Between Blinding and Enlightening: On Auden, Myth and Knowledge

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Abstract: James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud confirmed the sustained but divided critical interest in myth characterizing modernity and ranging from eschewal to espousal. The Enlightenment thinker Bernard de Fontenelle treated myth as a superstitious obstacle to understanding. For the Romantics, mythopoeic sensibility provided a "vital way of knowing the world" and a welcome alternative to abstracting reason. W. H. Auden was a novice poet forming his poetic voice in the 1920s when anthropology and psychology were inspiring the early generation of modernists to the use of the "mythical method" as a means of grasping the present. In this context, Auden also pondered deeply over myth and its relevance to contemporary poetry and society. This paper aims to examine Auden's ruminations on the category of myth for its capacity to deliver knowledge and enlightenment, but also blind and manipulate man and his consciousness. First, the present paper focuses on Auden's understanding of myth as a discourse for establishing useful and fruitful connections between the past and the present with the hope of broadening our awareness of the underlying attributes of the *condition humaine*. Then, it also proposes a counter-movement, drawing attention to Auden's suspicion of condemnable collective narratives with the potential to shade truth.

Keywords: Wystan Hugh Auden, myth, legend, knowledge, Norse mythology, Hellenism

As a term used in everyday communication and scholarly debates, "myth" has embraced a massive semantic range spanning a continuum between sacred narratives and modern mythologizing. This complicates attempts at a concise and precise definition of the term by even the most renowned authorities who acknowledge the status of myth as an unresolved, contested, and slippery concept. In his effort to correct Lévi-Strauss' assumption that myths have a similar function in all cultures, Geoffrey Stephen Kirk famously asserted that "there

is no one definition of myth, no Platonic form of a myth against which all actual instances can be measured." Myths, he continues, "differ enormously in their morphology and their social function." He thereby rejects the acceptance of Greek myths as "a paradigmatic system that can be used as a central point of reference for the whole study of mythology" (Kirk 1973, 7–8). Similarly, in *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship*, Bruce Lincoln empties his endeavour to "theorize" myth already in the introduction when he states that "it would be nice to begin with a clear and concise definition of 'myth,' but unfortunately that can't be done" (Lincoln 1999, ix).

Perhaps due to its semantic variety and ambiguity, myth has also received a mixed reception. Tracing its history since the advent of modernity, Steven Connor has discerned an impressive array of attitudes oscillating between eschewal and espousal. He argues that many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers discarded myths as unworthy fables. Mythical thinking became associated with what Bernard Fontenelle called "errors of the mind" and Friedrich Max Müller referred to as "the product of misunderstanding" that leads the mind "astray by the 'disease of language'." Myth, Connor suggests, came to be characterized by "superstition, credulity and ignorance from which reason was attempting to unpick itself." In the eighteenth century, it became "the antagonist" of the rationalist ethos. Connor also traces the contours of a growingly positive approach. This emerged with the Romantics, who began to appreciate myth as "a vital way of knowing the world" (Connor 2008, 251–253), and culminated at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in the work of anthropologists, ethnologists, psychologists as well as modernist writers. Some of them welcomed myths for their transhistorical validity and potential to be *paroles*, glimpsing the unchanging and universal schemata characterizing human experience. "Myths," Edward F. Edinger sums up, "are not simply tales of happenings in the remote past but eternal dramas that are living themselves out repeatedly in our own personal lives and in what we see all around ourselves" at present; "they are eternal patterns of the way life happens below the surface, if only one can see it." Myth, he concludes, "can lead us to a comprehension of the larger dimensions of our being" (Edinger 1994, 3–4). Such a claim for the enduring validity of myth has been corroborated by Peter O'Connor, for whom it is "distilled essence of human experience expressed in metaphor" (O'Connor 2000, 3), and by Karen Armstrong claiming that "Mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond

the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality" (Armstrong 2005, 7). Inspired by the progress in early twentieth-century anthropology, this capacity of myth to "illuminate" (Kirk 1973, 3) and assist in comprehending basic patterns of human existence in a larger perspective led numerous modernist writers to an appreciation of the genre. In the modernist era, T. S. Eliot even placed James Joyce's *Ulysses* on a par with "scientific discovery" and famously remarked in *Dial* (1923) that by "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" Joyce found a way "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 1923, 483).

Contrary to such essentialist and enlightening notions, critics have also foregrounded the links that connect myth to falseness and manipulation. Bruce Lincoln, for example, quotes Plato to argue that the ancient philosopher approaches myth (*mythoi*) as a tool the state should use to exert power over citizens and their knowledge:

> Above all, it seems to us that one must supervise the makers-of-*mythoi*, and one must approve that which is good in their compositions, and condemn that which is not. And those which are approved, we will persuade nurses and mothers to recount them to their children, and to shape their souls with these mythoi, even more powerfully than they shape their bodies with their hands. (qtd. in Lincoln 1999, 42)

What prevails in such fecundity of diverse approaches, characterizing the history of scholarship on myth as a narrative discourse, is the question of its veracity and trustworthiness. Since myth in the above definitions encompasses "everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious impression to an absolutely true and sacred account" (Honko 1972, 8), the issues of validity, but also caution and distrust, become relevant. "Perhaps myth's major paradox may be," John S. Gentile concludes, "that it can mean either *truth* or (particularly in casual conversation) *falsehood*" (Gentile 2011, 86).

Auden was well aware of such a multifaceted nature, complex reception, and contrasting connotations of myth. His affinity with myth as a literary discourse was profound and appreciative. This was rooted in his childhood and provided him with a life-long inspiration that projected itself into many of his poems and

critical prose.[1] Auden used the word myth plentifully from the beginning of his career but drafted a concise definition only in his lecture on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1946). Therein, he accentuates the general, trans-historical and trans-geographical validity of the genre. Contrasting myth with dogma, he defines the latter as "a presupposition that has to be believed, even though it can't be proved." Myth, on the other hand, is for him "a proposition about experience, and its truth must be tested by experiment. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden, for example, is a myth, a story of general experience. It is not a question of believing the myth actually happened." In his view, the usefulness of myths emerges from our ability to verify propositions through experience that confirms them:

> The question is, does it [i.e. myth] adequately describe certain experiences that we have? … A myth must have universal applicability, otherwise it becomes a private symbol, and the universal experience must be one to which the individual is related in a unique way – either intermittently, or happily or unhappily. There is no need for a myth on the law of gravity, since we all behave under its influence in the same way, but there is a need for a myth on the experience of falling in love, because its effects are unique.

Myth, Auden suggests, allows an individual to connect their unique encounter of the present with universal validity. Thus, mythological characters who animate and illustrate the underlying truth, Auden argues,

> describe certain universal experiences that we cannot control. You use Puck for a day when you get up and it's raining, you cut yourself shaving, you hurry over breakfast, you miss your train, your boss is sarcastic, your favourite lunch seat is taken, a bar drunk bores you with his life story, the potatoes are undercooked at dinner, and you quarrel with your wife.

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1 For this reason, the role of myth in Auden's work attracted scholarly attention already during his lifetime. See, for example, Patricia Jean Randall, *The Element of Myth in the Poetry of W. H. Auden*. MA thesis. Michigan: Michigan State College, 1949.

Auden concludes that myth offers a glimpse into the essence of human existence by fusing the constant with the fleeting: "Myths present an analogous fusion of accident and substance" (Auden 2002b, 54–56).

In his own prose and poetry, Auden confirmed his life-long fondness for myth and its ability to transcend the past and the present, as well as preserve and communicate what Edward F. Edinger calls "eternal patterns" (Edinger 1994, 3). Long before he defined myth in his 1940s lectures on Shakespeare, Auden incorporated mythical characters and imagery into his own work to relate the fleeting and variable phenomena of the present to the universally valid "substance." In a poem beginning "Having abdicated with comparative ease" from January 1930, he alludes to Kelpie, a shape-changing malevolent creature drawn from Celtic mythology, which usually takes on the form of a horse haunting rivers. The last stanza draws attention to Bigsweir, situated at the border between Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire. Auden's speaker bids the addressee to "look out" (Auden 1988, 46) for Kelpie with a suggestion of its potential to keep humans in a stalemate situation by thwarting their ambitions and progress. This is a fine reflection of Auden's belief at the time that "life is ruled by mysterious forces," as he puts it in his unfinished pensée *The Prolific and the Devourer* (Auden 2002a, 414). Edward Mendelson has aptly noted that two themes recur in Auden's work written in 1939, both concerning man's relation to history and myth. One is that the events forming one's life are products of "involuntary necessity." The other, a contrasting notion, is that such events issue from one's "free choice." Myth helps Auden in his poems to enunciate the former option: "a statement or imitation of some overarching necessity that cannot be altered by anyone" (Mendelson 1999, 28). Similarly, Andrew R. Deane has connected Auden's fascination with such processes to Thomas Hardy, who presented one of the strongest early influences on Auden. In Deane's view, Hardy helped Auden, the novice interwar poet, see the world as ruled by indifferent forces manifesting "some vast, inscrutable design" (Deane 1994, 44). In the poem beginning "Having abdicated with comparative ease", the mythical Kelpie at Bigsweir is an ageless constant. This allows Auden to ruminate on the powerful forces that animate the world, enabling us to encounter, as he would later put it in his lecture on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "certain universal experiences that we cannot control" (Auden 2002b, 56) and triumph over our will.

More than Celtic motifs, however, Auden's work manifests an "incremental Norse influence" (Taylor 2000, 213–214). This is the result of Auden's

"Northerness," his fascination, his emotional and intellectual proclivity for the culture, lifestyle, and bleak climate of the North. Auden's short essay "I Like It Cold" (1947) recalls the role that Norse mythology played in directing his topophilic sentiments towards this cultural region: "My feelings have been oriented by the compass as far as I can remember. Though I was brought up on both, Norse mythology always appealed to me infinitely more than Greek" (Auden 2002a, 335). This was largely the result of his father's doing. Dr Augustus Auden was so keen on northern culture that he attempted to trace the origin of his family name back to Iceland. His multi-genre library also provided the would-be poet with "a heterogeneous collection of books on many subjects" (Auden 2002a, 414) and guidance that set him on the path in his appreciation of the North and Norse literature. In the late 1920s, this fondness was further nourished by J. R. R. Tolkien's Oxford lectures, which Auden attended as a student after switching from science and engineering to English. Throughout his career, Auden wrote appreciatively about Tolkien and his Middle-earth universe. A symbolic tribute came in 1969, when Auden, Peter Salus and Paul Taylor translated *The Elder Edda* and dedicated it to Tolkien. In 1954, Auden published two reviews of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in which he celebrated Tolkien's choice to derive the landscape, history, and inhabitants of his literary world from "Celtic and Scandinavian rather than Mediterranean" mythology (Auden 2008, 491). More importantly, the merit he discerns in Tolkien's imagination and style echoes his above-mentioned trust in myth to have "universal applicability" (Auden 2002b, 55). In one of the reviews, Auden admits that Tolkien's characters and events are "superficially unlike the world we live in." He also concedes, however, that Tolkien "holds up the mirror to the only nature we know, our own." Clearly, when Auden says that "what happened in the year of the Shire 1418 in the Third Age of Middle Earth is not only fascinating in A.D. 1954 but also a warning and an inspiration" (Auden 2008, 490), he reiterates his earlier definition of myth outlined in the lecture *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where he treats it as a story with the potential to relate the unique and fleeting present experience to "certain universal experiences that we cannot control" (Auden 2002b, 56).

Paul Beekman Taylor (2000) provides an excellent overview of things Nordic in Auden's own work. He identifies traces of Norse and Anglo-Saxon imagination in Auden's earlier work, *Paid on Both Sides* (1928) and the poem beginning "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle" (1930). He places an emphasis on Auden's inclination to the use of alliterative sounds, rhythm and allusions to

Norse mythology, especially in relation to the theme of loneliness. *The Ascent of F6* (1936) is especially relevant for the present argumentation. This collaborative play written by Auden and Christopher Isherwood derives its central motif from Ragnarök, a series of apocalyptic events leading to the destruction of the world and its submersion in water, followed by resurfacing and rebirth in a new fertile form. Taylor argues that Auden compares Asgard, the home of the gods, before Ragnarök with England after the First World War. This analogy does not recall the Kelpie scenario showing people submitted to the will and caprice of more powerful forces. Writing at the time of public fascination with the adventures of numerous mountaineering expeditions to the Himalayas between 1930 and 1939 (Gillies and Mahood 2007, 143), Isherwood and Auden situate the main character, the mountain-climber Michael Ransom, into the position of a quest hero attempting to reach a summit, said to be inhabited by a guardian demon. Ransom consequently becomes Auden and Isherwood's means for pondering timeless issues of heroism, power, and temptation to become a public saviour, a common theme in myth. Ransom is an interwar mountaineer but, as Taylor suggests, he also recalls wandering Odin prior to Ragnarök. He becomes what Auden calls a "mythopoeic character" and defines it with an emphasis on historical and geographical universality reminiscent of his understanding of myth: "All characters who are products of mythopoeic imagination are instantaneously recognizable by the fact that their existence is not defined by their social and historical context; transfer them to another society or another age and their characters and behavior will remain unchanged" (Auden 2010, 741). This explains why Auden was willing to include Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Sherlock Holmes and Pickwick in the family of "mythopoeic" characters (Auden 2010, 741; Auden 2002b, 297).

Auden often embraced myth's spatial and temporal universality as a means for establishing such analogies between the past, the present, and different cultural regions, hence drawing attention to the essential and the patterns underlying human life. In 1936, he sailed to Iceland, the epitome of his beloved northern landscape and culture. The visit provided him with an opportunity to focus on motifs drawn from the rich pool of Icelandic mythology and weave them into *Letters from Iceland* (1937), an experimental travel book combining prose and poetry. In Part IV of *Letter to Lord Byron*, Auden reminds the reader of his life-long attraction to Iceland: "With northern myths my little brain was laden, / With deeds of Thor and Loki and such scenes" (Auden 1996, 329). More than relying on Norse myth and *The Elder Edda*, Auden alludes to motifs and characters

from Icelandic folklore and *Íslendingasögur*, a series of Medieval Icelandic sagas. There is, for example, an allusion in "Journey to Iceland" to Skálholt in the south-west of the island, where the controversial bishop Jöns Gerekesson was taken out, "put in a bag" (Auden 1996, 185), and drowned.[2] Additional letters contain more direct references to local legendary characters and their enmeshment in poetry which approaches that of myth. In "Letter to R. H. S. Crossman, Esq.", for instance, Auden invokes the crucial characters appearing in the *Njáls Saga*: Gunnar, who was "killed / At Hlitharendi," and Flosi "waiting on Three Corner Ridge." As with the motifs from myth, Auden mingles these moments in the life of those legendary heroes responsible for shaping the past with images of the present company: a group of ordinary and anonymous Icelanders sitting on the grass, leaping, dancing and playing the accordion. This recalls the above-mentioned "analogous fusion" (Auden 2002b, 55) that Auden would later claim myth creates between the historically constant phenomena and the fleeting quotidian present. His first-person speaker longs to "perceive the images of history," those happening today and in the past, "alike like bodies." He desires to see the heroic deeds as soberly and "clearly" as "the moment / The wraps of cellophane-torn off / From cigarettes flit through the glass" (Auden 1996, 242). Auden clearly attempts to collapse the divide between the heroic past and the quotidian lacklustre present through his focus on Gunnar, an outstanding warrior, who died after refusing to follow Njál's advice to leave the country. This effort and motif are also echoed in "Eclogue from Iceland," where Louis MacNeice, Auden's co-traveller and the co-author of *Letters from Iceland*, invokes the ghost of Grettir Asmundson, an outlaw who stayed in Iceland despite being "hounded" (MacNeice 1996, 276). This character reminds Auden and MacNeice's personas, Craven and Ryan, of the historically ceaseless futility of escapist attempts. Like Auden, MacNeice also pins down an aspect of historically and geographically valid experience and "eternal patterns." He draws an analogy between now and then through our shared tendency to evade one's present by means of idealizing history.

As noted earlier, the North and Norse mythology held a much more powerful grip on Auden's imagination than the South and Greek literature.

2 For an interpretation of other saga motifs, see Jack Threlfall Hartley: *"Oriented by the Compass": Old Norse Literature and W. H. Auden's Idea of the North.* Unpublished thesis. Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 2018.

Simultaneously, he wrote with a notable dose of disdain for warm southern regions, associating them with decadence, crowds, lack of privacy, noise, idleness, and "the way to ignoble ease" (Auden 2002a, 335). Hence, when Christopher Isherwood attempted to characterize his friend and co-traveller, he conceded that Auden's "romantic travel-wish was always towards the North. He could never understand how anyone could long for the sun, the blue sky, the palm-trees of the South. His favorite weather was autumnal, high wind and driving rain" (Isherwood 1975, 77). Despite all this, Auden began to summer in Ischia and explore Italy in 1948. This opened up a new stage in his writing. Auden poised himself to incorporate the Mediterranean landscape, culture, architecture, even materials like marble, into his poems, which encouraged him, more than ever before, to ponder over the differences and similarities between the two opposite ends of his moral compass: the abhorrent South and the beloved North, the Catholic "shame-culture of the Mediterranean countries," as he put it in 1973, and the Protestant "northern guilt-culture" (Auden 2015, 715).

This shift included Auden's growing readiness to participate in what Vassiliki Kolocotroni refers to as "Modern Hellenism," the readiness of twentieth-century writers, especially between the wars, to reanimate myth and the mythical past in order to make sense of the present (Kolocotroni 2012, 2). A gesture of this in Auden's work came about already in the 1930s after he visited Brussels and wrote "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938), one his most anthologized and celebrated poems. This ekphrastic piece has been generously read in relation to several paintings with Biblical motifs by Pieter Brueghel the Elder and his son (e.g. *The Massacre of the Innocents* and *The Numbering at Bethlehem*). The only painting Auden mentions explicitly is Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The painting and Auden's poetic rendering of the defeat of the mythical flyer contain numerous contrasts. The mundane life of the anonymous fisherman and ploughman stands in juxtaposition, for example, to the uniqueness and impressive achievement of Icarus. Their acceptance of repetitive and everyday occupation contrast with Icarus' heroism enabled by his father's inventiveness. Yet overarching all such differences in Auden's poem is what John Fuller refers to as the image of "a world of diurnal unconcern" (Fuller 1998, 266–267). Icarus' tragedy goes unnoticed by others. As he drowns, they continue to occupy themselves with their "own petty quotidian comforts" (Davenport-Hines 1995, 155). Auden sympathetically joins "The Old Masters," such as Brueghel, who he claims "understood" the "position" of "suffering" in human life in which one's

pain, defeat, and destruction are ignored by others who "[turn] away/Quite leisurely from the disaster" (Auden 1976, 146–147). In his effort to view human suffering and indifference as "distilled essence" (O'Connor 2000, 3) and underlying aspects of human experience, Auden weaves such notions into a grand cosmic design. While Icarus drowned, even the listless "sun shone / As it had to" (Auden 1976, 147). In order to "glimpse the core of reality" (Armstrong 2005, 7), Auden's present-day speaker admires an ancient motif and uses this occasion to bleach differences between the past and the present through establishing the Eliotian "parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot 1923, 483).

The crowning epitome of such an appreciative approach to myth and synthetic poetics in Auden's canon came about in one of his most accomplished and poignant poems of 1952, "The Shield of Achilles." Kolocotroni argues that Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Bert Underwood's stereoscopic image "The Erectheion, the Most Revered Temple of Ancient Athens, Greece" invest the ancient object with what Walter Benjamin calls "the ability to look at us in return" (Kolocotroni 2012, 2). Auden follows Keats and Underwood. He allows his speaker to interact with the shield that the goddess Thetis commissioned Hephaestos to forge for her son, the warrior Achilles. Unlike his precedents, however, Auden takes this opportunity to cast a disturbing image of a distraught crowd and "a wasteland of purposelessness and unthinking ruin" (Perry 2013, 378). As in *The Iliad* (XVIII), Thetis in Auden's poem expects the "shining metal" to depict "Marble well-governed cities," "olive trees," "flower-garlanded heifers," "athletes at their games." Yet instead of such signs of order, the stability, and prosperity of a civilized society, Auden lets Hephaestos depict "sky like lead" over "artificial wilderness," "weed-choked field" and grassless plains. Instead of acts of heroism, the shield portrays an anonymous "unintelligible multitude, / A million eyes, a million boots, in line / Without expression, waiting for a sign" (Auden 1976, 454). This public gathering awaiting orders in a lifeless landscape recalls Auden's "The third week in December frost came at last" (1932) and his life-long criticism of the masses for manipulability, the absence of communal spirit and the lack of civic responsibility. In "The Shield of Achilles" he once again synthetizes the past and the present in a process of searching for constancy and patterns underlying human history. He mingles the mythical past, describing Thetis and the shield, with disturbing images of "modern barbarity" (O'Neill 2013, 282). The listless crowd watch an "arbitrary spot" surrounded by "barbed wire." Inside this enclosure, "bored officials lounged" and have "three

pale figures" bound to "posts driven upright in the ground" (Auden 1976, 454). Through barbed wire, so hauntingly associated with twentieth-century warfare and concentration camp architecture, the metal shield does not communicate glory. It eternalizes some of Auden's earlier concerns: suffering, passivity of one's surroundings, purposeless atrocity, and the relation of art to life. As Michael Wood shrewdly sums up, "Hephaestos and Thetis, maker and watcher of what's on the warrior's shield, bear no responsibility for the distant horrors they craft and see; they are as helpless as the lost subjects of 'September 1, 1939'" (Wood 2013, 137).

"The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts" nod to Edward Mendelson's assertion that Auden was "an heir to the great first generation of modernists" who were "interested in myth, the primitive, that which is essential and hidden inside human beings" (Mendelson 2010, 1). They also demonstrate Auden's eagerness to approach life from an honest, unromanticized, and non-idealizing perspective. This latter quality echoes Auden's life-long poetics revealed already in his early conviction (1926) that if there is a general preference for poetry offering "casements opening upon Fairyland," there should also be art that "open[s] upon the Waste Land" (Auden 1996, 3). This fidelity to honesty continued to re-emerge throughout Auden's life. It is evident, for instance, in his "The Poet of the Encirclement" (1943), where he defines art not as "magic" but "a mirror" whose proper effect is "disenchanting." Through a "lucid pattern" of "significant details," art becomes a mirror that "shows our present state is neither as virtuous nor as secure as we thought" (Auden 2002a, 198). Auden clearly believed that Norse and Greek myth could be a means for such frankness and disenchantment helping an artist to expose the unflattering but true and permanent nature of the postlapsarian human condition. "The Shield of Achilles," as Rainer Emig shrewdly shows for example, illustrates that the mythical world traditionally characterized by certainty, heroes, athletes, community, piety and rituals has been replaced with decadence, uncertainty, anonymous crowds, aimless street urchins and men committing rapes and killings (Emig 2000, 208–209).

While entrusting myth as a literary discourse with the potential to glimpse the hidden constants of human existence and enlighten the reader, Auden also used the word "myth" in a contrasting way as a synonym for false and manipulating constructs. In his inaugural lecture "Making, Knowing and Judging" (1956), for example, he discusses poets' motives for writing and calls Rimbaud's decision to stop at an early age "The Rimbaud Myth" (Auden 2010, 492–493).

In the similar sense of a false construct, the word "myth" appears in several poems. In "Good-Bye to the Mezzogiorno" (1958), his farewell poem to Ischia, Auden claims that the "Myth of an Open Road" is "an invention" of the northern "climate where it is a pleasure to walk / And a landscape less populated / Than this one [the South]" (Auden 1976, 487). These are but two examples of his suspicious view of mythologizing history, historic figures, space, and landscape. In "Letter to R. H. S. Crossman, Esq.," for example, Auden was reluctant to heroize Gunnar. In a number of other poems of the interwar period, he refuses to transform ancestors into "a splendid empire" (Auden 1988, 119) by idealizing and mythologizing their deeds. He was equally reluctant and critical of spatial myths, especially the interwar reincarnation of the romantic idealization of the countryside. Convinced that "The progress of man seems to be in a direction away from nature" (Auden 1988, 298) towards individuation and communal existence in the urban space, Auden despised rural rides and the open-air ethos as acts of irresponsible evasion of social responsibility for one's existential space: the city. By the same token, he blamed the Scout icons Robert Baden-Powell and Frederick Haydn Dimmock for the artificiality of their plan to ennoble children by taking them to the countryside viewed as a superior environment. In literary contexts, he scorned William Wordsworth for inspiring the interwar wave of "nature-worship" (Auden 1988, 297) practised by the masses who came to believe that "The Good Life is confined above the snow-line" (Auden 1996, 251).

In his critical approach to such mythologizing and artificial constructs, and in suggesting ways of their debunking, Auden displays, I believe, a certain indebtedness to the scientific background delivered by his father and Auden's own early plans to pursue a career in science. Auden frequently wrote about differences between science and art. He could be critical towards science, for example, in questions related to the purpose and use of the knowledge it generates, as in "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics" (1961) or his essay "Do you Know Too Much?" (1962). At the same time, he acknowledged that science had merit. In his 1938 review of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, for example, he praises anthropology for "exploding" the romantic "fallacy of the Noble Savage … a primitive being unwarped by social pressure" (Auden 1996, 472). In his view, science, like art, can delude, disenchant, and remove dogmas: "The great achievement of the sciences has been," he asserted in 1971, "to demythologise the Universe. … a storm, for example, is a natural phenomenon, not as in polytheism, the wrath of *Zeus*" (Auden 2015, 696).

Auden borrowed the epigraph for *The Dyer's Hand* (1962) from Nietzsche: "We have Art in order that we may not perish from Truth" (Auden 2010, 449). Auden believed that myth could assist him in this endeavour and be one of his tools of enlightening about what he trusted to be the universal patterns of the *condition humaine*. The word myth was also his synonym for fallacy and, as Raymond Williams puts it in his definition of myth, "untrustworthy or even deliberately deceptive invention" (Williams 1983, 211). Auden was concerned about the deluding and manipulative impact of such constructs, fashioned by societies and politicians on individuals and their ability to think critically. In this he partly relied on science but mainly on poetry. If poetry has "an ulterior purpose," he asserts in *The Dyer's Hand*, "it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate" (Auden 2010, 473). Auden thus clearly ruminated on the category of myth within a contrasting spectrum. He could see its potential to blind, delude and manipulate, as well as the power to enlighten and instruct.

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