obsessions, and understanding Auden’s own central concerns is important in understanding him fully as a poet.
Chapter One: Auden’s Fixation with the Mines of Rookhope

Introduction

The mines of northern England prevail throughout Auden’s poetry, from his juvenilia to his final poems. Though the style of Auden’s poetry changes vastly from the dense “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” to “Amor Loci,” Auden keeps returning in his mind to this one place: Rookhope (pronounced RAY-cup), the mining town that he visited as a boy.

Auden’s poetic fixation with the mines has implications for reading his poetry as a whole. First of all, the symbolic significance behind the idea of the mines presents an effective way of reading Auden’s poetry. Just as one has to go through a dark and dangerous process to find lead underground, Auden’s poetry requires digging beneath the surface to find meaning. Even when Auden’s poetic style changes throughout his career and his poems become seemingly more straightforward, readers must still “mine” his poems to find even more meaning. Auden always puts meaning beneath the surface of the poems.

Secondly, the mines in his poems provide an occasion for him to write because Auden can speak about these poems with an authoritative voice. As a poet, his authority and technical expertise of the landscape give him confidence. With the mines, he can always come back to a new fact, anecdote, or imaginative idea. Just as Wordsworth talks about the idyllic Lake District, Auden finds his own place that he can describe to outsiders. For a poet whose influences, such as T. S. Eliot, seem to be the focus of critics, Auden’s own voice appears distinctively when he talks about subjects unique to his own experiences. It is purely Auden’s space, physically and poetically.

The forgotten landscape of the mines and the act of mining itself allows Auden to talk about desolation, isolation, discovery, and love. The mines remain a touchstone in Auden’s
poetry, even if the stylistic elements of his poems are changing, because they allow him to continue exploring the same ideas. In this chapter, I discuss five different poems that span across Auden’s poetic careers: two poems from *Juvenilia*, “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” “New Year Letter,” and “Amor Loci.” These poems elucidate the importance of the mines in the context of Auden’s writing because they provide a method for reading his poetry, an occasion for the poet to write, and recurring metaphors that suit Auden’s poetry well.

The importance of place and exclusive knowledge in *Juvenilia*

In Auden’s *Juvenilia*, the poet often writes about the place where he visited as a child: Rookhope, a mining village once prosperous but long forgotten with the decline of the lead-mining industry. The way that Auden describes this land in his early works reveals a specificity of knowledge that inspires him to write.

In “Rookhope (Weardale, Summer 1922),” a poem in *Juvenilia* written in April 1924, Auden again attempts to capture the forgotten landscape and people of Rookhope. One interesting element of this poem is its conception of time—Auden writes from his present point of view in the same place, but he describes people who lived and died a long time ago. The first line of the poem, “The men are dead that used to walk these dales”⁶, implies that no one walks in these valleys anymore. Auden exists as the only poetic authority that can provide information about the importance of the mines.

In addition, the mines, the workplace of these men, are “long forsaken” (*Juvenilia*, 54), presumably by both the people who worked there because they died and by the rest of society, either because they are no longer profitable or too dangerous. The speaker of the poem, however,

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has “stood by their deserted shafts” (ibid)—he stands out in the poem as being the only character in the poem’s present to visit the mines. The speaker of the poem presents a kind of exclusive knowledge, where the reader feels as though the speaker has information almost no one else does.

This type of knowledge creates an occasion for the poem—the speaker presents himself as the only living person with this insight. According to the speaker, “Dead men, they say, sleep very soundly, nought / Remaineth as a mark to signify / The men they were” (ibid). Dead men, in this poem, do not remain as symbols for or martyrs; their stories are at risk of being forgotten entirely. Auden writes that people now “shall not hear their laughter or their tales” (ibid). Poetry, then, is the only way to memorialize them. The effectiveness of this poem comes from the speaker’s sole authoritative voice on this subject and the need to memorialize the people of this place.

Another important occasion for the poem is the narrator’s physical place. Long after everyone else has abandoned Rookhope, the narrator of the poem is still there, even “While the rain lashed my face and clutched my knees, / And [he has] seemed to hear therein their careless laughs” (ibid). The narrator stands near the entrances to the mines and hears the ghostly sounds of their laughing and attempts to “glimpse the spirit which engendered these” (ibid) and feel “The splendid generous Soul, the simple Mind” (ibid). The last images of the poem are almost eerie, where the reader pictures the narrator standing in the rain near an abandoned mine shaft, attempting to channel the spirit of the dead miners.

The capitalization of Soul and Mind is indicative of a specific place and mindset of the many people in this mining community, rather than just one soul and mind. In this poem, the speaker writes about his unique connection to the people who once lived and worked there.
While others have forgotten about Rookhope, Auden’s narrator writes a poem commemorating it—the structure of the poem, too, with fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, as though it were a sonnet, echoes the narrator’s desire to make this desolate place worth of artistry, recognition, and beauty.

In “The Miner’s Wife,” also written in 1924, Auden describes a miner’s wife who answers her door one day to receive the news that her husband has been killed in a mining accident. The tone and structure of the poem, however, seem almost like a song. In the four evenly measured stanzas, the second and fourth syllables rhyme, making the poem read quickly, almost as though it should be sung rather than read aloud. This tone and structure give the poem a sense of irony because this situation happens often; miners die so often in the mines that there is practically a folk song written about it. Sometimes the grimmest subjects acquire a tone of levity because of how much they are discussed—for example, the “Ring around the rosie” folk song.

In the first stanza, Auden describes the house as a mundane, pleasant place, in stark contrast to the conditions of the mine. The domestic scene seems easy, and the miner’s wife seems to be almost lazy. Between the “cool parlour” (Juvenilia, 52) and the tea boiling on the stove, she appears be having an idyllic afternoon. In the second stanza, however, the speaker writes about “a young man white and pale” (ibid) who delivers the news “quickly” (ibid). This stanza emulates someone telling the wife of a soldier that he is dead; this noticeable parallel gives a new importance to the situation because, by calling to mind the honoring of a dead soldier, it elevates the status of the dead miner.

The communication from the young man to the deceased miner’s wife is direct; the dialogue in the poem seems almost nonchalant. The miner dies because “‘The pumping rod
broke’” (ibid)—the fact that the failure of industry caused the death of a miner is significant because it seems to be the fault only of the industry and not the negligence of the miner himself. The failure of the mine is the occasion and meditation for the poem.

Neither is the ending of this poem not overtly emotional. The miner’s wife seems subdued but definitely responsible—she “latched the door” (ibid) and hums as she goes “to work once more” (ibid). At the beginning of the poem, the miner’s wife seems to be relaxed in the cool parlour, but at the news of her husband’s death she begins to work again. Auden wishes to laud the hardworking mining culture with this detached, unemotional scene.

In Juvenilia, Auden writes about the mining towns of his childhood with authority and nostalgia. He lauds the forgotten mining culture of the past and to sentimentalize the moments special to people in this culture: the everyday laughter of miners and the devastating news that one’s husband has died.

The inhospitable land in “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed”

In “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” Auden demonstrates his unique knowledge of Rookhope, providing a view of the place that makes it inhospitable to outsiders. The poem, written in 1927, is, from the beginning, difficult to read, beginning with its rigid and measured structure. The two stanzas, the first eighteen lines and the second twelve lines, contain lines with ten syllables each (with some exceptions). The two stanzas are in a perfect 3:2 ratio and exhibit the attentiveness to numbers that Auden, especially an early Auden, pays to structure and form. Auden packs the poem full of words and complicated syntax, such that the reader of the poem barely has room to breathe. The poem, upon reading, presents a kind of suffocation in itself, which mirrors the dense, ominous darkness of the mines.
The person standing at the crux of the watershed also stands, metaphorically, at the intersection of many potential meanings of the word “crux”—the crux to which the speaker refers could be a religious symbol, the center of an issue, a dilemma, or a metaphysical way of talking about a person. Auden sets out a puzzle from the first line of the poem, making it a challenge to understand the cryptic usage of the word “crux.” The watershed, too, is a place high up above where the speaker is able to maintain a didactic and assertive viewpoint.

Another element of the poem that is “concerned only with borders, separations, finality, cruxes, a poem where even nature makes decisions, chooses between possibilities” (Early, 32) is the distinction between strangers and non-strangers to the land. The idea of being a stranger manifests not only in the physical sense but also in the emotional sense: “His estranged condition, not the landscape of mines, is the true Auden country” (Early, 34). The land will “communicate with no one,” isolating the strangers from this niche land of miners and mining. In bridging the lack of communication between the people of Rookhope and the reader, Auden takes on a somewhat didactic tone as someone situated high above the reader on the watershed. The speaker has complete knowledge of the area surrounding him; the person driving through the empty town, casting light across bedroom windows, has almost no power in the poem. Before this person even sees the rabbit-like animal, it has already sensed the danger that this person possibly presents.

One important element of this poem (and other poems about mines) may be the struggle to communicate between land and people. If mining is an invasion of the land for human profit, the land’s retaliation could be taking the lives of miners. The mine, to some degree, is characterized as something that is failing but also as something with its own distinct set of rules.

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and aesthetics. The reader must “mine” meaning from this poem because it is compacted so densely.

In the first few lines, Auden describes the bleak landscape of “the declining northern mine country of his schoolboy poetry” (*Early*, 33). The first poem in *Selected Poems* and his earliest poem not considered juvenilia; “Who stands” is, in a sense, a crossing-over from childhood to adulthood, from poetry in school to poetry as a profession. The landscape Auden chooses to describe, however, is not so dynamic; it is an “industry already comatose, / Yet sparsely living” (*Selected*, 3). In these first six lines of the poem, Auden paints a dense picture of an abandoned place. Auden speaks of this place in a way that the reader will not immediately understand, but his use of technical language in the poem implies an extensive knowledge of the place. The fact that the speaker uses technical mining language, such as the words “washing-floor,” “tramline,” and “winch,” isolates the reader from the poem, making the reader, too, a “stranger” (ibid).

In the poem, the speaker’s position, standing on the watershed looking out over all of the land, is indicative of this authority over the place. The speaker has been to where the person is standing and can describe exactly what happens in this world. On top of the watershed, the speaker sees everything “Below him” (ibid), and this vantage point also provides a sense of isolation. In his knowledge of the place, the speaker of the poem is alone compared to the stranger, who is not versed in the way of this place.

Auden ends the poem cyclically, with the creature, “taller than grass, / Ears poise[d] before decision, scenting danger” (ibid). Contrary to the great height from which the poem begins, the poem ends low down to the ground. Auden shows his concern with form and structure; in a sense, the reader of the poem travels from a position of power and vantage of a
particular place to a position of lack of knowledge and inability to see a certain place. In “Who
stands, the crux left of the watershed,” Auden demonstrates the speaker’s authority over the land
by using mining jargon, positioning the stranger in the poem, and making the reader, too, feel
like an outsider in Rookhope.

**Desolation and discovery in “New Year Letter”**

In his long poem “New Year Letter,” Auden writes about a place he visited often in his
childhood, where the Eden River runs through the Rookhope region. Auden writes that “No
matter where, or whom I meet”\(^8\), especially when he thinks about

> “the human creature we
> Must nurse to sense and decency,
> An English area comes to mind,
> I see the nature of my kind”  *(Collected, 227).*

Auden describes the landscape as “a locality I love” (ibid) and “my symbol of us all” (ibid). In
this description Auden hints at the universality of this landscape; he claims that aspects of its
humanity and tenderness apply to everyone in the world, whether or not they are directly
connected to this area. This idea makes the dilapidation of the mines especially relevant—Auden
writes this part of the poem to memorialize the place he loves, and the universality of the mines
makes the poem relevant even in a time that has surpassed and forgotten the mines of Rookhope.
The universality of mine metaphors also prompts Auden to keep coming back to this particular
theme—it almost always provides good material for poetry because it is so universal.

Auden writes, “Always my boy of wish returns / To those peat-stained deserted burns”
*(Collected, 228).* One interpretation of this element of the poem could be that the speaker of the

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poem feels younger when he goes back to these places in his mind. Auden, too, writes about the mines as places for wisdom and discovery in childhood:

“from the relics of old mines
Delves his algebraic signs
For all in man that mourns and seeks,
For all of his renounced techniques,
Their tramways overgrown with grass,
For lost belief, for all Alas” (ibid).

Auden places two images side by side: the imagery of the deserted mines and the mathematical, seeking imagery of the speaker’s knowledge as a young boy. In this poem, the forgotten landscape of the mines inspires not only the drive to learn but also the drive to create:

“Alone in the hot day I knelt
Upon the edge of shafts and felt
The deep Urmutterfurcht that drives
Us into knowledge all our lives,
The far interior of our fate
To civilize and to create,
Das Weibliche that bids us come
To find what we’re escaping from” (ibid).

The speaker of the poem recalls the landscape that allows him to reflect and learn, and this idea manifests especially well in a long poem—the drive to create and learn is also the impetus for writing a long poem. The mining landscape appears as not only the content but also as the driving force behind the poem. As with the other Auden poems about the mines, the speaker again demonstrates his knowledge of the mines as authoritative.

John Fuller writes about the Urmutterfurcht lines, “Auden appears to be claiming that his fear of the mother drives him into knowledge, that his civilizing creativity, his very vocation, is powered by fear of the mysterious and unknown” (Commentary, 331). However, it is not fear that drives the speaker’s creativity, but, instead, a love of a place and the resulting concern that this place will be forgotten. The “fear of the mother” Auden describes may not be the impetus for
—instead, the love of a place inspires a fear that it will be forgotten in the time of war and industry.

Auden writes “New Year Letter” in 1940, and World War II seems to play a role in this poem. Auden writes,

“No in that other world I stand
Of fully alienated land,
An earth made common by the means
Of hunger, money, and machines” (Collected, 229).

The “hunger, money, and machines” seem to be far removed from the natural beauty of the mines that Auden describes fondly earlier in the poem. In addition, the conquest of the British Empire is mimicked in Auden’s writing about the exploitation of the mines.

These lines make the speaker seem nostalgic for the genuine curiosity and fear that the natural world inspires. Instead, in reality, Auden is left with “his choice of New York, the world’s most notoriously alienating metropolis” (Commentary, 321). An interesting dimension to this conception of solitude is that New York, in Fuller’s estimation, is extremely lonely for the poet, even though people surround him. In the poem’s setting in Rookhope, however, the speaker of the poem is completely alone but somehow less alienated because he realizes some elements of what he considers universal knowledge; the lines “Das Weibliche that bids us come / To find what we’re escaping from” (Collected, 228) and “The deep Urmutterfurcht that drives / Us into knowledge all our lives” (ibid) both imply that the speaker feels universal truths that make him feel more connected to the rest of the world.

Mendelson writes that Rookhope has a “gift of isolation” (Later, 118) that allows Auden to return there “in memory in order to find the hidden springs of his future choices” (ibid). The speaker in the poem seems to be at a crossroads, where he is caught between the present, writing the poem at the time of World War II and simultaneously returning back to the land of his
childhood. This conflagration of times both reinforces the importance of the mines as a place for solitude and creativity and demonstrates the traumatic influence of the war that causes the speaker to return to these childhood places.

As Fuller writes, “The seeking is an important thematic element in the whole work” (Commentary, 322). Seeking in this particular section echoes its prominence a theme throughout many of Auden’s poems about the mines. Overall, several ideas stand out in this part of “New Year Letter.” As in the other poems mentioned in this chapter, the speaker’s authority over the mines provides both an occasion for the poem and a metaphor by which one can read the poem. In addition, the poem provides a landscape that contains enough solitude for meditation and creation. While this portion of the poem fits into the scheme of a much larger poem, it also meshes with ideas presented in the other poems Auden writes about mines.

**Love and isolation in “Amor Loci”**

Auden begins “Amor Loci,” written in 1965, with an overtly sentimental line: “I could draw its map by heart” (Selected, 290). Stereotypically uncharacteristic of Auden, this first line implies an intimate relationship with the place, “the abandoned mining country near the village of Rookhope, in the Pennine moors,…the most sacred of Auden’s landscapes” (Later, 473). The second line, “showing its contours” (Selected, 290), almost reminds the reader of the shape of the human body. Auden writes that he could “name every height, / small burn and lonely shieling” (ibid). Just as in “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” Auden takes pride in authority over a place, knowing both the natural features, like the burns, and the manmade ones, like the shielings. These words are archaic terms from the mining landscape, and Auden deliberately brings them back into use with his poetry.
But just as soon as his affection for the place begins, he asserts that the people who live there are “nameless to me, / faceless as heather or grouse” (ibid). Auden’s affection extends in no way to the people who live in his homeland—he feels attached only to the land itself. He believes the “dead too vague for judgment, / tangible only / what they wrought” (ibid). What they wrought, or what they created, was the mining machinery. While the land lives on into eternity, the machinery and people for Auden are gone in “days preterite” (ibid). The machinery the people have left behind is described in a depressing manner:

“dejected masonry, moss, decomposed machines, with no one about, no chance of buttering bread” (ibid).

Auden even seems accusatory of the people who are not there for any further action, not even to butter bread.

In contrast, Auden writes of “a land postured in my time / for marginal farms” (ibid), where people took pride in the remoteness of place, whereas now “Industry wants Cheap Power” (ibid). Auden criticizes people who are no longer satisfied with this land: because it offers no power, no “perilous wilderness” (ibid), and no “surf-riding, claret, sex” (ibid), they have abandoned this land. To Auden, however, this land is still place that is for someone “convinced he will die, / more comely, more credible / than either day-dream” (idem, 291). The religious imagery in this stanza could refer to the fact that Eden, or the prosperous days of the mining land, has ended, but the promise of any kind of structuring of a New Jerusalem, or a resurrection of these prosperous times, is also not a possibility.

The idea of a gracefully aging, formerly prosperous land is a good way for Auden’s speaker to view his own aging process. Auden’s insecurity about his own age and mortality manifest in his indignation that people have abandoned the barren mining towns of northern
England. In the last stanza, Auden tries to “imagine a love” (Selected, 291) that “does not abandon” (ibid). This ending to the poem is also overtly emotional—Auden desires to be loved as much as he loves the deserted mining towns. A fear of an inability to be loved because of his age and inevitable decay plagues the speaker’s consciousness, but he can imagine this love only “with some real focus / of desolation” (ibid), or, in other words, in rumination on his intense loneliness. As Mendelson writes, “because he loves a place of desolation, he can imagine his own desolation being loved” (Later, 474). This hopeful imagination, though, comes from his affection for these desolate places, not for the desolation itself. Auden imagines someone who mirrors his own love for the deserted, once-great places.

Structurally, there are seven stanzas with eight lines each in this poem. The lines in the poem alternate between seven syllables and five syllables—this structure is mathematically exact throughout the poem. There are no exceptions. When read aloud, however, the poem flows without a rigid rhythm. The poem has an easy nature, mirroring the ease with which Auden flows from topic to topic. The rigidity of the structure of the poem suggests, as I have discussed before, an almost neurotic preoccupation with numbers.

The phrase “imagine a love” also appears in “In Praise of Limestone” at the end of the poem—imagining love is inherently sentimental. Often images of love consist of people being struck suddenly with the affliction of love or having it grow and blossom, but imagining love is an especially romantic concept because the love exists only in imagination as a fantasy about a feeling. Just as Auden loves the desolate landscape of the mines, he can imagine that someone greater than himself could love him, too.

When analyzing Auden’s love poems, critic Zsuzsa Rawlinson writes, “Any enquiry into the merry-go-round nature of love and desire will inevitably lead to…the bitter fact that we may
never get what we want: literally as lovers and textually as readers”⁹. While this fact may hold literally true for Auden and for his readers, the speaker of the poem entertains the privilege of enjoying the eternal possibility of the future in the poem. Even if the poem’s speaker is rapidly aging, he will always in that moment have the possibility of an love that will not abandon.

Overall, the tone in this poem begins emotionally and ends very emotionally, but the middle parts of the poem present tough, critical, rational thoughts. An older Auden draws the reader in with easier syntax and emotion, and then he waits until the middle of the poem to present the complex syntax and ideas. Auden criticizes those who have left the place that he loves. In addition, he talks about how he imagines love “however often smeared, / shrugged at, abandoned / by a frivolous worldling” (Selected, 291) is still valuable and special to him. For Auden, this poem reflects a sentimentality that defies reason and logic.

Conclusion

In these poems, Auden demonstrates a fixation with the mines and with several metaphors that the mines provide. In writing about the mines, Auden can write about his own authority, the difference between insiders and outsiders in this community, and the idea of expansion and conquest. These poems span from Auden’s earliest to latest career, demonstrating a fascination throughout entire poetic lifetime.

However, when Auden talks about the mines in these poems, he uses four very different forms. He uses almost sing-song language in the Juvenilia poems, a long “pastiche neo-classical epistle” in “New Year Letter,” and two different syllabic patterns in “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” and “Amor Loci.” A couple of phenomena could explain this difference.

Although Auden maintains many of the same ideas throughout his poetic career, his style changes frequently as he grows older and writes more. In addition, changing the style of the poem prevents him from writing the same poem about the mines with the same ideas elaborated in it over and over again.

These different forms allow Auden to make slightly different arguments and meanings in these poems. For example, the sing-song nature of “The Miner’s Wife” suits the poem because it treats a heavy subject with levity, but the thick density and difficulty of “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” adds to the feeling that the reader is an outsider from the world of the poem. In “New Year Letter,” Auden repeats the pattern we will explore in a later chapter, where he talks extensively around what he really means before getting to the heart of an issue. “Amor Loci,” however, remains a measured poem that seems to have more room to breathe—this phenomenon could be a consequence of Auden’s poetic style developing over time. Both “Amor Loci” and “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” use technical mining terms native only to this particular region, but the former presents more ease of reading, as though the speaker wants, to some degree, for the reader to engage in his nostalgia.

Auden’s nostalgia for this region comes through even in his final poems. The mines hold the poet’s imagination captive and provide analytical tools for better understanding his poems. These poems reveal that Auden’s fixation with the mines is not just aesthetic or metaphorical but also personal:

> How, but with some real focus
> of desolation
> could I, by analogy,
> imagine a love
> that, however often smeared,
> shrugged at, abandoned
> by a frivolous worldling,
> does not abandon?  

In conclusion, Auden’s poems about mining provide a map for reading Auden’s work: although the styles may be different, writing about this topic repeatedly throughout his poetic career gives him the opportunity to explore the same important ideas over and over again. The mines appear again and again in his poetry, from his earliest to his latest work. Auden’s fixation, or even neurosis, with this topic indicates that he believes that important concepts universally applicable to all parts of the world can be found by digging into the mines of Rookhope.
Chapter Two: Landscape, the Human Body, and Anxiety

Introduction

Nature, especially landscape, is a common trope in English lyric. Images of the sun, the moon, and the countryside are abundant in modern English poetry. The human body, however, is a topic that is more repressed and harder to discuss. Through four poems, I demonstrate how depicting different types of nature—landscape, ecosystem, geology, and imagined—gives Auden access to the more sensitive and taboo topic of the human body. From there, a general pattern emerges: Auden discusses nature, shifts the poem towards some reference to the body, and ultimately ends up at a conclusion to the poem which would be completely unexpected from the start, a surprising turn from the conventional beginning of the poem. This pattern gives the impression that the poet tries to contain his insecurities, but they burst out at the end of the poem regardless.

Critics often describe Auden as austere, academic, and intensely focused on meter and form. Edward Mendelson writes, “a laconic Old English toughness thrived in his early poems, a suave Augustan civility in his later ones” (Mendelson, Selected Poems, xvi). While “toughness” implies a closed-off, hard nature, “civility” implies a more scholarly, dutiful poet who thinks about the world. Auden was both, yet the following poems also demonstrate a dimension of sensitivity and insecurity omitted in current criticism. According to Mendelson, too, Auden “thought of poetry as what he called a ‘game of knowledge’—a game that could explore matters of life and death, but was always itself less important than the world in which such things were real” (Mendelson, Selected Poems, xviii). Auden’s work, however, conveys a sense that poetry reflects his worries in reality. The line between poetry and reality is, for Auden, not as distinct as
Mendelson asserts—Auden’s insecurities, from death to fear of judgment from critics—emerge in his poetry manifested in his insecurities and anxieties.

In this chapter, I discuss Auden’s poetry where the poet writes about nature in order to access thoughts and feelings about the human body. When Auden begins with a common topic and moves then to a more sensitive topic, he allows readers view him as a more sensitive, emotional poet, rather than the rational, intellectual wordsmith. Auden’s nature poems merit attention for two reasons: they are often under-recognized in this context in current critical work, and they provide readers with another dimension in which to think to his poetry. Insecurity appears more in his work when he talks about nature, and, more specifically, how the body relates to nature.

I have picked four poems from a variety of time periods in Auden’s life: “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “In Praise of Limestone,” “Under Sirius,” and “A New Year Greeting” in order to illustrate the range of poems where Auden links the human body and the idea of landscape. These poems represent a span of Auden’s lengthy career as a poet, and they also are a mixture of canonical work and lesser known poems; the first two are more widely discussed and anthologized in literary criticism, and the second two are less so.

**Landscape as filtered lens in “Musée des Beaux Arts”**

Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” written in 1938, is a poem about nature, and, more specifically, about landscape. In this poem, the reader witnesses Auden making a transition from an analytical argument about painting to an understanding of how landscape painting makes people more aware of the smallness of their existence compared to the enormous natural world. In addition, the structure of the poem also showcases the speaker’s anxiety about the brevity of
life and the insignificant amount of attention paid to suffering. Overall, “Musée des Beaux Arts” demonstrates Auden’s description of landscape as a portal for talking about the body, which in turn becomes an outlet for his anxiety.

The structure of the poem transforms from order to disorder. It begins with three ten-line syllables, but this structure soon disintegrates into a syllabically erratic one. Auden starts out writing in a measured, controlled way, but he soon abandons this method—this phenomenon forces the reader to hypothesize that he loses control of the poem as he continues to write it. The structure of the poem has one stanza with thirteen lines and another stanza with eight lines—the Golden Mean, as Eddy Kent describes— that reminds the reader of the form of the sonnet. However, Auden breaks this sonnet structure, subverting the traditional sonnet structure as he would subvert the tradition of the Old Masters’ placing suffering in the margins. The poem has a rhyme scheme similar to that of a sonnet (ABCADEDBFGFGE // HHJJKKIJ), but the rhyme scheme is still not exact. When the poem is read aloud, it does not have the same rhythm or rhyme inherent in its structure—Justin Replogle writes that Auden “prefers collections of unlike sounds: ‘In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away’…Instead of being identical or similar (or giving the illusion of being so), the sounds, particularly vowel sounds, are abruptly unlike: I-car-us for –in-stance. Pronouncing these, the mouth keeps changing shape, the tongue moving around to perform differently”. These strange sounds alienate readers from the language and also from the remnants of a sonnet-like structure. By the time one hears the word “wood,” he or she does not remember hearing “understood” six lines before it. The poem wants to have the faintest echo of a sonnet-like structure, but the poem cannot be forced into this mold: Auden wants to write about the marginalization of suffering, and this cannot happen when

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adhering to the all too conventional structure of the sonnet. Auden takes a familiar structure and makes it unfamiliar and uncomfortable. He starts out with the intentions of form but unravels it as the poem takes on a more emotional and vulnerable ending.

The poem first describes the landscapes of two other paintings before it describes Brueghel’s “Icarus.” Clearly the poet wants to force the reader to think in terms of paintings. Lines such as “Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood” (Selected, 87) are especially visual, orienting the children’s location, the pond, as being at the “edge” of the wood, or at the “edge” of our frame of view. When we look at Brueghel’s “The Census at Bethlehem,” we see these children as silhouettes in the distance, far from the action (or even the “subject”) of the poem. Similarly, in the description of the dogs and the horse, Auden begins the portrayal of the dogs and the torturer’s horse with “Anyhow in a corner” (Selected, 87), situating the animals as minor players in the grand scheme of the painting. The animals are not only in the corner of the painting, but also in the periphery of the viewer’s attention. The paintings are “about,” respectively, the census of Bethlehem and the Massacre of the Innocents, but Auden pays attention to these fringe characters instead of the ones in the main storyline of the painting. Auden creates a dynamic in the second stanza of the poem where he brings characters from the margins of the landscape into the center. This centering is crucial for bringing marginalized characters or ideas into the poetic spotlight; Auden similarly brings more charged ideas, such as the human body, into his poems, performing a comparable kind of centering.

In the last stanza, however, Auden subverts Brueghel’s positioning of Icarus. Structurally, Auden puts Icarus in one of the most important places in the poem: the ending. The ending of the poem often carries the most weight and power. While the edges of a painting are
usually not the central focus, the ending of the poem certainly is—Auden uses the difference between poetry and painting to put Icarus in a more favorable position. This method of drawing out the marginalized details and accentuating their importance can also be an effective way to read Auden’s poetry in a more general sense. Taking meaning from the “sides” of the poem, rather than from the poem’s seemingly overt “message,” provides new readings of Auden’s poems.

Landscape is an important concept for this poem because it creates a lens through which we view differently both the painting and the poem. The idea of landscape here allows the reader to consider the insignificance of the body as compared to the massiveness of the landscape. Landscape allows Auden to access discussion of the body in a more vulnerable way. The poem describes a landscape that is faraway and unconcerned with individual suffering, in a place where “trade and agriculture can take no account of individual fate, not the corpse in the thicket (typically illustrating a proverb: no plough ever stops just because a man dies), not even a boy falling from the sky. An ‘important failure’ would be something like the failure of the harvest” (Commentary, 266). Larger failures are more important in the grand scheme of things, but this logic alerts us to the way that society thinks, not to the way that individuals think.

The description of Icarus’ body demonstrates how small the boy is compared to his physical landscape. When Auden writes, “the sun shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / Water” (Selected, 87), he strangely seems to imply that, if the sun had a choice, it would not shine on the legs. Auden explains how the sun must shine on the legs. The other description of Icarus, “the boy falling out of the sky” (ibid), shows the body as something completely overtaken by landscape—Icarus has no control over his own body because of gravity and the heat of the sun. The helplessness of Icarus exposes insecurity in the poetry.
The landscape brings out discussion of the body, which, in turn, unravels into the speaker’s own vulnerability.

In conclusion, the structure of this poem does twofold: firstly, subvert the suffering of Icarus such that he is no longer in a marginal position, as he is in the painting; and secondly, use nature as a way to talk about how small and insignificant human bodies and lives are in comparison. The tension between these two goals demonstrates the poet’s grappling with the urge to both subvert and pay attention to the human body. The urge to describe this insecurity about the smallness of the human body through a painting through a poem shows Auden’s hesitancy to describe the body outright; he prefers to go indirectly through layers of other meanings. The poem begins in an academic tone but ends up on a pensive note of sadness—while Auden seems to start the poem with the intention of an essayistic argument, he ends with enticing the reader to feel a more tender sadness about the insignificance of Icarus, a symbol of mythic importance, to the ship, a symbol for industry, travel, and progress.

**The personality of geology in “In Praise of Limestone”**

“In Praise of Limestone” also conforms to the structure where Auden describes a natural element that leads to a discussion of the body that, eventually, brings out a much more sentimental and emotional conclusion than one would expect given the start of the poem. First, the poet begins with nature, a familiar, comfortable concept in English poetry. Second, Auden links the limestone landscape to the body, and, finally, the ending of the poem unravels, revealing an emotional, anxious ending. “In Praise of Limestone” demonstrates the interconnectedness of people and their landscapes.
This poem, written in 1948, focuses on the geology of a certain part of central Italy, with Auden describing the seemingly content people who live there and how human life mirrors the landscape, and vice versa. The geology of this poem is important because it implies not only the way these people are currently but also how life always has been and always will be for them. Limestone also stretches across a huge span of time. It came before us and will last long after us, making people seem almost insignificant. This poem echoes the “moderateness” of the soil, how peaceful and stable the society here seems. Limestone and nature in general are nurturing forces in the poem. Auden begins with the idea that the limestone landscape is hospitable to animals: “filling a private pool for its fish and carving / Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain / The butterfly and the lizard” (Selected, 189). There is harmony between the natural world and the animals, and this concept is comforting to the speaker: “What could be more like Mother or a fitter background / For her son” (ibid), Auden writes.

In the first line, the speaker writes that he pines for the limestone landscape. The poet here visits this part of Italy as an outsider, observing the way of life here and understanding “why, I suppose, / The best and worst never stayed here long but sought / Immoderate soils” (Selected, 190). Fuller writes, “The poet is homesick for the limestone landscape because it suggests exactly what can no longer really be believed in: the benign immediacy of nature and the self-sufficiency of a people who can control their environment and relate their appetites to their ultimate well-being” (Commentary, 407). For Auden, the limestone landscape represents the control and self-sufficiency Fuller describes—the phrase “short distances and definite places” (Selected, 189) support this reading.

The poet also makes a distinct connection between the limestone landscape and the human body: “the half-concealed subject of this poem is the ordinary human body, with its own
rounded slopes and secret system of caves and conduits”¹². For example, the mother mentioned in the poem is compared to a landscape in that she creates her son; her son, in turn, the “nude young male who lounges / Against a rock displaying his dildo” (*Selected*, 190), resembles the landscape in his temporary, changing, and unapologetic nature. Mendelson argues that the dildo is an “object of artifice and display, like the hilltop temple and conspicuous fountain” (*Later*, 293). The idea that artificiality is immortal and therefore somewhat appealing therefore relates to an anxiety about the body’s similarity to the changing limestone landscape. The limestone landscape remains forever, but the body deteriorates with time. As Mendelson writes, “The body treats the limestone landscape as an allegory of the body and of the body’s relation to ultimate questions” (*Later*, 293); as the mind faces the same ultimate questions, the body changes and decays. The landscape even calls out to the speaker, knowing his ultimate plight—“‘Come!’ cried the granite wastes, / ‘How evasive is your humor, how accidental / Your kindest kiss, how permanent is death’” (*Selected*, 190). The mortality of people contrasts sharply with the endlessly changing immortality of the limestone.

Given the essayistic beginning to the poem, one might be surprised that the poem, boiled down to its essence at its very end, is a love poem in its final lines:

> “Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape” *(Selected*, 191).

From the beginning of the poem, which is academic, contemplative, and complex, the ending of the poem seems sentimental, tender, and affectionate towards both the lover and the landscape. The ending of the poem “begins to take its place not as an ode, after all, but as a kind of love poem: the lovers explore a habitat conducive to their attempt to transcend time” (*Commentary*,

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409). While we are all “the inconstant ones,” anxious about the temporary nature of both the body and love, these lovers look to this almost magical place in Italy to escape these concerns. The speaker of the poem uses landscape to emulate the body and explore and cope with the anxieties inherent in that landscape.

The structure of the poem is not strictly syllabic, but it still has the feeling of being measured—the length of the lines and the steadiness of the rhythm make the poem feel academic, as though one is reading an essay. For “In Praise of Limestone,” Auden “devised a style for it that accommodates the largest questions of universal meaning while speaking in the conversational voice that is the twentieth century’s closest possible approach to an authentic personal tone” (Later, 292). The long lines and subdued, soothing rhythm of the poem contribute to the idea that “the muted sadness that gives the poem a flavor unlike anything else in English verse derives from the elegy for the changing body that the poem intertwines among its meditations on landscape” (Later, 296). Though the poem does not have a strict meter, the slight syllabic meter of the poem creates “shared meanings signified by the regular metre correspond[ing] to the bodily rhythms which everyone has in common and which cannot be imagined as belonging only to a lost past” (Mendelson in Smith, Cambridge Companion, 57).

The concept of what is hidden under the landscape, too, holds a key to reading Auden’s writing: “beneath / A secret system of caves and conduits” (Selected, 189), beneath the intellectual ideas of the beginning of the poem, lies anxiety and concern about the impermanence of human life. This structure applies to both the limestone rocks and the poem itself. Beneath Auden’s measured rhetoric and long-winded phrases lies an anxiety that manifests at the end of the poem, as though Auden must gradually warm up to sentimentality, which comes after his intention to write about something else.
The landscape of the imagination in “Under Sirius”

In “Under Sirius,” written in 1949, Auden examines the power of a natural world that is almost entirely imagined; he writes about Judgment Day not from personal experience but from imagining both the classical past and the events on Judgment Day. Auden creates a sort of artificial nature poem, where he describes a landscape he himself creates, but he comes to a similar result as he has in the past two poems discussed: the natural world leads to the body, and the body leads to insecurity. The struggle of the body and the struggle of he doomsday landscape provide a landscape for the speaker’s physical and mental anxiety. This poem describes a man riddled with “a head-cold and an upset stomach,” (Selected, 201) a failing scholar, who seemingly wishes for some kind of natural disaster to take him from his work and this world.

The idea that the landscape is falling apart relays the chaos in the speaker’s mind. The poem begins, however, by describing almost dead landscape: “The heather lies limp and dead / On the mountain, the baltering torrent / Shrunk to a soodling thread” (ibid). It slowly gathers momentum to the more dramatic lines that imagine Doomsday. In this poem, the natural world is a crumbling, foreign landscape:

“How will you look and what will you do when the basalt
Tombs of the sorcerers shatter
And their guardian megalopods
Come after you pitter-patter?” (Selected, 202).

The words “basalt” and “megalopod” seem to have come almost from a science fiction story, and the images are not familiar ones—picturing a shattering tomb or a megalopod presents a challenge. The Judgment Day landscape is completely imagined and is filled with vivid imagery:

“‘The immoral nymphs fly shrieking
And out of the open sky
The pantocratic riddle breaks—
‘Who are you and why?’” (ibid).
This landscape is an abrupt turn from the lazy environment of the “dog days,” where the scholar struggles to begin his great work. The poem seems to increase its intensity from the beginning to the end, as the images and creatures of Doomsday come towards the end of the poem rather than the beginning, where Auden describes the lazy days of summer. This poem retains a structure slightly different from the previous two discussed, but it still presents elements of the natural world that incite anxiety.

The body, depicted as reflective of the speaker’s mental state, also plays a different role than it has in the past two poems, but it still serves to make the despairing scholar in the poem appear especially inadequate. In “Under Sirius,” the scholar’s body fails, the speaker ill “with a head-cold and upset stomach, / Lying in bed till noon” (Selected, 201). These lines precede the Doomsday lines and serve to make the spectacle of Doomsday even more impressive. The fact that the scholar wishes for “Some earthquake” (ibid) or other natural disaster—and that the imagined Doomsday landscape emanates from his mind—demonstrates how the wildness of the landscape stems from the anxiety in the speaker’s mind. The sickness of the body holds significance in that it also mirrors the sickness of the imagined Doomsday landscape. Mendelson writes, “And in ‘Under Sirius,’ the promised world to come is one in which the body regains its pedal graces and the ‘reborn featly dance’” (Later, 278). The chaos of the natural world here will eventually cause a rebirth where the body and mind of the speaker are rejuvenated. The desire of the speaker for rebirth because of physical failure and mental failure implies vulnerability and anxiety. The title of the poem, too, is a response to insecurity. “Under Sirius” can be considered a pun on seriousness, and contemporary critics of Auden were alleging that in some poems he was not serious enough. The title of the poem, therefore, is a seemingly facetious response to criticism he received.
The structure of the poem, however, is measured. There are six stanzas with nine lines each, and, in each stanza, there is one long line at the beginning and one long line in the middle of the stanza, and the rest of the lines are fairly short. This measured structure is characteristic of Auden but does not reflect the despair of the speaker: “you wish / Some earthquake would astonish” (Selected, 201). The poem begins with the connection between Sirius, the Dog Star, and the dog days of summer—instantly the starry landscape connects to the phrase “dog days.” The link between the dog days and the dog star foreshadows the fact that the much of the imagined landscape in the poem consists of heaven crashing down into earth. In addition, Auden’s “wantonness with words”\(^\text{13}\) stands out in the poem—words such as “baltering,” “soodling,” “eagre,” and “basalt” seem quirky and atypical of poetry. Auden wrote this poem in 1949, but he still uses language that seems foreign to many readers.

This poem has the same unraveling quality that the other three poems do—Auden begins with a landscape, transitions to talking about the body, and then uses that talk about the body to expose a deeper insecurity. In this poem, we see the process of landscape to body to insecurity go backwards—the scholar’s insecurity about his ambition and mind translates to a physical lethargy, which in turn produces this imagined, chaotic landscape. This reversal demonstrates how the mind of the speaker affects the natural world he imagines—anxiety about the inadequacy of the scholar creates a terrifying imagined landscape for the poem.

**The bodily ecosystem of “A New Year Greeting”**

While this poem begins as an irreverent New Year’s card to the organisms living on the speaker’s skin, the poem, written in 1969, reveals a much more charged emotional tension about

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judgment. In this poem, Auden uses the narrator’s body as an ecosystem for yeasts and bacteria. Through this somewhat unconventional type of nature poem, a description of a bodily ecosystem, Auden accesses insecurity and vulnerability.

Structurally, “A New Year Greeting” is painstakingly strict and restrained. Seven stanzas with eight lines each are comprised of lines alternating between eight syllables and seven syllables. While the stanzaic and syllabic constraints are not as overt as a rhyme scheme, the form is almost obsessively mathematic. Because Auden bases the poem off an article from Scientific American, he focuses more intently on numbers and precision. In addition, the rigid structure could be a futile effort at controlling the end of the poem, which barrels to a conclusion of self-doubt and fear of judgment. Based on the beginning of the poem, the ending is unexpected, as though it surprises writer, speaker, and reader.

This poem describes not just landscape or geology but an entire ecosystem living on the speaker’s skin. His body, “a free choice of habitat” (Selected, 305) allows the yeasts and bacteria to “settle yourselves in the zone / that suits you best” (ibid). In the poem, the speaker’s body presents itself as a landscape, with the

“pools / of my pores or the tropical
forests of arm-pit and crotch,
in the deserts of my fore-arms,
or the cool woods of my scalp” (Selected, 305).

The landscape agrees to “supply / adequate warmth and moisture” (ibid) as long as the bacteria does not turn into something unpleasant, and the bodily landscape even has “inner weather” (ibid). The landscape welcomes the organisms and encourages them to live there. As in “In Praise of Limestone,” the ecosystem welcomes and nurtures its visitors. Auden begins with the idea that an imagined ecosystem can be translated to the body, as demonstrated in the Scientific
American article. For the first part of the poem, harmony exists between the ecosystem, the body, and the bacteria.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, though, almost in the exact middle of the poem, the ecosystem turns into a hostile one. The speaker asks the bacteria of the tumultuous weather on his skin, “If you were religious folk, / how would your dramas justify / unmerited suffering?” (Selected, 306), such as the “hurricanes that come / twice every twenty-four hours” (ibid) when the speaker gets dressed and undressed. Though critics, when they mention the poem at all, speak of its “playful concern for the yeasts, bacteria and viruses for whom his ectoderm is the equivalent of ‘Middle-Earth’ for the poet”¹⁴, they undersell the darkness at the end of the poem, where the speaker fears that his body becomes “appetising for predators / of a fiercer sort” (ibid). Talking about the body brings about the inevitable question of what happens to the yeasts and bacteria when the body eventually dies; the reader can see Auden switching topics: from the imagined ecosystem on the body, to the body itself, to the grander questions that come with the temporality of the body, and to, finally, what ultimate judgment the speaker faces after death.

While the “predators / of a fiercer sort” (ibid) could refer to biological diseases or even judgments from heaven, the most fearsome predators in this poem may be critics commenting on Auden’s body of work. If the speaker’s physical body and body of work are merged in this poem. Auden is anxious that, when he dies, his poetry is “stripped of excuse and nimbus, / a Past, subject to Judgement” (ibid). When Auden dies, his body of work becomes complete—it has only a past, not a future. Though the speaker is facetious in the beginning of the poem, that feeling gives way to anxiety and vulnerability. While Fuller calls Auden “the poet’s body as a bacteriological microcosmos and the poet as an indifferent god to the denizens of his skin”

Auden is not indifferent at all, and the poem is not about the skin but instead about his anxiety about his legacy.

Similarities between poetry and the body support the interpretation that the speaker’s body and his body of work are the same. The poem itself contains some strange language—the language of *Scientific American*, as well as some unusual words such as “tift,” “purposive,” and scientific words like “keratin.” Just as the body lets bacteria live on the skin, so does Auden let these strange words live in his poem. Similarity between poem and the body appears in this willingness to accumulate what wants to live here. Auden’s fear of judgment from critics feels to him as though he is allowing his body to lie rotting, subject to the elements.

Even in Auden’s later poetry, readers can detect this same pattern: Auden begins the poem by talking about nature, in some form; he then moves on to connect nature and the body; and, finally, he uses the body as a way to access insecurity and vulnerability. In “A New Year Greeting,” Auden expands on the idea of the body as an ecosystem that has the power to flourish but also the capability of dying without consequence. The complexity of the ecosystem on the speaker symbolizes the various elements of Auden’s own writing; the form, word choice, and concepts all work together to produce meaning. Auden’s poems work not as vehicles to produce one takeaway meaning for the reader but as ecosystems from which many layers of meaning can be extracted and examined.

**Conclusion**

While critics do not typically look at Auden’s nature poetry in a broad sense, Auden’s work is filled with references to the natural world, whether he talks about the moon, the sunset, or the composition of limestone. In this chapter, I discuss four different types of Auden’s nature
poetry: a poem about landscape, the geological poem, the poem of an imagined landscape, and the ecosystem of the body. These four types of poems all have references to the body, and these bodily references in turn lead to an ending that focuses on sentimentality and insecurity. In addition, Auden uses more easily accessed topics, such as landscape, to gradually transition into more vulnerable topics.

While Auden is typically considered an intellectual poet, the predictable structure of these four poems suggests more of a compulsive impulse than an intellectual, exploratory one. Auden keeps returning to the same ideas of landscape, the human body, and anxiety, and he keeps mixing them around in different ways. These poems span the entire length of his poetic career, and they demonstrate how the poet maintains an interest in these ideas throughout his life. Auden cares not only about producing new ideas but also about meditating repeatedly on the same ones.

In addition, the analysis in this chapter suggests that Auden’s work holds more cohesiveness than critics previously considered. Thirty-one years passed between “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “A New Year Greeting,” yet the two have similar narrative and poetic structures. The similarity in structure between these four poems suggests that we should reconsider our current method of cataloging Auden’s work purely chronologically and instead look to commonalities and themes that exist throughout his entire body of work.
Chapter Three: Auden Goes “Howling to his art”: Writing on Places Unknown

Introduction

In selecting these four poems, I focus on places unknown for Auden, places to which he travels or places which are unknown entirely, like the moon, and I therefore gain an understanding of Auden’s natural world beyond the comfort of Rookhope. These four poems, “Journey to Iceland,” “Brussels in Winter,” “The Capital,” and “Moon Landing,” at first appear quite different. While “Brussels in Winter” and “The Capital” refer arguably to the same city and were written in the same time period, “Journey to Iceland” and “Moon Landing” stretch Auden’s imagination beyond known places and into places of travel or purely of conjecture.

In this chapter, I argue two particular points. First, I assert that Auden’s writing about strange or unknown places contains an inherent loneliness and desolation. Secondly, I discuss how Auden’s dichotomy between rural and urban places leads to the characterization of the city as evil and the countryside as pure and good but removed from everyday life.

The theme of loneliness appears throughout these poems—in writing about strange places, where one does not feel a sense of belonging, this theme appears in some capacity in all four of these poems. Auden seems to define a strange or unknown places with its inherent ties to loneliness and isolation. Whereas Auden writes to the “stranger” in “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” here, Auden is, in turn, the stranger himself. This loneliness becomes an inherent influence on Auden’s poetry and in how he describes people and the landscapes, especially. Mountains are no longer just mountains but instead “sterile immature mountains” (Selected, 50). Loneliness and isolation color Auden’s descriptions of these places.

The second theme that emerges from analysis of these four poems is the dichotomy between the urban and the rural. In describing rural Iceland, Brussels, and even the moon, Auden
is acutely aware of the effect that urbanization has on the world. While both cities and rural places can evoke the sense of loneliness, Auden chooses to highlight the difference between these places in nearly all of these poems, even if subtly. This difference appears in the form of the characterization of the city as evil and corrupting and the description of the countryside as both lonely and faraway.

**Loneliness and the search for connection in “Journey to Iceland”**

Auden begins this poem about a strange land with the word “and.” This word signifies that “Journey to Iceland,” written in 1936, is part of a collection, *Letters from Iceland*, and should be read in the context of the collection. Secondly, the word “and” implies a link between what comes before the poem, whatever that may be, and the poem itself. One could read this poem as a constant struggle to find connection between the traveller and his new place, as well as between the disjointed landscapes the speaker of the poem presents. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker describes the place as “The citiless, the corroding, the sorrow” (*Selected*, 49), and these words set the tone for the poem.

The reader can use the word word “and” as a tool to read this poem because, like the poem itself, it implies connections between two things but does not exactly specify that connection. This poem feels situated in the heart of the travel book, rather than a poem that stands without any context. This word also provides circularity to the poem where the first line could come after the last line if one were to read the poem a second time. The word “and” makes the poem lack a definitive sense of boundary and scope; rather, it implies that the poem and its images link to many different things, whether they are other poems, other parts of this poem, or ideas.
Despite the speaker’s initial attempt to bring together the lonely images of Iceland, the poem makes the place seem lonely and desolate. The images of the “student of prose and conduct” (Selected, 50), the “doomed man thrown from his horse” (ibid), and the “old woman confessing” (ibid) are presented one after another by the speaker, but no theme runs through their narratives aside from solitude and sadness. The stanza about the “student of prose and conduct” (ibid), too, begins with “and.” The speaker of the poem aims to link all of these people together in some way, signified by the use of the word “and.” All three of these people engage in solitary activities loosely linked to Iceland, but their stories are linked only by their isolation and lack of connection.

The landscape, too, seems desolate: Auden writes that the “lover of islands” (ibid) may find “limited hope” (ibid) in Iceland, yet the landscape he writes appears desolate: “These plains are for ever where cold fish are hunted.” Auden describes glaciers as “sterile immature mountains intense / in the abnormal northern day,” (ibid) making them seem cold, unreachable, and unemotional. The sterility of the mountains also relates to their lack of fruitfulness for poetry; the poem tends to switch from subject to subject without spending more than a stanza on each topic. The speaker also implores the reader to listen as he states “all your questions: ‘Where is the homage? When / Shall justice be done? O who is against me? / Why am I always alone?’” (ibid). These questions imply loneliness and isolation in the reader of the poem; the poem mimics travel to Iceland in that the reader is just as alone as the writer. Auden “wants to keep his distance from meddlers with ideas of their own about how to cure others. He wants only to be left alone, and Iceland seems the perfect setting” (Early, 341).

In this poem, Auden writes from a place of authority—“Here let the citizen, then, find natural marvels” (Selected, 50) implies that the speaker knows what the traveler will find there
and that he has been there before and seen those things, too. Auden has been the stranger. The repetition of the word “rock”—four times in the last two lines of the fourth stanza—at first seems strange, but this language aims to emphasize the landscape of the place: hard, unmoving, set and unchanging, a place of stoicim and loneliness.

Auden writes that in Iceland, “Europe is absent. This is an island and therefore / Unreal” (Selected, 50). These lines serve an important purpose for the poem concerning the word “and”: they relate the physicality of the island to the idea of everything being linked. Since the island of Iceland has no physical way to linking itself to another place, it becomes more unreal than Europe does. An island physically lacks the context of Europe because of its isolation.

Mendelson writes, “On his poetic voyages Auden never reaches the goal for which he sets out. Either his goal is illusory; or it refuses to offer the challenge a traveller needs if he is to change; or, simply, ‘he does not want to arrive’” (Early, 341). The meandering nature of this poem implies that Auden does not want to ever reach a destination—to journey to Iceland is to not reach a particular destination but rather survey the loneliness of the place itself.

Though the poem does not follow any strict syllabic structure, the indentation of the second two lines in each of the thirteen four-line stanzas gives the poem some visual structure and keeps the eye more engaged when reading the poem on the page. Auden also writes a defiantly uneven thirteen stanzas of poetry in “Journey to Iceland,” attempting to defy any interpretation based on the form.

In the final eight lines of the poem, Auden writes that “our time has no favourite suburb” (Selected, 51), that “Tears fall in all the rivers” (ibid). Contrary to the loneliness of Iceland, Auden argues here that everything is linked—the concept of the word “and” appears again and again. However, the connectedness between all of the places does not diminish the loneliness and
desolation he describes in Iceland. Auden, as well as poets and writers in general, can link many things together, yet making meaning out of those connections is challenging. Fuller writes that in the last three stanzas of the poem, “behind the tourist front and the heritage of the sagas is eternal human nature” (Commentary, 209). That challenge of making sense of both the connectedness and the loneliness in the world is what sends the writer “howling to his art” (Selected, 51) over and over again.

The misery of the city in “Brussels in Winter”

In “Brussels in Winter,” written in 1938, Auden evokes a sense of evil and a lack of humanity present in a city; in this poem, he specifies how the winter affects Brussels. This image of the city reinforces the idea that the rural countryside is faraway but desirable; Auden makes a bogey of the city in order to make the rural seem idyllic. The image of the “cold streets tangled like old string” evokes a sense of hopelessness and desolation. It brings to mind the images of many different paths of individual people winding alone through the streets, making paths that intertwine, but, instead of creating something orderly, they make a mess. The “fountains silent in the frost” (English, 236), too, create an eerie sense of a city that is not cohesive—fountains should not be silent, yet the winter freezes the water and takes away their function and agency. The universal “you” to whom Auden addresses the poem cannot find the city, which “escapes” the reader. Instead of seeing the city as a city, the reader sees the city engulfed in white, lacking any distinguishing characteristics, the “qualities that say ‘I am a Thing’” (ibid).

The form of “Brussels in Winter” also echoes the sense of control that the winter and the city seem to hold. Each stanza has about ten syllables in each of its stanzas, and the lines end

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neatly on phrases and clauses that give each individual line beauty and completeness. The uniformity of how a city looks in winter—covered in white snow and grey slush, desolate, empty, and freezing—also appears in the syllabic uniformity of the lines. The reader, even from glancing at the poem without reading it, does not expect drastic formal changes from the poem, and the poem keeps a steady pace when read aloud. Auden echoes the dullness of a city in winter with the unsurprising form of the poem. The structure of the poem is also a sonnet, a rhyme scheme that is frequently associated with love poems, making the ending of the poem even more ironic with the mention of male prostitution.

In this poem, “Only the homeless and the really humbled / Seem to be sure exactly where they are” (ibid). This line implies that Brussels in winter forces an experience onto the whole city, and only the desolate and hopeless seem to understand the condition put upon them. Assembled in the city, “The winter holds them like the Opera” (ibid). Taking a symbol of high society, the opera, and writing about it in the context of the most destitute people of the city, Auden undermines the importance of supposed high culture and at once elevates the status of these people. This view of the city detracts from the typical view of the city as a place for elevated thought; it instead presents the city as something sinister.

That the homeless and humbled “in their misery are all assembled” (ibid) visualizes the space of the city as a holding area for unhappiness. As in “The Capital,” Auden portrays the city as a place where evil abounds, and he does not subscribe to the idea of the city as an enlightened and civilized place. The city also brings out for Auden the dichotomy between wealthy and poor as well as between rural and urban. He writes, “Ridges of rich apartments rise tonight / Where isolated windows glow like farms” (ibid). By implying that the apartments are multitudinous and the windows are few and far between, Auden gives off the illusion that most people in the city
are wealthy, when, in the previous stanza, he contradicts that fact with the image of the homeless and miserable people packed into the city as though they were attending the opera. The image of the farm evokes the sense that the speaker looks at farms from a faraway distance, where they appear as small glowing lights in a field of darkness. This image situates the speaker as someone, too, who lives in the city and sees rural life as distant. The rural landscape, which Auden describes more favorably in other poems, seems faraway and almost dreamlike. For Auden, part of the allure of the rural is that it is so far removed from the malicious urban sphere. Distaste of the urban is crucial for his romanticizing of the rural.

The rhyme scheme of this poem is ABBA / CDCE / FGH / HFG – the poem rhymes frequently, but not in a predictable way. This jumbled rhyme scheme relates to Auden’s intentions for the poem in that it mixes up typical elements of a poem, just as the poem does not adhere to the typical, urbane view of the city. This poem is full of the dichotomies between the wealthy and the poor; the rural and the urban; and the sophisticated and the desolate. Auden tries to make connections between these different dichotomies, and his difficulty in doing so produces more loneliness. The structure of the poem, which has rhymes but no clear rhyme scheme, also contains an inherent dichotomy: the elements of a rhyming poem without the structure of one. Fuller concurs with this idea, writing “There are riddles in both octave and sestet: what would the city be able to say if you could untangle it?” (Commentary, 257). This commentary refers back to the first lines of the poem, to the tangled old string, and to the idea that the speaker of the poem is seeking a prostitute, most likely a male one.

In the final stanza, Auden describes an act that falls well within “the history of man” (English, 236), prostitution. As Fuller writes, “It is within the lit units of rich apartments that the only warm relationships possible in the city are conducted, through prostitution” (Commentary,
The stranger pays fifty francs for a prostitute, whom the “heartless city” represents. Auden ends this “threnody of urban desolation” (*Early*, 362) with the image of a classic evil that takes place in the city, and he even goes so far as to write that the heartless city can be represented by the prostitute. This ending is especially fitting for this poem when Auden has focused his writing not on the high society of the city but on the “homeless and the really humbled” (*English*, 236).

As he has in other poems, Auden writes about “the stranger”—in this case, the stranger could be new to Brussels or could simply stand for any typical person. However, the word stranger implies a lack of community and sense of isolation within the city. As in many of Auden’s descriptions about the physical features of places, desolation and isolation appear in the form of lonely figures. The description of the city as “heartless” (*English*, 236), too, contributes to the sense of loneliness in “Brussels in Winter.” The final act portrayed in the poem, prostitution, connotes a sense of longing for any human contact and warmth. Auden, the supposedly urbane poet, writes of prostitution to tell of the desolation and desperation rampant in the city; one can only come across human contact in a financial transaction. This loneliness in the city serves Auden as the means of romanticizing the rural as a faraway, idyllic place.

**Corrupting the countryside in “The Capital”**

In this poem, written in 1938, Auden describes the capital as a sinister yet attractive place that taints the “natural” world. Auden makes a clear distinction between the capital city and the “dark countryside” (*English*, 236). From the beginning of the poem Auden divides these spaces: the “Quarter of pleasures where the rich are always waiting” (*English*, 235) is extremely distinct spatially and conceptually from the “Café where exiles have established a malicious village” (ibid). Auden writes about the city not as a cohesive place but as an area of distinct provinces.
Even more different from those two places are the “Factories where lives are made for a temporary use” (*English*, 236) and “rooms where the lonely are battered” (ibid), where Auden criticizes the harsh industrial working conditions. But even more distinct from the places in the city is the “dark countryside, the enormous, the frozen” (ibid). In making all of these areas of the poem’s world extremely separate from one another, Auden demonstrates how physical boundaries can affect social boundaries. The rich come first in the poem, followed by the poor and then the people in the countryside. While the rich may get the first words in the poem, the reader leaves thinking about the farmer’s children being tempted by the city. Just like Icarus in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” the farmer’s children receive the place of poetic privilege. Fuller writes, “This is one of Auden’s most obsessive subjects, the alienation of the big city” (*Commentary*, 259), and in this poem, this alienation serves to make the countryside appear pure and romantic. However, the reader does not get the sense that upward mobility exists between these areas and that the city evolves continually into an agent of loneliness.

These distinctions also make the glow of the city intruding into the dark countryside seem invasive. When the glow of the city is “visible far / Into the dark countryside” (*English*, 236), Auden accuses the city: “like a wicked uncle, / Night after night to the farmer’s children you beckon” (ibid). Although Auden concedes that there are positive aspects of the capital, he seems to champion the pure, wholesome countryside over the potentially evil call of the city. While critics typically call Auden an urbane poet, this poem essentially degrades and makes a villain of the city. The countryside seems to be honest and forthright, but the city can

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“betray us
To belief in our infinite powers; and the innocent
Unobservant offender falls in a moment
Victim to his heart’s invisible furies”
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(ibid).
This language implies a sense of deceit in the city and that it almost lives as an organism that wants to draw in innocent people and then make them suffer in the factories and unlit streets. As Fuller writes, “The wicked uncle hints at forbidden pleasures, and the farmer’s children are lured to the flattering city, where each selfish illusion is shattered and the pieces are swept out of sight” (Commentary, 259).

Just as the reader will discover in “Moon Landing,” Auden seems somewhat opposed to the technological revolutions that make the cities even more magnetic and attractive to others. Auden portrays elements of the city as almost sterile: “Factories where lives are made for a temporary use / Like collars or chairs” (English, 236) imply that an unsettling sameness exists in the city. Similarly, the city has “abolished / The strictness of winter and spring’s compulsion” (ibid). Part of Auden’s opposition and reservation to the city seems to be that is takes away the natural beauty of the seasons. In a city where everyone is indoors constantly and the pavement and sidewalks prevent anything from growing, the city takes away the natural order and elements of time. In this way, Auden champions the natural world.

The way that light functions in this poem also points to the speaker’s frustration with the dynamics of the city. Auden writes, “Far from your lights the outraged punitive father, / The dullness of mere obedience here is apparent” (ibid). Though the city lights remain an iconic image and metaphor, the speaker argues that these lights are far from the average person, who, despite the city lights, still endures the wrath of an angry relative and the dullness of a life working obediently at the factory. The city, though eternally light, still maintains a metaphorical darkness. However, the far light from the city still reaches the children of the farmer, beckoning them to come. The image of the lights from the city still reaching the country demonstrates Auden’s concern with the evil of the city corrupting the purity of the rural.
While Fuller implies that the poem is about Brussels, Auden’s vague title argues for a more general reading of the poem. Few things about the poem point specifically to Brussels, and Auden uses no specific names of places. With this lack of names Auden insinuates that this type of scenario could happen anywhere in the world. No matter how wonderful a city may seem from the outside, oppressive structures may still exist within. The idea that this particular city is the capital is significant, too, because the capital theoretically should be the place where decisions about the country (including the “dark countryside”) are made. Therefore, an even greater power disparity exists between this particular city and the countryside where the farmer’s children live. Auden elucidates the negative aspects of the city but also this power dynamic, where the city appears as the illuminated, intelligent, cultured part of the country. The countryside, however, exists in the poem only as a place from which more people flock to the city. By describing the city as the “wicked uncle” Auden paints the capital in a more sinister light. Auden, too, by extension, is The Poet, as Brussels is The Capital—Auden, already boldly addressing the city, paints himself as the documenter of evil in the city.

In conclusion, “The Capital” demonstrates the speaker’s distrust with a successful urban metropolis; he claims that the city lures innocent people into its clutches only to mistreat them, especially if they are poor. While Auden’s poems that include nature typically do not reference social issues in this way, this poem describes a power dynamic between the urban and the rural that negatively affects the countryside. The speaker feels especially offended by the city’s promise of culture, which Auden as a writer would want and support, and its delivery of poor working conditions, separation, and loneliness. The speaker of the poem defends the countryside by demonstrating the evils of the city that corrupt it.
**Romanticism of the moon and distrust of technology in “Moon Landing”**

In “Moon Landing,” Auden’s speaker is extremely reluctant to see man’s first steps on the moon as a great success. Auden longs for the times when the moon was a romantic object about which one can write poetry, not for the times when society celebrates the excitement of space travel. In the first lines of the poem, written in 1969, Auden mocks the moon landing—“It’s natural the Boys should whoop it up for / so huge a phallic triumph” (*Selected*, 307). Implying that the space ship is phallic imagery and that the impetus for the moon landing is nothing more than childish bravado, Auden derides the space ship, completely negating any wonder or marvel at the technological advancement from the very first lines of the poem. Fuller writes that Auden “sees space travel as a natural consequence of the male aggressiveness that flaked the first flint” (*Commentary*, 533). Although Auden has no problem with miners digging into the lands of Rookhope for lead, the moon somehow seems more sacred to him. Auden’s disenchantment with the moon landing relates not only to his romanticized penchant for the moon but also to his dislike of the aggression of the moon landing. Auden asks the reader why such exploration is necessary in today’s world, when poets and artists offer up their own interpretations of the moon.

Auden also writes that the “motives / that primed [the moon landing] were somewhat less than *menschlich*” (*Selected*, 307), with *menschlich* translating roughly to “humane.” In this poem, Auden seems concerned with the idea that the technological advances from the moon landing are not as important and consequential as others think they are. In taking advantage of the natural world in this way, Auden implies that society loses some humanity. In a society “more facile / at courage than kindness” (ibid), Auden’s poem continually seems to mock and deride the significance of this supposedly historic event.
Instead of thinking about the future that the moon landing will bring according to scientists and the general public, Auden writes about the past:

“Homer’s heroes were certainly no braver than our Trio, but more fortunate: Hector was excused the insult of having his valor covered by television” (ibid).

While many people would consider it amazing that so many people could watch humans land on the moon for the first time, Auden focuses on the degrading, voyeuristic elements of television. Society’s viewing of the deed, not the braveness of the deed itself, taints this event for Auden’s speaker. In addition, the fact that Auden writes about the heroes of the past subverts the importance of this event—he shifts the focus backwards instead of forwards on an event that is supposed to change society. Auden sees this event as something to compare to past events in mythology, not an event that will incite new technology and conversation.

Rather than talk about the future, an Auden in his later stages of writing would rather have “a watered / lively garden, remote from blatherers / about the New” (ibid), a place where he “can count the morning / glories, where to die has a meaning, / and no engine can shift my perspective” (ibid). In this poem the reader sees the same stubborn Auden who refuses to say his insecurities and sensitivities outright—mentioning dying in this stanza implicates Auden’s own insecurities about his posthumous relevance after his death, especially when the reader considers the line about counting the morning glories, which echoes counting the days of one’s life. This element of the poem follows the same pattern as many of Auden’s other poems, where he starts talking about one subject to eventually get to another, more sensitive subject.

Fuller writes, “Auden sees the moon landing as an overwhelming interference with a numinous object” (Commentary, 532-533), and Auden does seem to see the moon not as a scientific element of our solar system but as the terrain of poets and artists. Instead of the moon
presented by the moon landing, which exists as a tangible object and can be explored and studied, Auden presents a more romanticized view of the moon that exists for writers:

“Unsmudged, thank God, my Moon still queens the Heavens / as She ebbs and fulls, a Presence to glop at, / Her Old Man, made of grit not protein” (Selected, 308). Auden mentions the idea that the moon actually waxes and wanes, rather than just a trick of the shadows; he talks about the moon as not being made of chemical material but rather a somewhat humanizing trait.

Auden’s speaker still wants to maintain the magic and the poetic wonder of the moon, to “glop” at the moon, and to write about the moon personified.

The form of the poem, too, echoes the idea that there are two points of view on the topic of the moon landing: the point of view of scientists and the general population and the view that Auden presents in this poem. This idea presents itself in the form of the poem, where each stanza is has the first two lines flushed left and the second two lines indented.

Rather than look to the future of what society may discover about the moon next, Auden’s speaker clings to the past, hoping that people will still remember the moon as an artistic vision: “all we can pray for is that artists, / chefs and saints may still appear to blithe” (ibid) what Auden calls “the usual squalid mess called History” (ibid). The last lines of the poem indicate that our society messes up beautiful, artistic things by overanalyzing them and trying to make historical moments out of them. Auden worries repeatedly that people exploit the moon, just like other place, closer to home, in the natural world.

While Auden’s stance about the moon seems somewhat contrary to his stance on the mines, there is a fundamental difference between the two elements of the natural world: the mines make their meaning from their interactions with man, but the moon, for Auden, has meaning by itself. Auden sees his poetic way of talking about the moon just as effective, if not
more so, than the invasive exploration of this sacred natural place. In addition, Auden’s stance on
the moon is perhaps distantly prophetic of the environmentalist movement that will come in the
years after this poem, where some are concerned that society over-exploits the natural world.

Conclusion

Exploration of places Auden does not know as well as he knows Rookhope and the mines
yields an understanding of Auden that is expanded but not inconsistent with past conclusions.
When Auden writes about places unknown, his poems often have similar themes and patterns in
terms of how they discuss these places. An abundantly clear theme in the poems discussed above
is the theme of loneliness and isolation. Whether an individual feels isolated in a crowded city or
a farm feels separated from the rest of the world, Auden frequently explores these themes in his
work. In these poems Auden exposes isolation and loneliness as a condition of human existence
regardless of whether one lives in an urban or rural area.

When Auden himself explores the experience of being a stranger, he exposes an alternate
of the changing, “advancing” world. Between the industrial revolutionizing of cities, the eye-
opening experience of travel, and new frontiers to space, society generally unequivocally
approves of this kind of “progress.” But Auden takes another opinion—he asks how human
connection is affected by growing cities; how our experiences in other countries can still make us
feel alone; and how space travel and science affect our appreciation for art.

In reading these latent questionings and skepticisms in Auden’s work, especially in work
that spans over decades, the reader can discern that the speakers of the poems carry several latent
concerns that do not appear in the other poems discussed so far. While Auden’s speakers have
total authority over talking about the mines of Rookhope, for example, these same speakers do
not have the same authority over the exploration of the moon. Therefore, Auden’s speakers in unknown realms speak with less affection and more skepticism that they do about known places.

In considering how unknown places and familiar places reconcile themselves within Auden’s nature poetry as a whole, the reader learns that Auden’s poetry tends to romanticize the familiar and question the unfamiliar. While Auden feels affection for the past and the familiar places, such as the mines and the body, he takes on new places with suspicion and questioning skepticism.
Conclusion: “Howling” Again

In this thesis, I argue that Auden’s consistencies in his writing are just as important as his changes and developments. Particularly, the way that Auden looks at nature throughout his poetic career demonstrates that there is value in a poet milling over the same topics and ideas throughout his entire life. Auden meditates over and over upon the same ideas related to the natural world and humanity.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I prove that the mines are an integral representation of how we should read Auden’s poetry—at first, these poems often look straightforward and somewhat unemotional, but underneath the surface Auden explores often the themes of loneliness and authority. As the authority of these places, Auden owns the right to write about them—he is the sole documenter of Rookhope, the only one writing about it at this time. This authority allows Auden to explore the role of the stranger from the outside, a role that he himself will play in the poems in the third chapter.

In the second chapter, I discuss the roles that landscape, body, and emotion play in Auden’s poetry. When Auden discusses the body in the context of a poem about landscape or the natural world, he often uses the body as an access point by which he can talk about emotions that the poem initially does not discuss. Although Auden does not necessarily set out to write a poem about anxiety or sadness, these emotions appear when Auden writes about nature and the body. This way of writing poems allows him to discuss these anxieties, whether they are about death or fear of critical judgment.

In the final chapter, I write about Auden himself as the stranger, discovering or imagining unknown, unexplored places in the world. In this chapter I assert that Auden favors the familiar places, such as rural countryside scenes and the mines, and is quick to criticize unknown or
sinister places, such as new cities, or to view skeptically travellers to new territory, such as astronauts travelling to the moon. Although Auden writes in his 1929 journal that man must move away from nature to make progress, in these poems about places unknown Auden seems to shy away from strangeness for the comfort of the places he knows he likes.

Overall, then, I make the argument that Auden’s poetry about the natural world stays the same more than it changes. Auden keeps circling back to the same themes and anxieties in his poetry about the natural world. Whether overtly or beneath the surface, the speaker of his poems constantly worries about death, irrelevance, and change. The natural world gives Auden a place to showcase these anxieties because he can talk around the subject—though Auden may begin with a description of a painting, latent anxieties about a single person’s insignificance in the larger scheme of the world. Through the metaphor of Auden’s poetry about the mines, the winding analytical path Auden takes to express these neuroses, and the way in which Auden treats the known against the unknown, a reader of Auden’s nature poetry can see that the poet loves to circulate the same ideas in the same spaces in his mind. These ideas, throughout the entirety of Auden’s poetic career, consist of concerns about whatever occupies his mind, and the concerns of the poet also stay consistent.

This assertion is significant in the world of literary criticism because it contradicts many common conceptions of Auden. Many critics argue that Auden’s earlier and later works are so different that they should be separated into two different volumes, but this analysis argues for a different way of categorizing Auden’s poetry. Instead of the traditional chronological way of organizing his poems, readers instead should be looking at Auden’s poems for their content and thematic elements.
Another interesting facet of Auden is a seeming contradiction in his work: he often criticizes the traveller, writing that someone who visits a place for a short period of time cannot fully understand a place. However, in his own life, Auden travelled extremely frequently to other countries for extended periods of time. One could make the argument that Auden’s biography allowed him to be even more aware of the “stranger-ness” of travel because he himself experienced this alienation. This idea contradicts the conceptualization of Auden as an urbane, worldly poet and instead introduces him as someone who feels the anxieties of constant travel.

One direction for future research on Auden could be analyzing whether Auden keeps any other themes or topics for poems, such as politics or family, consistent throughout his poetic career. While many critics focus on Auden’s changing poems and style, looking at the topics about which Auden writes could be fruitful for discussion of Auden as a whole and for bringing different poems into the limelight of critical attention.

I also would love to explore even more of Auden’s Juvenilia, looking at how it influences the rest of Auden’s writing. In this thesis I had the opportunity to look at only a small fraction of a large body of work, fragments of which appear in Auden’s later poems. Juvenilia contains much of Auden’s early thoughts about the natural world and Rookhope, but in this project I did not have room to discuss Juvenilia’s significance at length. I believe the collection could be a somewhat untapped resource in thinking about Auden’s entire body of work because it represents some of his earliest writing and thought.

In Early Auden, Mendelson writes, “In the texture of his verse, he used the repetitive elements of metre to represent the experience of events in nature, and the unique rhetorical stress of an individual line, its variation on a metrical ground, to represent the experience of unique events in history” (Early, 174). Mendelson’s idea can be extrapolated to an even larger scale.
Auden certainly works on a metrical level to produce cycles in his poetry, but the topics of his poetry also endure these same cycles. He recycles words and images from the mines of Rookhope into his poems years later. He repeats the same ideas and anxieties about nature over and over again in his poetry, imitating the cycles that happen within the world and within himself. While Mendelson demonstrates cycles on a metrical level, these cycles become even more prominent when considered on a larger scale. The poet possesses a vested interest in events and emotions that happen again and again.

In “Journey to Iceland,” Auden writes about the writer who, when times are difficult, goes “howling to his art” (*Selected*, 51). Auden’s speaker in many of these poems seems to undergo the same phenomenon. When the speaker of Auden’s poems ponders an issue to discuss, a feeling to comprehend, or a place about which to reminisce, those emotions appear in Auden’s poetry about nature. In looking at Auden’s poetry that explores the natural world, one gets the opportunity to analyze on both a micro and macro scale: to look at the small details within the poems as well as the poems in the context of one another. Aside from a project that organizes poetry by topic, these poems never would have been placed side by side, especially with Auden, who is typically seen as an urbane, metropolitan writer rather than one with an interest in the natural world. They vary in how frequently anthologized they are, as well as by length, time period, and style. But, in looking at what makes Auden go once more “howling to his art” (ibid), the reader observes that poetry about the natural world can bring Auden out of a seemingly rational shell and into a more emotional world.
Works Consulted


