

Wicked at all times.

Original Sin in W. H. Auden's anti-totalitarian
political philosophy

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Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate the function of Original Sin in W. H. Auden's political philosophy during and after the Second World War. The analysis is twofold, with a theoretical bridge. In the first chapter I consider the role of Original Sin in Auden's understanding of fascism, liberalism and democracy during the early 1940s, based on a reading of selected prose (1939-48) as well as two long poems Auden wrote in the early 40s: "New Year Letter" (1940) and "For the Time Being" (1941-42). Drawing on a theoretical framework developed by Roger Griffin in his study of modernism and fascism, I show how Auden's religiously grounded political philosophy in general, and his notion of the *time being* in particular, underpins his rejection of totalitarian apocalypticism. In the second chapter I bring in the theoretical perspective of political philosopher Hannah Arendt, whose concept of *action* sheds light on the *time being* as well as providing a useful conceptual framework for my analysis in the third chapter. In chapter 3 I investigate Auden's poem sequence *Horae Canonicae* (1949-54) in light of the findings from the previous chapters, with focus on its central theme of the *act* or crime and its portrayal of beginnings and ends. I demonstrate how a reading of the poems in light of 1) Auden's political philosophy from the 1940s onwards and 2) Arendt's theory of *action* reveals new insights into Auden's understanding of Redemption or the Last Judgment.

Preface and acknowledgments

I first fell for Auden in a library in Connecticut. It happened during the Fall semester of 2010, on the near-deserted third floor of the University of Connecticut library, Storrs Campus. I, like many in my generation, had first come to know of Auden through the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), where the character Matthew (John Hannah) gives a beautiful and understated reading of the poem “Stop All the Clocks.” The next encounter had been just as much of a coincidence, when one of Oslo’s cheap chain bookstores inexplicitly happened to have one volume of *Another Time* (1940) on sale for 30 NOK. It was lucky that *Another Time* should have been the first collection of Auden’s poetry that I read; unlike the *Collected Poems* it includes two of Auden’s most famous, but later to-be-discarded poems; “Spain, 1937” and “September 1st, 1939.” These two rhetorically powerful poems contributed to a firm first impression of Auden as someone who – also – had something to say about politics: “Find what occurred at Linz / What huge imago made / A psychopathic God” along with lines like “None can live for long / In an euphoric dream; / Out of the mirror they stare, / Imperialism’s face / And the international wrong.” The same collection – a jackpot, really – also contains Auden’s elegy to W. B. Yeats, in which he not only writes that “poetry makes nothing happen,” but that the role of poetry is, “In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise.”

But back to the library in Connecticut: on that near-deserted third floor I found, among other works, a first edition of *The Shield of Achilles* (1955). I opened it on a random page and read the curious, casual poem “Vespers.” Casual, that is, until its very last lines, where the speaker states that “...without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.” I didn’t understand what it meant. This, I believe, was the true beginning of my fascination with Auden’s poetry – a mystery. I found nothing in the poem to explain why a civilization – even “our dear old bag of a democracy,” as Auden writes, adding insult to injury – by necessity should have to be founded on innocent blood, nor why anyone would *end* a poem on a statement like that, and then seem to move on as if nothing had happened. The quest for an answer led me to the sequence *Horae Canonicae*, which again led me to discover and then try to figure out Auden’s Christianity, which eventually led me to the topic of this thesis, broadly described: Original Sin in Auden’s political philosophy. Needless to say, it has been a process in several stages, during which I have had a lot of help from a lot of people.

I have many to thank for what is good in this thesis. Any remaining faults or flaws are, of course, my own.

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Thank you to *Bokvennen Litterært Magasin* for printing my essay on Auden in the 1930s, and for valuable feedback and editorial assistance.¹

I am grateful to a number of people for commenting on and proof reading drafts, for listening patiently to explanations of often vague and obscure ideas, and in other ways challenging me to think. Thanks to Guilherme Schmidt Camara, Ingrid Hjertaker, Elin Kittelsen, Eivind Myklebust, Vincent Møystad, Andrea Phillips, Ingrid Rædergård, Marie Rædergård, Kjetil Simonsen and Ida Amalie Svensson. Thank you for your friendship and your help.

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¹ Hedda Lingaas Fossum, "Inn i sin tid: W. H. Auden og diktets muligheter," in *Bokvennen Litterært Magasin* 3 (2013), 71-19.

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Introduction

“Democracy is hard,” writes the poet W. H. Auden in a book review in October 1939. “I do not think that democracy can be sustained or defended unless one believes that pride, lying, and violence are mortal sins, and that their commission entails one’s damnation.”² Eight months later, in an address to college students, he states that while it is “tempting in this terrible crisis, which may quite conceivably end in temporary disaster, to believe that it is due to the sudden appearance of some unusually wicked men. This is too simple. *Man is lazy, impatient, and wicked at all times.*”³ These statements demonstrate quite explicitly what Auden believed at this point, namely that democracy did not work unless people were convinced of the reality and seriousness of sin, *at all times*. Coming from an author who had, during the 1930s, become famous for his anti-fascist political commitment as much as for his poetic virtuosity, statements like these were bound to raise some eyebrows.

This is a thesis about ideas as much as it is about poetry. More specifically, it is a thesis investigating the ideas of a poet, in poetry and prose, during a time of political crisis. W. H. Auden was a poet for whom ideas meant a great deal, including in his writing. Randall Jarrell noted that “Ideas, theories, dialectic are material for him as they have been material for few other poets; he uses abstractions, sets of ideas, astonishingly naturally and well...*in his poetry.*”⁴ According to Edward Mendelson, Auden used his poetry “to comprehend the world he shared with his audience.”⁵ The world that Auden shared with *his* audience, however, has changed. As one critic notes, religion, for instance, “no longer occupies the same securely central place in contemporary discourse. Many of those who in earlier generations would have felt some obligation to attend to such matter no longer feel it.”⁶

As religious belief becomes not only impossible but inconceivable for many people who would form Auden’s natural contemporary constituency of readers, it would be a serious loss if it also became impossible to grasp how much his religious thought is bound up with his...poetic language. [Auden’s] ideas about poetry and about religion are never very far from each other.⁷

In this thesis, I read Auden’s poetry and prose with the aim to “comprehend the world he shared with his audience,” and to comprehend Auden’s own idiosyncratic world-view.

² W. H. Auden, “Democracy is Hard,” *Collected Prose Volume II (1939-38)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.), 28. Hereafter *Prose II*.

³ Auden, “Romantic or Free?” *Prose II*, 68. My emphasis.

⁴ Randall Jarrell, *Randall Jarrell on W. H. Auden*, ed. Stephen Burt with Hannah Brooks-Motl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 70.

⁵ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), xiv.

⁶ Sean O’Brien, “Auden in Prose,” in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 335.

⁷ O’Brien, “Auden in Prose,” 335-336.

Original Sin

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made. – Immanuel Kant

In the first chapter of this thesis, I delve into what Auden “saw in” Original Sin, its “content” and relevance for his politics, in copious detail. I refer to this chapter for a more comprehensive investigation into its meaning and use in Auden’s writing. Nevertheless, a short presentation of what Auden understood by Original Sin, and how he connected it to politics in the first place, is in order. References to sin, sinfulness, the Fall and Original Sin appear frequently in Auden’s prose and poetry throughout the forties, but nowhere does he provide one unequivocal definition. In his unpublished manuscript of prose “pensées,” *The Prolific and the Devourer*, he writes that sin is “consciously to act contrary to self-interest...the only generalization we can make with certainty is the universality of guilt.”⁸ This view is echoed in a couplet from *New Year Letter*: “To sin is to act consciously / Against what seems necessity.”⁹ The Fall of Man, he continues in the pensées, “does not mean that there was once a time when he did no evil, only that there was once a time when he did not sin... [The Fall] is repeated in the life history of each individual, so that we have a double memory of Eden, one from personal experience and one social-historical.”¹⁰ In his poetry, some of the clearest expressions of his view of the human condition appear in poems written during the early years of the Second World War:

...lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night,
Who have never been happy or good. (“September 1st, 1939.”)

Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind. (*For the Time Being*. 1941-42)

These quotes give an idea of Auden’s understanding of sin. Sin, simply put, expresses itself in “conscious evil,” it is “universal” and “repeats itself in the life of each individual.” In fact, one of the most concise descriptions of what Auden meant by original sin is found in another stanza from “September 1st, 1939”:

The error bred in the bone

⁸ Auden, *Prose II*, 427.

⁹ W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), Ll. 608-9. Hereafter *NYL*. All quotes from *New Year Letter* are from this source, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ Auden, *Prose II*, 427.

Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

In a 1941 review of a work by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whose influence on Auden will be discussed further in chapter 1, he writes that the “most brilliant passages” in Niebuhr’s book are those that deal with the nature of sin and stating, at the same time, that “No Christian doctrine is more unwelcome to the modern liberal than that of Original Sin.”¹¹ Sin is also sometimes referred to in terms of rebellion, as when Auden writes, in an essay about detective stories, that “every murderer is the rebel who claims the right to be omnipotent. His pathos is his refusal to suffer.”¹² In the same essay Auden muses that the typical *reader* of detective stories is, “like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin.”¹³

One reason why Auden never concisely (or un-contradictorily) defines Original Sin was, perhaps, because he could assume, at the time of writing, that his audience was likely to be sufficiently familiar with the idea. In case this should no longer be so, I will in the following give a summary presentation of the term.

Alan Jacobs writes that Original Sin must not be confused with the “fatal choice” or flaw familiar from ancient Greek tragedies; a “choice that sets in motion vast irresistible forces of retribution.”¹⁴ In Reinhold Niebuhr’s words, Original Sin was *not* an inherited corruption, but should rather be understood as an “inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man’s spirituality.”¹⁵ The Christian understanding of sin, Niebuhr significantly emphasizes, involves the conviction that evil is “inextricably bound up with good” and that the “possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good.”¹⁶

The most well-known passages on Original Sin in the Bible come from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Sin “dwells in me. For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing....”¹⁷ Among other things Paul complains, in a line of thought picked up and paraphrased by Auden, about the paradox that “knowing the good” does not mean either willing or doing it. “For the good which I desire, I don’t do; but the evil which I don’t desire,

¹¹ Auden, *Prose II*, 134.

¹² Auden, *Prose II*, 265.

¹³ Auden, *Prose II*, 269.

¹⁴ Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), xi.

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brother Publishers, 1935), 90.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 97.

¹⁷ Rom 7:17, 7:18

that I practice...while I desire to do good, evil is present.”¹⁸ All of creation, in Paul’s writing, is fallen, awaiting redemption through Christ. “As through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life.”¹⁹

The first thinker to develop the doctrine of Original Sin into a cohesive body of teachings, and a significant influence on Auden, was the church father Augustine of Hippo, famous for his *Confessions*, in which he recounts his youthful sins. Augustine was especially concerned with the “forking and branching of his will,” and his fundamental judgment about himself is that he is “internally divided, driven here and there by multiple pressures and desires.”²⁰ In Augustine’s teaching Adam and Eve, having been created with free will, “chose to disrupt the perfectly good order established by God,” and as a result of the Fall, “all human beings are heirs to the effects of Adam’s original sin, and are vessels of pride, avarice, greed and self-interest.”²¹

Jacobs points out that the “deeper malady” of human life, according to Augustine, was that of *cupiditas*, or “the orientation of the human will toward its own gratification” as opposed to *caritas*, “divine love, which Augustine defined as ‘the movement of the soul toward God.’”²² Augustine believed in predestination: “For reasons known only to God, He has predestined some fixed number of men for salvation...while most He has predestined for damnation as a just consequence of the Fall.”²³ Auden often quotes Augustine, and was especially interested in his reflections on the *acte gratuit*, which Auden describes as “neither reasonable nor physically pleasant, but a pure assertion of absolute self autonomy.”²⁴ The desire to commit such acts reveals, for Auden, something essential about human nature, namely the desire for complete autonomy, which for him is the same impulse that drove Eve and Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Auden’s favorite among Augustine’s confessions was the latter’s ironic insight into the true character of his repentance; Auden paraphrased this saying in a poem as “I am sorry I’m not sorry... / Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet.”

¹⁸ Rom 7:19, 7:21

¹⁹ Rom 5:18.

²⁰ Jacobs, *Original Sin*, 27.

²¹ J. Mark Mattox, “Augustine’s Political and Social Philosophy,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2162-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aug-poso/> (Accessed 11.10.2013)

²² Jacobs, *Original Sin*, 26.

²³ Mattox, “Augustine’s Political and Social Philosophy.” (Accessed 11.10.2013)

²⁴ Auden, *Prose II*, 229.

Materials: Prose

Auden's prose texts constitute an important body of source material for this thesis. I have mainly relied on the *Collected Prose Volume II (1939-48)* and *Collected Prose Volume III (1949-55)*, referred to as *Prose II* and *Prose III* throughout the text. It has been necessary to make a careful selection. As Sean O'Brien puts it, Auden wrote and "immense quantity" of prose, spanning four large volumes.²⁵ One reviewer claims that Auden "must have been writing even while taking a shower."²⁶ The texts vary from essays, book reviews, essay collections, lecture transcripts and one critical monograph titled *The Enchafèd Flood*. Auden tended to use occasional essays (as he did with occasional poems) as an excuse to write at length about whichever topic occupied him most at the time. Complex metaphysical arguments could turn up thinly disguised as book reviews. An exasperated Randall Jarrell wrote that "...purple patches, heartfelt confessions, and memorable feats of dialectical ingenuity reach their highest concentration in reviews of minor theologians."²⁷ This is at the same time what makes Auden's prose such a rich source of insight. The primary essays discussed in this thesis are listed below. They have been selected according to their relevance for the main topics of the thesis; they deal with theology in general and (original) sin in particular; comment on fascism, totalitarianism, Hitler and the war; discuss the nature of evil and the nature of "man," or the nature of love and Agape. For the analysis in the third chapter I have focused on essays containing discussions of (natural and historical) time, forgiveness, the Redemption, the community and the city. When referring to essays published in the magazine *Encounter*, I have used the magazine's archives, which are conveniently accessible online. These have also been reprinted in *Prose IV*. The decision to use the online archive was pragmatically motivated: the print-outs were lighter to carry. I have assumed they might also be easier to access for any interested readers. When referring to the essay collection *The Dyer's Hand* and the commonplace book *A Secondary World*, I have used the original volumes, for the same reason.

Important essays are listed on the next page.

²⁵ O'Brien, "Auden in Prose," 329.

²⁶ Jeffrey Hart, "How good was Auden?" *The New Criterion* Vol. 15 (1997), 59. Available online: <https://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/howgoodwasauden-hart-3394>

²⁷ Jarrell, in *Randall Jarrell on W. H. Auden*, 89.

From *Collected Prose II*

- “A Great Democrat” (March 1939)
- “Effective Democracy” (May 1939)
- “The Prolific and the Devourer” (Summer 1939)
- “Christian on the Left” (September 1939)
- “Democracy is hard” (October 1939)
- “Jacob and the Angel” (December 1939)
- “Against Romanticism” (February 1940)
- “Romantic or Free?” (August 1940)
- “Mimesis and Allegory” (1940)
- “Criticism in a Mass Society” (1941)
- “Tract for the Times” (January 1941)
- “A Note on Order” (February 1941)
- “James Joyce and Richard Wagner” (March 1941)
- “*Yale Daily News* Banquet Address” (March 1941)
- “The Means of Grace” (June 1941)
- “Eros and Agape” (June 1941)
- “Ambiguous Answers” (June 1941)
- “La Trahison d’un Clerc” (January 1942)
- “Lecture Notes I-V” (November 1942)
- “Vocation and Society” (Early 1943)
- “Purely Subjective” (Summer 1943)
- “A Preface to Kierkegaard” (May 1944)
- “Augustus to Augustine” (September 1944)

From *Collected Prose III*

- “Nature, History and Poetry [A]” (19xx)
- “Nature, History and Poetry [B]” (19xx)
- “Nature, History and Poetry [C]” (19xx)
- “The Things Which Are Caesar’s” (19xx)
- “Introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*” (19xx)
- “Balaam and the Ass” (19xx)

From *Encounter*

- “Hic Et Ille” (1956)
- “The Fallen City” (1959)
- “Thinking What We Are Doing” (1959)

Note: When citing important essays, I will provide the titles in footnotes. Otherwise, I will simply refer to the collected prose volumes.

Materials: Poems

New Year Letter

The poem “New Year Letter” was written during the early months of 1940 and first published in the U.S., in the collection *The Double Man* (March 1941). In May the same volume was published in England with the title *New Year Letter*.²⁸ Both volumes consisted of a “Prologue”; the 1707-line poem “New Year Letter”; 82 pages of commentary, short poems and quotations called “Notes to Letter”; the sonnet sequence “The Quest”; and an “Epilogue.” The “Prologue”, “The Quest” and the “Epilogue” were all reprinted as independent poems in later collections.²⁹ “The Quest” has been left out of consideration in this thesis, as has the “Prologue” and “Epilogue.” The focus here is on “New Year Letter” and the “Notes.” All references in this thesis are from the 1941 British version, *New Year Letter*, for two important reasons: This publication, unlike the *Collected Poems* (1994), provides line numbers, and the “Notes” to the letter are left out of *Collected Poems* entirely. For the sake of simplicity and readability I have used the italicized form *New Year Letter* or the abbreviation *NYL* in my references. I use line numbers when referring to “New Year Letter” and page numbers when referring to the “Notes.”

New Year Letter was dedicated to one of Auden’s close friends in New York, the fifty-six-year-old Elizabeth Mayer, wife of an expatriate Jewish psychiatrist. Mayer was a sort of mother-figure to Auden, as well as a “real exile” and a patron of the arts, who opened her home to artists such as Auden and Benjamin Britten to live and work there, to the annoyance of her own children.³⁰ Auden addresses Mayer directly several times in the poem, calling her a “dear friend” who:

...on the lives about you throw
A calm solificatio.
A warmth throughout the universe...
[...] We fall down in the dance, we make
The old ridiculous mistake
But always there are such as you
Forgiving, helping what we do.³¹

²⁸ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 319.

²⁹ The titles of the three in the 1945 *Collected Poems* were, respectively, “Spring 1940,” “The Quest” and “The Dark Years.”

³⁰ Fuller, *A Commentary*, 320; Mendelson, *Later Auden* 101.

³¹ *NYL*, ll. 1694-96; 1699-1703. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “solificatio” means a “radiating warmth as from sunshine.” Their only example quotation is from “New Year Letter.”

(<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/184269?redirectedFrom=solificatio#eid>)

“New Year Letter” consists of three parts of varying lengths. It is written in octosyllabic couplets, and falls most easily into the category “discursive verse.” The 1700+ lines allow Auden to “range eclectically through distant epochs and conflicting ideas,”³² building a work which is part lighthearted metaphysical treatise, part “nutshell political theory” with the “pragmatic philosophical discoveries of a great talker thrown in for good measure.”³³ Michael Murphy has written thoughtfully about the neoclassicism of the poem, and its debt to the Augustan verse epistle.³⁴ He draws attention to how the flexibility of verse letter conversions allows Auden to engage with issues as wide-ranging as the experience of exile, Marxist and Freudian theory and the language of quantum physics.

The opening lines of “New Year Letter” set the tone of Auden’s verse discursion: “Under the familiar weight / Of winter, conscience, and the State...”³⁵ The “Letter” to Elizabeth Mayer takes the form of a digressive meditation on the “situation of our time,”³⁶ from one exile to another. It draws on Auden’s wide knowledge of history, art and philosophy, and includes a range of quotes in German, French, Italian, Latin and Greek – all falling “neatly into metrical step at Auden’s command,”³⁷ more or less correctly spelled. In the first and shortest part, Auden presents a “tribunal” of literary “Great masters” by whom he imagines himself to be assessed, the three most important of which are Dante, Blake and Rimbaud. The historical situation “surrounds us like a baffling crime,” and he enlists the help of his literary influences in order to not only understand the “grand apocalyptic dream,” but to avoid the “temptation to surrender” to it.³⁸ In the second part, he delves into the metaphysical and moral puzzles facing him and everyone else now that the “scrambling decade” of the 30s is over: “[O]ur lives have been co-eval / With a political upheaval,” he reminds the reader, with reference to the Russian Revolution, and goes on to remind us of his own former political sympathies as well: “Some dreamed, like students always can, / It realized the potential Man. [...] We hoped, we waited for the day / The state would wither clean away, / Expecting the Millenium / That theory promised us would come; / It didn’t.”³⁹ The central question for the former revolutionary enthusiast is how to face his disappointment, admit his mistakes and find a new framework for his (political) philosophy without seeking “atonement

³² Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 103.

³³ Fuller, *A Commentary*, 321.

³⁴ Murphy, Michael. “Neoclassicism, Late Modernism, and W.H. Auden’s ‘New Year Letter’” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33:2 (2004) 101-118.

³⁵ *NYL*: ll. 1-2.

³⁶ *NYL*: ll. 233.

³⁷ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 101.

³⁸ *NYL*: ll. 234; 289; 288.

³⁹ *NYL*: ll. 665-66; 673-74; 767-71.

in reaction.”⁴⁰ Part II largely takes the form of an imagined philosophical argument with the Devil, portrayed as trying to tempt the speaker into overly dualistic reactions to the disappointments and failures of his former political life. This gives an indication of another topic of central importance in “New Year Letter,” namely Auden’s newly adopted Christianity. Murphy points out that the poem, while dialectic and discursive in tone, moves in the direction “not of rational argument but...the uncertainties and doubts of faith.”⁴¹ Mendelson calls “New Year Letter” Auden’s *Faust*, with Mephistopheles (the Devil is also referred to by Auden by that name) as the continual threat and tempter and the only “solution” an “eternal process,” a state where one must “daily regain [one’s] life and freedom.”⁴² The third and longest part of “New Year Letter” spans out into lengthy reflections on time, Hell, Purgatory, industrialism, mass-production, the “Economic Man,” Auden’s childhood in England (“what I did when I was young”), the Ego and the Unconscious, modernity, war and, well, etcetera⁴³.

In my discussion of the poem for this thesis, I am especially interested in what Auden has to say about “conscience” and the “State” (Or: his conviction of Original Sin and its relation to his understanding of totalitarianism and liberal democracy) during the winter of 1939-40, in the shadow of the Second World War. The passages selected for discussion are therefore the ones addressing the “situation of our time,”⁴⁴ and the ones most relevant to the argument under construction concerning the relationship between religion and politics in Auden’s thought during the historical “crisis” of the Second World War.

For the Time Being

Auden composed his Christmas Oratorio *For the Time Being* in the winter 1941-42, and originally intended for it to be set to music. He and Benjamin Britten even began to discuss the oratorio as a musical collaboration, but the completed text – about fifteen hundred lines – turned out far too long to be sung. Eventually, the text of the Oratorio was published in the 1944 collection *For the Time Being*. The text referred to in this thesis is that in *Collected Poems* (1994). The Oratorio consists of nine parts, which correspond to the traditional

⁴⁰ *NYL*: II. 808

⁴¹ Murphy, “Neoclassicism,” 116.

⁴² Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 102.

⁴³ For a summary of lines 1 through 1707, see John Fuller’s *Commentary*, 323-336.

⁴⁴ *NYL*: I. 233.

ninefold gospel account of the Nativity celebrated in church festivals and medieval drama.⁴⁵ It opens with a chorus describing a society in the grip of winter and war: “Darkness and snow descends” and “The evil and armed draw near.”⁴⁶ The apathy and apprehension captured in the opening lines are interrupted by a Narrator, who appears throughout the poem in several guises, at times sounding like the head of a government PR team, at other times more hesitantly and doubtfully as an anonymous “average man.” The historical situation of the Oratorio is unclear. The “Temptation of St. Joseph” takes place in a well-lit bar, the Shepherds are, as Auden explained in a letter to his father, a kind of “city-proletariat,”⁴⁷ and Herod self-identifies as a “liberal.” In addition to the characters mentioned so far, the poem gives “speaking parts” to the Wise Men, Mary, Gabriel, Simeon, the Soldiers (who are sent to massacre the first-borns), a variety of choruses and, as a matter of fact, to what C. G. Jung had called the “four faculties”: Intuition, Thinking, Feeling and Sensation. All the characters speak in different verse and prose forms. In my own analysis, I focus on the prose monologues of Herod and Simeon, the first of which effectively parodies what Auden saw as “secular, humanist liberalism,” and the second of which have been called a “condensed and exhaustive statement of Auden’s religious position at the time.”⁴⁸ I also refer to parts by the Chorus and the Narrator, often expressing existential and historical anxiety, and emphasize a crucial aspect of the “Temptation of St. Joseph.”

Horae Canonicae

The poem sequence *Horae Canonicae*, which I turn to in the third chapter, consists of seven poems Auden wrote between the years of 1949 and 1954. They were published as a whole in the collection *The Shield of Achilles* (1955), but some of them had previously been published individually. The poems are based on the Divine Office, also known as the Liturgy of the Hours or canonical hours, and refer to a series of prayers recited at fixed hours throughout the day. The seven poems in Auden’s sequence borrowed their titles from seven of these prayers:

⁴⁵ Miriam Starkman, “The ‘Grace of the Absurd;’ Form and Concept in W. H. Auden’s ‘For the Time Being,’” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 67, no.3 (1974), 277. These nine parts are titled “Advent,” “The Annunciation,” “The Temptation of St. Joseph,” “The Summons,” “The Vision of the Shepherds,” “At the Manger,” “The Meditation of Simeon,” “The Massacre of the Innocents” and “The Flight into Egypt.”

⁴⁶ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 349-50. Hereafter referred to as CP in parentheses in the running text.

⁴⁷ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 186.

⁴⁸ Fuller, *A Commentary*, 354.

Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline and *Lauds*. The prayers traditionally correspond to the events of Good Friday, and their main purpose is to induce reflection upon the Crucifixion. As Fuller notes, Auden drafted “many tables of septenary categories” during the period of these poems’ composition.⁴⁹ Some of these are reproduced in *Later Auden*, and the way in which the prayers are tied to corresponding historical, social and physiological categories can be quite complex. Ultimately, however, in the published version of *Horae Canonicae*, “only a fraction of this program remained.”⁵⁰ I have therefore chosen to disregard these charts in order not to force my interpretations into an unnecessarily narrow framework. In the overview below, I have listed the hours to which each of the poems correspond, their years of composition and their publication history. The poems are listed in the order in which they appear in *Horae Canonicae*.

Title	Hour	Time of Composition	First Published
Prime	(6 a.m.)	August 1949	<i>Nones</i> (1952)
Terce	(9 a.m.)	October 1953	<i>The Shield of Achilles</i> (1955)
Sext	(Noon)	Spring 1954	<i>The Shield of Achilles</i> (1955)
Nones	(3 p.m.)	July 1950	<i>Nones</i> (1952)
Vespers	(6 p.m.)	June 1954	In <i>Encounter Magazine</i> (Feb 1955)
Compline	(9 p.m.)	Spring 1954	<i>The Shield of Achilles</i> (1955)
Lauds	(3 a.m.)	1952*	<i>The Shield of Achilles</i> (1955)

The texts referred to in this thesis are the ones printed in *Collected Poems* (1994). For the sake of readability, and to distinguish the sequence as a whole from the individual poems, I consistently italicize the sequence title, *Horae Canonicae*.

Theoretical Framework

My thesis project originates in a paper presented at the conference *Modernism, Christianity and Apocalypse* during the summer of 2012. The premise of the conference was that the modernist imperative “Make it new!” posits a break with not only traditional artistic forms, but also with the entire mould of a civilization felt to be in a state of terminal decay (‘an old bitch, gone in the teeth’, in the words of Ezra Pound). Modernism was “steeped in the language of apocalyptic crisis, generating multiple (and contradictory) millennial visions of

⁴⁹ Fuller, *A Commentary*, 457.

⁵⁰ For Mendelson’s discussion of the charts, see *Later Auden*, 311-313.

artistic, cultural, religious and political transformation.”⁵¹ At the same time, what has been described as the “political religions” of the twentieth century (Stalinism, Fascism, Nazism) “promulgated their own revolutionary visions of Apocalypse and a secular Kingdom. [...] These alternative salvation histories...were undeniably linked to their paradigm in the Christian tradition.”⁵²

Accordingly, my project has been informed by two overarching theoretical frameworks, which have lent direction to my thesis. One concerns the role of Christianity within modernism, while the other explores the link between modernism and fascism. These theoretical perspectives have shaped my choice of topic and interpretative strategies; introduced me to relevant research and methodological practices; and directed my attention to basic questions concerning period definitions (“isms”) and “canonized” critical perspectives. The following introduction to and outline of these frameworks should be considered as a theoretical and methodological backdrop to my own investigation, placing it within a wider critical landscape concerning modernism, Christianity and fascism.

Modernism and Christianity

Auden is among the “modernist converts” to Christianity. His Christian framework of ideas, and his interpretation of the Christian concept of Original Sin was, as I will argue, adopted (and adapted) as a conscious response to fascism. Auden’s appropriation of the concept of Original Sin, in particular, forms the basis of much of his political philosophy from 1940 and onwards. In the recently published work *Modernism and Christianity* (2014), Erik Tønning defends the view that “Christianity is intrinsic to any coherent account of Modernism,” and that “any theoretical, historical or critical discussion of Modernism that neglects or minimizes [the impact of Christianity] is inevitably flawed.”⁵³ Tønning claims, further, that a fundamental task for “Modernism and Christianity” as a field of study is to chart and document how the “active, unavoidable, *formative* tension between modernism and Christianity manifests itself from case to case,” and calls for “dense, historical context, archival research and biographical and textual details.”⁵⁴ My investigation of Auden, which begins with an analysis of the function of Original Sin related to what Auden himself

⁵¹ Quoted from the description/program poster of the conference, available here: <http://modernismchristianity.org/events/18-20-july-2012-modernism-christianity-and-apocalypse/> (Hereafter: MCA conference poster.) The term “political religion” has been used, among others, by Emilio Gentile. See “Fascism as Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25: 2/3 (1990), 229-251.

⁵² MCA conference poster.

⁵³ Erik Tønning. *Modernism and Christianity* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 1.

⁵⁴ Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity*, 5.

understood as the distinctly *modern* phenomena of fascism and totalitarianism, contributes one such case study of how Christianity manifested itself and impacted on a modernist author's central concerns and poetic practice. I argue that my thesis manages to reconstruct the kind of "dense, historical context" that Topping calls for, effectively charting and thoroughly documenting one modernist's appropriation of Christian concepts and ideas as well as assessing the function of those concepts and ideas within his political philosophy.

Modernism and Fascism

One aspect that becomes important in my research into Auden's metaphysical political philosophy is his perception(s) of *time*. Auden's adoption of the doctrine of Original Sin leads him towards an understanding of Redemption or the Last Judgment which, I will argue, is linked to a rejection of what one can call totalitarian *apocalyptic utopianism*. In this argument I draw on the theoretical perspectives of certain scholars working within a field that can be referred to, for the purposes of this thesis, as "Modernism and Fascism." These scholars have a common interest in the parallels between modernism in the arts and the "political modernism" of the fascist movements in the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁵ In the following I will present some aspects of their theories which have proven particularly relevant for my thesis.

One of the earliest proponents of the idea that parallels between artistic and "political" modernism were to be found, was the literary critic and English Professor Frank Kermode, who in a series of lectures published as *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) explored the links between "apocalyptic fictions" in the arts and "apocalyptic utopianism" in revolutionary political movements. Kermode argues that several major modernists, including Yeats and Eliot, were aesthetically and philosophically invested in apocalyptic visions: That the sense of living in the "end of an era," with contemporary society diagnosed in terms of decadence and disintegration, permeates modernist works. The sense of an ending, Kermode writes, is "as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution."⁵⁶ Kermode is interested in how the *aesthetic* paradigm of apocalypse functioned in modernist art, and how that paradigm had *parallels* in the political sphere. In other words, he establishes an analogy rather than any direct relation between the aesthetic and the political sphere. He makes sure to distinguish, therefore, between poetic *fictions* and politicized *myths*;

⁵⁵ Fascist Italy under Mussolini (1922-43) and the Nazi regime in Germany under Hitler (1933-45)

⁵⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theories of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 98.

nevertheless, he asserts that modernist radicalism involves “the creation of fictions which may be dangerous in the dispositions they breed towards the world.”⁵⁷

Another major contribution to the field is Roger Griffin’s *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (2007).⁵⁸ Griffin, whose field of expertise is the history of fascism and its ideological dynamics, takes Kermode’s essay as his starting point to build a wide-ranging, synoptic study of modernism and fascism. Griffin, like Kermode, identifies a sense of “permanent transition and crisis” as pervading literary and cultural modernism, and is interested in its “correlatives” in the political realm. Griffin’s theory rests on the assumption that the sense of an ending described by Kermode was accompanied by an equally strong, and related, sense of a *beginning*; of regeneration and rebirth. The term *apocalyptic* can be said to describe, after all, “a sense [of] *imminence* about [a] great upheaval” to come; the *apocalypse* is “the scenario whereby we now go from this evil and corrupt world to the redeemed one.”⁵⁹ In Griffin’s framework, it is the image of the “redeemed world,” what he calls a “temporalized utopia...created within historical time,” which constitutes the “core myth” of fascist movements.⁶⁰ The term he coins to describe this myth, as an ideal type, is *palingenesis*: The myth of social, national or collective *rebirth* or regeneration.⁶¹

Griffin understands modernity as a “secularizing and disorienting force”; one identified with a “qualitative change in the experience of time”; and one increasingly perceived, from the mid-nineteenth-century and forwards, through the trope of “decadence” rather than that of “progress.”⁶² To classify or describe the change in “experience of time” he draws on a typology first presented by Kermode, where the latter distinguished between *chronos* (“ordinary clock-time”), *kairos* (a point of time “filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relationship to the end”) and *aevum* (a time “neither temporal nor eternal...in which things can be perpetual”).⁶³ Griffin prefers a simpler distinction between *Cronus* (the “monstrous incarnation of human time”) and *aevum* (“transcendental time”, including moments of *kairos*). Modernity entailed, according to Griffin, a wide-spread experience of time as *cronic*; dreary, monstrous and devoid of significance. Correspondingly,

⁵⁷ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 110; 112.

⁵⁸ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

⁵⁹ Richard Landes. *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18.

⁶⁰ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 276.

⁶¹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 2.

⁶² Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 45.

⁶³ Quoted in Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 81

he sees modernist movements as (often) motivated by the ambition to re-instate or recreate the experience of sacred, significant, transcendental time: The “quest for *temporal* transcendence.”⁶⁴

Similar to Kermode’s distinction between poetic fictions and politicized myth, Griffin distinguishes between *epiphanic* and *programmatically* modernism. Whereas the former sought, often in strictly aesthetic terms, to cultivate “special moments” of transcendence of a “purely inner, spiritual kind,” programmatic modernism expressed itself as a “mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew.”⁶⁵ It is in the latter sense that Griffin describes political movements such as National Socialism as examples of “political modernism.” For programmatic and epiphanic modernists alike, however, modernity had begun to be identified, above all, in terms of *decadence*. Whereas the Enlightenment promoted a belief in human progress, by the mid-nineteenth century “the practical effects on European society” of the French and industrial revolutions had “undermined the myth of progress to a point where for many among its cultural elites modernity lost its utopian connotations and began to be constructed as a period of decline, decay, and loss.”⁶⁶ Epiphanic modernists tried to achieve the momentary suspension of Cronus by passing through “the still point of a turning world,” while Programmatic modernists generally aimed at a *revitalization* or *cleansing* of those modern, decadent societies. In either case, in Griffin’s words, modernism can ultimately be summed up as “the revolt against decadence,” one “intensely politicized form” of which emerged in fascism.⁶⁷ He therefore arrives at a “shorthand” definition of fascism as

[A] revolutionary species of political modernism originating in the early twentieth century whose mission is to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history (decadence) by bringing about an alternative modernity and temporality (a ‘new order’ and a ‘new era’) based on the rebirth, or palingenesis, of the nation.⁶⁸

Kermode emphasized the myth of *transition* in the apocalyptic, or *eschatological*, imagination; the sense of living in an end-time, soon to be succeeded by a new age, which turns into a sense of perpetual transition, perpetual crisis. In response to this crisis, according to Griffin, fascism would “literally make history. Its belief that a doomed form of modernity was ending was dialectically related to a heightened sense of a new beginning.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 92. Italics in original.

⁶⁵ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 62.

⁶⁶ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 51.

⁶⁷ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 52; 181.

⁶⁸ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 181.

⁶⁹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 181

The art critic Mark Antliff has cast the fascist approach to *time* even more specifically in terms of opposition/resistance to *capitalist* modes of time; the “pervasive rationalization of time under capitalism and the subsequent breakdown of older cultural patterns as the capitalist system of time became universalized.”⁷⁰ In response to the capitalist “disenchantment” of time, fascism sought to “infuse time with qualitative value.”⁷¹ This factor becomes especially important when we consider the revolutionary character of fascist movements. Antliff quotes Griffin’s claim that a revolution is “a moment when a mythically charged ‘now’ creates a qualitative change in the continuum of history, which is to be distinguished from undifferentiated ‘clock time.’”⁷² The mythically charged ‘now’ would be described by Kermode and Griffin as, respectively, “kairotic” and “aeval.” In revolt against modernity’s “perpetual crisis,” and in commitment to a utopian goal, fascist movements became dependent on a “perpetual revolution” in order to preserve/achieve a permanent sense of transcendent time, the “mythically charged ‘now’.”

These perspectives on modernism and fascism investigate the parallels between artistic modernism and fascist movements, and identify a common ground in the 1) perception of time under modernity as *chronic*, ordinary and un-transcendental, and the resulting quest for “temporal transcendence,” 2) the revolt against the perceived “decadence” of contemporary society, and 3) the shared belief that “temporal transcendence” could indeed be achieved by humans within historical time, whether by “epiphanic” or “programmatic” means. Fascism is distinguished by its revolutionary character, its mission to bring about a “new epoch” in historical time based on national rebirth, and its commitment to violent destruction of those “enemies” onto whom modern decadence had been projected.

I draw on these theoretical perspectives in my investigation of Auden’s religiously informed rejection of totalitarian and fascist politics. As I will argue, Auden’s adoption of Christian beliefs involves a shifting of the eschatological horizon into the beyond, to be realized only with the coming of a redeemer. I then use these perspectives as a backdrop to an exploration of Auden’s concept of the *time being*, the conditions of the Now and human action. I will show that Auden’s *time being* is fundamentally incompatible with any perceptions of time that allows for the conception that history can be “made” or that Paradise, the Millennium, The Thousand Year Reich, Parousia – whichever expression is used – can be made a reality within the frames of secular, historical time.

⁷⁰ Mark Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” *Art Bulletin* 84: 1 (2002), 160.

⁷¹ Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 162.

⁷² Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 162.

Auden and Hannah Arendt

In chapter 2 of my thesis, which constitutes what I have called a “theoretical bridge” between my two main analytical chapters, I introduce the political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s theory of action. This constitutes, of course, a theoretical perspective in its own right, and one that will be applied in my analysis in chapter 3. The affinities between Auden and Arendt have started to receive attention only in recent years, and two contributions should be mentioned. Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb has written a monograph titled *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden* (2003), in which she presents a thorough analysis of Arendt’s and Auden’s responses to the “historical disasters” of the twentieth century.⁷³ Secondly, a conference was arranged in April 2012 with the aim of investigating the links between Auden’s poem “The Age of Anxiety” and Arendt’s body of writing: *Poetics of Anxiety and Security: the problem of speech and action in our time. Homi Bhabha on Auden and Arendt*.⁷⁴ Gottlieb restricts her analysis of Auden to his *The Age of Anxiety* (1949) and the poem “Canzone” (1942). She points out that an “explicit discussion of Auden’s complicated commitment to Christianity” is absent from her study.⁷⁵ She suggests, too, that *For the Time Being* would be the place to start for such a discussion. My own exploration of Arendt’s theory, therefore, carried out in the interest of shedding light on the “time being” as portrayed in *For the Time Being*, can be read as a first attempt to make up for this absence.

On Methods

The contemporary critic has two primary tasks. Firstly he must show the individual that though he is unique he has also much in common with all other individuals, that each life is, to use a chemical metaphor, an isomorph of a general human life and then must teach him how to see the relevance to his own experience of works of art which deal with experiences apparently strange to him...

*And secondly the critic must attempt to spread a knowledge of past cultures so that his audience may be as aware of them as the artist himself, not only simply in order to appreciate the latter, but because the situation of all individuals, artists and audience alike, in an open society is such that the only check on authoritarian control by the few, whether in matters of esthetic taste or political choice, is the knowledge of the many.*⁷⁶

⁷³ Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.)

⁷⁴ Description available online: <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/04/poetics-of-anxiety-and-security-the-problem-of-speech-and-action-in-our-time-homi-bhabha-on-auden-and-arendt/> (Accessed 10.02.2014)

⁷⁵ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 25.

⁷⁶ Auden, *Prose II*, 92.

Some of Auden's ideas did, at the outset, appear a bit strange. What does Original Sin have to do with democracy? It was clear that, in order to understand the connections between philosophy, politics and religion in Auden's intellectual framework, not to mention the way these links appear in and influence his poetry, I would have to reconstruct the historical and intellectual context in which Auden's ideas took shape. I have read Auden's prose texts in order to reconstruct the arguments, dilemmas and convictions which, at any given time, informed his poetry. Approaching the poems with the intent of identifying and making sense out of potential political views, I have found these prose texts extremely helpful: often, Auden will transport an argument developed in an essay, practically intact, to a poetic passage he is working on at the same time – or vice versa; an idea first played around with in the poetry will find polemical or didactic shape in a review. In order to carry out this part of the analysis, I have also relied on a range of previous criticism concerning Auden in general and Auden's religious and political ideas in particular.

The label that lies closest to my methodological practice as outlined so far is arguably that of New Historicism. In a recent publication within the Modernism-Fascism field, Matthew Feldman refers to the “new historicist” turn within modernist studies as characterized by an insistence upon, above all, “theorizing from a position of empirical accuracy.”⁷⁷ This approach also places heavy stress, as he explains, upon “authorial presence and historical contextualization.”⁷⁸ My argument is underpinned by thorough readings of Auden's prose, as solidly documented throughout the thesis. These readings are supplemented by references to historical figures and works by which Auden was demonstrably influenced, notably *The Nature and Destiny of Man* by the contemporary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. As such I have striven to achieve a measure of empirical accuracy, as well as emphasizing authorial presence and historical contextualization. Feldman further explains how he uses a methodological approach first formulated by the historian of fascism, George Mosse, simply described as the attempt to “see how people then understand the world [sic]” in a process of “methodological empathy.”⁷⁹ I could say the same of my investigation into Auden's belief; I try to understand them on Auden's own premises. While Auden's turn to Christianity and its connection to fascism is generally well documented, I could borrow Feldman's expression, I am “coloring in” Auden's interpretation of Christian

⁷⁷ Matthew Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda, 1935-45* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), ix. Partly available online at <http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/doi/10.1057/9781137345516> (Accessed: 28 January 2014)

⁷⁸ Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda*, ix. (Accessed: 28 January 2014)

⁷⁹ Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda*, xiii. (Accessed: 28 January 2014)

doctrines such as Original Sin and the Last Judgment, and their exact role in his rejection of totalitarian politics.

To my knowledge, Erik Tønning is the only one who has applied an interpretative approach to a close reading of Auden's prose and poetry. Whereas Tønning's analysis of Auden enters into a comparison with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, which furthermore makes up one part of a larger (and highly innovative) study of modernism and Christianity, my analysis is solely focused on Auden, allowing me to delve into Auden's intricate systems of ideas in further depth. It has, moreover, allowed me to extend the scope of my analysis to one of Auden's central sequences written after the Second World War, *Horae Canonicae* (written 1947-1955). As a sequence that involves a meditation upon the Crucifixion, *Horae Canonicae* forms a natural counterpoint to Auden's Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, which is discussed in the first chapter.

In chapter 2, I bring in the theoretical perspective of political philosopher Hannah Arendt, known for her pioneering analysis of totalitarianism. Arendt's theory of human *action* from her major work *The Human Condition* bridges the analysis of Auden's writing during the early forties (chapter 1) and the interpretation of *Horae Canonicae* in chapter 3. In the discussion of Arendt's theory and its relevance for Auden in chapter 2, my approach varies slightly from the two other chapters. Rather than accounting for *direct influence* between these two thinkers (although we know that they became mutual influences on one another), I will construct something more like an *intellectual parallel*; using a distinction borrowed from Richard Shorten, I am interested in *affinities* rather than *influence*.⁸⁰ As a theoretical bridge, the chapter relies on the understanding of Auden's framework of ideas as developed in chapter 1, and prepares for the analysis of *Horae Canonicae* in chapter 3. More abstract than the two others in tone, it reveals its full relevance once Arendt's concept of *action* is employed in my interpretation of *Horae Canonicae*. As I will show, Arendt's theory brings out crucial nuances of Auden's Christian eschatological vision, which becomes especially important when the implications of that vision are contrasted with the eschatological hopes embedded in totalitarian ideologies.

Finally, my interpretative approach could be described, with a term first developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, as "thick description": the essential task, in his words, is "not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them."⁸¹ In other words, I make no claims as to the

⁸⁰ See Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 77-79.

⁸¹ Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda*, viii. (Accessed: 28 January 2014)

representativeness of Auden as a literary modernist invested in Christianity, nor do I carry out comparisons between Auden and other modernist writers. What I have attempted to do is to present Auden as a *case* of a literary modernist consciously adopting Christian dogma to formulate an anti-totalitarian political vision.

Auden noted his own “reproach” to the use of unique historical events and persons in universalizing generalizations in one of his “Shorts,” originally appearing in the notes to *NYL*:

'Hard cases make bad law,' as the politician learns to his cost:
Yet just is the artist's reproach; 'Who generalizes is lost.'⁸²

I make no claims to “make law.” Rather, I hope to supply a “thick” individual case in all its richness. As such, I hope my case study of Auden, a “hard case” perhaps, but an immensely rewarding object of study nevertheless, may contribute to the field of Auden studies as well as to the wider fields of Modernism and Christianity and Modernism and Fascism.

⁸² “Notes” to *New Year Letter*, pg. 140.

1 Apocalypse Deferred: Original Sin in W. H. Auden's Anti-Totalitarian Vision

Auden's "studiedly casual" use of the phrase "original sin" in a 1939 review "marked a watershed in his prose."⁸³ It also came to form the crux of his political ideas. In this chapter I will investigate the function of Original Sin in Auden's analysis of liberalism and fascism during the early 1940s, and the role it played in his vision of what it would ultimately take to resist totalitarianism. As Auden saw it, the failure of liberalism to prevent the rise of Hitler was due, in the last instance, to its fundamentally misconceived idea of human nature as inherently virtuous. Fascism, in his view, embodied a disillusioned reaction to the underlying premises of liberalism, but also against the experience of modern temporality. Drawing on Roger Griffin's theory of the palingenetic nature of fascism, I will present Auden's alternative vision of society as an elaborately constructed response to, and rejection of, the time-defying and apocalyptic tendencies he saw as inherent in totalitarianism. The chapter draws on Auden's prose writing from the 1940s, as well as excerpts from the long poems *New Year Letter* (1941) and *For the Time Being* (1944). Justin Replogle has argued that "all of Auden's major forties works are variations on the view of human existence introduced in *New Year Letter*."⁸⁴ *For the Time Being* has been described as "the fullest and most balanced expression of Auden's religious attitudes" with earlier religious ideas and images placed in "an ordered whole."⁸⁵ In these works Auden draws up, against the apocalyptic backdrop of an escalating world war, the poetic framework of his religious convictions.

1.1 The outlaw and the liberals

In a 1941 review titled "Where Are We Now?" W. H. Auden wrote: "The rise of Hitler, the outlaw, to power is a phenomenon that can never be sufficiently studied."⁸⁶ In Auden's writing, Hitler had become a central figure, not just as a threat to liberal civilization, but as a troubling symptom of a modern, misdirected system of metaphysics unwilling to come to terms with the source of human evil. The logic exhibited by Hitler's ideological stances, and the reception of Hitler as a sort of secular Saviour and prophet to the German nation both

⁸³ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 157.

⁸⁴ Justin Replogle, "Auden's Religious Leap," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 7, no. 1 (1996): 56.

⁸⁵ Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W.H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 206.

⁸⁶ W. H. Auden, *Collected Prose, Vol. II: 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 105. Hereafter *Prose II*.

seemed representative of an underlying set of attitudes that, in Auden's view, could be traced back to Romanticism.⁸⁷ Romantic idealism had provoked a disillusioned pessimistic reaction, out of which emerged the "political romanticism" he saw as characteristic of National Socialism. This merits some explanation.

Romanticism derived its power, according to Auden, from its "double faith, first in the possibility of realizing Unity and Equality on earth, and secondly in the intrinsic goodness of the physical world."⁸⁸ This idealism had, in the field of politics, "stimulated demagoguery and the woolliest kinds of humanitarianism from which the reaction into the worship of brutality and bureaucracy is now only too obvious."⁸⁹ Elsewhere, he is even more direct: "Like Rousseau, liberal capitalism began in the belief that all individuals are equally free to will, and just as Rousseau died a Catholic, so the masses, disillusioned, are beginning to welcome the barrack life of Fascism, which at least offers security and certainty."⁹⁰

One thing "liberal capitalism" and fascism had in common, to Auden's mind, was the abandonment of a notion of the unconditional: "[the view] that there is nothing which is unconditionally required, nothing for which one is in some sense or another eternally damned for doing or not doing."⁹¹ Liberalism, with its Enlightenment heritage of commitment to the faculty of Reason, invested itself in the human capacity to arrive at truth by their own efforts. It had successfully wielded the weapons of "skeptical rationalism, pragmatism [and] naturalism"⁹² against the "old orders" of tyranny and ignorance. However, a challenge arose once the Enlightenment's "own" intellectual and scientific disciplines started bringing the objectivity of reason itself into question (as in the theories of Freud and Bergson), or challenged the values of humanism (accused by Marx of concealing class interests, and further called into question by Nietzsche). Unless the existence of unconditional truths and values are assumed, Auden writes, all truths must be viewed as relative. In that case, liberalism has few ideological defences against alternative political systems that claim a better ability to provide material security, or against the outlaw who claims that "social stability can only be secured by coercion."⁹³ Confronted with a movement that explicitly denied freedom and equality for all, how could liberalism defend the superiority of ideals that could neither be

⁸⁷ For an in-depth discussion of Auden's relationship to Romanticism, see Alan Jacobs, "Beyond Romanticism: Auden's Choice of Tradition," *Religion & Literature* 21, no. 2 (1989): 61-77.

⁸⁸ W. H. Auden, *Prose II*, 446.

⁸⁹ Auden, *Prose II*, 446.

⁹⁰ Auden, *Prose II*, 10.

⁹¹ Auden, *Prose II*, 106.

⁹² Auden, *Prose II*, 222.

⁹³ Auden, *Prose II*, 106.

proven to be absolute, nor provide the results they promised? The historical importance of Hitler, Auden concludes, is to have “pushed liberalism to its logical conclusion.”⁹⁴

Among the misconceptions that liberalism in Auden’s view had inherited from Romanticism, the most important was the notion of human innate goodness, i.e. that “man’s essential nature is uncorrupted.”⁹⁵ The danger in this optimistic conception of human nature derived, among other things, from its denial or misinterpretation of “opposing evidence.” This in turn prepared the ground for a pessimistic counter-reaction which under the conditions of modernity could have catastrophic results. Under liberal capitalism, which in Auden’s view had produced “the most impersonal, the most mechanical and the most unequal civilisation the world has ever seen,”⁹⁶ any claim that the “good life” was equally available to all was patently absurd. While technological progress had created an economy of abundance that in theory made an “open society” possible, different social classes moved towards this open stage at different speeds.⁹⁷ This inequality would, as Auden saw it, reproduce the dangerous dualism of optimism and pessimism described above. The “Ins,” or the “proper and conventional / Of whom this world approves,” (CP: 367) would tend to identify the ideals of Freedom, Truth and Justice with the current state of affairs. The “Outs,” perceiving this “ideological pretention,” would on the other hand be disposed towards denying or rejecting such ideals altogether,⁹⁸ as when the token poor shepherds in *For the Time Being* sing: “feeling the great boots of the rich on our faces / We live in the hope of one day changing places.” (CP: 384)

The distinction between the ideal types of the “open” (modern) and “closed” (traditional)⁹⁹ societies is important in Auden’s analysis of contemporary disillusionment with liberal optimism. Whereas the individual’s role in the static, traditional society had been a function of the external environment, the modern individual had to seek and recognize her own peculiar vocation, a predicament Auden refers to as “subjective requiredness.” As a consequence, the “external causal necessity of matter [had been transformed] into the internal logical necessity of moral decision.”¹⁰⁰ In *New Year Letter*, Auden writes that:

[T]he machine has cried aloud

⁹⁴ Auden, *Prose II*, 106.

⁹⁵ Auden, *Prose II*, 136.

⁹⁶ Auden, *Prose II*, 6.

⁹⁷ Auden, *Prose II*, 68.

⁹⁸ Auden, *Prose II*, 94.

⁹⁹ This distinction, as Edward Mendelson points out, Auden had borrowed from Henri Bergson, who had used it in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* in 1932: Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 142.

¹⁰⁰ Auden, *Prose II*, 92.

And publicized among the crowd
The secret that was always true
But known only to the few,
Compelling all to the admission
Aloneness is man's real condition.¹⁰¹

Open, differentiated, modern societies had, as Auden saw it, revealed to an unprecedentedly broad range of people a certain arbitrariness of traditional ways of life, and of traditional beliefs and values. Many of yesterday's cognitive footholds had been eroded by the "skeptical rationalism...and naturalism" referred to above. In *New Year Letter* Auden refers to Darwin, for instance, as one of those "who brought an epoch to a close... brought / Man's pride to heel at last and showed / His kinship with the worm and toad / And order as one consequence / Of the unfettered play of chance,"¹⁰² thereby exposing "Man" to a new sense of the chaos and contingency of existence. Marshall Berman later described this experience of contingency and indeterminacy as "the sense of being caught in a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined; a basic uncertainty about what is basic, what is valuable, even what is real."¹⁰³ Modern society had, in a sense, democratized existential anxiety.

Once an awareness of Auden's "subjective requiredness" had been achieved, there could be no turning back. The individual was now aware that "his position in life is no longer a real necessity; he could be different if he chose."¹⁰⁴ Any attempt to abolish such choice and recreate the conditions of "objective requiredness," Auden concluded, would have to come about through artificial stimulation orchestrated by the state, as when "a Pseudo-Nature of imaginary objective dangers, Jews, plutocrats, communists, foreigners, [is] consciously manufactured by the State which in the end, of course must provide real ones, the Police and finally War."¹⁰⁵

In Auden's analysis, the experience of modern vertigo and isolation had combined with the disillusionment with liberal politics and humanist ideals to create a twin impetus—widely shared among the modern masses—to get rid of the democracies of the 1920s and 30s. In the "political relationship of the impassioned leader and the impassioned masses" that had clearly contributed to the appeal of National Socialism, Auden saw a return "to a collective

¹⁰¹ *NYL*, II, 1537-42.

¹⁰² *NYL*, II, 738, 746-50.

¹⁰³ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London & New York: Verso 2010), 121.

¹⁰⁴ Auden, *Prose II*, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Auden, *Prose II*, 178.

and political myth of Eros,”¹⁰⁶ an attempt to escape or drown the insecurities of modern life through totalitarian politics: Since modern man and woman “cannot lose the sense that they are individuals[,] they can only try to drown that sense by merging themselves into an abstraction, the crowd.”¹⁰⁷ In this context, Hitler’s appeal was practically messianic.

Auden saw in Fascism a “Socialism that has lost its faith in the future.”¹⁰⁸ Modern historians, on the other hand, have come to emphasize precisely the *futural* orientation of fascism; its revitalizing, palingenetic dimension. One such perspective has been offered by the historian of fascism Roger Griffin. Griffin was the first to formulate a theory of fascism that emphasized what he refers to as its “core myth” of *palingenesis*. Palingenesis, derived from palin (again, anew) and genesis (creation, birth), refers to “the sense of a new start or of a regeneration after a phase of crisis or decline which can be associated just as much with mystical (for example the Second Coming) as secular realities (for example the New Germany).”¹⁰⁹ As I will argue, the theory of the futural or millennial quality of fascism may in fact shed light on Auden’s analysis, not least on the alternative vision of society he eventually developed. According to Griffin, Hitler can be understood as a kind of modern *propheta*, a term originally used to describe 15th century radical, charismatic figures on the fringes of crisis-ridden societies, who together with their followers were intent on turning instances of particular upheaval “into the apocalyptic battle, the final purification of the world.”¹¹⁰ Nazism, defined by Anthony Stevens as a “new religion born out of social disintegration and the compensatory emergence of a charismatic leader,” presented itself as a radical break with the past, embodying a “revolutionary vision of history’s total regeneration.”¹¹¹ Griffin finds considerable evidence for the significance of the *regenerative and revitalizing* aspects of National Socialism in his work.¹¹² The unique blend of ideas represented by the German Nazi Party (NSDAP) was, he argues, “harnessed to the vision of a national palingenesis within a new order... [and] led by a man onto whom [sic] widespread popular longings for redemption

¹⁰⁶ Auden, *Prose II*, 138, 140.

¹⁰⁷ W. H. Auden, *Collected Prose, Vol. III: 1949-1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 294. Hereafter *Prose III*.

¹⁰⁸ Auden, “Notes” to *New Year Letter*, pg. 114.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Mark Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism and Modernity,” *The Art Bulletin* 84:1 (2002), 150.

¹¹⁰ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 101.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 274.

¹¹² On the other temporal pole of Nazi ideology, the idealization of the racial and cultural past, see Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 141. He argues that this mythical past served to provide the values and ideals to shape precisely a new and splendid *futural* version of this “Edenic” state in the Third Reich.

and a new sacred canopy [replacing the pre-modern Christian horizon] could be projected, Adolf Hitler...”¹¹³

[National Socialism] functions as a vehicle for secular transcendence, for the re-embedding of society, for national regeneration, and for... cultural and ethnic cleansing... It was the projection onto Hitler of this temporalized utopia of a purified society created within historical time that lay at the heart of the Hitler cult, and allowed him to embody the *propheta* leading his new community through its collective rite of passage into the new world beyond decadence and decay.¹¹⁴

As an antidote to modern despair and decadence, that is, Hitler promoted cleansing and national rebirth. This rebirth was to be achieved through an acceleration of social crisis into a cathartic “holy war” bringing the advent of the “new [order] of peace, harmony and justice.”¹¹⁵ In the Notes to *New Year Letter*, Auden calls Fascism’s slogan “Now or Never. In demanding a dictator it is really demanding the advent of the Good Life on earth through a supernatural miracle.”¹¹⁶ The “projection of a temporalized utopia” on to the figure of Hitler could be seen as an attempt to evoke or activate such a “supernatural miracle.”

One way to understand National Socialism, then, is as a revolutionary movement aiming to bring about the total regeneration of society by provoking a secular apocalypse. To elucidate this project Griffin, drawing on the work of Frank Kermode, employs the notion of *Cronus*—“monstrous human time”—and the contrasting belief in *Aevum*—sacred, transcendental time.¹¹⁷ The fascist project of bringing about a secular Utopia through holy war, according to this view, can be seen as rooted in a fundamental human drive to “escape” secular (mortal, “monstrous”) time, not unlike Auden’s theory of despairing moderns trying to “lose themselves” in fascism.¹¹⁸ Griffin’s interpretation of the millenarian promise of National Socialism in terms of human vs. sacred time—its “time-defying” dynamic or its will to “embody a new transcendent temporality”¹¹⁹— may serve to clarify and illuminate Auden’s alternative vision for society. To Auden, in the forties, humans were fundamentally unable to

¹¹³ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 275.

¹¹⁴ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 276.

¹¹⁵ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 101.

¹¹⁶ Auden, “Notes” to *New Year Letter*, pg. 114.

¹¹⁷ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 81. Griffin refers to these categories as “ideal typical construct... not pseudo-scientific or philosophical” ones.

¹¹⁸ Richard Shorten, author of *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, distinguishes between theoretical explanations useful to illuminate “ideological consumption” and “ideological production” respectively. (*Modernism and Totalitarianism*: 69) It is worth keeping in mind here that the dynamics of “escape,” “temptation,” and “flight into” fascism or totalitarianism that both Griffin and Auden try to articulate here, from their rather different angles, pertain more to the “consumption” than to the “production” of totalitarian ideology. When Auden writes about these almost subliminal desires to escape into the warm embrace of fascism, he really is interested in the *appeal* of totalitarian ideas – especially to the “masses.” When writing about dictators and bureaucrats, as he does elsewhere, he [taps into] a different register of his psychoanalytic vocabulary.

¹¹⁹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 291.

achieve such transcendence by their own efforts; transcendence lay beyond the realm of human affairs and could as such only be approached in terms of faith, bestowed by divine Grace. This view, as we shall see, was rooted in the conception of the inherently sinful nature of human beings.

1.2 Self-love and Sin

*“The power by which, without blinding himself to his anxiety, [man] is nevertheless still able to choose, is religious faith.”*¹²⁰

Auden’s writing in the early 40s is informed by the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. As Auden explained in a 1944 review, Kierkegaard approached the study of human nature and existence from the individual’s immediate experience as a *subject*, and as such, the “basic human problem is man’s anxiety in time.” A human being is defined as “a being who becomes[;] a conscious being who at every moment must choose of his own free will out of an infinite number of possibilities which he foresees.”¹²¹ Having an existential stake in the outcome of one’s actions, however, can make the self-aware individual’s existence an agony of choices—comparable to that threatening experience of time that Griffin labels *Cronus*. “Infinite” choice entails an infinite possibility of failure: in a finite existence, the incongruence between the irrevocability of action, the uncertainty of an action’s outcome, and the ever-present availability of alternative choices manifests itself in anxiety for the reflective individual.

The onrush of modernity had exacerbated this “chronic” condition of anxiety. In the work of the contemporary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, however, Auden found an interpretation of human nature that moved beyond its agonizing paradoxes. To Niebuhr, anxiety is an inevitable side-effect of “the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved,”¹²² but from his point of view the real issue is not anxiety, but the sinfulness of human attempts to escape it. The problem of anxiety is thereby subordinated to the problem of sin.¹²³ Niebuhr sees human evil as a consequence of man’s refusal “to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity, an unwillingness which involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks to

¹²⁰ Auden, *Prose II*, 214.

¹²¹ Auden, *Prose II*, 214.

¹²² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. A Christian Interpretation. Volume I. Human Nature*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons [sic], 1964), 186.

¹²³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 178.

escape.”¹²⁴ The human ability to transcend one’s situation and regard it from a distance, while allowing him to envision other and more virtuous ways of life, also tempts man to megalomania and persuades him “to regard himself as the god around and about whom the universe centres.”¹²⁵ In practice, Niebuhr concludes, humans “always mix the finite with the eternal and claim for themselves, their nation, their culture, or their class the center of existence. This is the root of all imperialism in man.”¹²⁶ Crucially, this means that human evil is inextricably intertwined with the capacity for good. “The Christian view of evil is so serious... because it places evil at the very centre of the human personality: In the will.”¹²⁷

In Auden’s Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, humans’ misuse of their will and their freedom is explicitly stated as the cause of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Describing the Fall during the Annunciation to Mary, the angel Gabriel delivers the following lines: “Eve, in love with her own will, / Denied the will of Love and fell... Adam, being free to choose, / chose to imagine he was free / To choose his own necessity.” (CP: 359-60) The play on the words “will,” “love,” “choose,” and “free” here amounts to a Niebuhrian argument about mistaking the finite for the eternal and claiming one’s right to literal self-determination. The law of human nature, Niebuhr states, is “love.” When man tries to make himself the centre and source of life, this law is violated. “His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.”¹²⁸ Spiritual imperialism and escapism are, in other words, considered the two vectors of human sinfulness in Niebuhr’s schema. Elsewhere he uses the expressions *pride* and *sensuality*: “Man falls into pride, when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance; he falls into sensuality, when he seeks to escape from his unlimited possibilities of freedom, from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing himself into a “mutable good,” by losing himself in some natural vitality.”¹²⁹

In *New Year Letter*, Auden portrays the modern, anxious subject as oscillating between these two varieties of sinfulness. The first is embodied in the Ego, who “looks upon her liberty / Not as a gift from life with which / To serve enlighten and enrich,” but rather “as the right to lead alone / An attic-life all on her own, / Unhindered, unrebuked, unwatched, / Self-known, self-praising, self-attached.”¹³⁰ Upon discovering the indeterminacy of this position—the infinity of choices and the impossibility of ascertaining the right ones, and

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 150.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 124.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 84.

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 16.

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 16.

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 186.

¹³⁰ *NYL*, ll. 1401-3, 1408-11.

whether it all means anything—the Ego plunges into an abyss of despair. Trying to destroy the self-consciousness that has brought on its miserable vertigo, the individual seeks escape in a suicidal nihilism, worshipping “the Not, the Never and the Night” and “The formless Mass without a Me.”¹³¹ Denying any possibility of a meaningful life in Time, the autonomy-seeking Ego falls back on its own bare power to end itself: the individual tries to be the hero whose “intellectual life [is] fulfilled / In knowing that his doom is willed.”¹³² Willing one’s doom becomes the final attempt at self-determination.

These modes of flight from *Cronus* could, in “modern times,” only be combined “in a collective form, in warfare, where every individual is at one and the same time the masochistic murdereed and the sadistic murderer, or in the political relationship of the impassioned leader and the impassioned masses.”¹³³ The extraordinary temptation and danger of twentieth-century totalitarianism lay, according to Auden, in its ability to offer both spiritual “triumph” and escapism. The first mechanism was demonstrated by the group-based superiority constructed by totalitarian ideology. The spectacle of escape, on the other hand, consisted of “an ecstatic and morbid abdication of the free-willing and individual before the collective and the daemonic. “We have become obscene night worshippers who, having discovered that we cannot live exactly as we will, deny the possibility of willing anything and are content masochistically to be lived.”¹³⁴ Auden’s linking of the dynamics of escape from sin to twentieth-century totalitarianism is entirely in tune with Niebuhr’s description of modern fascist nations as having achieved “a daemonic form of national self-assertion.”¹³⁵ Collective egotism, in Niebuhr’s phrasing, offered the individual “an opportunity to lose himself in a larger whole; but it also offers him possibilities of self-aggrandizement beside which mere individual pretensions are implausible and incredible.”¹³⁶ By contrast, the power of the Christian interpretation of existence, in order to withstand totalitarian ideologies, would need to be anchored in its acknowledgment of original sin.¹³⁷ Both Auden and Niebuhr saw the Christian faith as unique in allowing humans to acknowledge both the paradox of their transcendence-desiring finitude, and the real “bias towards evil” with which that condition is intertwined. Furthermore, it offered human beings the possibility of dealing with rather than

¹³¹ *NYL*, ll. 1429-30.

¹³² *NYL*, ll. 1436-37.

¹³³ Auden, *Prose II*, 138.

¹³⁴ Auden, *Prose II*, 38.

¹³⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 219.

¹³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 212.

¹³⁷ Niebuhr’s definition: “Original sin is not an inherited corruption, but it is an inevitable fact of human existence, the inevitability of which is given by the nature of man’s spirituality.” Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935), 90.

try to escape their condition, through the ability to repent and the related possibility of divine redemption.

The odd moment when a glimpse of Paradise—the potential for harmony and *Agape*—reveals itself, catching us off guard with an “accidental happiness,” plays an important role in *New Year Letter*. Auden recalls one such moment of private “vision” taking place in a “wedding feast” hosted by the *Letter*’s recipient, Elizabeth Mayer: “Warm in your house, Elizabeth, / A week ago at the same hour / I felt the unexpected power / That drove our ragged egos in / From the dead-ends of greed and sin.”¹³⁸ Critic Lucy McDiarmid has called weddings the “paradigmatic ritual[s]” in Auden’s poetry, rituals that symbolize the potential for the “[reconciliation of] a divided, unhappy community.”¹³⁹ The kind of private communal activities described by Auden in *New Year Letter* form a counter-plot¹⁴⁰ to the agonized frenzy brought on by solipsistic megalomania: In this scene, McDiarmid writes, “the centripetal power of love...[counteracts] the centrifugal selfish forces.”¹⁴¹ Without these instances of private happiness, Auden wrote in *The Prolific and the Devourer*, we could not have faith.¹⁴² They remind us that we can, at least, serve other ends than the “ornate / *Grandezza* of the Sovereign State,” by learning to love “the *polis* of our friends.”¹⁴³

As Edward Mendelson has shown, Auden’s pre-existing interest in the subject of the Absolute, once he immersed himself into the writing of Kierkegaard and modern theologians such as Niebuhr, lead him towards a distinctly existentialist Christianity. Measured against an absolute value or unconditional standard, no subjective life could be adequate, or even claim full access to that value. Thus, as Mendelson writes, “the existential drama of absolute choices occurred in a human world with no comfort and no guidance, in a universe that accepted neither compromise nor half measures.”¹⁴⁴ The bleakness of this scenario might seem purgatorial, and in *New Year Letter* time – “the life in which we live / At least three quarters of our time” – is indeed described as the “purgatorial hill we climb.”¹⁴⁵ Any skyline we attain, Auden writes, “Reveals a higher ridge again.”¹⁴⁶ However, as is suggested a few lines further

¹³⁸ *NYL*, ll. 843-46.

¹³⁹ Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.), 47.

¹⁴⁰ Claude J. Summers has used this term in an analysis of “The Shield of Achilles,” referring to the “network of subtle echoes and analogies” which Auden creates in the poem to qualify “[its] pessimistic surface plot.” Claude J. Summers, “‘Or One Could Weep because Another Wept:’ The Counterplot of Auden’s ‘The Shield of Achilles,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 83, 2 (1984): 215.

¹⁴¹ McDiarmid, *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry*, 83.

¹⁴² Auden, *Prose II*, 428.

¹⁴³ *NYL*, ll. 993-94, 998.

¹⁴⁴ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 133.

¹⁴⁵ *NYL*, ll. 927-28, 924-25.

¹⁴⁶ *NYL*, ll. 929-31.

down, this vertiginous mountaineering seems to be “the only game / At which we show a natural skill.”¹⁴⁷ Our task, then, is to “Ascend the penitential way / That forces our wills to be free,” even while aware that “every step we make / Will certainly be a mistake.”¹⁴⁸ Penitence is one way of responding to one’s self-aware existence in the ‘monstrous’. Now that acknowledges an Absolute horizon while accepting that it is beyond human reach. “In Time we sin,” Auden says, “But Time is sin and can forgive.”¹⁴⁹

1.3 Equally evil: Equality of wretchedness

*“While the Nazi success in Germany undermined Auden’s faith in the self-evident values of liberal humanism, the existentialism of Kierkegaard... helped shape the concept of Agape into a political credo.”*¹⁵⁰

In *New Year Letter*, modest visions of interpersonal community building form an important contrast to the hellish struggle to escape, rather than bear, our existential burdens. Such private consolations would become the blueprint for Auden’s formulations of a “counter-vision” to totalitarianism on the social and political scale; a democracy grounded in a common recognition of our “equality in wretchedness” and the necessity of *Agape*. For Auden, the “pact of totalitarianism” represented a “manifest contract of souls in reflective self-love.”¹⁵¹ In *New Year Letter*, Hitler emerges, startlingly, as an inverted theologian:

We face our self-created choice
As out of Europe comes a Voice
A theologian who denies
What more than twenty centuries
Of Europe have assumed to be
The basis of civility,
Our evil *Daimon* to express
In all its ugly nakedness
What none before dared say aloud,
The metaphysics of the Crowd.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ *NYL*, ll. 935-36.

¹⁴⁸ *NYL*, ll. 968-69, 963-64.

¹⁴⁹ *NYL*, ll. 925-26.

¹⁵⁰ Summers, ““Or One Could Weep because Another Wept,”” 216.

¹⁵¹ Auden, *Collected Prose II*, 172.

¹⁵² *NYL*, ll. 1016-25. Auden later revised the first two lines of this excerpt to: “...out of Europe comes a Voice / Compelling all to make their choice.” (Auden, *Collected Poems*, 225.)

The “evil *Daimon*” answered the moan of apathy and despair emanating from a “corrupt Christendom,” whose members Auden drily imagined as saying to themselves: “Faith is too difficult; nothing is despair, we must have no God but Caesar.”¹⁵³

In Auden’s wartime Christmas oratorio, Caesar’s Empire is portrayed as a decaying liberal state that has lost faith in itself. Caesar is praised for having conquered the Seven Kingdoms of rational virtue—metaphysics, science, mathematics, economics, technology, medicine and psychology.¹⁵⁴ As the Chorus puts it: “Great is Caesar: God must be with Him.” (CP: 371) The Narrator excitedly explains that this is “History... in the making... / The longest aqueduct in the world is already / Under construction; the Committees on Fen-Drainage / And Soil-Conservation will issue very shortly / Their Joint Report... and the recent restrictions / Upon aliens and free-thinking Jews are beginning / To have a salutary effect upon public morale.” (CP: 373) But despite the efforts of the public relations team, no one is entirely convinced – “at least not all of the time.” In fact, the atmosphere haunting the Imperial Capital seems to be one of apathy and alienation. The opening chorus is permeated by forebodings of evil; anxiety is rising to the surface from under the layers of reassurance and propaganda, and the citizens of the would-be Liberal State¹⁵⁵ find themselves ill-prepared for the advent of a seemingly ominous moment in time: “Darkness and snow descend. / The clock on the mantelpiece / Has nothing to recommend, / ... / The eyes huddle like cattle, doubt / Seeps into the pores... / The prophet’s lantern is out / And gone the boundary stone... // [As] The evil and armed draw near.” (CP: 350) Some subconscious Horror is scratching at the door, and the Narrator tries to find a plausible cause for “why we despair,” citing a sense of unreality and the sudden discovery that the “person we know all about / Still bearing our name and loving himself as before” has become a fiction, whilst “our true existence / Is decided by no one and has no importance to love.” (CP: 352) “This,” the Narrator concludes, “is the wrath of God.”

The Narrator seems to echo Niebuhr when he admits that “We know very well we are not unlucky but evil.” (CP: 374) The influence of Niebuhr’s argument becomes even clearer in the following couple of lines, which state: “that the dream of a Perfect State or No State at all, / To which we fly for refuge, is a part of our punishment.” (CP: 374) Here, then, is an

¹⁵³ Auden, *Collected Prose II*, 172.

¹⁵⁴ As Miriam Starkman has pointed out, this list of “virtues” can be read as a parody of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost. Miriam Starkman, “The ‘Grace of the Absurd;’ Form and Concept in W. H. Auden’s ‘For the Time Being,’” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 67, no.3 (1974): 281.

¹⁵⁵ Herod the Great appears in *For the Time Being* as a self-identifying liberal. His monologue is titled “The Massacre of the Innocents:” “Civilisation must be saved, even if it means sending for the military...” Auden, *Collected Poems*, 394.

explicit acknowledgment of that underlying sense of sin that Auden saw as a crucial part of the explanation for the modern appeal of totalitarian movements. Man is “tempted by guilt into a despair which tells him that his isolation and abandonment is irrevocable,” and tries to flee from that despair into the open arms of the totalitarian family. In a review of Niebuhr’s *Christianity and Power Politics*, Auden had written: “man cannot live without a sense of the Unconditional: if he does not consciously walk in fear of the Lord, then his unconscious sees to it that he has something else, airplanes or secret police, to walk in fear of.”¹⁵⁶

The failure of liberalism to offer a desirable alternative to totalitarian movements lay for Auden, as critic Bruce Cicero explains, in its refusal “to acknowledge the impossibility of successful social democracy without an unequivocal belief in man’s bias towards evil.”¹⁵⁷ In the 1941 essay “Criticism in a Mass Society,” Auden makes explicit his belief that one’s attitude towards the concept of Original Sin is decisive for one’s political choices. Either, he says, you presuppose that “Man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil,” or you presuppose that “Men are good by nature and made bad by society.”¹⁵⁸ Fascist ideology, he asserts, is based on the combination of a lack of faith in absolute values and a hierarchical system of human value. Assuming that absolute values do not exist, and that some individuals, nations or races are better and more deserving than others, the elite must “coerce the masses into accepting as absolute what in fact are myths” in order to achieve social and cultural unity; the system of government must be authoritarian and “the people must be protected from the consequences of their own mistakes by those who cannot err.”¹⁵⁹ The presupposition for social democracy, on the other hand, is that absolute values do exist, though our knowledge of them is always imperfect: “Men are equal not in their capacities and virtues but in their natural bias towards evil. No individual or class, therefore, however superior in intellect or character to the rest, can claim an absolute right to impose its view of the good upon them.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, democracy itself begins, in Auden’s framework, with an act of faith, namely that absolute values exist even though we must never claim to fully know or possess them.

The sense of totalitarianism substituting a lost faith in an unconditional Divine applies not only to its institutions of oppression (the secret police as a substitute for Divine Law), but extends, in Auden’s view, to the very core of the totalitarian project. Let us recall his

¹⁵⁶ Auden, *Prose II*, 109.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce Cicero, “Original Sin in the Later Auden,” *Modern Age* 44, no. 4 (2002): 344. Cicero’s article includes a more detailed discussion of “Criticism in a Mass Society.”

¹⁵⁸ Auden, *Prose II*, 94.

¹⁵⁹ Auden, *Prose II*, 97.

¹⁶⁰ Auden, *Prose II*, 98.

description of Fascism in the Note to *New Year Letter*: “[Its] slogan is Now or Never. In demanding a dictator it is really demanding the advent of the Good Life on earth through a supernatural miracle.”¹⁶¹ In Roger Griffin’s definition, National Socialism represented a longing for “secular transcendence,” a “temporalized utopia of purified society created within historical time,” to be achieved through what could be thought of as a secular apocalypse. Auden, seeing in this apocalyptic logic the lie of individual sublimation to a mythical collective, sought to elaborate a metaphysical alternative capable of providing a sense of meaningful co-existence within secular time. In the following sections of this chapter, I will show how that alternative built on Auden’s definition of the good community, and offer an interpretation of how his “communal counter-vision” relates to his idea of the *time being*.

1.4 Communal counter-vision

So far I have showed how Auden, during the early 40s, built up an elaborate framework of ideas from which he analysed the dynamics of liberalism and fascism. The cornerstone in this framework was the concept of Original Sin, allowing for a defence of democracy based on an “equality of wretchedness” and an imperative to have faith in absolute values of which we lack full knowledge. The emphasis has been on his critique of what he thought humans could *not* achieve, namely a “temporalized utopia of purified society created within historical time.” What kind of a society *could* be created? “If it were easy to be good / And cheap, and plain as evil how, / We all would be its members now,” he states in *New Year Letter*.¹⁶² Yet he did, of course, have some notions of the good. In the same poem Auden describes the kind of private experiences of community and happiness without which he considered it impossible to have any faith: “O but it happens every day / To someone... Out of his organised distress / An accidental happiness” catches man off his guard, surprising him “Out of his life in time.”¹⁶³ To understand how personal “visions” such as these informed Auden’s visions of society on a larger scale, we must turn to his definitions of, and distinctions between, *societies*, *communities* and *crowds*. Auden, notorious for his love of categories and classifications, returned to this particular taxonomy in a number of essays throughout the forties and fifties:

A crowd is a collection of people whose sole common bond is that they are together. [...] A society is an association of individuals for some functional purpose. Here I can think of something inorganic like a molecule of water, or of something organic like a

¹⁶¹ Auden, “Notes” to *New Year Letter*, pg. 114.

¹⁶² Auden, *NYL*: ll. 1586-88

¹⁶³ Auden, *NYL*, ll. 860-61, 872-73, 875.

string quartet. The point about a society is that the part is subordinate to the whole. [...] A community is an association of human beings who are united by a tie of a common love.¹⁶⁴

(From “The Prolific and the Devourer,” Auden’s unpublished book of pensées written during the summer of 1939)

A public is a disintegrated community. A community is a society of rational beings united by a common tie in virtue of the things that they all love; a public is a crowd of lost beings united only negatively in virtue of the things that they severally [sic] fear, among which one of the greatest is the fear of being responsible as a rational being for one’s individual self-development.¹⁶⁵

(In a review of Louise Bogan from 1942)

The same distinction played an important role in his major published analysis of Romanticism from 1949, *The Enchafèd Flood*, to which we shall return in chapter 3:

In a society, where the structure and relation of its members to each other is determined by the function for which the society exists and not by their personal choice, the whole is more real than the sum of its parts. In a community, on the other hand, which is determined by the subjective verbs Love or Believe, I always precedes We. In a closed traditional community this fact is hidden, because the I is only potential. The believer by tradition is unconscious of any alternative to his belief...and therefore cannot doubt. The further civilization moves towards the open condition...the sharper becomes the alternative: either personal choice and through the sum of such choices an actual community or the annihilation of personality and the dissolution of community into crowds.¹⁶⁶

A community, that is, is an association of rational human beings “united by a tie of a common love.” On a personal level this could be a love for any number of things, be it literature, music or football. On a larger societal scale, a principle of love uniting heterogeneous segments of a population would have to be impersonal and universal. This is how Auden came to shape the Christian concept of Agape, referring to the reciprocal love between God and humanity which extends to the “love of one’s neighbor,” into a “political credo.” Agape is in his view ultimately the “absolute value” in which humans must place their faith, although no one can ever claim to fully know or possess its meaning. In accordance with this interpretation, Auden writes, in 1944, that “there is no perfect *form* of society; the best form can only be the form through which at any given historical moment or in any given geographical location, love for one’s neighbor can express itself the most freely.”¹⁶⁷ That “love” was a serious component in

¹⁶⁴ Auden, *Prose II*, 492.

¹⁶⁵ Auden, *Prose II*, 154.

¹⁶⁶ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood, Or, the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1951): 36.

¹⁶⁷ Auden, “Augustus to Augustine,” *Prose II*: 230.

Auden's political analysis, indeed that he considered it the central component, is emphasized by the following from *New Year Letter*. Note that the passage demonstrates how the idea of Original Sin underpins and anchors the imperatives expressed; that "we need to" and "can" love "each" and "all."

[T]rue democracy begins
With free confessions of our sins.
In this alone are all the same,
All are so weak that none dare claim
'I have the right to govern' or
Behold in me the Moral Law,"
And all real unity commences
In consciousness of differences,
That all have wants to satisfy
And each a power to supply
We need to love all since we are
Each a unique particular
That is no giant, god, or dwarf,
But one odd human isomorph;
We can love each because we know
All, all of us that this is so:
Can live since we are lived, the powers
That we create with are not ours.

The first six lines of the passage closely resemble the argument in defense of democracy sketched out in "Criticism in a Mass Society." In that essay he wrote that people are equal "not in their capacities and virtues but in their natural bias towards evil"; in the poem, it is in sinfulness *alone* that "all are the same." In *New Year Letter*, none in a "true democracy" dare claim moral superiority, out of awareness of their own weaknesses. In "Criticism..." this was spelled out as "No individual or class...however superior in intellect or character to the rest, can claim an absolute right to impose its view of the good upon them."¹⁶⁸ The two texts were written and published in the same time period, and we see how closely the ideas in Auden's prose and poetry bleed into each other.¹⁶⁹ In this context, however, it is the explicit presence of the idea of love as a political credo I would like to call attention to. "All are unique" implies, on the one hand, that each individual is irreplaceable, and, at the same time, that no one can be, ultimately, anything other than her- or himself; there is no escape from the self and one's weaknesses, either in diagnosis or ideology, Auden seems to be saying. *Therefore* "we need to love all," there is no way around it; a "true democracy" will only arise out of

¹⁶⁸ Auden, *Prose II*, 98.

¹⁶⁹ We also see how Auden has by no means abandoned all his earlier socialist convictions: "all have wants to satisfy / And each a power to supply" clearly refers to the Marxist slogan "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

what Auden elsewhere refers to as Agape. This is possible – “we *can* love all” – because everyone is, in this view, fundamentally aware that it is necessary.¹⁷⁰ The last lines in the passage invoke something outside and other than ourselves. This can, on the one hand, be read as a call to humbleness: While we are superior in some things – men are not “equal in their capacities and virtues” – no one is responsible for their own talents or may be said to have “deserved” them; it does not entitle anyone to more power or privilege.

The belief that we *can* act with love towards our neighbours does not imply, however, any optimism as to the question of whether we *will*. The passage about the possibility and necessity of love follows on the heels of one in which a far grimmer reality is described:

But wishes are not horses, this
Annus is not *mirabilis*;¹⁷¹
Day breaks upon the world we know
Of war and wastefulness and woe;
Ashamed civilians come to grief
In brotherhoods without belief,
Whose good intentions cannot cure
The actual evils they endure,
Nor smooth their practical career,
Nor bring the far horizon near.

The order of these two passages from *New Year Letter* (opposite of my quotations) should not be considered accidental, however. The “world we know,” filled with an abundance of “actual evils,” only demonstrates the necessity of the uniting principles of *communities*.

1.5 Personal choice in the earthly city

In *New Year Letter*, the principles underpinning fascism are alluded to as the “metaphysics of the Crowd.” Modern man and woman could not lose the sense of being individuals, they could only try to “merge themselves into an abstraction, the crowd.”¹⁷² In the second quote on crowds and communities which introduced the last subchapter, the crowd’s greatest fear was defined as the fear of “being responsible as a rational being for one’s individual self-development.” A community, on the other hand, arises out of – in fact is no more than – the

¹⁷⁰ In *For the Time Being*, the same view is expressed in the following lines, spoken by the Wise Men at the manger: “The choice to love is open till we die.” (CP: 384)

¹⁷¹ *Annus mirabilis* = year of miracles.

¹⁷² Auden, *Prose III*, 294.

sum of individuals' "personal choices." Auden's emphasis on the personal is important, and is derived from Kierkegaard; a truly personal existence required active choices. In "The Prolific and the Devourer," as well as in several other essays and lectures, Auden uses a cartoon printed in the *New Yorker* as a starting point for a discussion about active personal choice. The cartoon depicts the following scene taking place in New York: A little man is standing in the middle of the street, fighting an octopus which has come out of an open manhole. A crowd has gathered around him, observing. Behind the crowd, two men walk past with suitcases, without looking at what is going on, and the one says to the other: "It doesn't take much to collect a crowd in New York." Auden called the cartoon "extremely significant," and declares that there is only one *individual* in the picture: The little man struggling with the octopus. "The lookers-on in the picture are a crowd because none of them dare step forward unless others do. They can only be a *we*. None of them is an *I*."¹⁷³ The two men that walk past the scene are not individuals either; their rule of action is to do whatever the crowd is *not* doing.¹⁷⁴

To act as a *person*, however; to accept responsibility for one's own self-development, meant that the individual would have to accept suffering. Acting out "personal choices" exposes the individual to the existential anxieties of uncertainty and indeterminacy: In Kierkegaard's terms, it would require a "leap of faith."¹⁷⁵ The acceptance of suffering is what the Chorus requires from Joseph in *For the Time Being*: "To do what is difficult all one's days / As if it were easy, that is faith." (CP: 365)¹⁷⁶ What is difficult is, in the context of this Christmas Oratorio, for Joseph to continue to love Mary despite his doubts as to the circumstances of her pregnancy.¹⁷⁷ What is asked of Joseph is the same as what is asked of any citizen in a true *community*, according to Auden's terms: To love, even in spite of oneself. In a 1944 essay Auden states that there can, for the Christian, "be no distinction between the personal and the political, for all his relationships are both; every marriage is a polis, every imperium a family..."¹⁷⁸ Thus, Joseph's dilemma and his doubts concerning his personal

¹⁷³ Auden, *Prose II*: 496

¹⁷⁴ This is in fact an echo of Kierkegaard's quip that a man without an opinion of his own tends to accept that of the majority – or, if he is quarrelsome, the minority. (my paraphrase)

¹⁷⁵ See Auden's poem "Leap Before You Look" (1940) for a glimpse into his most intensely Kierkegaardian phase. (*Collected Poems*: 313.)

¹⁷⁶ For a discussion of certain biographical events which might have influenced Auden's portrayal of Joseph, see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, Chapter Seven: The Absconded Vision.

¹⁷⁷ The Chorus is constantly taunting him: "*Mary may be pure, / But, Joseph, are you sure?*" (362, italics in original.)

¹⁷⁸ "Augustus to Augustine," *Prose II*: 230.

“polis” leads us back to the principle of Agape as a “political credo.” In the same 1944 essay, Auden makes this credo explicit:

In so far as its members love themselves, a society is an earthly city in which order is maintained by force and fear of chaos, bound sooner or later to break down under the tension between freedom and law; in so far as they love God and their neighbor as themselves, the same society becomes a heavenly city in which order appears the natural consequence of freedom, not a physical or logical imposition.¹⁷⁹

In Auden’s definition, love of one’s neighbor was in man’s best interest, based on “the most primitive instinct of all, self-preservation.” At the last supper, he points out, Jesus “took eating, the most elementary and solitary act of all, the primary act of self-love, the only thing that not only man but all living creatures must do...and made it the symbol of universal love.”¹⁸⁰ At first glance this might seem to contradict the statement that to love is to “do what is difficult,” but it is in fact consistent with Auden’s idea of love as the ultimate “necessity,” and freedom as the acceptance of necessity. To sin, in *New Year Letter*, is to “act consciously / Against what seems necessity.”¹⁸¹

1.6 The Incarnation and the “Thou”: Love as model

In *For the Time Being*, the most significant meditation upon the meaning of love or Agape takes place as the Wise Men and the shepherds arrive at the manger and sing their praise in alternating stanzas. The space here does not allow for in-depth analysis, but I will highlight a few examples relevant to the ongoing discussion. Towards the end of their song, the Wise Men state that “the singular is not Love’s enemy; / Love’s possibilities of realisation / Require an Otherness that can say *I*.” (CP: 384) If we connect this to the state described above of being “each a unique particular,” that state is not only said to imply aloneness and isolation, but to open for the possibility of love: Only an “Otherness that can say *I*” may be loved. Secondly, the Wise Men end their final stanza with the words “The choice to love is open till we die,” (CP: 384) echoing and reinforcing the view expressed in *New Year Letter* that “we can love” (my italics).¹⁸² In *For the Time Being* the “choice to love” is, significantly, made

¹⁷⁹ “Augustus to Augustine,” *Prose II*: 230. The terms “earthly city” and “heavenly city” refers to Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei – The City of God*.

¹⁸⁰ Both quotes from Auden, “The Prolific and the Devourer,” *Prose II*: 431.

¹⁸¹ *NYL*: ll. 608-609

¹⁸² According to the same logic, Auden claims that the gates of Hell always stand wide open, and that the “lost” are perfectly free to leave whenever they like. Doing so, however, “would mean admitting that the gates were open, that is to say that there was another life outside... [and] if they admitted its existence they would have to lead it... They know that they could leave and they know why they don’t. Their knowledge is the flame of Hell.” (*Prose II*, 428.)

possible by the Incarnation – keeping with/consistent with the Christian message and the function of the Christmas Oratorio – as is reinforced by the poem’s next section. In order to understand the role of Agape in Auden’s religious-political vision of the good community, therefore, I will devote some paragraphs to that section, the most philosophically dense passage in the poem.

Erik Tønning has argued that the Incarnation is the central Christian dogma in Auden’s thought.¹⁸³ *For the Time Being*, a Christmas Oratorio whose formal function is to praise the birth of Christ, is a natural first place to look for Auden’s understanding of that dogma. As the only long poem in Auden’s oeuvre dealing explicitly with Christian themes, it is also an important source of insight into the significance of the Christian concept of love in Auden’s communal vision. The passage in the poem titled “The Meditation of Simeon” is particularly central in this regard. In the Gospels, Simeon is the old man who had been promised that he would not die until he had seen Christ. When Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple to be baptized, Simeon utters a short prayer wherein he “makes explicit the universality of the Christian revelation.”¹⁸⁴ In *For the Time Being*, Auden has given him an extensive prose monologue, interspersed by the Choir, in which he explains the historical and metaphysical conditions that had to be in place before the Incarnation could occur, and the significance of the Incarnation to various sides of human life. For instance, Simeon states that “[t]he Word could not be made Flesh until men had reached a state of absolute contradiction between clarity and despair in which they would have no choice but either to accept absolutely or to reject absolutely,” (CP: 387) a description consistent both with Auden’s understanding of modernity and the uncompromising Christian existentialism he had derived from Kierkegaard. Simeon also explains the “present” significance of the Incarnation:

But here and now the Word which is implicit in the Beginning and in the End is become immediately explicit, and that which hitherto we could only passively fear as the incomprehensible I AM, henceforth we may actively love with comprehension that THOU ART. (CP: 387-88)

The “incomprehensible I AM” can be thought to refer both to (the paradox of) self-awareness and to the name God gave himself in the Old Testament, YHWH (Yahweh) or “I am that I am.” THOU ART has a similar double meaning. In the first editions of the Oratorio, the last

¹⁸³ Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 91.

¹⁸⁴ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 189.

words in the quote above were "...that HE IS."¹⁸⁵ Mendelson notes that the change to "THOU ART" might have been made as a result of Auden's reading of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. In fact, "HE IS" (as in "Christ is") and "THOU ART" mean the same thing, in this context: Through recognition of the Incarnation, Christian faith enables man him to really see his neighbor as a unique individual worthy of the pronoun "you." "THOU ART," is actually more consistent with Auden's writing about *persons* at the time, and with his overall argument that the Incarnation embodied the meaning of Agape; through love of God, or through faith, man was shown the meaning of loving one's neighbor. Keeping in mind that "Love's possibilities of realisation / Require an Otherness that can say I," the birth of Christ is here what makes it fully possible to recognize the Other as someone "that can say I," in other words a "thou."

As Mendelson and Topping emphasize, Auden had arrived at this understanding of Christianity and the Incarnation through his reading of Charles Williams' *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit of the Church*. Auden had read the book in February 1940, and it made a huge impact on him, particularly Williams' interpretation of the Incarnation through the idea of *co-inherence*. *Co-inherence* refers to the act of "divine substitution" inherent in the birth of Christ: "We were made sin in Adam but Christ was made sin for us and we in him were taken out of sin."¹⁸⁶ By entering into human existence, bodily and spiritually, Christ "took on" human sinful nature and redeemed it through his voluntary sacrifice. *Co-inherence* also involves "bearing one another's burdens even in this life, as Christ bore ours,"¹⁸⁷ thereby offering a "model" for Agape.

1.7 Democracy and science: Love as method

In October 1939 Auden wrote an essay – a book review, in fact – with the title "Democracy is hard." Here he makes explicit his belief that "[d]emocracy will only work if as individuals we lead good lives, and we shall only do that if we have faith that it is possible and at the same time an acute awareness of how weak and corrupt we are. [...] ...we must find a technique."¹⁸⁸ He goes on to offer a suggestion of this technique, modeled on the scientific

¹⁸⁵ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 189. According to Mendelson, the word was changed from "HE" to "THOU" when Auden reprinted the oratorio in his 1945 *Collected Poetry*. The original phrasing reappears – perhaps by mistake – in certain later publications, such as in W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958)

¹⁸⁶ Williams, Charles. *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*. (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002): 70.

¹⁸⁷ Topping, *Modernism and Christianity*, 92.

¹⁸⁸ Auden, *Prose II*: 29. The book in question was Jacques Barzun's *Of Human Freedom*.

method. Not only does he connect science (or the “way to true knowledge”) with absolute faith, but equates the scientific method with love:

There is one way to true knowledge, and only one, a praxis which, if defined in terms of human relations, we should call love. For what is the scientific attitude but that of the love which does not reject the humblest fact, resists not evil (recalcitrant evidence) nor judges, but is patient, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things? And what is its opposite but the way of dogmatic belief backed by force? Skepticism, then, in belief. Absolute faith in the way and in the existence of truth.¹⁸⁹

We see again how “absolute faith”, combined with the recognition of original sin (“how weak and corrupt we are”), is instrumental in Auden’s vision of a good society – however idiosyncratic his definition of “faith” might be.

Mendelson claims that Auden treated the Christmas story as a “parable of the advent and departure of a vision.”¹⁹⁰ He finds *For the Time Being* “more plausible at the end than at the beginning,” that is, after the vision has passed.¹⁹¹ The reality of failure is perhaps more realistically portrayed – or more recognizable – than the vision of success. After the Massacre of the Innocent and Joseph and Mary’s flight into Egypt, the Oratorio ends with a last monologue by the Narrator, followed by a short prayer by the Chorus. The Narrator’s concluding remarks open like this: “Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, / Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes...” (CP: 399) The atmosphere is one of physical and spiritual hangover, as the narrator admits that he and the rest of the party has drunk a lot, stayed up late and tried, “quite unsuccessfully,” to love all of their relatives. “Once again / As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed / To do more than entertain it as an agreeable / Possibility.” (CP: 399) The one thing that remains is a faint “whiff of apprehension” at the thought of the Good Friday already approaching. (CP: 400)

In other words, the Narrator might be said to find himself “back on the same old mountain side” that Auden had described in *New Year Letter*; the purgatory “in which we live / At least three-quarters of our time.” The Christmas vision does not offer any lasting relief to the participants in the ritual. They are offered a glimpse of what Auden would undoubtedly call the “Truth”, before reverting to “the ordinary condition of anxiety and doubt.”¹⁹² This, however, is what Auden refers to as our natural residence in *New Year Letter*: “Is it not here that we belong, / Where everyone is doing wrong?”¹⁹³ Similarly, Joseph and Mary sing, in

¹⁸⁹ Auden, *Prose II*: 28-29.

¹⁹⁰ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 180.

¹⁹¹ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 194. Needs sentence of explanation – Juan asked why Mendelson is of this opinion.

¹⁹² Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 187.

¹⁹³ *NYL*, ll. 952-53

their final verse in *For the Time Being*: “Safe in Egypt we shall sigh / For lost insecurity; / Only when her terrors come / Does our flesh feel quite at home.” (CP: 398) The vision *had to* fade for Auden, the ordinary condition of anxiety of doubt is our natural state of being. What he suggests is to walk on in good faith, so to speak, “once again...set out / Our faith well balanced by our doubt” with a “reverent frivolity / That suffers each unpleasant test / With scientific interest.”¹⁹⁴ The only suffering to be avoided is that of trying to escape from suffering. That is why Joseph is asked to “do what is difficult all one’s days / As if it were easy.” For the same reason, Topping describes Auden’s faith (or what Auden himself usually referred to as his attempt-at-faith, his would-be-Christianity) as characterized not by the abandonment, but the intensification of questioning and doubt.¹⁹⁵

This is the context in which one should read the Narrator’s statement in his final monologue that “The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.” Here it has come to embody human beings’ anxiety in time, the crookedness of human nature and the “purgatorial hill we climb” – what John Fuller calls “the continual demands of the Eternal upon an Individual living in Time.”¹⁹⁶ Another “time being” in the poem is, however, the moment of the Incarnation, as is reflected in the language of, especially, “The Vision of the Shepherds” and “The Meditation of Simeon.” In “The Vision...” the shepherds and wise men sing:

THE THREE WISE MEN:	O here and now our endless journey stops.
FIRST SHEPHERD:	We never left the place where we were born
	[...]
THIRD SHEPHERD:	To-night for the first time the prison gates
	Have opened.
	[...]
	And swept the filth of habit from our hearts.
THE THREE SHEPHERDS:	O here and now our endless journey starts.
	(CP: 381-82)

The emphasis on the *here and now* of the vision is repeated in “The Meditation of Simeon,” where the words “here and now” are used to mark the event of the Incarnation, the entry of Christ into history, and begin the meditation on its significance in the *present*. Simeon states

¹⁹⁴ *NYL*, ll. 961-62; 970-72

¹⁹⁵ Topping, *Modernism and Christianity*, 90.

¹⁹⁶ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 345.

that “by Him is illuminated the *time* in which we execute those choices through which our freedom is realized or prevented...” (CP: 388) That time must be understood as the “time being,” the only time available in which to “execute those choices.” The meaning of that time is revealed in the moment and event of the Incarnation. This has one further implication. In Simeon’s words, “here and now the Word which is implicit in the Beginning and in the End is become immediately explicit.” (CP: 387) The vision fades, but points forwards, according to Christian scripture, to the “End” of time, to Judgment Day, the Revelation, or the Apocalypse. Similarly, the very expression “for the time being” – another formulation of which would be “in the meantime” – implies waiting, in expectation of some future, if perhaps uncertain, event that would, if it occurred, bring the “time being” to an end.

1.8 The end and the time being

The notion of an “End” consistent with Christian Scripture merits two comments. First, to adopt a belief in a prophesied Christian End of Days during the early 1940s may be understood as a *postponement* of apocalyptic visions. As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, with reference to Roger Griffin’s theory of fascism, the revolutionary fascist movements of the 20th century were driven by myths of *palingenesis*; the belief in national, social or political *rebirth*. In other words, palingenesis can be described as belief in a form of secular *apocalypse* and regeneration through war; specifically, for the fascist movements gaining power in the 1930s, what would become the Second World War. Auden’s adoption of faith in Original Sin and the Incarnation is inextricable from a belief in the Last Judgment. The latter entails a rejection of *secular* eschatological ideologies such as National Socialism. If we recall that Auden was convinced that man, if he did not “consciously walk in fear of the Lord” would find “something else, airplanes or secret police, to walk in fear of,” the idea of competing and mutually exclusive eschatological ideologies becomes explicit: In short, Auden believed that “man,” in lieu of a fear of divine judgement, would be tempted towards the apocalyptic myths of contemporary totalitarian movements – either that or revert to that liberalism he saw offered as fascism’s only alternative and which he, as shown, despised. Secondly, we should remember that the Word which “in the End is become immediately explicit,” i.e. the vision revealed in the Incarnation, was, for Auden, one of Agape or love. Even the prospect of Judgment, in other words, is part of an overall interpretation that rejects despair. Rather, the recognition of Original Sin allows for a common recognition of one another as fellow sinners, in need of mutual forgiveness. The Shepherds and Wise Men in *For*

the Time Being, when at the Manger, declare in alternating lines that they “bless each other’s sin, exchanging here / Exceptional conceit / With average fear.”(CP: 382) The Narrator suggests the following prayer as a response to the insight that “we are not unlucky but evil”:

Let us therefore be contrite without anxiety,
For Powers and Times are not gods but mortal gifts from God;
Let us acknowledge our defeats but without despair,
For all societies and epochs are transient details,
Transmitting an everlasting opportunity
That the Kingdom of Heaven may come, not in our present
And not in our future, but in the Fullness of Time.
Let us pray. (CP: 374)

The note on the possibility of a Kingdom of Heaven to come in the “Fullness of Time” allows us, again, to identify the anti-totalitarian character of Auden’s *time being*, and define its role in his shaping of the Christian concept of Agape into a political credo *in response to* the contemporary threat of totalitarianism. Auden’s idea of the time being entails an abandonment of the hope for a human-made Parousia, a secular revitalization of society brought about through an apocalyptic war, and indeed the very idea that human beings are capable of achieving their own transcendence. Auden’s conviction was rather – to take one of his simpler formulations – that “man is born in sin but may be saved by the Grace of God.”¹⁹⁷ The eschatological horizon, instead of looming over the present, is shifted into the beyond, to be realized only with the coming of a redeemer.

In the same year that Auden returned to Christianity, in 1940, before either *New Year Letter* or *For the Time Being* were written, he had published a poetry collection with the title *Another Time*. Several of the poems in this collection deal with, as one would expect, variations on the topic of time. Auden’s use of the expression “another time” marks it as the opposite of his idea of the “time being.” In the poem that gives the 1940 collection its title, Auden writes:

So many try to say Not Now
So many have forgotten how
To say I Am, and would be
Lost, if they could, in history.¹⁹⁸

In *For the Time Being*, the emphasis has shifted from “I Am” to “Thou Art,” but “I Am” still means to take on responsibility for one’s own existence and choices; to be a *person*. Only a person can say “you are” and love his neighbor. Only a person can, as Auden was to write in a

¹⁹⁷ “Vocation and Society” (1943), *Collected Prose II*: 182

¹⁹⁸ W. H. Auden (1940), *Another Time*, London: Faber and Faber, 2007: 50.

later poem, assume “responsibility for time.”¹⁹⁹ The next stanza from “Another Time,” following the one quoted above, also indicates what the “time being,” or the unwillingness to say “Now,” has to do with Auden’s understanding of fascism and totalitarianism. There, Auden describes those who would be “Lost, if they could, in History” as

Bowing, for instance, with such old-world grace
To a proper flag in a proper place,
Muttering like ancients as they stump upstairs
Of Mine and His or Ours and Theirs.²⁰⁰

But, the poem concludes, “No one has yet believed or liked a lie: / Another time has other lives to live.” The duty of a Christian was “to act now, with an eye fixed, neither nostalgically on the past nor dreamily on some ideal future, but on eternity – “redeeming the time” – in the words of Sidney Smith, he is to “trust in God and take short views.””²⁰¹ The Incarnation had shown humankind the imperative of living in the *time being*, and set the task for the future, as, with the “new-born Word...A city based / On love and consent / [was] suggested to men.”²⁰² Faith, which Auden saw as the power by which anxious human beings were “nevertheless still able to choose,” allowed them to endure the time being and invest their existential energies in helping to build this just city in the here and now.

¹⁹⁹ “Their Lonely Betters” (1950)

²⁰⁰ Auden, *Another Time*, 50.

²⁰¹ “Augustus to Augustine,” *Collected Prose II*: 230-31.

²⁰² From the Chorus in *For the Time Being*. (CP: 378.)

2 Beginnings and ends: Hannah Arendt's *action*.

"The moments we call crises are ends and beginnings."²⁰³

"History is predictable in the degree to which all men love themselves, and spontaneous in the degree to which each man loves God and through Him his neighbour."²⁰⁴

In this chapter, I will introduce a new philosophical perspective into the thesis, namely Hannah Arendt's theory of *action* from *The Human Condition*. The aim is twofold: 1) to shed light on the *time being* as discussed in the previous chapter and 2) to supply a conceptual tool for my discussion of Auden's *Horae Canonicae* in the next chapter. The discussion of Arendt's theory, therefore, may be seen to supply a theoretical bridge between the two analytical chapters. This ordering of the chapters is intended to be clarifying: the discussion here relies on a prior understanding of Auden's *time being*, and it is fully applied only in the last chapter. The chapter is structured as follows: a short summary of what the *time being* entailed for Auden; an introduction of Arendt and her relevance for my analysis of Auden; a brief presentation of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and its similarities with Auden, and finally; a discussion of Arendt's theory from *The Human Condition* with focus on its parallels with and relevance for Auden.

2.1 The time being

The *time being* refers, in Auden's *For the Time Being*, to the present moment as a site of uncertainty, anxiety and doubt, the distinctly un-epiphanic experience of temporality characterizing everyday life. Frank Kermode used the term *Chronos*, traditionally the personification of Time in a general sense, for this particular, relentless experience of time: the endless unfolding of moments perceived as having no special significance, and therefore experienced as unfulfilling or even agonizing for the individual humans scrambling for foothold in it. In Auden's *New Year Letter*, the *time being* was described as purgatorial, the "same old mountain side" that human beings symbolically struggle on throughout their lives. The struggle and suffering implied in the *time being* was in part caused by the individual's more-or-less-conscious awareness of sin: "We know," as the Narrator in *For the Time Being* stated, "that we are not unlucky but evil." At one point in the Christmas Oratorio, however,

²⁰³Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 96.

²⁰⁴Auden, "For the Time Being," *CP*: 388.

the *time being* is filled with significance and wonder, in which the meaning of History is momentarily revealed to its participants: in the Incarnation. This moment corresponds to what in Kermode's model is termed *kairos*; a point in time which is brimming over with significance. In Auden's Christian Vision, the Incarnation did and continues to provide the true meaning of history, human existence in time, a meaning he approaches in terms of *Agape* or love of one's neighbor. The totalitarian promise, as Auden saw it, was related to the tribulations of the *time being* in that it offered the individual a refuge from anxiety and self-reflection in a collective identity construed as superior; in the projection of anxiety onto internal and external enemies; and in the prospect of a future utopian state, realized in secular, historical time, in which the uncertainties and sufferings of the *time being* would be transcended once and for all. In *New Year Letter* Auden gave himself the following reminder.

A particle, I must not yield
To particles who claim the field,
Nor trust the demagogue who raves,
A quantum speaking for the waves,
Nor worship blindly the ornate
Grandezza of the Sovereign State.
Whatever wickedness we do
Need not be, orators, for you...²⁰⁵

At the same time, he is aware that "We are conscripts to our age" and wonders how one can be a "patriot of the Now."²⁰⁶ This leads me to the parallel I am about to construct between Auden's *time being* – the Now – and Arendt's *action*. To Arendt, the public realm – what she sometimes describes as the "web of human relationships" – was constituted by two fundamental human activities: speech and action. These activities, as Arendt defines them, only exist in the moment of execution, in other words, in the "Now." They leave nothing behind, or if they do those "things" can no longer *be* defined as action or speech, but have been transformed into something else. To Arendt, action is essential to a fully human life. Individuals gain or reveal their unique identity as they "insert themselves into the world" in word and deed. Action is the basis of political life: Political power, she asserts, only exist where people "act together." All of this will be discussed at length throughout the chapter.

For Auden, to be a *person* meant to "take responsibility for time"; to make one's choices in the *time being* without attempting to seek refuge in the past or future, and without deluding oneself with visions of grandeur or despair. There is a clear affinity between his

²⁰⁵ *NYL*: ll. 989-96.

²⁰⁶ *NYL*: ll. 1164; 1169.

understanding of the *time being* and Arendt's *action*. To be a "patriot of the Now," as Auden formulates it, would be, in Arendt's terms, to *act*. The comparison between Auden and Arendt is all the more relevant because Arendt's philosophy is rooted in her analysis of *totalitarianism* from her first and perhaps most famous work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Clearly, Arendt developed the philosophical tools with which to make sense out of politics from an anti-totalitarian perspective, with the experience of totalitarianism, that is, close in mind. Therefore she provides nuance to some of the questions Auden struggles with as he attempts to construct a religious-political framework of ideas with which to both explain and reject the "totalitarian temptation."

2.2 Short background

Hannah Arendt was one of the earliest and most influential philosophers of totalitarianism. She became famous for her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951),²⁰⁷ and is usually credited for coining the term "totalitarianism" itself. Arendt's biography is of some relevance for her philosophy: She grew up in Germany and studied under Heidegger, Husserl and Jaspers, but fled the country in 1933 after Hitler's *Machtergreifung* as her Jewish identity and political activism put her at risk of persecution. She moved to Paris, where she worked to support Jewish refugees. In 1937 she lost her German citizenship, and in 1940, following the German conquest of northern France, she was placed in an internment camp for "enemy aliens" from which Jewish prisoners were to be deported to concentration camps. She managed to escape the camp, and in 1941 fled to the U.S., where she lived for the rest of her life.²⁰⁸

Arendt and Auden were close contemporaries, born in 1906 and 1907 respectively. The rise of fascism in Europe became the crucial formative experience for the both of them and they both, for different reasons, moved to the U.S. around the outbreak of the Second World War and became permanent residents in New York as well as American citizens. In fact, they later came to know each other personally and became friends, intellectual conversation partners and mutual influences upon each others thought, as documented in a number of mutual quotations, dedications and explicit acknowledgments of influence.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Initially published in Great Britain, with the title *The Burden of Our Times* (1951).

²⁰⁸ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 2.

²⁰⁹ For a short account of their relationship, see Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 5-11. For more details, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Hannah Arendt: *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press,), 2004.

Arendt's philosophy is relevant for Auden, and my thesis, for several reasons. First of all, her influence on and pioneering role within the philosophical understanding of totalitarianism makes her interpretation inherently interesting as a point of reference in my discussion of Auden and anti-totalitarianism. Secondly Auden, on coming across Arendt's philosophy in *The Human Condition* (1958), proclaimed in an effusive review that he felt that the book had been "written especially for [him]." ²¹⁰ There were so many parallels between his own and Arendt's understanding of "the human condition" and the modern age that he felt as if he had found an intellectual soul mate, and even telephoned her to thank her for having written the book. ²¹¹ We know, in other words, that Auden himself recognized and appreciated the similarities in their thinking. Thirdly Arendt's idea of human *action* in *The Human Condition* sheds light on Auden's understanding of the *time being* and on human *being in time*. In particular, the role of *forgiveness* in Arendt's analysis of the "realm of human affairs" lends clarity both to Auden's idea of Judgment, i.e. the *eschaton* in his interpretation of Christian eschatology, and to the links between his *time being* and anti-totalitarianism. This will prove a useful perspective in my analysis of *Horae Canonicae* in chapter 3.

2.3 The Origins of Totalitarianism

Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* consists of three parts titled "Anti-Semitism," "Imperialism" and "Totalitarianism." The aspects of her theory most relevant to my investigation, i.e. those that are closest to Auden's ideas and therefore allows for the most constructive comparison, derive from the third volume, particularly its discussion of "Ideology and Terror." ²¹²

²¹⁰"Thinking What We Are Doing." *Encounter* 1959. Available online at: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1959jun-00072> (Accessed 07.02.2014)

²¹¹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 7. Mendelson notes that Auden appreciated *The Human Condition* so much because it "systematically expounded his existing ideas about vocation and alienation, the private and public worlds, and the relation between speech and responsibility." (Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 260.)

²¹² Arendt has sometimes been criticized for "political aestheticism" in her writing, an aestheticism which "fails to take account of historical fact and political reality." ²¹² This chapter which I am about to present, "Ideology and Terror," has been described by critics as "excessively speculative or even mystical." The critic Michael Halberstam has argued that this critique mistakes the character of "Arendt's aesthetic approach to politics," expecting "descriptive empiricism" where Arendt's account should in fact be understood as a "model or an ideal type." (Michael Halberstam, "Hannah Arendt on the Totalitarian Sublime and Its Promise of Freedom," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Ascheim (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2001), 105.) For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I will treat Arendt's theory as, precisely, an "ideal type," rather than attempting to assess its empirical accuracy. I am, to reiterate, interested in how totalitarianism was perceived by contemporary observers, and the main function of Arendt's concepts in this setting is to help clarify *Auden's* understanding of totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism, as Arendt saw it, constituted an entirely novel form of political organization, not to be confused with "traditional" forms of authoritarian government such as tyranny, despotism and dictatorships. She considered the essence of totalitarianism to be found in terror and ideology. Totalitarian movements claim to have access to a law, truth or authority above and beyond the realm of human law, such as History, Nature or the Divine. They pretend to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth – something which the legality of positive law...could never attain."²¹³ The law in question, whether History or Nature, is interpreted deterministically, in other words as inevitable. The totalitarian movement or party, in this scheme, considers itself something like Nature or History's helping hand: Its role is to *execute* the higher law on earth, to *accelerate* its realization, in Arendt's words by making "mankind itself the embodiment of the law."²¹⁴ Totalitarianism's chief characteristics, related to this mission of reshaping mankind into an embodiment of the Law, were therefore *terror* and *ideology*. Under conditions of tyranny terror is used to quench opposition and instill fear of the ruler in the population. Under totalitarianism, Arendt argues, terror became something more: Not only arbitrary, but *total*. This had to do with the internal logic of totalitarian governments' interpretation of that Law they tried to execute. Whereas the sources of ultimate truth (say, Nature or Divinity) have traditionally been conceived of as *permanent* and *eternal*, in totalitarian ideologies they have become "laws of movement," according to Arendt, revealing themselves in a process of constant *development*.²¹⁵ The danger was that the principle of "movement" would come to justify perpetual terror, because the "end" of development would mean the end of the Law itself:

If it is the law of nature to eliminate everything that is harmful and unfit to live, it would mean the end of nature itself if new categories of the harmful and unfit-to-live could not be found; if it is the law of history that in a class struggle certain classes "wither away," it would mean the end of human history itself if rudimentary new classes did not form, so that they in turn could "wither away" under the hands of totalitarian rulers. In other words, the law of killing by which totalitarian movements seize and exercise power would remain a law of the movement even if they ever succeeded in making all of humanity subject to their rule.²¹⁶

Terror, therefore, would not come to an end even if all internal and external enemies could be eliminated. In fact, she writes, terror in totalitarian regimes is indifferent to the guilt or innocence of its targets; it chooses its victims "without reference to individual actions or

²¹³ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1968), 160.

²¹⁴ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 160.

²¹⁵ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 161.

²¹⁶ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 162.

thoughts, exclusively in accordance with the objective necessity of the natural or historical process.”²¹⁷ Terror was more than an *instrument* of totalitarianism, it was its very *essence*. Its consequence and function was to eliminate the “space” required for freedom of action, in an attempt to eliminate the very capacity for freedom in men. Because totalitarian regimes aim to realize the higher Law in mankind, the outcome of which has been preconceived by its theorists, it must oppose, and ultimately try to abolish, the human ability to act out of accordance with the “script”: The capacity for free or spontaneous action. The chief aim of totalitarian terror, Arendt therefore concludes, is to “make it possible for the force of nature or history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action.”²¹⁸

The other essential instrument and characteristic of totalitarian movements and regimes was *ideology*. The term, as Arendt points out, literally means “the logic of an idea.”²¹⁹ All ideologies have totalitarian aspects, she argues. They claim to explain everything, past and future, and insist on a “truer” reality behind observable reality. Ideologies order facts “into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality.”²²⁰ As such ideology implies *emancipation* from reality. The device, she writes, by which Hitler and Stalin transformed their respective ideologies into weapons, was simple: They “took them dead seriously”: By elevating ideologies to the status of absolute truths, they proceeded to “drive ideological implications into extremes of logical consistency...a “dying class” consisted of people condemned to death; races that are “unfit to live” were to be exterminated.”²²¹ This absurd and circular consistency demonstrated, for Arendt, the ability of ideology to eliminate the capacity for *thinking*. Once in power, totalitarian governments would attempt, instead, to change reality in accordance with their ideological claims.

If totalitarianism is *essentially* different from other historical forms of authoritarian government, and therefore novel, Arendt claims that it must also be based upon a new “basic experience” in the “living-together of men.” To the question of what kind of basic experience “permeates a form of government whose essence is terror and whose principle of action is the logicity of ideological thinking,” her answer is: Loneliness.²²² This loneliness is “closely connected with what she calls the “uprootedness and superfluosity which have been the

²¹⁷ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 165.

²¹⁸ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 163.

²¹⁹ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 167.

²²⁰ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 169.

²²¹ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 169.

²²² Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 172.

course of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution.”²²³ Like Auden, that is, Arendt locates this new basic experience of loneliness, which she sees as a precondition for totalitarianism, in modernity:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality.²²⁴

Compare this quote to those lines from *New Year Letter* which state that “The machine has cried aloud / And publicized among the crowd...Aloneness is man’s real condition” and the similarity is especially clear.

Arendt connects the experience of loneliness to what she understands as the three essential activities of human life: Fabrication, labor and action. Fabrication (from the Greek *poiesis*) refers to the “making of things,” the efforts that go into creating a *product* or an *artifice*. Whether the result is a piece of craftsmanship, a book, or a work of art, the act of fabrication as a rule leaves something behind, which might be shared with others. The second activity, “sheer labor,” refers simply to the “effort to keep alive,” for instance activities undertaken with the aim of securing nourishment. Finally action (*praxis*) in Arendt’s philosophical sense refers to activities which take place between people, in other words in a social or political world; activities that produce nothing tangible, but are carried out for their own sake, for the sake of *acting together*.²²⁵ Now, when an individual is involved in *productive* activities, i.e. *fabrication*, she “tends to isolate [herself] with [her] work, that is to leave temporarily the realm of politics.”²²⁶ We see how isolation may be compatible with tyranny but not with totalitarianism: It requires a private sphere to which one may withdraw, which under totalitarian regimes is invaded by the threat of terror and subject to the demand of ideological orthodoxy. The realm of human *action*, as already stated, is similarly targeted by both totalitarian terror and ideology, attempting to control and orchestrate both deed and thought. Only *labor*, characterized by automatism and predictability, is compatible with totalitarian government, which consequently tries to transform all human activities into laboring. The same is true the other way around; totalitarianism is more likely to triumph in a

²²³ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 173

²²⁴ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 176.

²²⁵ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 172-73.

²²⁶ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 173.

world “whose chief values are dictated by labor,” and where isolation has been replaced by loneliness.²²⁷

Arendt would elaborate on labor, fabrication and action in *The Human Condition*, to which I shall turn shortly. It is important to note already here, however, that Arendt’s understanding of *loneliness* and its connection (or rather, lack of connection) to the *public realm* is based on her approach to the most basic questions of human identity and being-in-the-world. For Arendt, the individual is dependent on the social world not only for the affirmation of his or her identity, but for the affirmation of the reality of his or her very perception of the world:

Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our *common sense* which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sense experience.²²⁸ (173-74)

This is why, in other words, the totalitarian bid to eliminate plurality – to make out of many, different, unpredictable individuals one homogenous mass that acts in accordance with the Law – and with it the shared space of spontaneous interaction, destroys not only the ability to *act* but to *think*: Our understanding of the world is developed in interaction and dialogue with other people. It also helps explain why Arendt sees loneliness, i.e. detachment from the common world, as a factor that makes people more susceptible to totalitarian ideology: “The only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience as it is of thinking is the ability of logical reasoning whose premise is self-evident.”²²⁹

The activity of *fabrication* is not entirely eliminated from totalitarian societies, however. It remains in the ambition, on behalf of totalitarian rulers, to *reshape* or *fabricate* mankind into an embodiment of their ideology. This ambition of total control would require the elimination of all spontaneity; it would be possible “only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.”²³⁰ In practice, Arendt concludes, total control was achieved only in the concentration camps. The camps were not only aimed at the extermination and degradation of people; from this perspective, they constituted a giant

²²⁷ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 173.

²²⁸ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 173-74.

²²⁹ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 175.

²³⁰ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 136.

experiment in reshaping human nature, aimed at the “utter elimination of spontaneity and freedom from human existence.”²³¹ It was there, under “scientifically controlled conditions,” that the erasure of human individuality came furthest, as human beings were reduced by terror into “mere specimens of the human animal.”²³² The camps, Arendt concludes, are therefore “the true central institutions of totalitarian organizational power,”²³³ the *paradigm* for the perfect totalitarian society. They demonstrated how totalitarianism’s aim of “eliminating the incalculable from human existence” requires not only the *impotence* of the ruled, but “their sheer *superfluosity*.”²³⁴ In the camps, the inmates were indeed both “exchangeable” and superfluous.

Conversely, one of the biggest threats to totalitarianism was precisely the human capacity for spontaneity and new beginnings: Unpredictability remained an inherent potential in all human action. Arendt concludes *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with the following quote

[T]here remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identified with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – “that a beginning be made man was created” said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.²³⁵

These lines in *Origins* point forwards to Arendt’s major work of philosophy, *The Human Condition*, published in 1958. There, she would place the faculty of *action* at the very centre of her investigation. “Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin,”²³⁶ she had written in *Origins*, and to *act*, for Arendt, was to begin.

2.4 Work, labor and action in *The Human Condition*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt returns to the distinction between fabrication (now called *work*), labor and action. The bulk of the work is devoted to these three categories, which are presented as the three essential types (ideal types) of human activity, together constituting the

²³¹ Dana. R. Villa, “Modernity and the Tradition,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, 130.

²³² Villa, “Modernity and the Tradition,” 130.

²³³ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 136.

²³⁴ Villa, “Modernity and the Tradition,” 126.

²³⁵ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 177.

²³⁶ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 171.

active life (*vita activa*).²³⁷ Each of the activities corresponds to a “temporal structure” or experience of time, which again is related to a distinct form of “unease.” Labor, in its continual (re)production of objects that are (practically) immediately consumed, is marked by a simultaneous immediacy and eternity. The repetitive and seemingly endless process of laboring, Arendt argues, mirrors the cycle of nature. It does not allow for any individuality – one specimen, or laborer, cannot be distinguished from the next. *Work* (fabrication), in the same schema, *redeems* laboring man (*animal laborans*) from that immediacy and eternity: By constructing an “objective and durable” world in which “an individual life can first appear out of the life of the species,” work *interrupts* the cycle of labor and therefore allows for the recognition of change and thus the comprehension of time itself.²³⁸ The activity of work is, however, entirely absorbed by its end: The meaning of work lies in its products. Arendt describes the general purpose of work as determined by the axiom “in-order-to,” as a contrast to the expression “for-the-sake-of,” in terms of which humans usually define meaningfulness. Here lies the particular “unease” of work: Man as a worker or producer (*homo faber*) “cannot overcome the meaninglessness of a world determined by the means-end schema.”²³⁹ The activity of work can, in Arendt’s schema, only be redeemed by the possibility of *action*.

The meaning of *action*, for Arendt, is not to be found in material products or processes: *Action*, and the related faculty of *speech*, takes place between people, i.e. in the realm of social or political affairs. Together action and speech “constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs.”²⁴⁰ They are the “outward manifestations of human life,” how we “insert ourselves into the human world...like a second birth,” and how we reveal our identities, our “unique distinctness,” to others.²⁴¹ The premise of action is the “human condition of plurality, [namely] the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”²⁴² The world of human activity is a social world, inhabited by a plurality of unprecedented and unpredictable beings “who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow.”²⁴³ To *act*, moreover, to Arendt, means “to take an initiative, to begin... to set something into motion”²⁴⁴ Action is inherently *unpredictable*, because each human being is a unique specimen who is always potentially able to do something *new*; i.e. to *begin* something.

²³⁷ As opposed to the “life of contemplation” (*vita contemplativa*). *Vita Activa* is also the title of its original German publication.

²³⁸ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 144.

²³⁹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 144.

²⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press (1958), 95.

²⁴¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95; 176.

²⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

²⁴³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

²⁴⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

Action is also inherently *irreversible*, because it takes place *between* people, within a web of relations in which the ability of others to respond and act themselves is equal to our own. To act is to set into motion a chain of unforeseeable reactions – new actions in themselves, over which we have no control. It is the ability to act, the potential to do something entirely new, which Arendt sees as the most essential feature of human life or the human condition:

Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. [Initium] ergo ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nullus fuit (“that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody”), said Augustine in his political philosophy. The beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.²⁴⁵

In an interesting parallel, Mendelson calls attention to Auden’s use of *verbs* in one of his poems, the elegy for Ernst Toller: the poem concludes with the lines “existence is believing / We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving.” (CP: 250) Existence is *active*, Mendelson writes: “To define the word “person” using nouns like “self” or “personality” is to deceive oneself. To define it through verbs like “believing,” “mourning,” and “grieving,” so that a person is that which thinks, speaks and acts...is to come near the truth.”²⁴⁶ In yet another elegy, “At the Grave of Henry James,” Auden ends one of his stanzas by noting that, at each tombstone, “one more series of errors lost its uniqueness / And novelty came to an end.” (CP: 311) One way to read this – and note that the “series of errors” also conveys a sense of sinfulness – is in light of Arendt’s definition of *beginnings* (actions) as the essential capacity of human life: only in death does one individual’s capacity for *novelty* truly come an end.

2.5 Action: Beginning and being-in-time

By beginning something, introducing something unprecedented and unexpected into historical time, action interrupts the means-end logic of work. In Arendt’s terms, while work was able to “save” the individual from the recurrence and anonymity of the life-process, action “saves” working man from the meaninglessness of strictly productive activity.²⁴⁷ In the “redemptive schema” of *The Human Condition*, indicated by the frequent use and crucial function of the

²⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

²⁴⁶ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 29.

²⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*: 7. The terminology might cause some confusion here: By “working man” Arendt still refers to someone involved in the creation of works or artifices (*homo faber*), as distinguished from laboring man (*animal laborans*), involved in the repetitive and ‘automatic’ processes of labor.

terms “save” and “redeem,” each of the three main categories of human activities needs to be redeemed from its inherent (structural) frustrations. Arendt’s description of the inherent frustrations of action – unpredictability and irreversibility – resembles Auden’s portrayal of human “being in time” in his discussion of Kierkegaard. Auden there describes man as a “being who becomes,” who at every moment “must choose of his own free will out of an infinite number of possibilities which he foresees,” the combination of which with the irrevocability of choices – “he can neither guarantee nor undo the consequences of any choice he makes” – is the main reason for his “anxiety in time.”²⁴⁸ Auden concludes that what finally enables individuals to choose, “without blinding [themselves] to [their] anxiety,” is “religious faith.”²⁴⁹ Arendt sees it differently, despite the “redemptive schema” mentioned above. Arendt scholars have pointed out that it is not “man himself,” in this scheme, who is in need of redemption, but rather the world itself, from the “inherent ruination” that characterizes the normal, natural” course of affairs.”²⁵⁰ The redemption in question in *The Human Condition*, in other words, has nothing to do with any “effort to transcend the conditions in which human beings find themselves” and is as such opposed to what Arendt perceives as the “worldlessness” of Christianity.²⁵¹ Even so, the “redemptive schema” is crucial to Arendt’s theory and worth our attention.

2.5.1 The redemption faculties of action: promising and forgiveness

Action stands out from the other two activities in Arendt’s scheme in that it possesses the means of its own redemption. Whereas labor must be redeemed by work and work redeemed by action the “remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself.”²⁵² The remedy for the irreversibility of action lies in the “faculty of forgiveness,” and the remedy for unpredictability is to be found in the “faculty to make and keep promises.”²⁵³ A promise contains the possibility – though not the guarantee – of predicting future actions, simply because an individual can choose to fulfill his or her promise. But the stabilizing power of promising, as Gottlieb puts it, is “predicated on the interruptive faculty of forgiveness,” precisely because no one can guarantee their future

²⁴⁸ Auden, *Prose II*, 214.

²⁴⁹ Auden, *Prose II*, 214.

²⁵⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 137.

²⁵¹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 137.

²⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 236-37.

²⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

keeping of a promise (“...never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow”). The anxiety caused by the inability to ensure that one will keep one’s promises, or indeed to predict whether any action will turn out to have been “right,” can only be alleviated by the prospect of forgiveness: “Only if one trusts others to relieve one of one’s trespasses can anyone – oneself or others – be entrusted again with the power to act.”²⁵⁴ Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, in Arendt’s words,

we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities – a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel.²⁵⁵

Arendt refers to the covenant between Abraham and God in the Old Testament to illustrate how the promise “of fidelity to another...is predicated on a prior promise of this other to release one from one’s failure to keep this very promise.”²⁵⁶ The prospect of forgiveness, in other words, has to come first. Only in the act of forgiveness, in

...this constant mutual relief from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.²⁵⁷

Forgiveness has the potential to bring an otherwise endless chain of consequences, actions and re-actions, to an *end*; it is *interruptive* in the same sense that work interrupts the repetitive and automatic world of labor. At the same time, forgiveness is itself an *act* and as such a new beginning, initiating a new chain of actions in the web of human relationships. This implies that the act of forgiving itself needs to be forgiven; there is no “end” to action; it issues into an “abyss.” The significance of forgiveness, in Arendt’s scheme, as a (structural) response to action is perhaps not fully clear unless contrasted with another *re-action* to an act, namely revenge. Revenge is, in Arendt’s terms the “natural, automatic reaction to transgression...which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated.”²⁵⁸ It can be calculated, measured or assessed *in proportion to* the foregoing act or grievance and therefore depends, to a certain extent, on that same act; it retains an

²⁵⁴ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 153, 156.

²⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

²⁵⁶ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 153.

²⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240. (Involves a more complex discussion of the original wording (in New Testament Greek) of the phrase “And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.” Apparently the word translated as “repent” (*metanoein*) could mean “change of mind”, and the word translated as “forgive” could also mean to “dismiss” or “release.”)

²⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

element of the “automatism” of nature. Far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, Arendt writes, revenge ensures that “everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course.”²⁵⁹ Forgiveness, on the other hand, cannot be expected or calculated. To forgive is, in Arendt’s sense, truly an *act* in that it must be spontaneous to be real. By initiating a *new* series of acts forgiveness also preserves or contributes to the web of human relations.

2.5.2 Action as suffering, action as miracle: Arendt on Jesus

Forgiveness also serves to highlight what is described, in *The Human Condition*, as another characteristic of action: Suffering. “Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings.”²⁶⁰ One reason that forgiveness can never be predicted or expected is because, one must assume, it is difficult, even unreasonable or irrational. I would like to suggest another parallel here between Arendt’s idea of *action* and Auden’s idea of “personal choice”: Auden, too, wrote of choosing and suffering as two sides of the same coin, and his character Joseph, in the Christmas Oratorio written just after his conversion to Christianity, was told that “to do what is difficult all one’s days / as if it were easy, that is faith.” (CP: 365) Auden, again similarly to Arendt, also saw the frustrations of doing or choosing as a consequence of the “indeterminacy” and “irrevocability” of action, or being *in time*. In a turn that makes the parallels between Auden and Arendt even more striking, Arendt refers, in her discussion of forgiveness, to the “discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs...Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁶¹ It is perhaps worth noticing that the Jewish, secular Arendt should give such credit to the Christian Messiah at this crucial point in her investigation of “the human condition.” It certainly lends credit to the idea that Auden and Arendt had more than a few things in common on their ideas about the “realm of human affairs,” despite their diverging views on the role of religious *faith* (as distinct from religious *figures*...). Arendt in fact claims that the fact that Jesus “made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense,”²⁶² while Auden, of course, considered the faith itself

²⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 240.

²⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

²⁶¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 238.

²⁶² Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 238.

indispensable. In her discussion of Jesus as the “discoverer” of the role of forgiveness, Arendt points out that he turns around the “ordering” of promise in the relationship between God and men: The point is not that men must forgive because God has promised to do so, but that if men forgive each other *God* shall do “likewise.”²⁶³ The power of promising “does not derive from God...but on the contrary must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also.”²⁶⁴ Forgiveness, then, becomes a *primarily* human faculty, and only *secondarily* a divine faculty. Still, as Susannah Gottlieb points out, Arendt’s discussion of action in *The Human Condition*, and especially her writing on forgiveness, abounds with references to “miracles” and the “miraculous.”

Whereas work is principally determined with respect to its ends, action is defined in terms of beginnings. Every beginning worthy of the name is as unprecedented as it is unexpected, and Arendt therefore strongly associates action with one of the categories that Enlightenment discourse progressively disqualified: the miraculous.²⁶⁵

Towards the end of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition* Arendt writes that action, “seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle. In the language of natural science, it is the “infinite improbability which occurs regularly.”²⁶⁶ In the concluding paragraphs, she employs the image of birth – or rather “natality”²⁶⁷ – as an analogue to action, in language that emphasizes its “miraculous” dimension:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.²⁶⁸

Action is “ontologically rooted” in the miracle of birth because of its ability to initiate something *new*. Whenever an individual reveals herself through action as a unique individual, the miracle of birth is in a sense re-enacted. In a formulation that Auden later borrowed as an epigraph to one of his essays, she describes the faculty of beginning which is inherent in action an “ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”²⁶⁹ Gottlieb points out that Arendt by this phrase not only replaces the

²⁶³ Arendt’s discussion is found on pg. 239-40 in *The Human Condition*.

²⁶⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 239.

²⁶⁵ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 148.

²⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 246.

²⁶⁷ “The fact or condition of being subject to birth. Cf. *mortality*.” (Oxford English Dictionary: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125260?redirectedFrom=natality#eid>, accessed 05.02.14)

²⁶⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 247.

²⁶⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 246.

“dismal thought of inevitable death” with the idea of beginning, but “inverts the teleological order in which the concept of “in order to” operates.”²⁷⁰ *In order to* normally indicates an end which absorbs the means, either in the sense of achieving a purpose or coming to conclusion; here, on the other hand, the end is to begin. I will return to the eschatological implications of this idea towards the end of the chapter. First, however, I will discuss certain *political* implications of Arendt’s emphasis on action-as-beginning. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she had written that “freedom...is identical with the capacity to begin,” in other words to act. In the following I will explain how this understanding of freedom, combined with her view of the functions of promising and forgiveness as redeeming potentialities of action, informs her politics.

2.5.3 Action as basis for politics: frailty versus sovereignty

*“Democracy is not a political system or party but an attitude of mind.”*²⁷¹

According to Greek thought, Arendt writes, action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) were the two activities deemed to be *political* in nature and to constitute the “realm of human affairs.”²⁷² The *polis* (city-state or state in a general sense; body politic) is not “properly speaking...the city state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.”²⁷³ This space is a “space of appearance” and comes into being “wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action.”²⁷⁴ Once these activities cease, so does the space of appearance, and with it the potential for political *power*, in Arendt’s terminology: *Strength* – the “natural quality of an individual seen in isolation” – and *violence* both remain possible even where people cannot speak or act, but *power* exists as a potential only where people act together.²⁷⁵ Being reliant on speech and action, however, means that the “realm of human affairs” or political realm is restricted by the same inherent limitations as action itself: The “fleetingness” characterizing the time span of interaction and the “boundlessness” that results from the unpredictability of action. This “frailty” of human affairs, Arendt writes, arises out of “the human condition of natality.”²⁷⁶ It has nothing to do,

²⁷⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 141.

²⁷¹ Auden, *Prose II*, 8.

²⁷² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 25.

²⁷³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

²⁷⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

²⁷⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200-201.

²⁷⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191.

as she sees it, with the “frailty of human nature,” but is a result of new individuals continuously entering the world, each embodying a potential new beginning. The frailty of human affairs is, like action, inherent in the condition of plurality.

This does not, however, make the unpredictability and boundlessness of human affairs any less frustrating. How, according to Arendt, have humans traditionally attempted to *respond* to this frustration in politics, and to protect themselves from it? In order to distinguish between authoritarian and non-authoritarian responses to the frustrations of action, Arendt turns to the linguistic origins of the verb “to act.” Both Greek and Latin, she points out, has two words with which to describe action: In Greek, *archein* means “to begin,” “to lead,” or finally “to rule” while *prattein* means “to pass through,” “to achieve” or “to finish.”²⁷⁷ Correspondingly, Latin distinguishes between the verbs *agere* (“to set into motion,” “to lead”) and *gerere* (originally “to bear”).²⁷⁸ Historically, she explains, the former of the two terms in both languages gradually changed from indicating “beginning” or “setting into motion” and came to mean chiefly “to rule” and “to lead.”²⁷⁹ The role of the beginner, in other words, changed into that of a ruler. In Plato, for instance, only the beginning (*archē*) is entitled to rule (*archein*).²⁸⁰ Arendt uses these linguistic origins to relate the role of action to both ancient and modern notions of rule, hierarchy and, in the last instance, tyranny. The separation of *archein* from *prattein*, beginnings from carrying out, has its parallel in the relationship between a ruler and her followers: Political action is split into two functions, “the function of giving commands, which [becomes] the prerogative of the ruler, and the function of executing them, which [becomes] the duty of his subjects.”²⁸¹ Because our understanding of *action* fails to acknowledge its two constitutive – and interdependent – parts, she argues, we are often misled into believing that political problems may be solved by the strong individual who is capable of *inventing* and *making* solutions. But the tyrant or dictator de facto ends up “monopoliz[ing], so to speak, the strength of those without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything.”²⁸² The false notion of strong leadership justifying a monopoly on authority, Arendt sees as based on a misconceived ideal of *sovereignty*. Plato’s justification for the legitimacy of “philosopher-kings,” for instance, is based on the analogy he draws “between the city and the individual soul: only those who have sovereign control over

²⁷⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

²⁷⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

²⁷⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

²⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 224.

²⁸¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

²⁸² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189; 190.

themselves have a right to control others.”²⁸³ This analogy fails to acknowledge the difference between the personal and the public sphere. “There are two atlases,” Auden writes in *New Year Letter*, in language closely resembling Arendt’s: “the one / The public space where acts are done” and the other “the inner space / Of private ownership...That each of us is forced to own” and where each individual is “sovereign indeed.”²⁸⁴ The problem with extending the notion of sovereignty to the public sphere, according to Arendt, is that it ignores plurality, and thereby the conditions for action.

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth...²⁸⁵

Theories attempting to justify dictatorships, benevolent or not, conceive of politics “according to the model of fabrication.” One example is Plato’s utopia, where Plato is argued to

substitute[e] making for acting...[He seeks] to overcome in one stroke both poles of the temporality of action: its fleetingness on the one hand, which links it with everything ephemeral, and its boundlessness and unpredictability on the other, which correspond to the condition of nonsovereign freedom – namely, plurality.²⁸⁶

At this we have arrived at a crucial similarity, according to Arendt, between traditional notions of tyranny and the modern political phenomenon of totalitarianism: Both try to *substitute freedom with sovereignty* and consequently to *replace action with fabrication*. Auden had persistently rejected, as Alan Jacob notes, what he saw as the “Romantic quest for autonomous selfhood” and the “delusion that it is possible to exercise full control” over one’s destiny.²⁸⁷ Arendt can call the ideal of sovereignty a “replacement” of freedom because she has defined freedom as the ability to begin. From the opposite point of view, however, where freedom is defined in terms of independence, to be free *is* to be sovereign. Arendt’s critique of this equation of freedom and sovereignty contains an interesting defense of egalitarianism, based on an acknowledgment of the frailty of action.

The question...is whether our notion that freedom and non-sovereignty are mutually exclusive is not defeated by reality, or to put it another way, whether the capacity for action does not harbor within itself certain potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 149.

²⁸⁴ *NYL*: 1036-37; 1047-48; 1053.

²⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.

²⁸⁶ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 149.

²⁸⁷ Jacobs, “Beyond Romanticism: Auden’s Choice of Tradition,” *Religion and Literature* 21:2 (1989), 66.

²⁸⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 235-36.

The “potentialities” to which Arendt appeals are, of course, the “redemptive faculties” of promising and forgiveness.

2.5.4 Promising and the “darkness of human affairs”

While they remedy the uncertainties of action they are hardly “saving solutions,”²⁸⁹ being actions of their own and thus characterized by the same frailty. Nevertheless, the stabilizing power of promising is recognized by “all bodies politic that rely on contracts and treaties,” the “danger and advantage” of which is that they “leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are.”²⁹⁰

The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a twofold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the “darkness of the human heart,” that is, the basic unreliability of men who can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act.²⁹¹

The function of the faculty of promising is to “master this twofold darkness of human affairs” and is, Arendt states, “the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one’s self and rule over others.”²⁹² The “force of mutual promise or contract” is what can keep the public space in existence beyond the fleeting moment of concerted action.²⁹³ According to Arendt, the stabilizing power of promising was predicated on the possibility of forgiveness. In the public realm, however, forgiveness is a thornier issue, and lacks the more clear-cut connection between the promise and the contract. On the one hand, “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would...be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.”²⁹⁴ On the other hand, she distinguishes between “trespasses” and “willed evil,” and states – again quoting Jesus – that the right response to the latter is *not* forgiveness, but retribution.²⁹⁵ Punishment is an alternative to forgiveness in that it also “put[s] an end to something that without interference

²⁸⁹ The expression is Auden’s: In his review, he muses that “Nobody, I fancy, feels “happy” about the age in which we live or the future,” then hurries to specify that “Miss Arendt is not, of course, so foolish or presumptuous as to offer saving solutions.” Auden, “Thinking What We Are Doing,” 72.

²⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

²⁹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

²⁹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

²⁹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 245.

²⁹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

²⁹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240.

could go on endlessly.”²⁹⁶ Here she arrives at a famous paradox. Arendt insists that “men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish.”²⁹⁷ Some offences, she concludes, those that she (following Kant) calls “radical evil,” can neither be forgiven nor punished: They “transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power,” and causes her to “repeat with Jesus: “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea.””²⁹⁸ What she, as a consequence of this paradox, ended up concluding about the nature of forgiveness, was to become the object of an enlightening disagreement between her and Auden.

2.5.5 Forgiveness, punishment and charity

To forgive, Arendt writes, is always a personal affair and ultimately done “for the sake of *who* did it.”²⁹⁹ In an essay about Shakespeare’s Falstaff, published five months after Auden’s review of *The Human Condition* in *Encounter*, he makes a distinction between forgiveness and “judicial pardon” which implicitly responds to Arendt’s claim about forgiveness quoted above.³⁰⁰ The law, Auden writes, “cannot forgive, for the law has not been wronged, only broken; only persons can be wronged. The law can pardon, but it can only pardon what it has the power to punish.”³⁰¹ This limitation does not apply to forgiveness, however: “The command to forgive is unconditional...to the spirit of charity, it is irrelevant whether I am at my enemy’s mercy or he at mine.”³⁰² As implied by the term *charity*, Auden here makes “the command to forgive” indistinguishable from Agape, love of neighbor as discussed in chapter 1 (The term “Agape” is sometimes used interchangeably with “charity”). Apparently, Auden made Arendt aware of the essay, after which she wrote him a letter conceding that she had been wrong about forgiveness being done “for the sake of who did it,” and also conceding that punishment could only be, as Auden had argued, an alternative to judicial pardon, not to forgiveness.³⁰³ At the same time, Arendt accuses Auden of talking about charity “as if it were love” and asks if even love does not “violate the integrity of the wrongdoer if it forgives

²⁹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

²⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

²⁹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

²⁹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

³⁰⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 7.

³⁰¹ W. H. Auden. “The Fallen City.” *Encounter* XIII:5 (1959), 29. Available online: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1959nov-00021> (Last accessed 12.02.2014)

³⁰² Auden, “The Fallen City,” *Encounter*, 28.

³⁰³ Arendt letter to Auden (14 February 1960; #004864 and #004865); General Correspondence, 1938-1976, n.d. – Auden, W. H. – 1960-1975. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A digitized version of this letter can be found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/arendthome.html>

without being asked to.”³⁰⁴ She then defends her own “prejudice against charity” in a passage which would seem to confirm the importance of Original Sin in *Auden’s* idea about forgiveness or Agape: “I would admit that there is a great temptation to forgive in the spirit of Who am I to judge?, *but I’d rather resist it.*”³⁰⁵ Arendt as such takes a chance against “absolute” forgiveness, and instead defends the importance of judgment, in both senses of the word.

2.5.6 Redemption as natality: forgiveness as beginning anew

Arendt’s “redemptive schema” in *The Human Condition*, what Gottlieb describes as her *messianism*, is precisely *not* Christian, as indicated by her stance on Christian charity. As Gottlieb puts it, Arendt finds “the otherworldly character of Christian messianism a stumbling block.”³⁰⁶ In Arendt’s redemptive schema, accordingly, it is the world (of human affairs) that itself needs to be “saved” from its “inherent ruination” – “not souls from the world.”³⁰⁷ The central image she which embodies her “faith in and hope for the world” – natality – is therefore, even while described as “the miracle that saves the world,” placed *within* the boundaries of the world. The passage on natality which concludes her chapter on action is, admittedly, undeniably ambiguous, ending as it does on a quotation from the Gospels: “A child has been born unto us.”³⁰⁸ This is, Arendt writes, the “most glorious and most succinct expression” found for natality, the embodiment of new beginnings. Even so, Arendt’s analysis, her messianic schema, ultimately remains non-religious. In Gottlieb’s words:

Salvation *does not come by way of a child*, for the appearance of a child is [in]capable of resolving once and for all the abyssal structure of action.... This structure is constitutively incapable of resolution – so much that *not even divine forgiveness can resolve it, since forgiveness is primarily a human faculty*. Redemption, then, remains only a schema internal to the activities of the *vita activa* in relation to one another: this schema *cannot be embodied in a salvational figure*, nor even can it proceed into the world as an independent force. Nowhere is this impossibility more apparent than in the appearance of a child, for a child is sheer dependence. And with its appearance the anxiety generated by the abyssal structure of action itself changes from a concern with

³⁰⁴ Arendt letter to Auden (14 February 1960; #004864); General Correspondence, 1938-1976, n.d. – Auden, W. H. – 1960-1975.

³⁰⁵ Arendt letter to Auden (14 February 1960; #004864); General Correspondence, 1938-1976, n.d. – Auden, W. H. – 1960-1975. My emphasis

³⁰⁶ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 138.

³⁰⁷ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 137.

³⁰⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247. Actually, as Gottlieb points out, this is a slight miscitation: the quote stems not from the Gospels but from the opening passages of Isaiah, and in a slightly different version: “For a child has been born to us” (Isaiah 9:5). (Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 136-37.)

forgiveness for one's own actions to an alertness to one's responsibility for a child – and therefore *alertness to one's responsibility for the world to come*.³⁰⁹

This difference with respect to the “otherworldly” character of forgiveness clarifies, as I see it, the specifically Christian elements of Auden's theory. In his view, redemption *did* need to transcend the human world, because of Original Sin. Arendt's insight that even forgiveness is an act which therefore requires forgiveness approaches this stance, but to Arendt, the interruption of human chains of action by the birth of new human beings – and the re-enactment of the beginning of birth in each action – was ultimately the means by which man was “released” from the consequences of previous actions, and the cause for hope in the world. Both in its differences and similarities, Arendt's “redemptive schema” and her understanding of acting as beginning – a re-enactment of the beginning embodied in birth – illuminates Auden's *time being* and how it relates to his anti-totalitarianism. I will now summarize what I see as the main implications of Arendt's theory for Auden.

2.5.7 Implications: plurality, helplessness and eschatology

One implication of *promising* and *forgiveness* being considered the “redemptive faculties” of action is the relational quality of these acts. As Arendt puts it, both faculties “depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself.”³¹⁰ This is one way in which promising and forgiveness is opposed to the notion of sovereignty, which can well be conceived of in isolation. By placing action at the centre of her analysis of the human condition, Arendt deeply commits herself to human plurality or fellowship. Although Auden and Arendt disagreed with regards to the relationship between forgiveness and Agape (or charity), similarities between their interpretations remain. The dependence on others for forgiveness has a parallel in Charles Williams' theory of *co-inherence*, of taking up the burden of another, by which Auden was influenced. Auden's view of forgiveness, rooted in the conviction of Original Sin and developed through the idea of co-inherence, finds expression in *For the Time Being* when the shepherds sing “We bless / each other's sin.” (CP: 382.) This dependence on the web of human relations is, for Arendt, not viewed in negative terms. Gottlieb points out that Auden, too, tended to emphasize “the essential indeterminacy” in contemporary writings

³⁰⁹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 160.

³¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

and speeches.³¹¹ To Arendt, human “distinctness” is revealed in speech and action: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”³¹² In other words, human individuality is only revealed through an individual’s appearance among a plurality of other beings, both equal and distinct to herself.

Arendt’s use of birth, or the “fact of natality,” as a central image or metaphor has similar implications in terms of dependency or helplessness. “A child is sheer dependence,” Gottlieb points out, who for this reason deems what she sees as Arendt’s messianism as “weak” and “inconspicuous.” Helplessness is, in Arendt’s schema, an inevitable consequence of the unpredictability and irreversibility of even the “smallest act in the most limited circumstances,” and this, to her, testifies to the falsity of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies.³¹³ The totalitarian attempt to “fabricate” mankind as to be in complete accordance with an ideological Law, which abolishes all uncertainty, is, in Arendt’s words, a “delusion” – as is the idea that something can be “made” in the realm of human affairs at all, that one can “make institutions or laws, for instance, or “make” people better or worse.”³¹⁴ Whereas all totalitarian movements, in Gottlieb’s words, seek to “overcome helplessness with the principle of infallible leadership,” action, as Arendt understands it, “continually reignites helplessness without end.”³¹⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in her use of the image of the child, which, within the general structure of *The Human Condition*, “functions as the central image of miraculous novelty.”³¹⁶ The image also demonstrates why helplessness, in Arendt’s theory, is something to be “reignited” and embraced: Without it, novelty would be impossible. If the outcome of an action could be controlled or directed, “omnipotence would be a concrete human possibility,” but nothing unexpected would ever happen.³¹⁷ Neither would human life any longer be human, because plurality would be abolished. “Plurality and contingency save a world otherwise consigned to reactive repetition.”³¹⁸

The definition of action as a new beginning has an *eschatological* dimension. By beginning something new, an action at the same time brings an old chain of events to an end. This is especially revealed in the act of forgiveness, that potentiality of action which itself

³¹¹ Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, “Two Versions of Voltaire: W. H. Auden and the Dialectic of Enlightenment,” *PMLA* 120:2 (2005), 395.

³¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176-177.

³¹³ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 190.

³¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188.

³¹⁵ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 186.

³¹⁶ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 159.

³¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201.

³¹⁸ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 24.

embodied the potential to redeem action. Jesus, as the figure who “discovered the role of forgiveness” for Arendt, also discovered the “immanent eschatological possibility contained within the miraculous act of forgiveness itself: the possibility, that is, of “put[ing] an end to something that...could go on endlessly.””³¹⁹ Without relying on means of any kind, “forgiveness can accomplish an end” and “only under the condition that action be able to come to an end can it begin.”³²⁰ To Auden, for whom human *being in time* was characterized by the agonizing paradox of indeterminacy and irrevocability, what finally allowed man to make choices was “religious faith.” Man had to “walk in fear of the Lord,” in other words to make each choice in the shadow of the thought of Judgment Day. But Judgment, for Auden, contained the possibility of redemption. By looking at Auden’s *time being* through Arendt’s “redemptive schema” of forgiveness and promise, we get a sense of how Auden’s existentialist understanding of *being in time* is compatible with a notion of absolute Judgment. *Action* itself, which is parallel to Auden’s idea of being a “patriot of the Now,” living in the *time being*, itself provides a beginning and an end which, as Arendt sees it, provides hope for the world. To Auden, that hope would have to be anchored in faith in divine redemption, the promise embodied in *the* birth, the Incarnation: That was, for him, the “prior promise, issued by another, of forgiveness for failing to fulfill one’s promises” the responsibility for which Arendt assigns to other people.³²¹ For Arendt, the very fact of birth was enough to earn the description “the miracle that saves the world,” a miracle that was re-enacted every time an individual “stepped forward” in word and deed into the human world.

In this chapter I have introduced Hannah Arendt’s theory of action to shed light on Auden’s *time being* and to provide a theoretical bridge to chapter 3. The main points can be summed up as follows. Arendt’s definition of *action* provides a useful parallel to Auden’s understanding of human *being in time*, not least since both concepts have been shaped in response and opposition to totalitarian metaphysics. Arendt’s understanding of what she calls the “redeeming faculties of action” – promising and forgiveness – illuminates the possibility of non-totalitarian responses to the frustrations of the *time being*, and lends clarity to Auden’s proposed responses, which were anchored in his interpretation of Christianity. A politics based on the faculties of promising and forgiveness, acts which are relational in nature, underpins political ideals of fellowship and plurality above those of sovereignty and strength. Dependency and “helplessness” are ultimately positive qualities in Arendt’s theory, because

³¹⁹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 155. Arendt quote from *The Human Condition*, 241.

³²⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 155.

³²¹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 153.

they allow for fellowship and new beginnings. Arendt's emphasis on the function of *beginnings* in the "realm of human affairs," and her rooting of this function in "the fact of natality," provides an interesting parallel to Auden's rooting of human choice in the Incarnation. The *eschatological dimension of action* lends credit to the idea that Auden's *time being* may, similarly, be understood as eschatological in nature, as I suggested in chapter 1. This chapter has now made available some useful terms and theoretical connections through which to assess Auden's *Horae Canonicae*.

3 The Unforgiveable Act: Auden's *Horae Canonicae*

*"I have heard it suggested that the first punctual people in history were the monks – at their Office hours. [...] [The notion of punctuality, of action at an exact moment, depends on drawing a distinction between natural and historical time which Christianity encouraged if it did not invent.]"*³²²

*"Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would...be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover."*³²³

In this chapter, I will investigate the *act* in Auden's *Horae Canonicae*. *Horae Canonicae* is a sequence made up of seven poems written in the late 1940s and early 50s. Auden originally wanted to write them to explore the topic of natural vs. historical time, but the poems encompass a range of themes: the act, the community, punishment and forgiveness. At the center of the poem sequence is an *act*. It is not described directly, but referred to as "this dying," "this death," "our deed," "our act" and "this event." The *structure* of the sequence – seven poems corresponding to various points of time throughout the day – is derived from the catholic Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office or the Canonical Hours: recitation of prayers at fixed hours throughout the day. The original purpose of these prayers is to encourage participants to meditate upon the significance of the Crucifixion. In other words, the unnamed deed in *Horae Canonicae* alludes to the Crucifixion, if quite subtly. The poems are not "about" the crime they imply so much as they are "about" the people who partake in the crime, watch it or repress it. The *victim* of the deed is entirely absent from the poem: only perpetrators and observers are present.

The *city* is a central symbol in *Horae Canonicae* and stands for the collective in its various forms. I will argue that *Horae Canonicae* explores the *community in action*: what it means to act, what it means to act collectively, and what an "unforgivable act" can be said to mean in this context. Towards the end, I will link Hannah Arendt's theory about the faculty of forgiveness to Auden's idea of the Last Judgment or Redemption in a discussion of the last poem in *Horae Canonicae*, "Lauds."

³²² Auden, "Balaam and the Ass," *Prose III*: 468.

³²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

Auden, we will recall from the discussion in chapter 1, often resorted to the distinction between a *crowd*, a *society* and a *community*. A crowd was simply a “collection of people,” a society was organized for “some functional purpose” and a community was “united by a tie of a common love.”³²⁴ He used these terms not only to distinguish between different forms of human social relations and organization, but applied them to all kinds of *pluralities* (defined as three or more events), whether in the realm of nature, history, emotions or language. The poet, for instance, when sitting down to write a poem, had two *crowds* at his disposal, according to Auden:

[T]he crowd composed of the total number of occasions of past feeling he can recall, and the crowd composed of the total number of words in his vocabulary. His task is to organize the relevant members of the latter into a society which will embody as many members of the former as it can transform into one community.³²⁵

The task of the poet, that is, was to organize crowds of past feeling into verbal *societies* that could— if the poem was good — embody a verbal *community*. Only human beings, Auden writes, have “real individuality and [are] therefore capable of forming communities.”³²⁶ In nature, on the other hand, there were only societies, since “in nature there is no choice and hence no distinction between doing and loving.”³²⁷ Natural events, recurrent and occurring according to laws, had to be distinguished from historical events, which were unique. Nature and history were related to different forms of *time*: “Natural time in which natural events occur is reversible and cyclical. Historical time which historical events create by their occurrence is irreversible and moves in a unilinear direction.”³²⁸ Man, in Auden’s phrase, “is both a natural and historical being.”³²⁹

In the period 1949 – 1954, Auden composed a sequence of seven poems that were eventually published as a whole in the collection *The Shield of Achilles* (1955).³³⁰ His idea was originally, as he explained to an audience of students in 1950, to write a series of poems “about the relation of history and nature, which is a problem which has fascinated me for at least ten years.”³³¹ The poems were to be modeled on the church offices, which “celebrate

³²⁴ “The Prolific and the Devourer,” *Prose II*: 492.

³²⁵ “Nature, History and Poetry [B],” *Collected Prose III*: 231. There are three different entries in *Prose III* titled “Nature, History and Poetry.” For the sake of convenience I will refer to them as [A], [B] and [C], according to the order in which they appear. The first two are essays, the third a lecture transcript.

³²⁶ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [A],” *Prose III*: 162.

³²⁷ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [A],” *Prose III*, 162.

³²⁸ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [A],” *Prose III*, 161.

³²⁹ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [A],” *Prose III*, 162.

³³⁰ Two of the individual poems had already been published, separately, in the collection *Nones* (1952).

³³¹ Auden, “Nature History and Poetry [C],” *Prose III*, 648.

historical events, particularly events of the Passion of Christ, and...are repeated daily.”³³² By 1955 the planned sequence was finished, and published as *Horae Canonicae*. The title – “canonical hours” – refers to the prayer services of the Catholic Church, also known as the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours. These are a series of prayers that are carried out at set times throughout the course of a day. The seven poems in Auden’s sequence borrowed their titles from seven of these prayers: *Prime*, *Terce*, *Sext*, *Nones*, *Vespers*, *Compline* and *Lauds*.³³³ Auden begins with “Prime,” named after the morning prayer (to be said at the first hour of daylight), and ends with “Lauds,” the prayer at dawn in the early morning hours. The sequence, in other words, covers the span of a single day. The day cycle is overlaid by several levels of imagery, where associations shift between the course of a day, the course of an individual’s life, the life of a society and the life of the world. In Edward Mendelson’s words, the poem’s structure encompasses “the decades of a human life from birth to death, the history of a city from its founding to its dissolution, and all time from the creation of the world to the Last Judgment.”³³⁴ Thematically, the poems circle around what is alternately referred to as a deed, a crime, a sacrifice and a murder. While the exact nature of the event is never explicitly revealed, the very structure of the sequence alludes to Good Friday: As Auden was quoted as saying above, the church offices celebrate the Passion of Christ in particular. The day in question could, in other words, be read as Good Friday, and the poems as revolving around the event of the Crucifixion.

Horae Canonicae is very interesting to this investigation, for a number of reasons. As shown in the first chapter, Auden’s religious framework in the early 1940s was, to a large extent, developed as a response to the political and metaphysical questions raised by the rise of fascism and the eruption of the Second World War. Analyzing *Horae Canonicae* allows me to see to what extent Auden’s ideas from the early 40s, particularly the concept of Original Sin, had survived in a post-war context: Which parts remained, and what had changed? *Horae Canonicae* revolves around the Crucifixion, and this makes it a good place to look for the expression of religious ideas. *For the Time Being* was the only poem in Auden’s authorship dealing explicitly with a Christian theme, the Incarnation. *Horae Canonicae*, to the extent that it alludes to the Crucifixion, provides a natural counter-point: The death of Christ as opposed

³³² Auden, “Nature History and Poetry [C],” *Prose III*, 648.

³³³ In his lecture Auden also mentions another “hour” or prayer services which is not included in the poem sequence: the midnight service *Matins*. (*Prose III*: 648) John Fuller argues that the choice of seven poems was inspired by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy’s *Out of Revolution*, a work Auden repeatedly acknowledged influence from, and in which Rosenstock-Huessy had developed a “symbolism of sevens.” (Fuller, *A Commentary*, 457.)

³³⁴ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 333.

to the birth of Christ. Moreover, of course, Christianity teaches that Jesus died for the sins of humankind. The Crucifixion could be understood as the ultimate consequence of human sinfulness, making it an ideal motif for investigation of the concept of Original Sin and its connection to forgiveness and redemption.

Secondly, *Horae Canonicae* explores the topic of the human *City*: In Auden's usage, the *City* signifies civilization, human collective life, or what Monroe Spears termed "man's social achievement."³³⁵ The *City* can take any form and as such encompasses all the varieties of crowds, societies and communities that Auden saw it as possible for people to enter into. In the beginning, Auden explained to his students, he wanted *Horae Canonicae* to portray the "idea of two cities, the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terrena*."³³⁶ The distinction refers to Augustine's concepts of the City of God and the Worldly City. Auden claimed to have given up the particular distinction during the course of writing, "but kept the idea of the city."³³⁷ Yet that distinction, which appears repeatedly in Auden's prose during the 50s, should be considered relevant as a backdrop to the poems. In the 1951 prose publication *The Enchaféd Flood*³³⁸, for instance, Auden describes the two cities as, respectively, "The state of being human as decreed by God," and as the wordly city "created by self-love, inherited and repeated, into which all men since Adam were born, yet where they have never lost their knowledge of and longing for the Civitas Dei and the Law of Love."³³⁹ The ideal community, as we saw in chapter 1, was the one that approached as closely as possible the principles of Agape, i.e. the "Law of Love." The City of God, in other words, remains a relevant concept as the absolute standard against which all human "social achievements" and civilizations should be measured. *Horae Canonicae* engages, I will argue, closely with the questions raised in chapter 1 and 2, regarding the nature and possibility of the good society. The relation of the individual to the collective is central to *Horae Canonicae*, as it was in *New Year Letter* and *For the Time Being*. More than in the two other long poems, however, *Horae Canonicae* explores the question of *collective* guilt and responsibility; the role of the "We" in the unnamed event at the centre of the poems.

Thirdly, the poems' central event or *act* allows me to return to the discussion of Arendt's concept of action, introduced in chapter 2, and develop its connection to various

³³⁵ Monroe Spears, "The Dominant Symbols of Auden's Poetry," *The Sewanee Review* 59:3 (1951): 413.

³³⁶ Auden, "Nature, History and Poetry [C]," *Prose III*, 650.

³³⁷ Auden, "Nature, History and Poetry [C]," *Prose III*: 650.

³³⁸ Auden's investigation of the "nature of romanticism," originally delivered as a set of lectures to the Page-Barbour Foundation at the University of Virginia. Incidentally these were the same traditional lectures that T. S. Eliot had held in 1935 and which were published as *After Strange Gods*. (Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 120.)

³³⁹ Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood*, 64.

notions of *time* in Auden's poetic universe. The cyclical structure of the poems, and the prayer services they are based on, imitate the cyclical processes of nature. Its central act, on the other hand, belongs to historical time and is as such unique and irreversible. But history is also, as one critic points out, the realm of "transcendence and the freedom to create something new."³⁴⁰ The tension between the cyclical time of nature and the historical time of the act is important to the sequence, and central to my argument: That the nature of *action* demonstrates the possibility and necessity of forgiveness and, ultimately, redemption.

3.1 The Fall

*I draw breath; that is of course to wish
No matter what, to be wise,
To be different, to die and the cost,
No matter how, is Paradise
Lost of course and myself owing a death...* ("Prime," CP: 627)

The first poem in *Horae Canonicae*, "Prime," depicts an individual in the process of waking up: "Simultaneously, as soundlessly, / Spontaneously, suddenly / As, at the vault of the dawn, the kind / Gates of the body fly open / To its world beyond..." (CP: 627.) The cascade of multi-syllabled, similar-sounding adjectives creates a sense of motion and rhythm, of being rushed along. The line breaks, punctuation, and the irregularly placed internal rhymes, on the other hand, bring the motion to asymmetrical stops, a rhythmical syncopation almost tripping up the reader. Auden, famously attentive to the musicality of poetry, and obsessive about formal and metrical requirements, here achieves several effects at once. The combined elegance and complexity of the meter in "Prime" requires a certain attentiveness in the reader, in order not to stumble: one could argue that it wakes us up. More importantly, the tension between motion and interruption introduces, by imitation, one of the central concerns of *Horae Canonicae*: the difference (and tension) between historical and natural time. Each of the three stanzas contains one long, unbroken sentence. Along with the syllabic meter and internal rhymes, this gives the lines an unforced, natural flow, while the interruptive measures, on the other hand, draws attention to individual words and rhymes.

In one of his lectures on "Nature, History and Poetry," Auden used "Prime" to illustrate the process by which a poem develops, how the crowd of recollections is made into a verbal society. Here Auden explains that he used syllabic meter in "Prime" to achieve a

³⁴⁰ Jan Curtis, "W. H. Auden's Theology of History in *Horae Canonicae*: 'Prime', 'Terce', and 'Sext'", *Literature and Theology*, 11:1 (1997): 53.

balance between “freedom and order.”³⁴¹ This balance – or tension – could be interpreted as an analogy to the tension between natural and historical time in human experience. Through conscious metrical choices, the poet could create a voluntary “sense of pattern” out of the crowds of memories and words he had at his disposal.

“The experience of waking up is something that has always interested me,” Auden explained in lectures; “the problem of return to consciousness and the return of memory and identity, the whole relation of the ego and self.”³⁴² In sleep the individual belongs to the realm of the “Unconscious, the Instinctive and extra-personal,”³⁴³ in other words, outside the realm of personal responsibility, willed choices and individuality. Upon returning to consciousness, he or she is back in the historical world of irreversible actions and a unilinear time; the world of work and action that, according to Arendt, *interrupts* the endless cyclicity of natural processes. The first stanza ends with the words “Recalled from the shades to be a seeing being, / From absence to be on display, / Without a name or history I wake / Between my body and the day.” (CP: 627). In this interval, “between my body and the day,” the speaker is awake, but not yet self-conscious, “the will has still to claim / This adjacent arm as my own, / The memory to name me.” The senses (“the kind / Gates of the body”) have become aware of the external world, but the personality is still unsplit into instinct and morality, between individual desires and the “shouldn’ts and shoulds”³⁴⁴ of the social world, so that the day is still “intact.” (CP: 627) In this state of “intact” time and an intact sense of self, the speaker calls himself the “Adam sinless in our beginning, / Adam still previous to any act.” (627) It is common to read the waking into consciousness portrayed in “Prime” as an analogue to the Fall. When identity, volition, and memory are assumed, as Monroe Spears puts it, “Paradise is lost.”³⁴⁵ This interpretation is supported by the third and last stanza of “Prime,” the quote that opened this subchapter:

I draw breath; that is of course to wish
No matter what, to be wise,
To be different, to die and the cost,
No matter how, is Paradise
Lost of course and myself owing a death. (CP: 628.)

In 1939, Auden had written that the Fall is “repeated in the life history of each individual, so that we have a double memory of Eden, one from personal experience, and one social-

³⁴¹ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [C],” *Prose III*, 649.

³⁴² Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [C],” *Prose III*, 648.

³⁴³ Auden, “Jacob and the Angel,” *Prose II*, 37.

³⁴⁴ An expression from Auden’s poem “Song of the Devil” (CP: 782.)

³⁴⁵ Monroe K. Spears *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963): 317.

historical.”³⁴⁶ In “Prime” the Fall repeats itself in the daily entry into consciousness. The rapidly disappearing memory of that “smiling” instant “in which the day is intact” doubles as a memory of Eden, in an echo of a stanza from one of Auden’s “Sonnets from China,” wherein, “Chilled by the present, its gloom and its noise, / On waking we sigh for an ancient South, / A warm nude age of instinctive poise, / A taste of joy in an innocent mouth.”³⁴⁷ In Auden’s 1941 review of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose passages dealing with sin Auden found especially “brilliant,” he drew attention to an excerpt where Niebuhr describes the Fall as “*a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of Man. ...Perfection before the Fall is, in other words, perfection before the act.*”³⁴⁸ The event of waking up in “Prime” makes up one such historical moment, and in the moment of drawing breath – resuming consciousness – the intactness of the day “before the act” is broken. According to Alan Jacobs, the key experiences that led Auden to Christian belief involved, among other things, “a conviction of his own sinfulness,” which consequently informed large parts of his theology early in his life as a Christian.³⁴⁹ However, Jacobs argues, Auden later moved beyond his emphasis on existential despair and contrition: One major theme in his later moral theology became “the insistence that we live in the realm of natural necessity as well as that of existential choice.”³⁵⁰ Another such theme was his emphasis on *communal* life. Tony Sharpe has described how this emphasis on community informed Auden’s Anglicanism: “Private devotion was important to Auden...but so were the public prescriptions in *The Book of Common Prayer*, defining ‘a community in action’ renewed by repetition through the centuries.”³⁵¹ The “community in action” is, I would argue, precisely the issue and central problem in *Horae Canonicae*. In the last lines of “Prime,” the speaker states that:

...my name
 Stands for my historical share of care
 For a lying self-made city,
 Afraid of our living task, the dying
 Which the coming day will ask. (CP: 628.)

³⁴⁶ Auden, “The Prolific and the Devourer,” *Prose II*, 427.

³⁴⁷ Sonnet XVIII, *Collected Poems*: 193.

³⁴⁸ Quoted in Auden, “The Means of Grace,” *Prose II*: 134. Italics by Auden. “Act” must be taken here, Auden adds as an afterthought, to “include thought.”

³⁴⁹ Alan Jacobs, “Auden’s Theology,” in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 171.

³⁵⁰ Jacobs, “Auden’s Theology,” 177.

³⁵¹ Tony Sharpe, “The Church of England: Auden’s Anglicanism,” in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 87.

The individual's existence in "historical time" unavoidably entailed her participation in communal life, in the "self-made city" or *civitas terrena*, "created by self-love." To attempt to withdraw from the City into a private world of prayer and contrition would make one no less complicit in the unspecified "dying / Which the coming day will ask." If we remember that a poem, for Auden, constituted a "verbal community" that could be analogous to interpersonal communities, it becomes clear that the structure of *Horae Canonicae* itself contains a parallel to the participation or "historical share of care" that the speaker in "Prime" acknowledges. According to Sharpe, Auden associated Anglicanism with "liturgical practice that enabled...reaffirmation of individual faith within a verbal structure that was *communal*."³⁵² In choosing the canonical hours as a model for his sequence of poems, Auden consciously entered into/participated in a communal liturgical practice which might enable the "reaffirmation of individual faith."

3.2 The Act

The critic Richard Johnson has suggested that an exploration of "action" or "to act" lies at the heart of *Horae Canonicae*.³⁵³ Based on the understanding of *action* developed in chapter 2, the questions I aim to answer in this section are: How does the *act* appear in *Horae Canonicae*, what is its significance, and how does it relate to Auden's communal vision, Original Sin, and his warning against totalitarianism? I will look at these questions with reference to the poems "Terce," "Sext," "Nones" and "Compline."

The act at the heart of *Horae Canonicae* is a murder, although it is never described explicitly. During the course of the sequence, the central act is referred to as "the dying," "this death," "our deed," "our act," "our feat" and "this event." The terms themselves are neutral, descriptive, saying nothing about the moral status of the act. But we know that it is related to "us" somehow, that the act-feat-deed is "ours," in other words that it concerns the community. The poems avoid direct descriptions of the deed, describing instead the thoughts and actions of participants, observers, witnesses and other "agents." The poem is about "us" as much as it is about the victim of "our deed," concerned with the significance of the murder for the collective, its complicity, participation and response.

In an essay about detective fiction from 1948, titled "The Guilty Vicarage," Auden discusses the unique nature of murder. All crimes, he writes, are "offenses against God,"

³⁵² Sharpe, "The Church of England: Auden's Anglicanism," 85. My emphasis.

³⁵³ Richard Johnson, *An Essay on Auden*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973.

some are offenses against one's neighbors, but only murder was also an offense against *society*. "Murder is unique, in that it abolishes the part it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand restitution or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has a *direct* interest."³⁵⁴ In Arendt's sense, murder is the ultimate demonstration of the irreversible nature of action. If action could be redeemed by the possibility of future forgiveness, the forgiveness becomes distorted in the case of murder, because it must be performed vicariously. But what about a murder in which the society as a whole had been complicit? Questions of guilt, responsibility and forgiveness permeate *Horae Canonicae*. The poems "Terce," "Sext," "Nones" and "Compline" all explore the question of complicity: Who can be said to have responsibility for, or have contributed to the act? Could anyone at all be exempted? And how could the collective – the society, community or City – respond to its own role in facilitating the murder? The day cycle of the poems makes all events that take place in it the more symbolic. If the murder is at the heart of the poem, how are the other actions depicted in the cycle related to it?

After shaking paws with his dog
 (Whose bark would tell the world that he is always kind),
 The hangman sets off briskly over the heath. ("Terce," CP: 628)

The second poem in Auden's cycle, "Terce," corresponds to the third canonical hour, the prayer traditionally said at 9 A. M. In the Liturgy, "Terce" refers to the hour at which Jesus was condemned to death. In the opening stanza of the poem, three representative figures are getting ready for work: the hangman, the judge and the poet. All three appear as "civilians," i.e. outside their official or professional role, mentioned with reference to spouses and pets and recognizably domestic surroundings: the judge, for instance, "descends his marble stair" with a sigh, after "Gently closing the door of his wife's bedroom / (Today she has one of her headaches)." (CP: 628) These details have the effect of humanizing the nameless figures, establishing a sense of identity in the reader through the recognition of the average. According to Arendt, *action* is something that invariably takes place in an inter-personal, social realm. In "Prime," the speaker was still confined to what Auden thought of as "the inner space / Of private ownership,"³⁵⁵ and has yet to enter the world of action. In "Terce," the "I" from "Prime" has yielded to a "we," and the figures are preparing to enter the city. The poem deals with a moment with which "the Big Ones / Who can annihilate a city / Cannot be bothered,"

³⁵⁴ Auden *Prose III*, 263.

³⁵⁵ *NYL*, ll. 1047-1048.

and each individual is left to “his secret cult,” praying for personal and arguably banal accomplishments: “Let me get through this coming day / Without a dressing down from a superior... Or behaving like an ass in front of the girls; / Let something exciting happen... Let me hear a new funny story.” (CP: 628-629.) The rather trivial desires, ambitions and fears governing everyday life are here depicted in all their underwhelmingness. “At this hour we all might be anyone,” the speaker states, a phrasing that foreshadows the “crowd” which is to appear in the next poem; in a crowd, we may recall, there are no *persons*, only faceless and replaceable constitutive elements. For the time being, however, the figures in “Terce” seem “naively unaware” of the “measureless resonances and implications”³⁵⁶ of their role in the event soon to take place. The hangman “does not know yet who will be provided / To do the high works of Justice with” and the poet does not know “whose Truth he will tell.” (CP: 628.)

The figures in “Terce” are presented not as persons but in their respective functions as professionals. In the third poem of the sequence, “Sext,” Auden continues to explore the topic of vocation, or what Arendt defined as the faculty of work. In the first stanza the speaker praises “that eye-on-the-object look” of people “forgetting themselves in a function,” and asks “Where should we be but for them?” (CP: 630) It is due to the “nameless heroes” who forgot their dinners while engrossed in their work, he claims, that civilization has progressed at all. In the second stanza the focus shifts from expertise, superiority within a given field, to the authority that comes with it. “You may not like them much,” the speaker admits, referring to figures of command, the ones who take pleasure in always “being right,” “but we owe them / basilicas, divas, / dictionaries, pastoral verse, / the courtesies of the city.” (CP: 631) The characteristics and abilities that have driven human development forward, however, and made possible successes on an ever larger scale, have also enabled proportional misdeeds and atrocities, in Auden’s schema. Without the human ability to subordinate or sacrifice certain concerns in order to achieve a self-defined goal, they would not be able to justify the sacrifice of individuals for the larger good. In the words of the poet Anthony Hecht, commenting on the poem, the “competence of the actors also enables them to carry out death sentences.”³⁵⁷ In “Terce,” without the judge and the hangman serving in the name of Law and Justice, there would “at this noon, for this death...be no agents.” (CP: 630) In this image we recognize the understanding of human capacity for good as inseparable from the ability to do evil; in other words, what Auden interpreted in terms of Original Sin.

³⁵⁶ Formulation borrowed from Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 383.

³⁵⁷ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 383.

All the three parts of “Sext” play on the contrast between a generous exposition on a concept – vocation, authority and the crowd, respectively – and a concise final statement about that concept’s connection to “this death,” altering the reader’s view of its significance. “This death” takes place in public; it is commanded, carried out and watched. It is observed not by individuals but by a *crowd* which “stands perfectly still, / its eyes (which seem one) and its mouths / (which seem infinitely many) / expressionless, perfectly blank.” (CP: 632). It happens, as is repeated thrice, at noon, alluding to the first hour of the Crucifixion. Richard Johnson claimed that the Crucifixion, in this poem, is “emblematic of all actions.”³⁵⁸ If that is true, it is also the ultimate symbol of the sinfulness which, if one believes in Original Sin, is inherent in all human action.

In “Nones,” set at the ninth hour from dawn (the hour of Christ’s death), a community wakes up – or comes out of the trance of the crowd – in the aftermath of the execution. “It is barely three, / Mid-afternoon, yet the blood / Of our sacrifice is already / Dry on the grass; we are not prepared / For silence so sudden and so soon...” (CP: 634) The collective is “left alone with [its] feat.” (CP: 634) At its core the poem explores the response of the collective to the “deed” that has been done. Two moments have particular significance with regards to the argument under development. The first is the speaker’s realization in the third stanza, on behalf of his collective, that “wherever / The sun shines, brooks run, books are written, / There will also be this death.” (CP: 635) This insight follows on the heels of a claim that *any* activity, even the most innocent game, ultimately lead to this “deed,” the result of which is “the mutilated flesh” of the victim. This is a fact of which “we” will from now on always be aware, an awareness which is going to haunt their subconscious and pursue their waking minds until, one day, it catches up with them: “under a hotel bed, in prison / Down wrong turnings, its meaning / Waits for our lives.” (CP: 635) At some unspecified point in the future, in other words, the “we” of the poem, representing the community, are going to realize the full extent of their deed. The shadow of Judgment Day in this sentiment in fact materializes a few lines on in seemingly apocalyptic imagery: “Sooner than we would choose / Bread will melt, water will burn, / And the great quell begin.”³⁵⁹ (CP: 635) Secondly, the poem hones in on the unique nature of the murder: All “our projects under constructions, / Look only in one direction, / Fix their gaze on our completed work...Crane and pick-axe wait

³⁵⁸ Johnson, *An Essay on Auden*, 198.

³⁵⁹ Mendelson notes that the apocalypse is evoked here in terms of “nuclear catastrophe.” (*Later Auden*: 344.) The word “quell” have historically also been used in the sense of “murder” or “slaughter.” (OED) In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the expression “our great quell” is used by Lady Macbeth when conspiring with Macbeth to kill Duncan. (Act 1, scene 7)

to be used again, / *But how can we repeat this?*” (CP: 635, my italics) Murder is, as discussed earlier, the ultimate embodiment of the irreversibility of the act. It “abolishes the party it injures,” leaving the question of punishment, forgiveness and atonement in the hands of society. But how can the collective respond to this?

The day is too hot, too bright, too still,
Too ever, the dead remains too nothing.
What shall we do till nightfall? (CP: 634)

These lines from the first stanza of “Nones” hone in on the uncomfortable experience of *time* after the deed; the excruciating indifference of a time in which the terrible sacrifice seems to have left no mark. It is “too ever,” too unrepeatable, it cannot be undone. It is also “too still”: There is no apocalypse (yet), no repercussions, no response from the universe. No *change*. If the deed was hoped to achieve something, it fails to materialize, and the members of the collective are no nearer to an answer to the eternal question: “What shall we do?” The most distressing factor is perhaps the lack of distress, the seamless way the catastrophe has merged itself with the other events in time. Stanza five returns to the baffling normality of society, continuing as if nothing has happened: “The shops will re-open at four, / The empty blue bus in the pink square / Fill up and depart: we have time / To misrepresent, excuse, deny / Mythify...” (CP: 635) The individuals who had witnessed the murder as a part of the crowd, the “faceless many who always / Collect when any world is to be wrecked,” are now once again persons, none of whom wishes to take responsibility for the crime:

All if challenged would reply
“It was a monster with one red eye,
A crowd that saw him die, not I.” (CP: 634)

For Hannah Arendt, it was an important point that “men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish.”³⁶⁰ This becomes significant in a context wherein a collective as such is complicit in a crime, and where no identifiable individuals admit responsibility for the act. In the 1948 essay on detective fiction, Auden explained that a murderer should, “preferably,” be executed: “Execution...is the act of atonement, by which the murderer is forgiven by society.”³⁶¹ But what if the society is the culprit? In “Nones,” the vague guilt and impotence felt by the collective in the wake of the act materializes in subconscious anxiety. “Our dreaming wills,” the speaker states, wander “on knife edges, on black and white squares,”

³⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

³⁶¹ Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage,” *Prose II*, 266.

fleeing through vaguely disturbing subconscious realms in order to “escape / This dead calm.” (CP: 636) Meanwhile, the apocalyptic hints discussed above indicate the fear that there will indeed be a day of reckoning. This foreshadowing of a Judgment Day re-appears in the night poem “Compline.”

In “Compline,” sixth in Auden’s sequence and traditionally the last prayer in the Liturgy, the speaker has withdrawn from the social realm, left to contemplate the events of the day. Alone, he waits for the “instant of recollection / When the whole thing makes sense” but all he recalls is “doors banging, / Two housewives scolding... A child’s wild look of envy, / Actions, words, that could fit any tale, / And I fail to see either plot / Or meaning.” (CP: 640) Above all, he cannot remember a thing “between noon and three.” (CP: 640) The murder or sacrifice, “our deed” which took place in that interval of time, withholds its significance from the participants. “Compline” is the hour of confession, but the speaker is uncertain of what to confess: Maybe, he muses, “My heart is confessing her part / In what happened to us from noon till three,” but the heart talks “a language of motion / I can measure but not read.” (CP: 640) The heart’s rhythm, like the rest of the human body, belongs to the realm of nature where processes are cyclical. As the speaker approaches unconsciousness, “the body escapes, / Section by section, to join / Plants in their chaster sleep.” (CP: 640) In “Nones,” the automatic bodily functions restore “the order we try to destroy, the rhythm / We spoil out of spite: valves close / And open exactly, glands secrete, / Vessels contract and expand / At the right moment, essential fluids / Flow to renew exhausted cells...” (CP: 636) The language evokes images of eternal reoccurrence, echoing Auden’s reminder that human beings belong to the natural as well as the historical world. In historical time, however, participants must face the reality of beginnings and ends. The speaker in “Compline” admits that “the end, for me as for cities, / Is total absence,” (CP: 641) recalling the pre-conscious absence from “Prime” as well as the more solemn absence in death: What comes to be “Must go back into non-being / For the sake of equity, the rhythm / Past measure or comprehending.” (CP: 641) In the following and last stanza of “Compline” the speaker turns to contemplate the prospect of final Judgment: “Can poets (can men in television) / Be saved?” (CP: 641) He prays for himself, his friends and “all poor s-o-b’s who never / Do anything properly” to be *spared* “in the youngest day when all are / Shaken awake, facts are facts, / (And I shall know exactly what happened / Today between noon and three).” (CP: 641) The “youngest day” alludes, of course, to Judgment Day. It is significant that the speaker expects to be shown “exactly what happened” between noon and three, that is, to be shown the full significance of the Crucifixion. In 1939, Auden had written that

Forgiveness of sins does not mean that the effects of our acts are annulled, but that we are shown what that effect is. This knowledge, which is our only punishment, the punishment consisting in knowing that we have failed in our intention, removes our sense of guilt, for guilt is in part ignorance of the exact effect of our act upon others, and in part a dread that upon ourselves it has had no effect at all, that we are so unimportant to be beneath the notice of the Divine justice.³⁶²

To “know exactly what happened,” in other words, can mean forgiveness as well as judgment. Here we approach the religious significance of the “unforgiveable act” at the center of *Horae Canonicae*. Jan Curtis has presented a persuasive reading of Auden’s “philosophy of salvation history”³⁶³ in *Horae Canonicae*. He argues that the sequence, as a poetic construct, not only “provides an analogue of the Christian philosophy of history” but that the choice to model the poems on the *Divine Office*, as a liturgical pattern of devotion, suggests not only analogy “but a sacramental re-enactment of the events of salvation history.”³⁶⁴ In Christianity, it is the “redeeming work of Christ who gives meaning to a history which men and women create.”³⁶⁵ Connecting this account to Arendt’s interpretation of action sheds further light on the collective dilemma in *Horae Canonicae*. In Arendt’s philosophy, individual *action* could be redeemed through the act of forgiveness:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would...be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.³⁶⁶

The faculty of forgiveness depends, in Arendt, on plurality, “on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself.”³⁶⁷ In the human plurality of the “city” in *Horae Canonicae*, no one is at liberty to forgive the central act because, it is implied, no one is entirely free from complicity. But the Christian significance of the Crucifixion is, of course, that humans are forgiven through Christ’s voluntary sacrifice. It is the act through which history, conceived of as the chain of human *action*, is ultimately redeemed. The forgiveness of sins, Curtis explains, constitutes the “eschatological fulfillment toward which the historical world, as a redeemable world, moves.”³⁶⁸

However, as the speaker in Auden’s “Compline” admits even as he prays to be forgiven: “It is not easy / To believe in unknowable justice / Or pray in the name of a love /

³⁶² Auden, “The Prolific and the Devourer,” *Prose II*, 427.

³⁶³ Curtis, “W. H. Auden’s Theology of History,” 48.

³⁶⁴ Curtis, “W. H. Auden’s Theology of History,” 46.

³⁶⁵ Curtis, “W. H. Auden’s Theology of History,” 47.

³⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

³⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

³⁶⁸ Curtis, “W. H. Auden’s Theology of History,” 49.

Whose name one's forgotten." (CP: 641) The question from "Nones" remains: what shall we do until nightfall? In the next parts of this chapter I will look at Auden's formulation of possible responses to that question in the political, social and poetic realm.

3.3 The Victim

The liturgical prayers are, as Curtis emphasizes, a form of "corporate worship."³⁶⁹ Their significance cannot be divorced from their collective function. From the individual I becoming aware of the world in "Prime" to the individuals getting ready for work in "Terce" to "everyone" watching the sacrifice taking place in "Sext," *Horae Canonicae* weaves the individual voice and experience into a social context, without which, of course there would be no individual existence. This exploration of the dynamic between individual and collective serves, in the poem's context, a specific purpose. Modeled on a ritual meditation revolving around the significance of the Crucifixion, the poems in *Horae Canonicae* explore the dynamic of individual and collective, private and public, with regards to a central *crime*, an unforgiveable act: A murder. The question of guilt and responsibility concerns the collective as a whole. Individual and collective become citizen and city: Born into history as well as into nature, each person takes part in a common effort to create or sustain a civilization with its particular norms, rules and aims. A city or civilization, in Auden's sense of the word, does not (only) evolve mindlessly and deterministically, but is shaped by our conscious wishes, aims and actions. "The course of History," we remember from the discussion of Simeon's Meditation in *For the Time Being*, is predictable "in the degree to which all men love themselves," and spontaneous in the degree to which "each man loves God and through Him his neighbor." The "city" is where the central act of *Horae Canonicae* takes place, and constitutes a central theme in its own right. In this section I will explore the city as a socio-political arena, as it appears in Auden's evening poem in *Horae Canonicae*, "Vespers."

"Vespers" is the poem that addresses the question of the city's collective responsibility for the murder perhaps the most explicitly. Before the first sentence is over, the poet has asked or alluded to "what a citizen really thinks of his citizenship." (CP: 637) The speaker is on his way back home after a day of work, and during the course of his walk he runs into his "Anti-type," with whom he constructs an imaginary argument. In the liturgy, "Vespers" is prayed in the early evening, the hour of "peaceful reflection on the passing

³⁶⁹ Curtis, "W. H. Auden's Theology of History," 47.

day.”³⁷⁰ The stanza form in “Vespers” is among the most relaxed in the sequence: it is written in a seemingly prosaic and conversational style which Mendelson simply calls “cadenced prose.”³⁷¹ The style allows for lengthier sentences, and prepares the reader for longer trains of thought, digressions and what might first come across as detached observations and idle musings. One can practically hear the dawdling train of thought in the poet’s mind as he strolls aimlessly through the city. The casual form lowers the reader’s defenses in a way that is typical of Auden, setting us up for a final statement that will impact all the more in its unexpected gravity.

“At this hour we all might be anyone” was the verdict from “Terce.” In “Vespers” this image is inverted: “in this hour of civil twilight all must wear their own faces.” (CP: 637) One can imagine, for instance, the commuter from Auden’s famous “September 1, 1939” who was in the morning on his way “into the ethical life”, concentrating on his vows, now tired after a long days’ work, with more truthful wishes written into his face. In this hour, the masks and demeanors of everyday “ethical life” have become more transparent – or perhaps it is the speaker, his own concerns and worries successfully worn down by a long day, who has become more perceptive. In either case, the speaker now perceives, for instance, behind a “drunkard’s caterwaul” his “rebel sorrows crying for a parental discipline.” (637) The central opposition in the poem is set up by the speaker between himself as an Arcadian and his “Anti-type” the “Utopian.” The Arcadian poet wants, in Mendelson’s words, “to be left alone to daydream about an aesthetic Eden,” while his utopian counterpart “dreams of organizing everyone into the permanent ethical order of some New Jerusalem.”³⁷² This opposition has long roots in Auden’s poetry. One example would be Sonnet XVIII from “Sonnets from China,” where “at night in our huts we dream of a part / In the balls of the future” and “On waking we sigh for an ancient South.” (CP: 193) Both tendencies were present in Auden’s archetypal individual, but whether one leaned more towards the one or the other longing he perceived as a matter of personality. “Arcadia” is associated with ancient Greece and the “idyllically pastoral”³⁷³ – but also, as the speaker states, with “Eden”, with a state of harmony preceding history. Auden also attributed to the Arcadian personality an “aesthetic” attitude, in terminology deriving from Kierkegaard. Thus the speaker observes that a lampshade in a store window is “too hideous for anyone in their senses to buy” while the Utopian notes that it is

³⁷⁰ “Liturgy of the Hours,” *Abbey of New Clairvaux*, available online: <http://www.newclairvaux.org/liturgy-of-the-hours.html> (Last accessed 12.02.2014)

³⁷¹ Mendelson, *Later Auden*: 335.

³⁷² Mendelson, *Later Auden*: 352.

³⁷³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arcadian>

“too expensive for a peasant to buy.” (CP: 637) If the latter point of view has a ring of absurdity, the first, though entertaining, is frivolous. The Arcadian in the poem is bohemian, ivory tower, removed from reality, loves comfort, cultivates certain taboos and rituals, and idealizes the past: “In my Eden we have a few beam-engines, saddle-tank locomotives, overshot waterwheels and other beautiful pieces of obsolete machinery to play with...” (CP: 638) He preserves certain illusions about the present, and hopes that “our senators will behave like saints, provided they don’t reform me.” (CP: 638) In other words, he avoids the question of participation in the public or political sphere by imagining that professional politicians will, somehow, be exempt from the flaws that he is aware of in himself. The Utopian, on the other hand, is pragmatic, practical, dedicated, uncompromising and willing to commit violence, but also to risk violence against his own person. He idealizes the future, cultivates rationality and envisions a world where “the temples will be empty but all will practice the rational virtues.” (CP: 638) Whereas, in the speaker’s Eden, “a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to be born,” in the Utopian’s New Jerusalem “a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born.” (CP: 638) The contrasts between the two also bear certain similarities to Auden’s frequently used distinction between the artist and the politician, or between the point of view privileging the uniqueness of particular individuals and events (the artist, the historian) and the attitude compared with generalities, averages and comparable truths.³⁷⁴

As in “Terce” and “Sext,” however, casual musings and drawn-out comparisons build up towards a simpler and harsher concluding statement. In the very last sentence, which itself spans six stanzas, the speaker turns to the possible meaning or purpose of the meeting of the two “incorrigible” types. Perhaps, he suggest, they met to “remind each other...of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget”? At that, the poem has arrived at its real point, the reminder “...for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim.” Our nameless and faceless victim here makes its third and last appearance in *Horae Canonicae*. Each time the expression used is “our victim.” In the concluding lines of “Vespers,” the speaker connects the victim and the city in a statement that drives home the extent to which Auden’s ideas about society were still anchored in the doctrine of original sin:

...forcing us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me, he could forget the innocence),

³⁷⁴ Auden had it in for statisticians in particular, and wrote a brilliant satire about the value of average data when it came to individual *persons* in “The Unknown Citizen” (1939)

on whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy are alike founded:

For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.

(CP: 639)

Any civilization, in other words, is founded upon the sacrifice of innocents. No “city” comes into being without such sacrifice; the point about a society, after all, was “that the part is subordinate to the whole.”³⁷⁵ The reference to Abel and Remus is significant here. Both of their counterparts – their brothers Cain and Romulus, by whom they were murdered – became *founders of cities*. In both cases it is the murderer who founds the state, an idea first developed in Augustine.³⁷⁶ Power, in this *worldly* city, is from the first moment associated with guilt. Hannah Arendt, who was also intimately familiar with the writings of Augustine, expressed a similar thought when she wrote that “whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origin in crime.”³⁷⁷ To accept this premise and still not “forget the innocence” – not to treat it with indifference or try to justify the fact – is a problem the poem has been quietly working towards. Even if the sacrifice is somehow inevitable, it is “real suffering and reminds us of all the suffering in the world which we prefer not to think about because, from the moment we accepted this world, we acquired our share of responsibility for everything that happens in it.”³⁷⁸ This responsibility, Mendelson asserts, is what both the Arcadian and Utopian in “Vespers” try to avoid, in their respective daydreams of an “aesthetic Eden” and the “permanent ethical order” of a New Jerusalem: it is only when they meet that they are reminded of the “mechanisms of injustice and murder which their evasions serve.”³⁷⁹ What they try to evade could perhaps, in the terminology of earlier chapters, be described as the *time being*. Like “So many,” they try to say “Not Now.”

In 1950, Auden wrote about the “most besetting temptations for the Christian layman” in the contemporary age “in relation to the evils of the historical order with which it is his duty to deal.”³⁸⁰ Apart from “the self-love which either fear to lose by change or hopes to gain,” the most important of these temptations were to be found in *laziness* and *impatience*:

³⁷⁵ Auden, “The Prolific and the Devourer,” *Prose II*: 492.

³⁷⁶ Trond Berg Eriksen, *Augustin: Det Urolige Hjertet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), 242-243. My translation.

³⁷⁷ Quoted in Jeffrey C. Isaacs, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 134. Arendt wrote her doctoral thesis on Augustine’s concept of love.

³⁷⁸ Auden, “The Fallen City,” *Encounter*, 27.

³⁷⁹ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 352.

³⁸⁰ Auden, “The Things Which Are Caesar’s,” *Prose III*, 209.

Laziness acknowledges the relation of the present to the past but ignores its relation to the future; impatience acknowledges its relation to the future but ignores its relation to the past; neither the lazy nor the impatient man, that is, *accepts the present instant in its full reality and so cannot love his neighbour completely*. [my italics]

In our age it is impatience, perhaps, which is the more characteristic temptation, partly because the historical situation is rather desperate, but mainly because for us the problem of faith is not of lapsing into a childish magical conception of God but of despair, of believing that God has abandoned us. "Trust in God and take short view [sic]," wrote Sidney Smith. ...[A]s a motto for the laity in 1950 I cannot imagine a better one nor a more terrifying."³⁸¹

The Arcadian and Utopian in "Vespers," it would seem, display the respective vices of laziness and impatience. The second part of the quote above is included in order to connect it to Auden's linking of *despair* and *totalitarian temptations* in the political sphere, of which he had warned since the late 1930s. A clear continuity can thereby be established to his political analyses of the 1950s. In a 1942 essay, Auden had written that:

Every child, as he wakes into his life, finds a mirror underneath his pillow. Look in it he will and must, else he cannot know who he is, *a creature fallen from grace*, and this knowledge is a necessary preliminary to salvation. Yet at the moment that he looks into his mirror, he falls into mortal danger, tempted by guilt into a despair which tells him that his isolation and abandonment is irrevocable. It is impossible to face such abandonment and live, but as long as he gazes into the mirror he need not face it; he has at least his image as an illusory companion, so that, if he yields to despair, then he can never dare take his eyes off the mirror for an instant. Self-love is the *faute-de-mieux* of despair: "I am so dreadful that neither God nor other men can love me, therefore I shall have to love myself."³⁸²

The totalitarian, he continues, whether "of the Right or the Left, promises the crowd that if only they will all hand in their private mirrors to him, to be melted down into one huge mirror, the curse of Narcissus will be taken away."³⁸³ One of the temptations of totalitarianism, in other words, was the prospect it offered of replacing the anxieties of individual self-love with the equally false certainty of collective self-love – the certainty of the crowd. Fourteen years after the above essay, in a series of aphorisms published in the magazine *Encounter*, Auden returns to the mirror metaphor in almost identical formulations: "Every man carries with him through life a mirror, as unique and impossible to get rid of as his shadow...The politician, secular or clerical, promises the crowd that, if only they will hand in their private mirrors to him, to be melted down into one large public mirror, the curse

³⁸¹ Auden, "The Things Which Are Caesar's," *Prose III*, 209-210.

³⁸² Auden, "Lecture Notes I," *Prose II*: 161. My italics.

³⁸³ Auden, "Lecture Notes I," *Prose II*: 162.

of Narcissus will be taken away.”³⁸⁴ The sentiment is the same, but the “tempter” has changed from a “totalitarian” to, simply, “politician.” A decade after the end of the Second World War, Auden still perceived in politics a highly relevant threat of being tempted out of personal responsibility. “The politicians we condemn / Are nothing but our L.C.M.,” as he had put it in *New Year Letter*.³⁸⁵ (Auden once quoted, with bitter humor, a reply by the populist politician Huey Long to the question of whether Fascism would ever come to America: “Sure. Only it will be called Anti-fascism.”³⁸⁶ Ironically, the magazine in which the above warnings about politicians were published, *Encounter*, later turned out to have been secretly funded by the C.I.A., and thus caught up in the U.S. Cold War strategy. As critic Stan Smith notes, “Auden’s reflections here are not exactly historically innocent.”³⁸⁷)

Smith has argued that Auden’s concern in the mid-50s was still “to explain the sorcery by which totalitarian political movements mobilize...the self-love” of the man in the street in projects which would ultimately be “not only self-destructive but world-destroying.”³⁸⁸ In 1950 Auden warns, again, against the kind of despair that makes one vulnerable to the “totalitarian temptation” – or to an apathy that allows it to grow. Yet even our “dear old bag of a democracy,” in “Vespers,” is implicated in the emblematic crime at the heart of history: “without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.” By “secular,” Auden could here be referring to the Augustinian use of the term, meaning temporal, embodied and historical. According to Augustine, “we live in the *saeculum*, the world of time and space, of history and its sufferings, in which all incarnate human existence takes place.”³⁸⁹ All worldly life, whether or not religious, belonged to the *civitas terrena*, the worldly city; “No political state, nor even the institutional church, [could] be equated with the City of God.”³⁹⁰ In Auden’s terms, no Arcadia or Utopia could either, nor “our dear old bag of a democracy.” This view must be connected with the conviction that all “our” efforts are, from the outset, imbued with sin; it hinges on the premise of Original Sin.

³⁸⁴ W. H. Auden, “Hic et Ille,” *Encounter*, VI: 4 (1956): 33. Available at: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1956apr-00033> (Accessed 13.11.2013.)

³⁸⁵ *NYL*, II, 1364-65. (L.C.M. = Least Common Multiple.)

³⁸⁶ Auden, *Prose II*, 151.

³⁸⁷ From footnote 5 in Stan Smith, “The Hunchback and the Mirror: Auden, Shakespeare and the Politics of Narcissus,” *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 18 (1997), 281-298. Available at <http://www.miscelaneajournal.net/images/stories/articulos/vol18/smith18.pdf> (page 11 in PDF) Note: The online source does not provide page numbers, and I was unable to access a printed version. The PDF file is easily searchable, however; in this case I will have to trust that that will suffice.

³⁸⁸ Smith, “The Hunchback and the Mirror.” (Page 3 in PDF.)

³⁸⁹ Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience*, 7.

³⁹⁰ J. Mark Mattox, “Augustine’s Political and Social Philosophy,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2162-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aug-poso/> (Accessed 11.10.2013)

Our cities come into being, like us, in an already Fallen world, in which we must nevertheless partake. “Vespers” thus points back to “Prime” and its allusion to the loss of Paradise.

The phrase “for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim,” placed in the middle of one of “Vesper’s” casual, sprawling lines, is an unassuming admonition, perhaps easily overshadowed by the claim in the last two stanzas about the “cement of blood” in our “secular wall.” And yet this little reminder is arguably the heart of the poem. “But still each private citizen / Thanks God he’s not as other men,” Auden had written in *New Year Letter*, and in one sense, the preceding lines of “Vespers” can be read as a display of the same vanity; the imaginary rivalries and petty distinctions by which we all try to establish our identities. Auden tends to be humorous and affectionate rather than acerbic in tone when portraying “weaknesses” such as these. After all, he does not imagine that we are able to improve ourselves much. “Each has his comic role in life to fill / Though life be neither comic nor a game,” Auden wrote in a 1938 poem. (CP: 176) Our weaknesses only become *serious*, in Auden’s vocabulary, in light of the victim: What our “evasions serve,” in Mendelson’s words, were the “mechanisms of injustice and murder” to which *real* people fall victim, and because of which real, innocent people experience real suffering. To “remember our victim” is another way for Auden to remind us about those “absolute values” that, in his view, we must assume to exist although “our knowledge of them will remain imperfect,” the same values that, to him, were inseparable from Judgment.

Despite the significance of the references to Abel and Remus in “Vespers,” i.e. victims of murderers that went on to become the founders of cities, the reader is nevertheless encouraged to view the victim in *Horae Canonicae* as “whom you will.” By indicating that the victim could be anyone, Auden seems to confirm the symbolic role of the victim in the sequence. Unlike Abel and Remus, Christ is never named in the poems, and other than the title and structure of the sequence, the closest we have come to a direct allusion to the Crucifixion so far has been the mention of “good Friday” in “Terce.” Christ was never mentioned by name in Auden’s Christmas Oratorio either (*For the Time Being*), but there he was still alluded to by Simeon as “He” who is “in no sense a symbol.” By sticking to phrases such as “our victim” in *Horae Canonicae*, i.e. in leaning towards a neutral and “universalizing” language, Auden in practice ensures that here, the immediate associative range is open. The nameless space behind “our victim” is left blank for the reader to fill, allowing for allegorical and historical as well as religious interpretations. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there were plenty of “unforgivable crimes” to choose from.

Auden is, however, as unwilling to name any of these crimes as he is to name the victim. In *A Certain World*, he would write that while “Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot.”³⁹¹ A play about Auschwitz, he claimed elsewhere, would be “wicked,” for “author and audience might try to pretend that they are morally horrified, but in fact they are passing an entertaining evening together, in the aesthetic enjoyment of horrors.”³⁹² If we take Auden at his word, therefore, *Horae Canonicae* cannot be “about” either Good Friday or the Holocaust. Yet, by borrowing a structure from a ritual set of prayers corresponding to the events of Good Friday, and whose major religious purpose is to meditate on the significance on the Crucifixion, Auden does allude – to state the obvious – to Good Friday. And by having the poems circle around a “murderous deed” involving the whole collective, the poems certainly allow for associations to contemporary historical events. The speaker in “Vespers” reminds himself to “remember the victim,” but nowhere in the sequence does the poet write *about* the victim. As one critic notes, at “the heart” of this central poem is “a massive absence, an emotional blank.”³⁹³ In this sense, the poems can be read as pointing to something outside themselves, outside of the aesthetic sphere: The speaker will try to “remember the victim,” but somewhere else than in his poetry. In another sense, the poems can be seen as calling attention to their own absence. Where is the victim? Who? Readers in search of answers will have to supply their own suggestions.

Absence of descriptions of horrific deeds was one of the major topics raised at the 2012 Auden-Arendt Conference *Poetics of Anxiety and Security: The Problem of Speech and Action in Our Time*. In her lecture “Poetry in Times of Need,” Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb paraphrases one of the questions that concerned Auden: What is the responsibility of poets, and other political thinkers, in times of unprecedented political catastrophe?³⁹⁴ Both Auden and Arendt, she points out, remained silent about the experiences where they themselves personally came closest to the “catastrophic events of the twentieth century.” In their quests to develop “articulate responses to the catastrophic events of the twentieth century,” she says, both Auden and Arendt confronted the “limits and incapacities of language.” Arendt practically never talked about her personal experiences from the internment camp in France in

³⁹¹ Quoted in Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 18.

³⁹² Quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith, 4.

³⁹³ Gareth Reeves. “Auden and Religion.” In *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 197.

³⁹⁴ Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need,” lecture at *Poetics of Anxiety and Security: The Problem of Speech and Action in Our Time. Homi Bhabha on Auden and Arendt* (2012). Podcast available here: <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/04/poetics-of-anxiety-and-security-the-problem-of-speech-and-action-in-our-time-homi-bhabha-on-auden-and-arendt/> (Last accessed 10.02.2014) Hereafter “Lecture podcast.”

which she “had the opportunity of spending some time.”³⁹⁵ Auden, who had written (highly allegorical) poems about the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War, left one experience wholly out of his writing: his service with the American military as a Bombing Research Analyst in the Morale Division of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. His job had been to “interview German civilians about the effects of Allied bombing on their morale.”³⁹⁶ Gottlieb connects Auden’s and Arendt’s silence about the catastrophes they “surveyed and survived” to one of Arendt’s insights about the totalitarian horrors: That “the brutality of unimaginable events makes those who survive them into brutes, bereft of language at the very moment it may be needed most.”³⁹⁷ Language, in the face of atrocity, can be rendered incapable to communicate. In fact, as Arendt saw it, language was totalitarianism’s first victim. “Whenever language and action no longer correspond with each other, wherever the relationship between speech and action is misunderstood, misrepresented, or obscured, there emerge the conditions for brutality.”³⁹⁸ Arendt had experienced how citizens, once reclassified as “enemy aliens,” become vulnerable to evacuation, interment, extermination. Totalitarian propaganda and mass indoctrination “deform and fossilize reality to such an extent that descriptions of the world cannot be distinguished from *proscriptions* – for wide scale murder.”³⁹⁹ In response to the totalitarian perversions of language, Gottlieb points out, Auden had begun to conceive of his responsibility as a poet, “in times of unprecedented political catastrophe,” as someone whose role was to *defend language* against corruption. This was, he told a friend, “the poet’s only political duty.”⁴⁰⁰ But Auden, like Arendt, did not conceive of language as something that could be secured against dishonesty or insincerity. As a poet known as a rhetorical virtuoso, Auden knew only too well how easily speech could turn into rhetoric. In Arendt’s terms, speech was “inherently irresponsible.”

Gottlieb remarks, about Auden’s *For the Time Being*, that something is “missing.” First of all, the child whom Gabriel announces and about whom Herod worries is “entirely absent,” which casts the whole poem, as she sees it, “into a mood of mourning.”⁴⁰¹ For Auden, she argues, whose concept of time in *For the Time Being* runs counter to all notions of history “on the march” or “in the making,” the only access to time *not* understood in terms of

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 3.

³⁹⁶ Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need.” Lecture podcast. (Last accessed 10.02.2014; same for all reference.)

³⁹⁷ Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need.” Lecture podcast. (Last accessed 10.02.2014)

³⁹⁸ Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need.” Lecture podcast. (Last accessed 10.02.2014)

³⁹⁹ Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need.” Lecture podcast. (Last accessed 10.02.2014)

⁴⁰⁰ Quoted in Anne Freemantle, “Reality and Religion,” in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, 90.

⁴⁰¹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 26.

making and marching is in the experience of mourning.⁴⁰² This sheds light on the other something missing from that poem, the “brutal destructions and annihilations that were being organized and executed as the [text was] being written,” about which the poem ostensibly remains silent.⁴⁰³ The absent victim in *Horae Canonicae* can be considered in a similar way; as a silence which points to its own absence and cast the poems into a mood of mourning.

While, however, the only *direct* response to the “historical disaster” in the background Auden finds in the poems is “silence,” silence is not the answer to the question posed in “Nones”: “What shall we do until nightfall?” If silence was “all” no speech – from the point of that first act Arendt alludes to, the first trespass from which “we would never recover” – would be possible, and Auden would not be a poet. In her lecture Susannah Gottlieb draws attention to the last line of one of Auden’s most famous poems, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939). The line in question reads “Teach the free man how to praise.” There is no bridge, Gottlieb argues, between the horrors referred to above and the imperative of praise: “Praise was not something a “free man” wanted to do in 1939,” or at any time in response to historical catastrophes.⁴⁰⁴ Yet praise, she suggests, is a “response to the irresponsibility of action that absorbs into itself this very irresponsibility.”⁴⁰⁵ One of the people to perceive this function in Auden’s poetry was Hannah Arendt, who made it into a guiding motif for her memorial essay on Auden after his death. What had made Auden a great poet, she begins, was

[T]he unprotesting willingness with which he yielded to the ‘curse’...of vulnerability to ‘human unsuccess’ on all levels of existence; the crookedness of the desires, the infidelities of the heart, the injustices of the world.⁴⁰⁶

The praise which Auden called for, Arendt explains, is a praise “that pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man’s condition on this earth and sucks its strength out of the wound.”⁴⁰⁷ Gottlieb follows this line of thought when she writes that Auden and Arendt saw it as possible to “praise the frustrations of action *against* the infinitely unsatisfactory historical disaster that occupies, and never leaves, the center of both Arendt’s and Auden’s articulate reflections.”⁴⁰⁸ Praise offers no resolution to the “historical disaster” – there is no bridge – nor is it directed *at* them. What praise *can* do, in Gottlieb’s words, is not to praise individuals for

⁴⁰² Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 26.

⁴⁰³ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 27.

⁴⁰⁴ Gottlieb, “Poetry in Times of Need.” Lecture podcast. (Last accessed 10.02.2014)

⁴⁰⁵ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 187.

⁴⁰⁶ Arendt, Hannah. “Remembering Wystan H. Auden.” In *W. H. AUDEN: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975), 186.

⁴⁰⁷ Arendt, “Remembering Auden,” 186.

⁴⁰⁸ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 187.

their actions but to embrace “the condition of action such that there can be individuals.”⁴⁰⁹ The object of praise, even against the backdrop of totalitarian horrors, are not those horrors but the capacity for action (in Arendt’s definition: freedom), even though that same capacity made totalitarian horror possible. The totalitarian attempt to eradicate the “irresponsibility” inherent in action represents, in Gottlieb’s words, “the intensification of irresponsibility.”⁴¹⁰ The fact that the Holocaust, for instance, was not planned as a genocide from the start, but rather turned into a genocide through a radical *escalation* of the genocidal impulse inherent in totalitarian ideology,⁴¹¹ could be read as a grotesque confirmation of this argument: The unimaginable extent of the genocide is itself a demonstration of the same “boundlessness” of action that all totalitarian movements try to control. To praise the frustrations – the unpredictability, irreversibility and boundlessness – of action *against* historical disaster means to reject the totalitarian attempt to achieve control over those frustrations. The *act* of praise directs itself at “the calamities of action” while at the same time embodying those calamities: It is a “frail” act, as “irredeemably faulted as action itself,” which directs itself at “frailty,” and therefore points towards what Arendt called the primary “redemptive faculty of action,” namely forgiveness. It is with these considerations in mind that we must turn to the last poem in Auden’s *Horae Canonicae*, the in some senses most *difficult* poem, “Lauds.” The last poem in Auden’s series of reflections about the “unforgiveable act” or historical disaster, is a poem of praise.

3.4 Praise what there is for being

The last poem in *Horae Canonicae*, “Lauds,” corresponds to the prayer said at daybreak. In *New Year Letter*, “Day breaks upon the world we know / Of war and wastefulness and woe.”⁴¹² Daybreak formed, in that setting, a disillusioning contrast to the vaguely idealistic formulations in the preceding lines. In the Divine Office, on the other hand, daybreak is first of all an occasion for praise. Within the pattern of the liturgy, the prayer “Lauds” gives occasion for the monks to “chant songs of praise for the wonder and splendor of a new day,

⁴⁰⁹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 187.

⁴¹⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 186.

⁴¹¹ See Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, for a discussion of the inherent genocidal impulse in totalitarian ideologies.

⁴¹² *NYL*, ll.1605-1606.

the glory of all creation and the glorious gift of light.”⁴¹³ Auden’s poem follows this model, as everything related to the *deed* which resonates through the rest of the sequence is set aside and attention turned to the task of ritual prayer. This has caused some critics to dismiss it prematurely, as when John Fuller calls it “merely a decorative postscript.”⁴¹⁴ As we shall see, rather, the poem absorbs several of the central themes touched upon in the sequence, and is functionally crucial to the poems’ religious significance. The poem is included in its entirety below.

Lauds

Among the leaves the small birds sing;
The crow of the cock commands awaking:
In solitude, for company.

Bright shines the sun on creatures mortal;
Men of their neighbours become sensible:
In solitude, for company.

Men of their neighbours become sensible;
God bless the Realm, God bless the People:
In solitude, for company.

Already the mass-bell goes ding-ding;
The dripping mill-wheel is again turning:
In solitude, for company.

God bless the Realm, God bless the People;
God bless this green world temporal:
In solitude, for company.

The dripping mill-wheel is again turning;
Among the leaves the small birds sing:
In solitude, for company.

(CP: 641-642)

The poem derives its form from a thirteenth-century Galican *cossante*.⁴¹⁵ The circular pattern of the seven stanzas, where every line is repeated except for number 4 and 14, reflects the cyclical character of the day covered in the sequence as a whole. “Lauds” is the prayer set at dawn, and by placing it last Auden evokes associations of beginnings and awakening, rather

⁴¹³ “Liturgy of the Hours,” *Abbey of New Clairvaux*, <http://www.newclairvaux.org/liturgy-of-the-hours.html>, accessed 12.11.15.

⁴¹⁴ John Fuller, *A Commentary*, 238.

⁴¹⁵ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 358. According to Mendelson, Auden found the form in Gerald Brenan’s *The Literature of the Spanish People* when it was published in 1951. (Ibid)

than the “total absence” and nothingness referred to in the night poem “Compline.” The implications of these associative beginnings significantly inform my reading of “Lauds.” In the following, I will discuss the significance of “Lauds” as a poem of praise in the context of *Horae Canonicae*.

To begin with, this is the only poem in the series that is completely impersonal: there is neither an “I” nor a “we” present. This impersonality reinforces the timeless, ritual aspects of the prayers from which the sequence borrows its structure. The repetition of “*In solitude, for company*” at the end of each stanza could be seen as resembling the response of a choir to a soloist (chorus to a verse) or that of a congregation to a preacher. It has the ring of something said together, a confirmation of “company” from the solitude of the individual, and would tie in with Auden’s appreciation of a “verbal structure that is communal.” Still, there is no particular “we” or “ours.” If, for Hannah Arendt, praise could be understood as a “response to the irresponsibility of action that absorbs into itself this very irresponsibility,” the poem, considered as an impersonal, collective act of praise, can be read as a self-reflective acknowledgment of the calamities of action. According to Gottlieb, Auden can be seen as praising the calamities of action – uncertainty, dependency, indeterminacy, unpredictability, irreversibility, irresponsibility, boundlessness and “helplessness” are all words that have been used – because “this condition alone makes possible fellowship.”⁴¹⁶ The repetition in “Lauds” of the words “*for company*” lends strength to this interpretation. A *ritual* also belongs to several generations, and as such may also be said to connect the participants to the historical past and future; creating the sense of participating in a chain of continuous events whose reach in time is known to no one. New individuals and communities may be imagined as coming into being after one’s own subjective passing into “total absence,” participating in the same or similar rituals. For Hannah Arendt, the essential characteristic of human existence, the capacity for *action* or the ability to begin, was rooted in the fact of natality. The birth of a new person embodied the very principle of beginning, for it meant not only the beginning of something but “of somebody, who is a beginner himself.”⁴¹⁷ If the novelty of action or the capacity for new beginnings is the most unique characteristic of human existence, the idea of future beginnings contained in the generational dimension of a collective ritual could be seen as an affirmation of the individual participant’s temporal –and

⁴¹⁶ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 24.

⁴¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

temporary – existence. Without the frailty and eventual end of one’s own existence, life would be resigned to the endless repetitions and cyclicity of nature.

Secondly, the ritual act of praise – embracing the calamities of action because they enable fellowship and new beginnings – can be linked to Auden’s understanding of Agape. As we know, Auden’s ideal society was one in which “love for one’s neighbor can express itself the most freely,” that is to say, a worldly “city” approaching the conditions of a true *community*: “A group of people associated on the basis of common love.” In “Lauds,” “Men of their neighbours become sensible,” in a parallel to the process of awakening portrayed in “Prime,” but also in the Christian sense of acknowledging others as real and unique subjects in their own right, what Martin Buber would call “Thous.” From that point of recognition, it is possible for Auden’s “man” to choose out of his own free will to do what he must, namely to love his neighbor. To recall Simeon’s Meditation in *For the Time Being*, human history was “predictable in the degree to which all men love themselves, and spontaneous in the degree to which each man loves God and through Him his neighbor.” For Auden the possibility of new beginnings, the spontaneity inherent in all acts of “love,” would have to be rooted in the prospect of divine redemption. In “Lauds,” however, the line “God bless the Realm, God bless the People” is placed *after* “Men of their neighbours become sensible,” perhaps indicating the order of things: First when people recognize, or try, the realness of their neighbors, does the possibility of redemption arise. “Sensible” here also celebrates the “body’s senses as a medium of faith and charity.”⁴¹⁸ The physical existence of the body was as important in Auden’s faith, and as deserving of blessing, as man’s “spiritual” existence, his imagination and consciousness.

Horae Canonicae, thirdly, deals with the tension between natural and historical time. History was the “realm of unique, voluntary, irreversible events that occur in linear time,” while nature was the “realm of recurring, involuntary, reversible events that occur in cyclical time.”⁴¹⁹ Human experience occurs in both these realms. When God is called upon in “Lauds” to bless the Realm and the People, the prayer addresses both the natural and the historical dimension of human experience. The sun that shines “on creatures mortal,” the crow of the cock and the small birds all belong to the realm of natural processes, and are all praised. The dripping mill-wheel and the mass-bell indicate the human world of work and worship, the realm of willed, historical acts. In the end, Mendelson notes, the prayer in “Lauds” asks

⁴¹⁸ Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*: 138.

⁴¹⁹ Edward Mendelson, “Introduction” to *Prose III*: xv.

“benediction on two kinds of time, the cyclical time of the green world and the historical time of the temporal world.”⁴²⁰

In Auden’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956, he ends on a statement about the fundamental duty of all poetry: “there is one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening.”⁴²¹ This echoes a line from the poem “Precious Five,” written in 1950, in which Auden praises the five senses with reference to “That singular command / I do not understand, / *Bless what there is for being.*” (CP: 591) In fact, *blessing* appears everywhere in Auden’s poetry, before and after his conversion.⁴²² Arthur Kirsch has pointed out that Auden found “belief in the goodness of existence” an “assumption necessary to the writing of poetry.”⁴²³ As Gottlieb perceived, however, this should not be taken to mean that Auden saw it as necessary – or possible – to praise “everything.” In her words, “nothing that destroys the plural world of appearances” could be praised.⁴²⁴ This excludes, in other words, the possibility of “blessing” anything which threatened to destroy the “common world,” the world of speech and action. Combine this with Auden’s definition of praying as “paying attention to” or “listening” to someone or something other than oneself⁴²⁵ and we get even closer to his understanding of the task of poetry: “Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—be it on a landscape, or a poem or a geometrical problem or an idol or the True God—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying.”⁴²⁶ “Lauds” is an example of both praying and praising. The refrain “celebrates the liturgy, a thing done together,”⁴²⁷ In *New Year Letter*, “aleness” was stated to be “man’s real condition.” While that might not have changed, the emphasis has, as the (imagined) participants of the collective ritual pray “*In solitude, for company.*” When writing about social and interpersonal relationships, Auden often referred to the Biblical phrase that “it is not good for man to be alone.” In the context of *Horae Canonicae* and its exploration of the “city,” this can be kept in

⁴²⁰ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 358.

⁴²¹ The lecture, “Making, Knowing and Judging,” was reprinted in W. H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 60.

⁴²² One beautiful instance of such pre-conversion blessing can be found in the concluding stanza of “Fish in the Unruffled Lakes” (1936), one of the songs Auden wrote for Benjamin Britten: “Sighs for follies said and done / Twist our narrow days, / But I must bless, I must praise / That you my swan, who have / All the gifts that to the swan / Impulsive Nature gave, / The majesty and pride, / Last night should add / Your voluntary love.” (CP: 138-139.)

⁴²³ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*: 139.

⁴²⁴ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 190.

⁴²⁵ Quoted in Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 386.

⁴²⁶ Quoted in Edward Mendelson, “Auden and God,” *The New York Review of Books*, 54:19, December 6, 2007. www.nybooks.com/article/20875 (accessed 14.11.13)

⁴²⁷ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*: 140.

mind as a premise: each individual is born into a social world, for better and for worse, and that should be seen as a cause for praise, even in the wake of atrocity. “Men of their neighbours become sensible / God bless the Realm, God bless the People.” Mendelson takes Auden’s choice of the word “People” here to mean simply “a plurality made up of persons, not an abstract impersonal public.”⁴²⁸ *Persons*, in Auden’s vocabulary, enter *communities*, but I read the word “People” here as referring equally much to the “city” itself, the neutral plurality that individuals can make into a *community* if – and only if – they choose to act as *persons*. As I see it, the prayer for blessing here can be read, in other words, as a blessing of the *potential* for community, the “uncertainty and indeterminacy” that makes possible new beginnings: Not any particular existing community, but the potential to create one. “In solitude, for company” quietly unites the private and public worlds of Auden’s poems in a communal verbal structure.

The emphasis on communal praise in “Lauds” achieves a particular significance in the context of *Horae Canonicae*. The poem marks the end of a series of meditations upon the role of the victim, the meaning of the sacrifice of an innocent as embodied in the Crucifixion. How does the poem – how does *praise* – relate to “our victim,” to “this death,” “the blood dry on the grass” and the “cement of blood” as the foundations of civilization? For an answer to this, we have to return to the question of Original Sin and see how it is connected, in Auden’s framework of ideas, to the possibility of redemption.

The Crucifixion can be understood, within the framework of Christianity, as the ultimate consequence of human sin. With Auden’s definitions in mind, it also functions as an embodiment of that “unique class of crime,” murder, which constitutes an “offense against society” as well as against the victim and against God. According to Christian scripture, Christ’s voluntary sacrifice turns the Crucifixion into an “eschatological triumph,” demonstrating the possibility of “ultimate reconciliation.”⁴²⁹ As I showed in chapter one, Auden became convinced, in the forties, that the only answer to the existential anxiety and despair arising out of the condition of sinfulness was Christian faith. “*The power by which, without blinding himself to his anxiety, he is nevertheless still able to choose, is religious faith.*”⁴³⁰ In 1950 this conviction is echoed in the essay “The Things Which are Caesar’s,” in which Auden once again connects the demands on the individual living *in time* – the

⁴²⁸ Mendelson, *Later Auden*: 358.

⁴²⁹ Curtis, *Theology of History*: 49, 50. “Eschatological triumph” because, in Christianity, “the eschaton, the fulfillment of history, has already occurred.” (Ibid. 50)

⁴³⁰ “A Preface to Kierkegaard” (1944), *Prose II*: 214

challenge in being a *person* –with *sin* and the necessity to have faith in (ultimate) forgiveness:

A Christian is at once commanded to accept his creatureliness, both natural and historical, not to attempt to escape into a fantastic world untrammelled [sic] by the realities of space and time, and forbidden to make an idol of nature or history. It might be said that for him only two temporal categories are significant, the present instance and eternity. The present instance is, of course, the result of the past; the command to accept this world exactly as it is without bowdlerization would be impossible but for the promise that our sins can be forgiven, for the burden of guilt for one's own sins and of resentment for the sins of others which have made the present instant what it is would [otherwise] be intolerable.⁴³¹

The murderous deed in *Horae Canonicae* embodies this “burden of guilt.” Curtis has argued that the central problem in the sequence is in fact that of sin, “which is occasioned by the paradox of human freedom and finiteness and the various ways in which we either deny contingency or seek to escape the responsibility of freedom.”⁴³² Auden, convinced of the reality of Original Sin, characteristically tried to imagine what his own role would have been if he had been present on Good Friday:

Just as we are all, potentially, in Adam when he fell, so we were all, potentially, in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday before there was an Easter, a Pentecost, a Christian, or a Church. It seems to me worthwhile asking ourselves who we should have been and what we should have been doing. None of us, I'm certain, will imagine himself as one of the Disciples, cowering in agony of spiritual despair and physical terror. Very few of us are big wheels enough to see ourselves as Pilate, or good churchmen enough to see ourselves as a member of the Sanhedrin. In my most optimistic mood I see myself as a Hellenized Jew from Alexandria visiting an intellectual friend. We are walking along, engaged in philosophical argument. Our path takes us past the base of Golgotha. Looking up, we see an all too familiar sight – three crosses surrounded by a jeering crowd. Frowning with prim distaste, I say, ‘It's disgusting the way the mob enjoy such things. Why can't the authorities execute people humanely and in private by giving them hemlock to drink, as they did with Socrates?’ Then, averting my eyes from the disagreeable spectacle, I resume our fascinating discussion about the True, the Good and the Beautiful.

If we recall Auden's interest in the *New Yorker* cartoon depicting the little man fighting the octopus (chapter 1, page 17), we see some clear parallels. In his analysis of the caricature, Auden identified the failure of anyone to step in and help – the failure of Agape, in practice – as an unwillingness to be *persons* (individuals).

The poems in *Horae Canonicae* were written in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Auden, who had been deployed to survey the damage in Germany

⁴³¹ Auden, *Prose III*: 209.

⁴³² Curtis, *Theology of History*: 61.

after the war, had seen some of the damage first hand.⁴³³ Susannah Gottlieb, as discussed above, argued that the function of *praise*, in Auden's poetry, should be understood as a conscious response to the "catastrophes of totalitarian domination," the "historical disaster" of the 20th century. In "Memorial for the City," another poem "consciously written in the years after Auschwitz,"⁴³⁴ Auden writes: "As we bury our dead / We know without knowing there is reason for what we bear, / That our hurt is not a desertion, that we are to pity / Neither ourselves nor our city; / Whoever the searchlights catch, whatever the loudspeakers blare, / We are not to despair." (CP: 592) In that poem, Auden tried to articulate the historical disaster in metonymical images: "On the right a village is burning, in a market-town to the left / The soldiers fire, the mayor bursts into tears..." (CP: 592) In *Horae Canonicae* descriptions of the central event, the crime itself, are entirely absent. Instead, the focus is turned towards the other inhabitants of the city in which the deed takes place: The professional participants in the murder, the expressionless crowd and those observers who, like Auden thought he himself would have, avert their eyes from the "disagreeable spectacle."

The idea that we were "all, potentially, in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday" is another expression of the conviction that men are equal "not in their capacities and virtues but in their natural bias towards evil."⁴³⁵ Each individual has their "historical share of care" for the *civitas terrena*, the "lying self-made city." (CP: 628) To take on that responsibility, or to take "responsibility for time," as Auden put it in a later poem,⁴³⁶ would be impossible "but for the promise that our sins can be forgiven." For Hannah Arendt, the predicaments of action – uncertainty and irreversibility – could, similarly, only be redeemed through the faculties of promising and forgiveness. Forgiving, she writes:

is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. The freedom contained in Jesus' teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance, which incloses [sic] both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process...⁴³⁷

Where vengeance would be predictable, forgiveness is always spontaneous. Whereas vengeance is predictable, characterized by some of that automatism that belongs to the natural realm, forgiveness is and has to be an act of free will. It is "the only reaction that acts in an

⁴³³ His job was to "interview German civilians about the effects of Allied bombing on their morale." (Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 3.)

⁴³⁴ Fuller, *A Commentary*, 226.

⁴³⁵ Auden, "Criticism in a Mass Society," 100?.

⁴³⁶ Already referred to? "Their Lonely Betters"

⁴³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

unexpected way,” the only *reaction* that “retains...something of the original character of action,” perpetuating the principle of beginning.⁴³⁸ Again,

Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. [*Initium*] ergo ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nullus fuit (“that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody”), said Augustine in his political philosophy. The beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.⁴³⁹

Forgiveness, as Arendt saw it, is the faculty which makes beginnings possible, by interrupting the otherwise endless chain of reactions. Where vengeance perpetuates a past chain of reactions, forgiveness puts an end to them, thereby initiating a *new* series of events. As I understand it, Auden’s view of the *time being*, of personal acts and choices in the difficult “Now,” can be tied to his view of redemption – or Judgment – in the same way. In his investigation of the “theology of history” in *Horae Canonicae*, Jan Curtis quotes another of Auden’s theological influences, Paul Tillich: “History has a turning point or a center in which the meaning of history appears, overcoming the self-destructive trend of the historical process and creating something *new* which cannot be frustrated by the circular motion of nature.”⁴⁴⁰ In Christianity that center is Christ, in whose sacrifice “the eschaton, the fulfillment of history has already occurred.”⁴⁴¹ In other words, it is the forgiveness of sins embodied in Christ’s voluntary sacrifice – the Crucifixion – which allows for the creation of something *new* in the realm of history. The canonical hours or Divine Office, Curtis argues, constitute a “re-enactment of the history of salvation.”⁴⁴² Modeled on the framework of the Divine Office, *Horae Canonicae* presents an analogy to that same history of salvation.

The idea of salvation or redemption in fact impacted directly on Auden’s view of his own poetic practice. “Every beautiful poem,” he wrote in 1950, presents “an analogy of forgiveness of sins.”⁴⁴³ The “formal order” of a poem echoed the state of harmony that would govern in a true community. As he devotes a generous portion of *New Year Letter* to argue, “Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society.”⁴⁴⁴ In 1942 he had written that art “cannot make a man want to become good, but it can prevent him from imagining that he

⁴³⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁴³⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted in Curtis, *Auden’s Theology of History*, 48.

⁴⁴¹ Curtis, “*Auden’s Theology of History*,” 50.

⁴⁴² Curtis, “*Auden’s Theology of History*,” 46.

⁴⁴³ Auden, “Nature, History and Poetry [C],” *Prose III*, 652.

⁴⁴⁴ *NYL*: ll. 78-79.

already is; it cannot give him faith in God, but it can show him his despair.”⁴⁴⁵ In 1956, the poem’s foremost duty has become to “praise what there is for being and happening.” The span between these two quotes indicates the direction in which Auden’s faith had developed in the decade following the Second World War: While still rooted in a conviction of sinfulness and the despair such a condition inevitably entailed, the imperative to – nevertheless – *praise* had come to share the central spot among the doctrines of Auden’s faith. The severe and *absolutely* passionate Kierkegaardian position from the 40s has given way to an arguably humbler rephrasing emphasizing communal ritual and allowing for not only the endurance but the embrace of the calamities of action.

The exploration of historical and natural time in *Horae Canonicae* ultimately frames the Now in which all human beings must *act*. As individuals who “know” that they have “fallen from grace,” the inhabitants of the City in *Horae Canonicae* carry a burden of guilt and a fear of complicity in the “dying / Which the coming day will ask.” But trying to escape the “predicament,” as we remember from the discussion of Niebuhr in chapter 1, can only worsen it; the citizens wish to deny the realities of the present, but, as Mendelson puts it, their “evasions serve...the mechanisms of injustice and murder.”⁴⁴⁶ For the Christian, Auden wrote, “only two temporal categories are significant, the present instance and eternity.” His task was to

act now, with an eye fixed, neither nostalgically on the past nor dreamily on some ideal future, but on eternity – “redeeming the time” – in the words of Sidney Smith, he is to “trust in God and take short views.”⁴⁴⁷

In Gottlieb’s interpretation, Auden calls on his “fellow-creature” to praise the uncertainty and irreversibility of action – the condition of the Now – because “this condition alone makes possible fellowship.” The calamities of action also made possible new beginnings. For Auden and Arendt both, the “faculty” or prospect which continually made beginnings possible within the chain of historical, unilinear time, was forgiveness.

The subtitle of *Horae Canonicae* is “Immolatus Vicerit,” which means “the victim triumphs,” or “the sacrificed one triumphs.”⁴⁴⁸ Biblically, the crucified Jesus is “victorious” in two senses: His sacrifice redeems the sins of mankind, and he “conquers” death in the Resurrection. In *Regions of Sorrow*, Susannah Gottlieb draws attention to the way forgiveness and resurrection tends to appear as parallels in Auden’s poetry, which leads her to suggest the

⁴⁴⁵ Auden, “Lecture Notes I,” *Prose II*, 167.

⁴⁴⁶ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 352.

⁴⁴⁷ Auden, “Augustus to Augustine,” *Prose II*, 230-231.

⁴⁴⁸ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 335.

following “conclusion” in terms of how Auden perceived forgiveness: “[T]here is nothing simple about the act of forgiving faults; it is no less miraculous and no less transformative than the paramount and paradigmatic messianic moment: the resurrection of the dead.”⁴⁴⁹ Forgiveness, in Arendt’s sense, put an end to the past chain of reactions and made it possible to begin again; it perpetuated the principle of beginning embodied in *action*. Arendt saw Auden’s praise as a response to the irresponsibility of action which “pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man’s condition.” To Auden, the duty of poetry had become, precisely, to praise, and beautiful poetry presented an “analogy of forgiveness of sins.” To conclude my discussion of “Lauds” and *Horae Canonicae*, I want to bring in a quote from one of the last books Auden published, a book of quotations accompanied by his own commentary titled *A Certain World* (1970). As he explained in the foreword, he considered the compilation “a sort of autobiography,” a map of his world. Here, he has included a quote from the anthropologist and natural science writer Loren Eiseley, describing the attack on a nestling by a raven. Below is the quote in full.

When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing, the light was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast cathedral. I could see the dust motes of wood pollen in the long shaft of light, and there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in its beak.

The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling’s parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment and sat still. Up to that point the little tragedy had followed the usual pattern. But suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise.

Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished cries of the tiny parents. No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they know. He was a bird of death.

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unperturbed, untouchable.

The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in the clearing the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And, finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing was being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and

⁴⁴⁹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 194.

sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were singers of life, and not of death.⁴⁵⁰

Read as an analogy, this quote can be seen to reveal quite a lot about Auden's view of the role of poetry. The "black bird at the heart of life" allows, within the framework presented in this thesis, for a range of interpretations: Original Sin, the catastrophe at the centre of Auden's (and Arendt's) historical reflections, the Crucifixion, the calamities of action or death itself. The quote absorbs the fullness of the mourning that Gottlieb read in *For the Time Being*, and which the absence in *Horae Canonicae* points to. Above all, it portrays – not identically, but *analogously* – the kind of praise Auden thought that poetry could be, performed "under the brooding shadow of the raven": A praise of "what there is for being," of everything that constitutes the common world, and of the capacity for new beginnings. Eisely calls it "the judgment of life against death," Auden calls it forgiveness or redemption. As a Christian he saw the prospect of forgiveness as embodied in the sacrifice of the Crucifixion. For Arendt, the capacity for beginnings was "ontologically rooted in natality," the fact that new individuals keep being born into the world, themselves embodying the capacity for beginnings. In her formulation, the "judgment of life against death" sounded like this: "Man, although he must die, is not born in order to die but in order to begin." For Arendt, too, forgiveness was what enabled new beginnings within the stream of history. By allowing individuals to start again, forgiveness could, in Arendt's sense, perhaps be understood as "resurrecting" the capacity for action.

⁴⁵⁰ Auden, *A Certain World*, 36-37.

Conclusion

In the first chapter of my thesis, I investigated the function of Original Sin in Auden's political philosophy in the early 1940s, particularly his analysis of the dynamics of liberalism and fascism. Auden sees the "failure of liberalism" to withstand fascism as rooted in a misguided optimistic assumption about the fundamental goodness of human nature. He perceives in fascism a "romantic pessimistic reaction" against the failure of liberalism to produce the good society, one which is characteristically *modern* in nature. I describe the mechanics of this argument with reference to Auden's analysis of Hitler, his critique of romanticism and his understanding of modernity. With reference to the historian of fascism Roger Griffin, I show how some more recent perspectives upon the core dynamics of fascism helps shed light on Auden's analysis of fascism, particularly with regards to its conception of *time*. I further showed how Auden's understanding of sin is crucially influenced by his reading of the contemporary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as the Christian existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard. With reference to *For the Time Being* and *New Year Letter*, I illustrated how Niebuhr's and Kierkegaard's influence manifest in Auden's poetry during the early 40s. I place particular emphasis on the link, as Auden saw it, between Original Sin and the twentieth-century *totalitarian temptation*, and how it relates to his view of the uniquely *modern* experience of time.

I have demonstrated how Auden's adoption of the doctrine of Original Sin underpins a complex defense of democracy as opposed to fascism. Based on readings of *New Year Letter*, *For the Time Being* and Auden's central prose texts from the early 40s, I show how Auden's rejection of fascism is rooted in his recognition of an "equality of wretchedness": "Humans are equal not in capacities and virtues but in their natural bias towards evil," he writes, and concludes that no individual or group can claim the kind of moral superiority that would justify.

While rejecting fascism and expressing a clear preference for democratic governance, Auden remains critical of liberalism, something which becomes especially clear in *For the Time Being*. In the last parts of the chapter I take one step further and explore Auden's "counter-vision" or anti-totalitarian vision; his understanding of a good community based on the Christian notion of Agape. With emphasis on Auden's existentialist notion of *personal choice*, I show how he links the concept of Agape to Original Sin, to the forming of communities, and to the idea of the "time being."

In my second chapter I continue to explore Auden's notion of the *time being* and its anti-totalitarian implications from a slightly different angle. The chapter is devoted to the political philosopher Hannah Arendt's theory of *action*.

Arendt sees *action* as the most characteristic faculty of human existence. Her analysis of action becomes the cornerstone in a philosophical framework wherein the human capacity for *promising* and *forgiveness* become central constitutive principles. Inspired by the scholar of philosophy Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, I show how Arendt's emphasis on forgiveness and promising led to a view of politics fundamentally different from that which underlies fascist and totalitarian ideologies, because it is based on a recognition and embrace of *interdependence*, *uncertainty* and *helplessness*. Her interpretation of promising and forgiveness also helps shed crucial light on the link, in *Auden's* framework of ideas, between Original Sin and the role of forgiveness in Christianity. Her understanding of *action* as *beginning* is shown, in chapter 3, to be directly relevant to Auden's *time being* and his view of the ideal community. This becomes especially clear when Arendt's Augustinian-inspired writing on *beginnings* is compared to Auden's understanding of the role of *praise*.

This chapter should be considered as a kind of interlude in the thesis, a theoretical bridge. First of all, I argue that Arendt's *action* illuminates the role of forgiveness in Auden's schema of Original Sin, democracy and faith in a Christian Judgment. Secondly, by framing Auden's *time being* in terms of Arendt's *action*, I am preparing the way for my third chapter, in which *the act* plays a central and religiously significant role.

In chapter 3, I looked at *Horae Canonicae*, a sequence of poems Auden wrote between 1949 and 1953. *Horae Canonicae* is modeled on the Liturgical Offices of the Catholic Church, whose central function is to induce reflection upon the significance of the Crucifixion. The poems in the sequence revolve around an unnamed act which is revealed to be a murder or sacrifice, and which alludes to the Crucifixion. The sequence was therefore ideal for an investigation of the continuities and changes in Auden's religious views. My aim in this chapter was to revisit the questions of sin, democracy and the *time being* in this sequence, written after the Second World War. I have argued that *Horae Canonicae* explores the *community in action*: what it means to act, what it means to act collectively, and what an "unforgivable act" can be said to mean in this context. Using Arendt's theory of action as *beginnings* I have demonstrated how the *act* in *Horae Canonicae* can be linked to Auden's idea of the Last Judgment and Redemption.

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