



Collected Poems

W.H. Auden , Edward Mendelson (Editor)

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Between 1927 and his death in 1973, W. H. Auden endowed poetry in the English language with a new face. Or rather, with several faces, since his work ranged from the political to the religious, from the urbane to the pastoral, from the mandarin to the invigoratingly plain-spoken.

This collection presents all the poems Auden wished to preserve, in the texts that received his final approval. It includes the full contents of his previous collected editions along with all the later volumes of his shorter poems. Together, these works display the astonishing range of Auden's voice and the breadth of his concerns, his deep knowledge of the traditions he inherited, and his ability to recast those traditions in modern times.

Collected Poems Details

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Nancy Watson says

I first became aware of Auden in my early teens after hearing a reading of Funeral Blues in the movie Four Weddings and a Funeral. That poem enchanted me and I have been an Auden fan since! This collection of poems may seem a bit daunting because of the size; good for picking up and reading a few at a time or getting lost in Auden's spell-binding language for hours at a time.

C says

I will be reading this book until I die.

Fergus says

CODA

From Archaeology
one moral, at least, may be drawn,
to wit, that all

our school text-books lie.
What they call History
is nothing to vaunt of,

being made, as it is,
by the criminal in us:
goodness is timeless.

August 1973.
(the last word...)

Bob Wollenberg says

Sometimes clear as a bell. Sometimes I'm lost. But lots of it really sends my mind off in new directions. Wonderful! It's worth it to read his Christmas poem/play "for the time being."

Ken W. says

Having read an autobiography, interspersed with poetry, of Auden by Charles Osborne, I think I have a better

understanding, holistically, of the man and his writing. Auden used his wayward intellect to create a flippant, yet cleverly contrived personal style, with witticisms of the cartoonish kind, and bon mots, to be applauded like a theatrical event, similar to his many collaborations with Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten.

He was sometimes outrageously gay, and belonged to an Oxford group which included Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender.

In the thirties he, like Spender, had left leanings, but later became disenchanted and veered to the right. Like Evelyn Waugh, he returned to religion, in his case the Church of England, which he had abandoned while at Oxford.

With Isherwood, he became a resident, and later a citizen, of the United States.

For this he was considered to be a traitor by some, for escaping from England during its hour of need - just prior to World War 2.

In the US he lectured at a number of Universities and gave poetry readings. Later, he and a much younger lover, Chester Kallman, wrote for the theatre and lived just outside Vienna in the Austrian countryside for six months of every year. The other six were spent in Greenwich Village, New York, where they had a flat.

During the last years of his life, Auden returned to Oxford, where he was provided with a cottage for a nominal rent. He was a heavy drinker and ultimately died alone of a heart attack in a hotel room.

Robert says

For a month or more now I've been dipping into a 900 page collection of poems by W.H.Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson. Since there's no way to "review" such a massive book, I'll divide this comment into two parts: 1) Why You Should Read Auden and 2) Why You Should Not Read Auden.

I. Why You Should Read Auden:

--Auden was a master of virtually all poetic forms employed in English.

--Auden's range extended from the melancholy to the cheeky.

--Auden made poetry out of everyday life and friendships.

--Auden's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is a marvelous exploration of the complex statement we all make at one time or another: "I love You."

--Auden's poem, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," underscores a fundamental fact about his poetry: he had thought through and gained command over virtually every dimension of human experience.

--Auden was not afraid to write biting verse about contemporary issues while preserving poetic distance and form (not giving in to shocking ranting, for example.)

--Auden's classical frame of reference could be challenging, but he still managed to write more directly and clearly than T.S. Eliot, whose mantle he was thought to have donned upon Eliot's departure from the scene.

--Auden managed to be intelligent in virtually every line he wrote; the connective tissue between his

perceptions was his gift for analysis and valuation.

--Auden both embraced and transcended his homosexuality, normalizing the facts and truths.

II. Why You Should Not Read Auden

--Auden's been dead a long time now, so who cares?

--Poetic forms have been dead for a long time now, so who cares?

--Any poet who is ironically passionate about his passions isn't passionate enough to be passionate about.

--A poet who doesn't serve up the same stuff all the time cannot be trusted--did Auden ever have a thought he didn't transform into a line of poetry?

--Auden wasn't really the heir to Eliot, and he'd say so himself, challenging the notion of heirs altogether.

--Who has time for poetry that has a consistently gentle Olympian quality to it? I mean, who knows who Aphrodite and Achilles were? And again, who cares? Talk about dead, they were never even alive!

--Auden might have been gay, but he still was a male WASP who spent a lot of time at Oxford.

--Philip Larkin, the most overrated of English poets, has made perfectly clear that he thought Auden was overrated.

--Where did Auden come up with this Dictung und Warheit idea anyway? Who was Goethe? How do you even pronounce a name spelled like that?

--And he didn't stop at memorializing Sigmund Freud, he carried on about Henry James, as well. Something about his "heart, fastidious as a delicate nun..." What's that supposed to mean?

Cinco says

People are always surprised to hear this is Auden's, but it is:

As the poets have mournfully sung,
Death takes the innocent young,
The rolling-in-money,
The screamingly-funny,
And those who are very well hung.

J. Alfred says

I've never really gotten the Auden thing. He's good, but a lot of guys are good. It seems like he gets more air time, as it were, than most comparable talents.
Reading this mammoth book kind of confirmed my opinion, while at the same time jarring it once in a while:

every time I was tempted to skip ahead--and this was often--I would hit a line or a whole segment of a poem that gave me shivers. You kind of get tired of the tone of the early poems, and the more relaxed later ones don't have the same pop. But still, he's written a few that deserve to be in your working memory ("Shield of Achilles," "The Fall of Icarus," "In Memory of W.B. Yeats") and a bunch more which are worth puzzling over.

I find the "Shorts" the most fun. There is something significant in the following:

His thoughts potted
from verses to sex to God
without punctuation.

Jen says

673 pages of Auden's poetry, from 1927, when he was 20, to 1972, the year before his death. I'm not going to pretend to have anything original to say about Auden and there are single poems of his about which a full review could be written. So this is just going to be some impressions.

First, this was a slog. I can certainly stand impressed with his intelligence (clearly a genius) and his skill with craft but I won't be calling him a favorite. Though he is to be lauded as a serious poet who was also unafraid of humor, the majority of his poetry came across as monotone to me, which is why it was such a difficult volume to get through.

Having said that, I have to reverse myself a little and say that I was pleasantly surprised by a couple of the very long early poems. I dragged my heels about reading "New Years Letter" and "For the Time Being" but enjoyed them both and intend to read them again some time. The better known "Age of Anxiety" is awful (anglo saxon verse for anyone interested in contemporary examples of that form—but terribly dull). Though the phrase caught on and the attitude expressed may be considered historically important, I can see why no one reads the poem any longer or even knows where the phrase came from.

Another one of his supposedly great poems, "In Praise of Limestone," I liked but would not call one of my favorites of his. I was particularly curious about it because it was one of the most selected poems when David Lehman of The Best American Poetry series asked all of his previous editors in the year 2000 edition to select what they thought were the 10 best poems of the 20th Century.

Since Auden was born in the UK but became a U.S. citizen, a question hovers around him whether he is a British poet or an American poet. I fall firmly on the side of calling him British. I see little in his poetry or temperament that makes him American. I think he was British to the core though he may also have loved New York City, Germany and Austria.

One of the reasons to read a "collected" or "complete" works is to see the development of another poet and to see overall what they wrote instead of simply what has received the official stamp of approval or which is easily anthologized. Auden wrote many poems dedicated to people. He wrote very long poems and very short poems. He wrote verse plays. He talked backed to earlier poets. He wrote occasional poems and he was commissioned to write poems. He also wrote aphorisms and silly rhymes. No denying he had scope even if he tended to write these different things in a similar tone. As a poet, it challenged me to consider my own lack of range or where I have not dared to try and fail--as he certainly did with some of his attempts. He was incredibly ambitious when young, tackling the big projects of his poetic predecessors with skill and aplomb, even cheekiness. He seemed less invested in impressing people as he aged and wrote more of homey things. I liked the cranky old man voice of his later poems the best.

Here are links to some of his poems I enjoyed:

First Things First: <http://www.ashokkarra.com/2011/09/w-h...>

Humor: The Ballad of Barnaby

<http://literaryballadarchive.com/PDF/...>

He had fun with diction. An extreme example, which he subtitled (a lexical exercise) is "Bad Night" (here a piece of the middle):

Instead of a facile
Five-minute trot
Far he must hirple,
Clumsied by cold,
Buffeted often
By blouts of hail

But keep this man away from my wedding. Here is a stanza from the "Epithalamion" he wrote for what appeared to be a relative.

Cool Hymen from Jealousy's
teratoid phantasms,
sulks, competitive headaches,
and Pride's monologue,
that won't listen but demands
tautological echoes,
ever refrain you.

That is the staid, urbane, intellectual voice that made me reluctant to dive in for more.

Here's the cranky (or here affronted) old man voice in "A Shock":

Housman was perfectly right
Our world rapidly worsens:
nothing now is so horrid
or silly it can't occur.
Still, I'm stumped by what happened
to upper-middle-class me,
born in '07 when Strauss
was starting on Elektra,
gun-shy myopic grandchild
of Anglican clergymen,
suspicious of all passion,
including passionate love,
day-dreaming of leafy dells
that shelter carefree shepherds,
averse to violent weather,
pained by predator beasts,
shocked by boxing and blood-sports,
when I, I, I, if you please,
at Schwechat Flughafen was

frisked by a cop for weapons.

Though Auden often expressed a current mentality he observed, as in "Age of Anxiety." He was firmly old guard in most things. Not unpleasantly, not stodgy, but firmly rooted and unapologetic. One of his shorts (as he called them) is:

No, Surrealists, no! No, even the wildest of poems
must, like prose, must have a firm basis in staid common-sense.

So I've read Auden and have had the full view of him. He's easy to admire and it was interesting to see the projects he took on. But he's not my kind of guy. I would recommend others read a selected works first to see if he's your cup of tea before diving into 600+ pages. I had this on my shelf because I'd found it cheap. I don't regret reading it because a "selected" editor might have left out the poems I liked best, but it was a slog.

Aaron says

The greatest poet of the past 100 years.

Olivia says

There are many poems in here I have yet to mine, but this collection has kept me company on many cold nights when all I want to do is curl up with some words, some wine, and my own thoughts. Tough to beat.

Sarah says

Auden tends to either hit the mark with great skill, or be totally off base.

It's nice to have the whole collection of poems, but there are a lot of totally forgettable ones in here.

However, some of his work is so starkly and utterly beautiful, this is a collection I'll always want to have with me.

"Lullaby" alone makes this a treasured book.

Simon says

I dipped back into the old Auden collection this week. Wow, still blown away. He's our bridge from the Romantic to the Modern. Formally flawless in so many poems, always stimulating intellectually, even when he misses the mark. I favour the earlier poems, but find beauty throughout.

Perry says

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

. . W.H. Auden, "Twelve Songs," *Song IX* (1936)

Rather than pen a review of a "collection" of such sublimity in Auden's oeuvre, this is simply in homage.

Unless you're studying a poet, it's doubtful you read a book of poems beginning at page 1 and ending at, here, page 897. To me, a collection of poetry such as this, created by such an acclaimed and beloved poet, is really an assortment of comfort foods for the gods, full of epicurean pleasures to push a mortal's dopamine rush. This is poetry to be sampled, savoured and treasured over the years. After having this on my library card for a few months, I'm determined to purchase my own now.

I think most literati recognize *Song IX* of Auden's "Twelve Songs," which begins "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone...." (1936) (quoted in full in the endnote *), made popular in the modern day by the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). It's one of my favorites, but the most surprising delight for me has been "Academic Graffiti (In Memoriam Ogden Nash)" (1952, 1970), a fun and puckish poem, parts of which are quoted below:

St. Thomas Aquinas
Always regarded wine as
A medicinal juice
that helped him to deduce.

Ludvig van Beethoven
Believed it proven
That, for mortal dust,
What must be, must.

William Blake
Found Newton hard to take,
And was not enormously taken
With Francis Bacon.

Lord Byron
Once succumbed to a Siren:
His flesh was weak,
Hers Greek.

Dante
Was utterly *enchanted*
When Beatrice cried in tones that were peachy:
Noi siamo amici.

Thomas Hardy
Was never tardy
When summoned to fulfill
The Immanent Will.

No one could ever inveigle
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
Into offering the slightest apology
For his *Phenomenology*.

Henry James
Abhorred the word *Dames*,
And always wrote "*Mommas*"
With inverted commas.

When the young Kant
Was told to kiss his aunt,
He obeyed the Categorical Must,
But only just.

Nietzsche
Had the habit as a teacher
Of cracking his joints
To emphasize his points.

Louis Pasteur,
So his colleagues aver,
Lived on excellent terms
With most of his germs.

Christina Rossetti
Thought it rather petty,
When her brother, D.G.,
Put laudanum in her tea.

When Sir Walter Scott
Made a blot,
He stamped with rage
And started a new page.

T. S. Eliot is quite at a loss
When clubwomen bustle across
. At literary teas,
. Crying:--"What, if you please,
Did you mean by *The Mill on the Floss*?"

**Song IX* of Auden's "Twelve Songs":

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead

Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Whitney says

I don't usually read poetry anymore, but when I want to this is definitely the book I turn to.

Michael A. says

I can't even remember how I ended up reserving this book from the library and I don't think I really knew who W.H. Auden was before this, and I definitely didn't realize I was getting 897 pages of poetry from the same guy, poems from 1927 until his death in 1973 that he wanted to preserve. So I got a very big introduction to Auden...

I feel like the Auden, maybe beginning around "Age of Anxiety" era, got more enigmatic with his poetry after that and uses obscure words, and it is clear from his poetry that he is very well-read and a lot of his poetry is intertextual, reacting to or referencing literature and scholars/poets/authors. His main two sources are Christianity, Anglican specifically I believe, and Greek mythology. As for the poetry itself, I'd say it's rather austere and there's not a lot of visceral or physical imagery, it almost seems like meditations or observation. "In Praise of Limestone" I think is a good example, I don't think the imagery gets as out there as surreal poet poets and it doesn't seem as obscure as *The Waste Land*, but the meaning to it to me is pretty much impenetrable. Reading it out loud feels like reading a kind of mundane sentence but you have idea what you're saying - interesting experience.

There were two main things I didn't really like:

1. As a result of his style a lot of the poems in here are forgettable to me, all the long ones that take up full "parts" of the book I think are good (I didn't really like part 3 to sea and the mirror because it felt like a slog to read, also maybe I need to read Shakespeare first, I really don't know) and the book in general, being so long and a lot of poems being forgettable, felt like a slog, almost like a chore to read at times, even though the poetry I don't think was ever bad.
2. he implicitly says Stalin and Hitler were the same twice in gigantic tome of poetry. cmon man! oh well Octavio Paz has a whole poem about hating Stalin that I thought was aesthetically good.

Overall I would say I enjoy Auden's poetry but I probably would have rather read a "selected" than "collected".

Christy B says

How I have a degree in Literature and barely read Auden til this past Winter is beyond me. Amazing, amazing, amazing.

Kelly says

Lullaby

*Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.*

*Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's sensual ecstasy.*

*Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.*

*Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of sweetness show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,*

*Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness see you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.*

Patrick Gibson says

There is never a volume of Auden far from me. No matter who you are or what your background, he is a poet you can love.

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
"Love has no ending.

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,

"I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

"The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
"O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

"In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

"In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,

And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

"Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

"O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

"Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
And Jill goes down on her back.

"O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

"O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

Lindsey says

I thought I liked Auden; apparently I only like the few poems editors always anthologize. His later poems are better though.
