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W. H. Auden's Proto-Queer Theology of 1939-1941

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INTRODUCTION: AUDEN'S SIGNIFICANCE

With the advent of queer theory in the early 1990s, critics have increasingly sought to “queer” texts; that is, seeking out demonstrations of identity that do not fit conventional norms of sex, gender, and sexuality. Given the historic persecution of homosexuals and other “deviants” in the twentieth century, W. H. Auden is an interesting case when viewed through this lens because his expansive career brims with homoerotic (and equally homosexual) undertones. It is not surprising that Auden guarded himself by masking sentiments regarding his sexuality below the surface of his writing, though not so much so that one could not detect it if they knew the coded jargon of certain queer communities (Bozorth 709). What Auden said regarding his homosexuality in an ethical and moral sense varied over time, creating difficulties in capturing his complete range of thought on the matter. Critics widely agree that Auden remained conflicted regarding his sexuality and continued to be so for most of his life despite a characteristic affinity for change. For instance, if broken down into the heuristic “secular and sacred” view of Auden’s legacy (i.e., the view that his poetry shifted from “propaganda” to “parable” upon his immigration to the U.S.), one sees that this conflict persists despite supposedly different forms. In his secular period, he suspected homosexuality to be caused by some global psychological disorder, which people suffered from universally and experienced in different forms psychosomatically; yet upon moving to America and returning to the Catholic faith of his childhood, his concern with homosexuality as illness diminished, though his focus now turned to its complicated relationship with marriage (Mendelson 365).

Thus, critics have found much to contend with in tracing Auden’s development of thought regarding homosexuality, and there are certainly many analytical highpoints that are worth mentioning. There is of course Edward Mendelson, Auden’s literary executor, who has undoubtedly laid the foundations for discussions of Auden and sexuality by way of his critical biographies *Early*

Auden and *Later Auden*. Other authors, chief among them Arthur Kirsch, have likened Auden's doubts of his own "sexual morality" to doubts of faith, recognizing that the two may be closely linked and may even inform one another. Some have even proposed "final verdicts" on Auden's part (as I interpret them); Stephen Schuler, for instance, argues that Auden never reached a moral resolution (at least one that integrated his sexuality within a Catholic lifestyle), but he nonetheless went on with his sexual practices without great concern. Indeed, this perspective echoes another of Arthur Kirsch's arguments which states that frivolity, or respectful mockery of serious business, was at the heart of Auden's views on both sexuality and his religion. Finally, authors like Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb and Richard Bozorth have placed Auden within a centuries-long tradition of queer radicalism: Gottlieb's analysis highlights Auden's simultaneous transgression of sexual and religious norms, which deemed him as both deviant and ineligible to marry, while Bozorth uses the context of queer history to argue that many of Auden's earlier poems are protests not only against fascist politics but also heteronormative oppression. While these paradigm-shifting contributions are critical to the analysis I will conduct in this thesis, none of these works has given direct attention to the relation between Auden's sexuality and faith as a prototype for future generations of religious queer people.

In 1947, Auden wrote that "sexual fidelity is more important in a homosexual relationship than in any other," further elaborating that "in other relationships there are a variety of ties. But here, fidelity is the only bond" (qtd. in Bozorth, "Tell Me," 200). This statement, while appearing to simplify the dynamic components of a same-sex relationship down to a single stipulation, implies something much more complex. On the one hand, it speaks to a variety of privileges that are barred from homosexuals which would otherwise strengthen or solidify their romantic relationship. Among these withheld privileges is marriage—a ceremony that both the Catholic Church and

the U.S. federal government (along with all other world powers) barred Auden from participating in, as both entities denied legal recognition of homosexual marriage during his lifetime. Thus, Auden's emphasis on his own fidelity is rather poignant, as it is effectively a stand-in for the consecration—and perhaps validation—he yearned for. Auden's emphasis on sexual fidelity, then, suggests that this is the only tie that can sustain homosexual relationships because it is self-regulated, and self-regulation is the only option in a social environment that invalidates queer couples.

Such public statements are but a microcosm of Auden's lifelong interest in the relationship between his homosexuality and his Catholic faith, particularly with respect to marriage, which he viewed as among other things a potential meeting ground for the two. As other scholars have posited, Auden's contemplations were far ahead of his time—so much so, I would add, that they bear striking resemblance to the views of a contemporary queer-religious movement known as “Queer Christianity,” which I define as the theological concepts and practices of a diverse set of LGBTQ+ individuals (along with the support of their allies) who, like Auden, felt at one point compelled to justify their gender or sexual orientation with respect to their Christian faith. Herein, I will examine Auden's literary rhetoric and experiences between 1939 and 1941; this is the period in which Auden and Chester Kallman were “married,” and what emerges is a bold transgression of religious and secular homophobia which, amidst its larger demands for global justice, legitimizes same-sex marriage and, as a result, renders Auden's work that of a proto-queer theologian. My analysis will be comprised of four close readings of Auden's early American poems, in order of their composition: “Like a Vocation” (1939), “Law Like Love” (1939), *New Year Letter* (1940), and “In Sickness and in Health” (1940). These works reflect Auden's general progression of thought in regard to his newfound marriage, which begins to coincide with other, more commonly recognized preoccupations of Auden's; the most prominent of these include an impending global crisis

perpetuated by nationalistic violence and the persistent desire to create a diversified, communal space in which such a crisis may be averted. Prior to my analysis, I will also briefly explore personal milestones of the 1930s which may have influenced Auden's later progression of thought. Additionally, I will describe the essential elements that constitute twenty-first Queer Christian thought, which significantly resemble the themes of Auden's 1939-1941 works.

As a further matter, the selected poems between 1939 and 1941 are not only indicative of Auden's conceptualizing but also characteristic of what most critics describe as Auden's unique charm as a poet: they represent at once the utter seriousness and playful frivolity that Auden brings to his work, a choice that is equally shocking and refreshing. According to Peter Firchow, emblematic of this spirit is Auden's "Dirge": what is presumably an elegy for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt nonetheless "shifts in and out of the serious, the not-so-serious, and even the funny. This is undoubtedly odd for an elegy. But such sudden and jarring shifts in diction and tone are (and were already) characteristic of Auden's poetry, even in formal elegiac contexts" (457). Firchow continues by highlighting the persistence of this poetic spirit in modern contexts, which survives in no small part thanks to Auden; in regard to the American poet Richard Howard's "elegies" for Auden, which reveal "a very personal truth about being homosexual," he states that "only after Auden came to America did it become possible for a 'serious' American poet like Howard to publish a 'song' like this one, with its offhand and quite casual confession about its author being a 'cocksucker'" (468). Accounts such as these exemplify the inherent value of Auden's poetry today, not so much in its content but in its underlying spirit, which almost always finds a balance between audacity and prudence, action and contemplation, and reverence and transgression—all of which are critical to the forms of the aforementioned poems.

AUDEN BEFORE MARRIAGE

While Auden discovered that he had lost his faith in 1922, at around the age of fifteen (Spender 9), his poetry nonetheless brimmed with Christian imagery and contemplation. Fragmented identity, as well as attempts to remedy that uncertainty, characterizes much of his poetry of the 1930s and is not limited exclusively to the spiritual. Following his year abroad in Berlin, Auden's 1932 long poem *The Orators* partially reflects an attempt to self-therapize, particularly to end the "storm-and-stress period of his sexual adolescence" (Davenport-Hines 88) and to moderate his sexual behavior. His dissatisfaction with hypersexuality is, of course, linked to the moral principles of his Christian upbringing, which stuck with him even after his defection (Davenport-Hines 100). With regard to his views on homosexuality, however, Auden seems at this time more concerned with the internecine strife within homosexual communities; in 1932, he told John Pudney, "we are all sex-obsessed today [...] because there isn't [sic] any decent group life left" (qtd. in Davenport-Hines 114). This absence of "group life" is explored further in *The Orators*, wherein a certain character demonstrates a "specialised sensibility" (110) that allows him to identify other homosexuals effortlessly, an ability which binds him to others of the same sexual disposition and holds the potentiality for a deeper, more intimate sense of community. In other words, likeness in being homosexual, not merely sexual compatibility or mutual desire, provides a template through which to foster deeper connections between individuals.

Only a year later, Auden experienced firsthand that sense of connection in its most visceral form. One evening in June, he received unexpectedly what he later termed his "Vision of Agape":

I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. [...] I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I

consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly because, thanks to the power, I was doing it – what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself. [...] My personal feelings towards them were unchanged [...] but I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it. (qtd. in Davenport-Hines 132)

Undoubtedly, Auden perceived his vision to be of a spiritual essence, as he remarked later that “at the time it occurred, I thought I had done with Christianity for good” (132). As he recalls, the sense of community he experienced by way of this vision was not sexual, nor was his sense of community constituted solely by those who were attracted to one another; nevertheless, Auden’s desire for meaningful “group life” was actualized briefly at that moment, certainly to a greater degree than what he had envisioned in *The Orators*. This “transfiguration of love” (131) is, according to Richard Davenport-Hines, but one step (albeit a crucial one) in Auden’s journey toward a more concrete spirituality, which culminated around the same time as his marriage to Chester Kallman in 1939. Following his 1933 vision, Auden would write the poem “A Summer Night” that same month, in which he predicts “a major upheaval [...] that, when [it] is over, the lyrical love which the poem celebrates – part Eros, part Agape – will play a part in the re-establishment of civilization” (Carpenter 162-63). The sheer magnitude of this prediction coincides with Auden’s yearning for an authentic group life, only now he conceives that this group constitutes all of humanity.

In the years leading up to his first encounter with Chester Kallman in 1939, Auden would continue with his “hope of discovering a course of action which could alleviate the evils of society,” which would, in turn, bring society closer towards a sustained Agape (Carpenter 180). His poetry would continue to operate as a sort of self-interrogation with respect to his individual role in society, and the search for a possible answer likely motivated his excessive travels during this

period; his destinations included Portugal, Iceland, Hong Kong, and Spain during the Civil War of the late 1930s. It should be mentioned that Auden enlisted in 1937 as a volunteer ambulance driver for the Spanish Communists, but shortly thereafter found himself disillusioned by division and dissent within their movement: theirs was not the unified, infallible remedy for all social ills he was looking for. His time in Spain had not been the first time that the woes of the interwar period had an effect on Auden; the proliferation of violence across Europe and elsewhere granted Auden keener insight into the darker instincts of humankind—an insight which operates as the “necessary counterpart” to his vision of Agape in 1933 (Davenport-Hines 153). These two opposites contrasted one another in much of Auden’s poetry of the 1930s, depicting at once the widespread, horrific violence of the early twentieth century and the desperate need for an outpouring of selfless love to end it. Auden would not find the means of achieving that love until his immigration to the United States in 1939, where he would meet Chester Kallman for the first time.

Auden had only been residing in New York City for about three months before his first encounter with Kallman. On April 6, 1939, Auden and his long-time friend and literary collaborator Christopher Isherwood were scheduled to give a public reading for the League of American Writers. Auden read his elegy “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” to a sizeable audience that included a group of students from Brooklyn College; these students, Chester Kallman among them, approached Auden and his colleagues in hopes of receiving an interview for their literary magazine, *The Observer* (Farnan 18). In retrospect it may come as a surprise that, while Kallman was making his request to the man directly, Auden found himself fixated on another Brooklyn student, Walter Miller, who was chatting with Isherwood. Auden obliged Kallman’s request mainly in hopes that Miller would accompany him—yet two days later, on April 8, the date set for their interview at Auden’s residence, he would find himself utterly disappointed: Kallman arrived alone. Leaving

Kallman momentarily at his doorstep, Auden approached Isherwood in another room and stated bluntly, “It’s the wrong blond” (qtd. in Farnan 20). Their interview, to no surprise, began with considerable discomfort, though Auden’s disposition towards Kallman changed quickly as they began to discuss the Renaissance poet Thomas Rogers; according to biographer Dorothy Farnan, Auden recognized in Kallman a “kindred spirit,” which likely triggered something “conscious, unconscious, [and] inexplicable” in Auden (20-21).

Following their interview, the two began to see one another more frequently, and their new relationship moved rather quickly. One month later, Auden would publish “The Prophets,” one of many poems that Auden claimed to have grown out of his love for Kallman (Carpenter 262). In it, the speaker claims to have found

the answer from the face

That never will go back into a book

But asks for all my life, and is the Place

Where all I touch is moved to an embrace

And there is no such thing as a vain look. (Auden, “The Prophets,” 203)

Interestingly, the “answer” this speaker is looking for is, on the one hand, found in the face of their lover, possibly implying that the lover themselves is the answer to some unspecified predicament. The speaker also suggests that their lover is quite literally the “Place” where love is transfigured; this is evident in the way “touch”—ephemeral and sensory—becomes an “embrace,” an experience that is both physically and emotionally intimate. It is no coincidence that this passage mimics Auden’s views on the utility of Eros (a more passionate, sexual form of love) in achieving his desired Agape, the selfless, compassionate love which he believed to be a starting point in remedying the world’s ever-increasing discord. Read with this framework in mind, “the answer” found

in the lover's face takes on an entirely different meaning: they are the means through which to achieve that Agape and, perhaps, to extend that love elsewhere. An unverifiable conclusion would be to simply state that the speaker and the lover of "The Prophets" are symbolic of Auden and Kallman; indeed, it is important to acknowledge the danger in "identify[ing] Auden's love-poetry too closely with one lover or set of circumstances, so much did he transmute his personal experiences before making them into verse" (Carpenter 262). A poem that Auden wrote to Kallman on his twentieth birthday speaks to this transmutation of reality:

In harness the Two are a fine combination
 But a little too fond of the mirror—Beware
 When you look in one then of the fair fascination
 Provided by that ingenious pair [...] (qtd. in Farnan 27)

While "The Prophets" flaunts an absence of vanity and self-interest, here we see the speaker acknowledge deliberately an overabundance of both: the lovers are "too fond of the mirror" and, hopeful of preserving the ingenuity of their pairing, the speaker pleads with the recipient to avert their eyes.

Likely, this is a more accurate depiction of Auden's relationship with Kallman, though its imperfect nature did not stop him from glorifying their bond. Within the first year of their relationship, Auden began to wear a gold wedding band, bought another for Kallman (who refused to wear it), and declared himself married in every sense of the word (Farnan 22). He became deeply intrigued with *The Observer*, expressed a desire to get closer to Kallman's family, and shared many of Kallman's interests, which included Italian opera (28). Auden's fervency during this period, in no small part contributing to the relationship's eventual downfall in 1941 (Davenport-Hines 209), equipped him with a keen sense of certainty that he brought to his work. During the spring and

summer of 1939, he produced several drafts of “The Prolific and the Devourer,” an essay that argues for “laws which govern human life,” which, despite being expressed on “purely humanist and non-religious grounds” (qtd. in Carpenter 268), are for the purposes of convenience referred to as “divine laws” (qtd. in Carpenter 269). He further declares that “there are two and only two philosophies of life, the true and the false [...] the [true] Way cannot be codified as a philosophy: that would be to suppose that perfect knowledge of the whole of reality is possible, indeed that it is already known” (qtd. in Carpenter 269). Stating that religion serves to delineate divine law, he continues, “If anyone chooses to call our knowledge of existence knowledge of God, to call Essence the Father, Form the Son, and Motion the Holy Ghost, I don’t mind: nomenclature is purely a matter of convenience...But no religious dogma...can be anything but poetry” (qtd. in Carpenter 269). While Auden would later disavow the piece, particularly for its tone of unerring superiority (Carpenter 274), the influences that drove his reconversion in 1940 are clear.

It is not by coincidence that Auden interprets authentic religion—or at least what he considers it to be—in non-supernatural, non-sanctimonious terms. Given that Auden’s love for Kallman was a major, if not the most important, component of his return to Christianity, a natural conflict arose in the way of the homosexual nature of their marriage. He contended with this problem in part by simply paying it little mind. This is not to say that Auden had no qualms with respect to his homosexuality as it related to his faith; indeed, Christopher Isherwood once stated that “[Auden’s] religion condemned it and he agreed that it was sinful, though he fully intended to go on sinning” (qtd. in Carpenter 299). Nevertheless, Isherwood’s remark does not fully encapsulate Auden’s views on the matter. Three reasons can be traced as to why Auden believed his attitude did not conflict with his reclaimed Christian identity. While the first two are mainly self-derogatory, the third is quite telling in that it coincides with his views expressed in “The Prophets” as

well as “A Summer Night”: “[Auden] argued that to undervalue sexual love was actually heretical: it denied the goodness of the physical bodies created by God” (300). Thus, Auden’s love for Kallman, of a supposedly more profound essence than mere sexual attraction, was corrective of the sexual “immorality” that may have underpinned their marriage. The critical influence of these assumptions is furthermore, reflected in much of Auden’s poetry between 1939 and 1941: they function as an amalgamation of Auden’s desire for an outpouring of love, or Agape, his abhorrence of the modern world, and the potentiality he saw in his marriage as a method of “achieving” the first and remedying the second.

QUEER CHRISTIANITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Despite the better part of a century separating Auden’s poetry and the rhetoric of Queer Christians, there are certain ideological pillars that persist through time and form the basis of both parties’ poetic and rhetorical practices. Regarding Queer Christianity, the most distinct of these pillars include the acquisition of a selfless love in pursuit of forming genuine, empathetic community with others, as well as the rejection of heteronormative, systematic theology in favor of queered—and therefore more accurate and encompassing—theological perspectives.

First and foremost, in recognizing Queer Christianity’s critical ties to queer theology, it is important to understand what this term truly means. In *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Patrick S. Cheng, ordained minister and Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Episcopal Divinity School, defines three essential components to queer theology:

First, queer theology is LGBT people “talking about God.” Secondly, queer theology is “talking about God” in a self-consciously transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Third, queer theology is “talk about

God” that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity. (9)

Cheng’s definition of queer theology is both overlapping and encompassing, given that it asserts access to queer and non-queer people to perform said theology and accepts any level of transgressive actions against heteronormative categories—the same logic that constitutes Queer Christianity. Deliberate works of queer theology—or at the very least “LGBT-positive” theology—can be traced back to the mid-1950s and are rooted primarily in other theological forms, namely apologetic theology (e.g., “gay is good”), liberation theology, and relational theology (Cheng 26). Another essential component of queer theology, presenting itself most clearly in Cheng’s third definition, is queer theory, which engages broadly in the “debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities” (Jagose 3); its assumptions and strategies coincide with queer theology’s attempt to erase both physical and metaphysical boundaries that push queer people out of heteronormalized (i.e., binarized) spaces. Where queer theory becomes most effective in supporting queer theology is its presupposition that binaries of sex, sexuality, and gender are social constructions that obscure the reality of the human condition. In other words, experiences of these categories fall more accurately along a nonlinear spectrum, and it is the hope of queer theologians that, by reflecting openly upon this spectrum, namely through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (Cheng 11), binary discourses may be transgressed and space may be provided for a breadth of religious experiences. It is these essential components which fortify queer theology and, as a result, inform my understanding of modern Queer Christianity.

Akin to the necessity of Auden’s transfiguration of love, a Queer Christian’s understanding of God’s Love is closest to the phrase “agape,” an Ancient Greek word which represents “the highest form of love”; this is a love that is selfless, unconditional, inclusive, and therefore radical.

As Cheng states in his foreword to *Radical Love*, “radical love is at the heart of Christian theology because we Christians believe in a God who, through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, has dissolved the boundaries between death and life, time and eternity, and the human and divine” (x). Cheng names but a few of these false binaries which are transgressed ultimately by God’s will as a means of bridging the gaps between people, regardless of differences on the basis of sex, sexuality, and gender. This will, in and of itself, is radical love, sent forth by God to expose and dismantle stifling human boundaries (51). Under this premise, queer people stand as harbingers of this love, challenging assumptions regarding sexuality and gender, which include, among others, “the categories of female and male, and homosexual and heterosexual” (51). These beliefs have been expounded by others; in 2018, Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest, proclaimed that LGBT people “are loved by God. [...] [He knows] them in the complexity of their lives, celebrating with them when life is sweet ... loving them like Jesus loved people on the margins, which is extravagantly” (qtd. in Falsani par. 12). Tellingly, these assertions are not grounded upon reinterpretations of Scripture; at their core, they rely upon some of the most fundamental Biblical lessons: to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 22.39)—the same virtue which Auden encountered unexpectedly in 1933—and that Jesus would stand always on the side of the marginalized.

Of equal importance to the conception of radical love is its physical expression via the flesh. Many queer theologians posit that this expression often manifests itself in the erotic and stands on equal grounds with its Agapian counterpart, though this is a belief that many still take issue with to this day; as Cheng explains, “people throughout the history of the church have held the dualistic view that matter is evil and spirit is good. This arises out of the Platonic view that the abstract world of forms is ‘higher’ than the world of matter, which includes our bodies and

sexualities” (62-63). As mentioned previously, while Auden found eventual utility for his erotic desires, he viewed Eros primarily as a means to an end in achieving Agape, or the “higher” form of love that Cheng describes. Queer Christianity interprets these forms of love differently than Auden, typically viewing the two as dyadic rather than hierarchical. Such a dyadic view is captured best in Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*:

Born out of a split relationship between *eros* and agapian love, Christ has become the lustless messiah of systematic theologians. Why ‘either/or’? Why choose between agapian and erotic love? Why these two separate concepts and a fence between them, ordering them by alphabetic categories? What sordid or brilliantly passionate stories are hidden behind the love which is constructed as de-eroticized? (120)

In the context of Latin American liberation theology, Althaus-Reid advocates for the divine power of intense sexual desire, especially that of “illicit lovers [...] [which] carries that of life in itself,” as “this is what moves them to feel a loving commitment to their lives and a strong passion for destruction of the oppressive structures” (125-26). In this vein, the erotic plays a crucial—and equally central—role in religious worship, as sexual desire becomes the source through which heteropatriarchal dogma is challenged and destabilized. This emphasis on religious expression through the physical is, according to some, reflected through the body of Jesus himself; for instance, Angel F. Méndez Montoya, Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Ibero-American University, states that “Christ’s mystical body is already political, the co-abiding of a nondivisive body conjoined by both human and divine desire, responding to the hunger of and for the Other, emerging in a space and time wherein eros and agape constitute one another. Within this queer body-politics, otherness is always welcomed” (326). Additionally, it is important to note that while

Auden's Eros played a sequential role in his theological vision, he nonetheless writes explicitly about the erotic during his marriage, thereby acknowledging the essential role it occupies.

Queer Christians believe that this same love—expressed equally through Agape and Eros—aids in the destruction of barriers that seek to divide and oppress, thereby fostering borderless community. Queer theologians agree that the nature of God's existence as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit defies standard notions of the "self" and "other," and these three identities are at once "coequal and co-eternal" (Cheng 56). This Trinity defies other binary categories as well; regarding queer experience specifically, the fluid and interpenetrative qualities of the Trinity provide counterevidence to common notions of "fixed" identities (60). Borderless community is also depicted symbolically through the church; as Cheng states, "the church was a new community that dissolved traditional boundaries that kept people apart such as biological relationships, social class, and physical attributes"—a development that is taken a step further when we consider the ways in which the "church" subsumes a plethora of sexual and gender identities today (106). As these theologians have posited, queer people not only stand to benefit from these divine implications, but are also suited uniquely to expand and diversify systematic theological discourses through personal experience; in discussing the queer process of "coming out," Marcella Althaus-Reid enunciates how narrativization of this process "give[s] a testimonial with an affirmation of what normativity has denied. The first [component] creates an order of conformity, the second, a network of rebellious people, the sort of rebellion which nurtures theology with a deeper questioning of life [...] somehow, [coming out narratives] are more authentic than church liturgies, and more effective too" (145). Moreover, the love both expressed through God's existence and imbued in human experience challenges, and eventually destroys, the oppressive barriers that arbitrarily separate human beings from one another.

This prompts the question, then, of why the Bible would speak out against oppressed queer people, whose experiences resemble so clearly the experiences of Christ and the nature of the divine. Ultimately, this is where rejection of heteronormative, systematic theology is crucial. Rather than refuting Biblical claims directly, Queer Christians focus instead on the Bible's tendency towards contradiction. Deborah Jian Lee, author of *Rescuing Jesus*, argues that biblical literalism is inherently selective and inconsistent, used to “construct strict delineations between right and wrong—careful, of course, to place [those who employ it] on the right side” (71). This tendency towards rhetorical opportunism is also cited in *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, which analyzes the Bible as a heterogenous, multivariate work of literature, while nonetheless acknowledging its social, cultural, and historical significance: “when using the Bible to provide proofs in religious arguments, [...] readers always turn to those passages that support their own point of view and ignore those that do not. The well-known fact that even the Devil can quote scripture to his own purposes indicates the variety and multiplicity of this inexhaustible collection, for there is something here for all tastes” (Gabel & Wheeler 83). Both perspectives challenge the popular idea of the “closed canon” (82), not denying outright the homophobic and transphobic passages of the bible but instead questioning their significance amidst a larger narrative landscape—a landscape which is undoubtedly characterized by contradiction, collaboration, omission, and ambiguity.

Biblical contradictions have, on the other hand, only further solidified Queer Christian faith. As openly gay Christian activist Brian Murphy describes, “the authors [of the Bible] were struggling to make sense of themselves, the world around them, and their relationship to something bigger than themselves [...] That doesn't make the Bible less true, it makes it more true” (par. 15). Murphy's description of the Bible's uncertain—or perhaps provisional—intent echoes one of queer theology's essential tactics: “queer reason” (Cheng 16). This mode of reasoning, more

recently making use of poststructuralist philosophy and postcolonial theory, “challenge[s] not only the fluidity of sexual and gender boundaries, but also the boundaries relating to Christian theology itself [...] soul vs. body, life vs. death, heaven vs. earth, center vs. margins” (18). In this sense, queer reasoning is effectively a continuation of the struggle braved by the authors of the Bible. In the same sense that the Bible itself is human (Gabel & Wheeler xii), it is also alive via the exchange between itself and Queer Christians, who continue to search for themselves within its contents while nonetheless seeking their interpellation beyond present systematic theologies.

Queering biblical narratives only strengthens these associations further. It is important to note that this does not entail altering these narratives by any means; rather, it is a tactic taken from the Bible itself. The Reverend Elizabeth Edman, highlighting a key point in her book *Queer Virtue*, argues that “Christianity persistently calls the followers of Jesus to rupture, or queer, false binaries that pit people against each other” (Edman par. 1). She uses “queer” to describe the act of debunking social norms we often take for granted; in the case of queer Christians, this involves queering religious texts to reveal false dividing lines—lines which are not limited to sexuality and gender. The story of Jesus himself, for instance, could be called queer in the ways he defies our expectations of reality. In his critical scholarship, “Rethinking the Western Body,” Gerard Loughlin recalls how “Christ’s body is transfigured, resurrected, ascended, [and] consumed. Born a male, he yet gives birth to the church; dead, he yet returns to life; flesh, he becomes food” (9). Kittredge Cherry, a retired lesbian pastor, points out not only how Jesus “had two fathers (God and his adoptive dad, Joseph),” but also how “Mary gave birth [to him] without having sex with a man” (Kuruvilla par. 3). Without simple explanation, these biblical phenomena contradict general assumptions made regarding human beings and the world we inhabit. One could make the argument that these

passages are not meant to be taken literally, but to do so would be to simultaneously reject any literal interpretation of the Bible whatsoever.

These core values and assumptions not only provide the foundation for the Queer Christian movement, but also hark back to Auden's poetry of the late 30s and early 40s. By accounting for Auden's respective views on homosexuality and Catholicism in both their relatedness and opposition to one another, as well as their tendency to be reconsidered and redefined by Auden continuously, we can approach an understanding of each at a more fundamental level. Auden's career, then, documents an unmistakably candid account of the twentieth-century tensions between homosexuality and religion, which are largely the result of norms set by overarching hegemonies.

“LIKE A VOCATION”: SELFLESS COMPASSION AS REMEDY TO DEPARTURE

Above all else, “Like a Vocation” (1939) revolves around one's overcoming their propensity for self-interest; initially moving through time and space, the poem settles on observations of an unspecified, second-person subject who, although well-traveled and welcomed by many, struggles to find permanency in their life. Their dormancy in this matter is thwarted unexpectedly by childlike crying, which throws them involuntarily into a compassionate state; we are left with a sense that, likely desiring to comfort the source of this crying, this second-person subject has made some sort of breakthrough in quelling their prior selfishness. Moreover, it is here that Auden gestures towards the utility of Agapian love as a basis for overcoming self-interest, which could in turn bring about “community” in its most authentic sense. As we are informed almost immediately by the poem's speaker, this community is unlike anything seen in prior history.

In its first stanza, the speaker drops us in the midst of an unspoken conundrum: our speaker, engaged in a process of eliminating potential solutions to this conundrum, seems convinced that

the end goal must be brought about by means that are both particular and lasting. The first failed hypothesis comes in the form of “that dream Napoleon [...] / Before whose riding all the crowds divide, / Who dedicates a column and withdraws” (Auden, “Like a Vocation,” 203). We are given a few clues as to why Napoleon, or perhaps his “dream,” has fallen through as a viable solution. First and foremost, the fact that Napoleon himself is characterized as a “dream” suggests an ethereality to his vision; in other words, the fact that he himself (and by extension, his vision) exists outside of reality renders him unable to realize his goals. Of course, this depiction seems antithetical to the popular image of Napoleon Bonaparte—conqueror and unifier of western Europe—that persists into the twenty-first century. The speaker, taking no interest in reconciling this disparity, introduces us to two other failures:

Nor as that general favourite and breezy visitor
 To whom the weather and the ruins mean so much,
 Nor as any of those who always will be welcome,

 Do not enter like that: all these depart. (203)

The first failed visitor, the “breezy visitor,” receives an even briefer introduction and explication than Napoleon; unlike the latter, whose approach causes “the crowds” to “divide,” the breezy visitor appears to have gained favor among those around them, yet their interest seems to lie more so in the inanimate and the sublime, perhaps explaining their visitation. On the other hand, the second visitor(s) (“those who will always be welcome”), while sharing some resemblance to the breezy visitor in their being welcomed unconditionally, remains more ambiguous in nature; they are not so much a single individual as an archetype of the peaceful, hospitable traveler. Again, unlike Napoleon, whose presence is welcomed purely out of fear, “those [...] welcome[d]” elicit in others

a sense of trust that, for whatever reason, ceases to change or disappear—yet, strangely, it is this same acceptance that prevents them paradoxically from “entering.” What binds these three visitors, perhaps not so much in who they are but in what their actions represent, is revealed thereafter: “all these depart.” Indisputably, these visitors share the propensity to enter a space and have some memorable impact—yet their presences, along with the possible realities their presence may evoke (e.g. imperial unification, growing tourist networks), leave eventually. By way of the visitors’ similarities, we begin to approach an understanding of the speaker’s conundrum: in analyzing these visitors, the speaker appears to be searching for a mode by which to bring about a “permanency” unseen in human history.

The speaker interrogates this matter further in the following stanzas in what appears to be a revisiting of the “breezy visitor,” though this is not apparent at first. Through the lens of pleasure, particularly “the stranger’s right to pleasure” (203), the speaker addresses suddenly an uncertain “you,” all the while depicting a vivid collage of seemingly innocuous social interactions. Over the course of the stanza, this “you” is greeted with foreign knowledge, entreated with questions, and advanced upon flirtatiously—gestures which culminate in the revelation that “the mountains and the shopkeepers accept you / And all your walks be free” (203). These final lines appear at first to stand on their own, in association with but not subsuming the previous gestures—yet “mountains” may very well be a metaphorical stand-in for nation or community, as “shopkeepers” may pertain to residents of said community, or those who keep shop. In this vein, those who engage with our second-person subject are effectively the shopkeepers, and their community the mountains. Such are the circumstances of the breezy visitor, “that general favourite” who searches primarily for inanimate wonders while accepting passively the company of locals—they are consistently engaged with, rather than the other way around. This onslaught of unsolicited attention is, in essence,

“the stranger’s right to pleasure,” though one would suspect that, with time, this attention would render the label “stranger” a misnomer. Indeed, the concluding lines of this stanza suggest no qualms with this sort of relationship, and if the stanza were to stand in isolation from the rest of the poem, the breezy visitor might stand as a viable candidate for the “permanency”—or, at the very least, as close to permanency as one might hope to reach—that the speaker is looking for. However, this assumption is challenged directly in the third stanza, as the speaker turns once again to the notion of reality. Like Napoleon’s so-called dream, the stranger’s cordial affairs with the locals “lead / Up to a bed that only looks like marriage” (204). Not to be taken literally, the “wedding” of the stranger to the locals speaks nonetheless to the incomplete nature of their relationship; this is because their relationship is predicated solely upon pleasure. Not only this, but symbolic of this nascent relationship is the “bed,” which suggests temporary repose or a brief sexual encounter. Though the speaker concedes that “these have their moderate success” (204), which they capture momentarily in the preceding stanza, they insist that, without deeper cultivation, the stranger remains just that: a stranger.

A few key points of context in relation to Auden’s literary style and biography provide further insight to this section. First and foremost, while the depiction of the breezy visitor may be a vague invocation of the Romantic poet Lord Byron, the potential similarities between visitor and Auden himself are equally noteworthy; Auden’s lifelong travels—his immigration to the United States notwithstanding—included brief vacations and short-term “residencies” in places like Germany, Iceland, China, Spain, Italy, and Austria. Traveling, for Auden, became not only a search for poetic inspiration, but also a search for home (Jenkins par. 8). The possibility for direct influence upon this character seems more likely when one considers the sheer, subjective tone of the second stanza, which reads almost ethnographically, capturing a small sample of local values,

interests, and mannerisms. Indeed, an interesting feature of Auden's poetry of the early 1940s, acutely so in *New Year Letter*, is the utilization of subjectivity for the purposes of repenting (Dean 448). More can be said of this; for instance, the speaker in "Like a Vocation" provides little in the way of a motivation for the breezy visitor's travels, save for their interest in the inanimate—yet this too can be linked to Auden's caution towards the aimless pursuit of passion. Like Eros, these inanimate wonders elicit an intensity of emotion by means of visual splendor, an effect which can be profound but possibly unproductive if left to its own devices. In other words, Auden may be invoking his own experiences via the breezy visitor, particularly as a way of grappling with erotic desires, and subsequent regret, that occasionally reared themselves during his travels. The presence of "marriage," then, is by no means a coincidence: it stands as the closest thing to a viable solution in the way of permanency, not only in its ability to remedy the breezy visitor's incompleteness vis-à-vis their affinity "to pleasure," but also to redirect Auden's erotic desires towards something more substantial.

We glimpse this solution, along with its outcome, in the final stanza of the poem. Curiously, the speaker refers once again to a second-person subject, "you," and describes the approach of a faint, childlike weeping. While its exact location remains unknown, the speaker insists that it has always been there, coming from "nowhere particularly unusual" (Auden 204), yet it "climbs towards your life like a vocation" (204). If the subject in question remains the breezy visitor, this revelation may certainly come as a surprise. The breezy visitor's fascination with the sublime, and their subsequent search for it in foreign lands, may equally be a search for a deeper, spiritual meaning; therefore, the speaker's implication that the "search" does not require extensive travel, nor the answer bound to anything remarkable, turns the breezy visitor's quest on its head. Whether or not

this brings them recourse, this weeping, like Auden’s vision in 1933, demands both their attention and assistance:

The one who needs you, that terrified
 Imaginative child [...]

 [...] knows he has to be the future and that only
 The meek inherit the earth, and is neither
 Charming, successful, nor a crowd [...] (204)

It is at this moment that we gain insight into our speaker’s goal, and the mode by which to achieve it. The situation at hand involves a child in need of guidance from someone (presumably a parental figure or someone from the preceding generation) who possesses more experience with the world. Specifically, this child must learn to embody meekness, as this is the precondition for “inherit[ing] the earth.” The speaker’s invocation of scripture (*King James Bible*, Matt. 5.5), alongside marriage, brings us closer to an understanding of their desired reality: it is a vision for humanity that can only begin to be understood in biblical terms, one that seems to involve a reconstitution of human behavior, to achieve a sort of quietude. Indeed, this notion is supported by the acute clamor of this stanza, flooded with noises of traffic, birds, crowds, and the bustle of summertime, all of which make the child’s weeping harder to discern. Equipped with this knowledge, however, the speaker’s vision is still left wanting. The vision, while certainly noble, remains abstract, conceived only by means of allusion and negation; in other words, we know what this vision is like (i.e., a Christianized utopia) and what it is not like (it is not “charming,” like the breezy visitor; “successful,” like Napoleon; “nor a crowd,” like the mass of welcomed visitors). Our only possible indication as to

what the vision could be, literally, is marriage, as marriage embodies another critical aspect of this vision: permanency, or the propensity not to depart.

We can gain a bit more clarity by considering Auden's own marriage in relation to the speaker's envisioned reality. It should not be overlooked that this is one of a selection of poems that "he said had grown out of what he called 'l'affaire C,' his love for Chester" (Carpenter 262), and considering its composition just one month after meeting Kallman, it is very likely that this last stanza captures the spirit of their first meeting. I've touched briefly upon the recurrence of passivity throughout this poem (e.g., the breezy visitor's tendency to be acted upon by those around him), as well as the fact that the child operates similarly to Auden's vision of Agape. Indeed, Kallman's emergence in Auden's life was entirely unexpected, which he seems to have predicted in his poem of the early 1930s, "O tell me the truth about love": "When it comes, will it come without warning / Just as I'm picking my nose?" (qtd. in Carpenter 259). These parallels suggest that Kallman had an equally evocative effect on Auden's life, and the confidence with which his speaker touts the supremacy of marriage, whether as a direct solution to their conundrum or as a starting point, opens up the possibility that Auden is bringing hindsight to "Like a Vocation." Indicative of this hindsight are the shortcomings of past efforts to bring about the speaker's vision, as well as the speaker's critiques of the breezy visitor. In other words, through the breezy visitor Auden may be critiquing his own interpersonal misconduct, the likes of which prevented him from thinking accurately about humanity's broader mistakes. What can be said of these mistakes, and the methods by which to resolve them, may be found in the essence of the relationship between the breezy visitor and the child. Their relationship is nothing short of the compassion one might feel for a crying baby, and the breezy visitor's desire to remedy such distress comes not from a place of self-interest—they are not seeking out the source of the crying, but rather it is seeking out

them—but from something less obvious, perhaps instinctive. As with their sparse descriptions of their vision, the speaker is unconcerned with defining the nature of the subject’s desire, but it is nonetheless “like a vocation”: it is like something divine but also not, yet it is nonetheless commanding and exigent.

“LAW LIKE LOVE”: PRUDENT BOASTING & THE SEARCH FOR TRUE “LAW”

While beginning in the affirmative, “Law Like Love” (1939) nonetheless resembles “Like a Vocation” in its observational, and eventually inquisitive, tone. “Law Like Love” is concerned primarily with voice and its potential consequences; noting a general trend among the masses to speak rather than listen—and more specifically, to draw assumptions rather than consider other possibilities—the speaker calls for a rhetorical ceasefire, recognizing that it is those same voices that so desperately search for righteousness that inadvertently drown it out. Yet, the speaker acknowledges their—as well as their romantic partner’s—complicity in this matter and their desire to change their ways, the speaker nevertheless boasts the ability of love in bringing all closer to that obscured truth (i.e., “Law”). Through this poem, Auden further elucidates the potentiality of love, as well as the union of love, in approaching a revolutionized alternative to the status quo or, as his speaker describes it, an “unconcerned condition.”

In its first half, the speaker presents us with a series of claims regarding what the “Law is,” laying out for readers a definition (if it can truly be called that) that changes in accordance with its audience. The poem begins,

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,

Law is the one

All gardeners obey

To-morrow, yesterday, to-day. (Auden 208).

Here we receive our first glimpse of what “Law” comprises, as well as its nature: from the obedience that the gardeners express across time to the sun, which is an embodiment of the Law, we can conclude that the Law not only holds singular, dictatorial power over its subjects, but also that it has always been this way. While this nature holds true as the poem continues, that which Law comprises changes. In the second stanza, the speaker introduces us to a generational dispute between the young and their ancestors:

Law is the wisdom of the old,
 The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;
 The grandchildren put out a treble tongue
 Law is the senses of the young. (208)

Several observations are of note here, first and foremost being that these claims about the Law are just that—claims, with no substantial evidence to back them save for subjective observation. Naturally, those making such claims run the risk of fallibility, and while the speaker does not indicate outright that their claims are wrong, they gesture, nonetheless, in that direction. This is reflected in the pontifications of both generations, the claims of which appear to be in direct opposition to their more visible qualities: the grandfathers’ proclamations of unwavering authority seem antithetical to their impotent, feeble bodies through which they deliver their claims, while the grandchildren’s youthful zeal, their “treble tongue,” may result in their overreaching and misinterpreting the world around them. Secondly, by way of suspected fallibility, our understanding of what the “Law is” is thrown into question. We have not only two but three groups making claims in the works (the gardeners, the grandfathers, and the grandchildren), and these will not be the last. With each claim comes a respective opinion informed by subjective experience, and the incongruity of

each claim, save for the nature of the Law, suggests that most, if not all, must be incorrect; this possibility, however, does not steer these groups towards caution in expressing their claims about the Law, favoring instead a sort of licentiousness of speech, the consequences of which are expounded in the succeeding stanza.

Law is explored thereafter at the institutional level, and it is here that the speaker begins to debunk many of these claims. Broadly, the speaker suggests that it is not so much these false claims that we should be concerned about in particular but rather the act of making claims to begin with. Discourses surrounding the Law have punctured places of worship and, perhaps not as surprisingly, courts of law. We are greeted by two individuals in the third stanza, the priest and the judge, both of whom speak sanctimoniously to the group before them, perceiving them as subordinates. Illustrative of this relationship is the priest who, “with a priestly look, / Expounding to an unpriestly people,” claims that “Law [...] / [...] is the words in [their] priestly book, / Law is [their] pulpit and [their] steeple” (208). The priest’s clear position of authority is telling, in that it is likely a ruse; the insistence that the priest is truly “priestly,” via repetition of the word, in fact has the opposite effect, throwing their legitimacy into question. It seems more likely that this person embodies priesthood which, coupled with their possessiveness towards the church, creates an aura of righteousness around them, which others are inclined to follow. A similar comment could be made of the judge, who quite literally positions himself above his audience, presumably from the bench:

Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose,

Speaking clearly and most severely,

Law is as I’ve told you before,

.

Law is The Law. (208)

The judge's explanation of the Law lacks specificity, and this appears to be intentional; his gestures—the condescending glare, the intonation of his voice, and his firm declaration—appear to be scare tactics disguised as generosity (he's told his audience before, as he states, but he is willing nonetheless to repeat himself). In reality, his explanation garners nothing more than a petition for the status quo: "Law is the Law," and therefore requires no further explication from himself or, in particular, from others. The judge may have divulged further details in the past, as he himself suggests, yet without any evidence for it, we are left to assume that his "non-explanation" is in fact a reinforcement of the Law's authority, of which he is the arbiter. By way of these two individuals, the speaker is potentially expressing cynicism towards the act of making claims about the Law: what at first seems virtually harmless—at its worst, fostering petty resentment between generations over who is correct—becomes a gradual infiltration and perversion of positions of power. Furthermore, claims such as these are less interested in critical thought about the Law for some greater good and more inclined to obfuscate it for selfish ends.

The speaker further suggests that their reflections highlight a core issue in the act of making claims about the Law: it relies solely upon externalization and persuasion, rather than introspection and contemplation—in other words, speaking rather than listening. What follows a lengthy series of claims about the Law is the speaker's proclamation that "Others say, Law is our Fate; / Others say, Law is our State; / Others say, others say" (208). In comparison to the claims aforementioned, the brevity of these newest claims suggest frustration on the part of the speaker, who appears more focused on drawing attention not to "Fate" and the "State" but to the act of vocalizing these ideas in the first place. Indeed, what "others say" has been the focal point of the poem thus far, and despite capturing the claims themselves, there are no moments in which those making claims are

in dialogue with their respective audience, choosing instead to plant this claim and let it blossom through blind persistence. This idea is echoed clearly in the following stanza:

And always the loud angry crowd,
 Very angry and very loud,
 Law is We,
 And always the soft idiot softly Me. (208)

We see again an emphasis on vocalization, vocalization which, here, seems to be driven primarily by passion or ignorance. Regarding both the “angry crowd” and the “soft idiot,” the speaker once again utilizes repetition to highlight some deeper irony. In the case of the “angry crowd,” their propensity to be “loud” and “angry” may quite literally bar them from hearing themselves, thus disabling their ability to reflect on their claims and potentially arrive at a clearer, more accurate position than before. Yet it is not the volume at which one speaks that denotes the false claim, as we see in the case of the “soft idiot” that even the faintest of claims can derail meaningful dialogue, and thus a deeper understanding of the Law. Moreover, the speaker pushes back against the act of making claims about the Law as a whole, since, based on their observations laid out thus far, making claims about the Law as a whole has only worked to obfuscate it and strengthen those who seek control and domination. Yet in rejecting this process, the speaker points to an alternative unspecified thus far, the likes of which they elucidate, or perhaps replicate, through the lens of a companion unmentioned thus far.

The remainder of “Law Like Love,” like the ventures of the breezy visitor in “Like a Vocation,” feels utterly personal, reflecting a private interaction that may nonetheless provide insight in remedying ongoing, public miscalculations through the rejection of their outcomes. Directed to

their companion, the speaker draws parallels between themselves and those around them in regard to their equal understanding (or lack thereof) of the Law:

[...] we, dear, know we know no more

Than they about the Law,

.

Except that all agree

.

That the Law is [...] (209)

This concession may come as a surprise, given the speaker's own tone of superiority heretofore, yet it remains in line with their emphasis on refraining from further conjecture. Nevertheless, the speaker's hesitance to characterize the Law beyond its nature does not stop them from stating unequivocally that the "Law is." Accompanying this assertion is a vague sense that something must be done, though whether that something pertains to defining the Law or not is unknown; thus, we are left speculating as to why, or what it is that prevents each individual, the speaker and their companion included, from "know[ing] what [they] should and should not do" (209). The intentions behind this ambiguity may be manifold; however, it has the effect of equalizing all involved in universal ignorance.

This need to understand what must be done may, on the one hand, refer to the steps necessary in perceiving and explicating precisely the Law and its effects, but it may also speak to the attitudes held by Auden himself in relation to the power structures that constituted the world around him in 1939. It is certainly power structures (specifically in the United States, but almost universally across the world) that, backed by de facto social policing, both discredited Auden's relationship with Chester Kallman and prevented their legal marriage. This, however, did not stop

him from viewing their relationship as anything less legitimate than marriage, for, in the context of “In Sickness and in Health,” Gottlieb states that Auden acknowledged the inherent “doubleness” of marriage: “it can be both a legal institution and a moral commitment [and] the two need not overlap” (31). Nonetheless, Auden did not leave the legal institution of marriage unattended; in 1935, prior to his immigration, Auden married the Jewish refugee Erika Mann, enabling her to secure British citizenship and subsequently flee Nazi Germany. Evidently, Auden “simply did not hesitate to exploit a legal formality that otherwise remained unavailable, even hostile to him. On the contrary, he even tried to create a kind of spontaneous institution, in which gay men would marry women threatened under fascist regimes” (Gottlieb 30). Such bold defiance of social expectations can be found in “Law Like Love,” even in the context of conscious humility. The passage that follows the speaker’s declaration of a universal ignorance, and subsequent plea to reassess and reconsider the situation at hand, is surprisingly divergent from these concepts. Conceding once again, the speaker states,

Although I can at least confine

Your vanity and mine

To stating timidly

.

We shall boast anyway:

Like love I say. (Auden 209)

This unexpected claim about what the Law is (that it is in fact “like love”) stands in total opposition to the speaker’s prior reticence, and would more or less upend the credibility they have built over the course of the poem if not for their prior forewarnings. Moreover, the presence of this contradiction bears a keen resemblance to Auden’s eagerness in transgressing, in more ways than one,

prescriptive expectations of marriage. This is made evident by the fact that he seems to be invoking his own marriage here; referring to the confining of “your vanity and mine,” it is difficult to ignore the similarities between “Law Like Love” and the poem Auden gave to Kallman on his twentieth birthday; in it, he alludes again to a shared sense of vanity: “In harness the Two are a fine combination / But a little too fond of the mirror” (qtd. in Farnan 27). Perhaps by no coincidence, the poem captures the spirit of “Law Like Love” in its regard for the shortcomings, but inherent potential, of paired individuals as a model for progress.

The numerous similarities between “Law Like Love” and “Like a Vocation” should not be understated, not only in their symbolic adoption of marriage as a solution to the problem at hand, but also in a shared search for a reality that has yet to be realized. I have discussed previously the ways in which “Like a Vocation” operates as an interrogation of an imagined present that, at its core, is contingent upon the departure and division of individuals, as well as an exploration of “marriage,” analogous to selfless compassion, as a remedy to those divisions. While this pursuit is less transparent in “Law Like Love,” one particular remark from the speaker, delivered as part of his private reflections, is telling; explaining his reticence to describe the Law in comparison to others, he insists that

No more than they can we suppress
 The universal wish to guess
 Or slip out of our own position
 Into an unconcerned condition. (Auden 209)

It is interesting that, to achieve such an “unconcerned condition,” one must first be rid of their “position,” a term which fittingly remains open-ended, but in the context of the poem brings to mind both the perspectives that individuals hold in regard to the Law and its machinations, as well

as the “occupations” these individuals hold (gardeners, priests, judges). To “slip out,” therefore, requires one not only to relinquish their beliefs but also the social status that likely informs them, as both result indirectly in the chaos, and certainly division, throughout the poem. In the case of the grandfathers and grandchildren, for instance, the distinctions between, and concomitant expectations of, “old” (wise, but frail) and “young” (sensible, but rash) categories foment disagreement between the two groups. On the other hand, the priest and the judge draw deliberate lines between themselves and their underlings, reinforcing their power through specious authority. Conversely, to slip out of such positions would be tantamount to casting off these constructed distinctions and, subsequently, to “equalize” humanity—a feat which the speaker is able to observe privately, in the form of general human ignorance about the Law, but can essentially do nothing with unless others follow suit.

NEW YEAR LETTER: THE LONG & WINDING ROAD AHEAD

Far longer than “Like a Vocation” and “Law Like Love,” *New Year Letter* (1940), addressed to Auden’s colleague, Elizabeth Mayer, is divided into three parts, each of which takes place on the last day of the year. The poem functions as an exploration of crises facing the world at large and the speaker personally; supposedly having succumbed to dark forces, both parties search desperately for a panacea that might turn the tides in their favor and bring about a state of genuine peace and cooperation. To the same degree that these conflicts are sensationalized, Auden writes didactically and with a striking degree of verisimilitude—his speaker, recognizing that human misconduct lies at the heart of these crises, depicts a rigorous mountain path analogous to the road that all must travel to bring humanity back to its natural state; as we will see, this natural state reflects their larger desire for “diversity in unity” (171). At the same time, the speaker hints that

this road also reflects their personal experience surrounding commitment; their romantic relationship, while not blatantly propounded, is characterized equally by difficulties in the form of repeated error and miscalculation. Moreover, it is only through acceptance and reconsideration of these difficulties that true progress can come about, and the same could be said for the aforementioned trek towards the mountain's summit. With regard to Auden's larger conceptualizations, the poem serves as an expansion of the ideas expressed in the previous poems; his emphasis on the rigorous nature of positive progress—be it towards genuine love, community, or both—is not to suggest implausibility, rather it is to say that, like commitment (more specifically marriage in his case), it will often be as grueling as it is utterly lucrative.

In a broad sense, Part One seeks to characterize the atmosphere of the New Year, as well as the conflict at hand. This is done by immediately thrusting readers onto the scene, wherein people appear to be both jovial (underscored by a sense of optimism directed towards the future) and apprehensive (acknowledging the possibility that the conflict may only worsen as time progresses). It should not come as a surprise at this point that the speaker refrains from delivering direct exposition regarding this conflict, though we are given vague explanations of its cause(s) and effects. The speaker notes their familiarity with such an atmosphere; a year prior, they recall their stay in Brussels during the New Year, remarking that

the sleepless guests of Europe lay

Wishing the centuries away,

.

As on the verge of happening

There crouched the presence of The Thing. (Auden 161)

This passage, while clearly evoking wartime anxieties over the prospect of German invasion (almost five months after the publication of *New Year Letter*, German forces would occupy Belgium until 1945), depicts “The Thing” as a lone creature that prefers to wait rather than take immediate action as a means of acquiring power. Allegedly, “all formulas were tried to still / [...] All bolts of custom made secure” (161) to prevent the entrance of The Thing, yet by means of subterfuge it somehow breached the city, “approaching every bedside all the same” (161). Equipped with total awareness of The Thing’s presence and taking every precaution they can muster, the city astonishingly and, perhaps unknowingly, falls victim to the creature’s influence. Nevertheless, the apprehension that the city expresses on the verge of the New Year suggests a partial awareness of this possibility—that, despite the concerted efforts of the city’s residents to fortify themselves against The Thing’s invasion, they may somehow remain entirely defenseless.

In this vein, the speaker seems to possess an insight that the city does not, specifically regarding the essence of their adversary. According to the speaker, The Thing’s invasion is neither swift nor visible; rather, its greatest strength is its perniciousness. While in large groups it may risk discovery, “time can moderate his tone / When talking to a man alone,” and over time

Suspended hatreds crystallize

In visible hostilities,

Vague concentrations shrink to take

The sharp crude patterns generals make... (161)

With this explanation in mind, it becomes rather clear as to why physical barriers fail to keep out The Thing, whose threat comes in the form of subtle, ideological reconstitution. The Thing resembles a demagogue, sowing hatred by essentializing or extremifying his target’s thought processes. Indeed, this is expressed via the oxymoronic “sharp crude patterns,” which suggest that the target’s

thoughts are clear-cut and direct yet unrefined and rudimentary; in this way, the target becomes a “general” itself, capable of making sweeping, impassioned statements about reality which are nonetheless off-base (perhaps alluding to those making claims throughout “Law Like Love”) and underscored by disdain for diversity. What The Thing accomplishes via ideological reconstitution is diversion; his targets become vessels through which he may fabricate scapegoats to prevent his own discovery, leading to widespread suspicion and paranoia. Embodying the helplessness felt in Brussels a year prior, the speaker exclaims, “O Who is trying to shield Whom? / Who left a hairpin in the room? / [...] / How did a snake get in the tower?” (165). Enlisting aid from local authorities proves to be useless, as they too are divided, specifically by factionalism and desperate self-interest:

The rival sergeants run about
 But more to squabble than find out,

 To one inspector dressed in brown,
 He makes the murderer whom he pleases
 And all investigation ceases. (165)

Having infiltrated the ranks of the community’s protectors, The Thing appears to have succeeded in its endeavor. In service to this creature, whose true motives remain unclear, these negligent authorities cast off fully their social responsibilities in search of mindless distraction. Despite this preponderance of corruption, there appears to be no discernible mode by which to trace it to its starting point. The speaker identifies The Thing as the source of the problem, but their desire to know where the creature’s pursuit began surpasses their yearning to vanquish The Thing itself;

this suggests that the “solution”—not only to the corruption, but to an ever-increasing atmosphere of distrust—lies in ideological reconstitution from within, not without.

What also emerges throughout Part One, in a similar fashion to “Like a Vocation” and “Law Like Love,” is an express desire to bring about a reality that has yet to be seen in human history. Identifying a universal need “to set in order” (162), the speaker concedes nonetheless that “order can never be willed / [...] For will but wills it opposite” (162), alluding perhaps to those failed attempts at achieving the vision described in “Like a Vocation,” and the elusive “Law” in “Law Like Love.” Even in the context of the “Law” in “Law Like Love,” Linda Ross Meyer’s analysis provides insight here: “we call for it, it calls to us, be we cannot ‘have’ it [...] to have Law and control Law would be to take the lawfulness (the justice) out of it” (444). The same could be said for “the order,” which

In intention all are one,
 Intending that their wills be done
 Within a peace where all desires
 Find each in each what each requires,
 A true *Gestalt* where indiscrete
 Perceptions and extensions meet. (Auden 162)

Here, the emphasis placed on “intention” and “desire” suggests that it is these dispositions, rather than the literal order which they are in pursuit of, that will bring about the “true *Gestalt*”; order, then, is not governance bestowed upon a geographically defined community, but a voluntary measure in which one conducts oneself in accordance with the needs of others. Given that these intentions must be ubiquitous across society to bring about this reality, this becomes a grandiose

undertaking which the speaker themselves grapples rigorously with in finding a model through which others may learn to do the same.

As with the previous two poems, the speaker once again assesses potential models, or potential courses of action, that may befit their vision; here, they reason that Art, in its broadest sense, possesses some advantages but is ultimately ineffectual in this matter for various reasons. They speak plainly in their belief that “Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society” (162), insisting first that “Art in intention is mimesis” (162); in other words, despite conscious efforts to mirror reality, making art results in abstraction. In making this claim, the speaker seems to dispel the utopic qualities surrounding their vision, insisting that it must be as mundane as the means by which it is obtained. Art also fails in that it is a “*fait accompli*,” and since “Life-order comes to living men / It cannot say, for it presents / Already lived experiences” (162). We see yet another of Auden’s speakers taking issue with the tendencies of others—here, by way of their creations—“to say,” and thus to direct their listeners. Finally, and perhaps the most telling in the way this vision must come to fruition, is that it is inherently subjective and therefore moving perpetually towards simplification:

[...] each particular artist knows,
 Unique events that once took place
 Within a unique time and space,
 In the new field they occupy,
 The unique serves to typify,
 Becomes, though still particular,
 An algebraic formula,
 An abstract model of events... (162)

In other words, inasmuch as the speaker's vision is real and must therefore reflect reality, it must also be specific to an everchanging temporal plane. The contradictory nature of the poem, being a mode of art itself, should also be apparent by now. If *New Year Letter* possesses an intention of its own—which by the speaker's terms it must—it appears to be a call to action, a petition for a collective change of course in search of their new vision. Certainly, the speaker does not dismiss the utility of art entirely. The “particulars” mentioned above, for instance, are valuable in that they enable hindsight and reconsideration on both the artist's and observer's part; equipped with this understanding, “Like a Vocation” and “Law Like Love” seem keenly aware of this function, at once considering the particulars of each poem's respective past and present while also standing as a particular itself, ready to be dissected by future generations of readers. Indeed, we receive such particulars in this poem as well; the speaker, for instance, goes to great lengths in illustrating a “summary tribunal” (163) consisting of key writers throughout history, ranging from Catullus, to William Blake, to Rainer Maria Rilke. These figures, embodying in death the standing of “great masters” (163), function not simply as a source of inspiration for the speaker but also a benchmark through which to judge the speaker's own work and actions. Their position in the speaker's life is constant, and while their influence is “considerate and mild and low” (163), their weighing presence over time prompts the question, “who can show convincing proof / That he is worthy of their love?” (164). In capturing this intimate moment of introspection in writing, the poem delivers a distinct vantage point at a given time in history which nonetheless speaks to ubiquitous aspects of the human experience (e.g., moments of vulnerability and uncertainty).

Nevertheless, this still does not completely answer the question of intent, given that there are certainly other, more rhetorical elements at work. On the one hand, the poem's adherence to subjectivity seems itself rhetorical. Patrick Deane remarks, “the solipsistic experience of reading

such a work is paradoxically at the root of whatever efficacy the text may eventually enjoy in history and in human affairs outside of literature,” and further states that the conscious effort “between one subject and another reading, turns out indeed to be [...] a way in which an author can—albeit obliquely—make something intentional ‘happen’” (184). The oblique nature of this “something” seems purposeful as well, as the speaker expresses time and again their uncertainty over where to begin, how to instigate change in the correct way, and how to overcome the unrest they face within themselves. While these concerns appear to be genuinely felt, they also function as an acknowledgment of change; implicitly aware that the vision itself, along with the means of approaching it, may change shape, the speaker vaguely conceptualizes the vision as a means of preservation, allowing others to connect their own search across time and space. Approaching the conclusion of this first part, the speaker emphasizes this point: “truth, like love and sleep, resents / Approaches that are too intense” (Auden 166). This appears to be an extension, or perhaps a revision, of sorts, of the logic expressed in “Law Like Love,” which emphasizes conscious reticence over boisterous debate. Here, the speaker advocates not for a default silence, but rather for prudent discourse; it is not so much a resignation to “boast anyway” (209), but an acceptance that speculation holds the potential to provide any measure of insight. Potentiality, rather than certainty, is key here, as the speaker finishes Part One:

“This private minute for a friend,

 Be under Flying Seal to all
 Who wish to read it anywhere,
 And, if they open it, *En Clair*. (167).

In Part Two, we witness the sudden emergence of “The Devil” (171), whom the speaker depicts in a surprisingly human light. Like the Thing, this Devil engages similarly in psychological manipulation for the purposes of forging a “false association” in the minds of men: he links “Truth with a lie, then demonstrate[s] / The lie and [the men] [...] in truth’s name, / Treat babe and bath-water the same” (171). This process is merely a catalyzed account of the Thing’s pernicious influence, wherein individuals are persuaded unknowingly to invert their values to suit the creature’s interest. The speaker’s concern as to how this could happen without arousing suspicion receives an explanation here: it is not so much that one’s perception of “Truth” is obscured or reconstituted, but rather it is the means by which one believes Truth will be obtained that undergoes change. The subtlety of these malicious efforts only serves to increase anxieties surrounding this crisis, yet despite the Devil’s successes, his efforts are fraught with difficulties of their own:

For as the great schismatic who
 First split creation into two
 He did what it could never do,
 Inspired it with the wish to be
 Diversity in unity [...] (171)

In other words, his method of dividing others has succeeded in sowing isolation and hatred; however, these persistent divisions only intensify human desires for a natural coexistence among all. As the speaker states, this desire is not bent on a desire for uniformity—an attempt to do so would likely result in the failures expounded in “Like a Vocation”—but rather for heterogeneity. Therein lies another error on the Devil’s part: his attempts to obscure and divide humanity only serve to create more “dualities” within it, thus driving his vision of all-encompassing domination further towards the realm of impossibility. In effect, his goals become, like the speaker’s own, a vision

that distorts the more one tries to grasp it. Tellingly, “diversity in unity” becomes the only viable option for the Devil and the speaker alike in this scenario. It is the only mode by which both can come close to their respective visions: the Devil, in that his vision of supremacy is impossible and will only be an approach, bent on division, at best; and the speaker, in that their vision of Truth is universally inclusive, indiscriminatory, and voluntary.

The Devil’s human-like qualities—his fallible reasoning, as well as his need for a unified diversity—place him in close association with humanity at large. Indeed, the speaker suggests that the Devil’s presence does not merely distract and corrupt individuals; rather, he serves as a reflection of humanity’s destructive tendencies. The devastation that the Devil has waged throughout the poem is weakened momentarily in one stanza, wherein the speaker declares that his presence is an embodiment “Of fear and faithlessness and hate / That takes on from becoming me / A legal personality” (169). By depicting the Devil in mundane, emotionally fervent terms, we receive an account of this crisis that places more direct responsibility on the person rather than on clandestine forces beyond human control. The speaker once again employs subjective experience in characterizing themselves as taking on such a state. It should also be mentioned that, in becoming a “legal personality,” they are also voicing their skepticism towards a global trend towards modernity and rationalism; in part three, we witness the speaker pivot from their ideological formulations to deliver a lengthy exposition regarding “the Renaissance Man,” who “feel[s] in splendid isolation / [...] In the closed cab of Occupation” (184). Like the Devil, he too achieves “half-success” (184) in his attempts at promulgating reason and economy, yet in the end he “[dies] hated and alone” (185). Nonetheless, without proper vigilance from the public, these values proliferate even after the man’s death, ultimately leading to an unfamiliar reality:

Whichever way we turn, we see

Man captured by his liberty,

 Boys trained by factories for leading
 Unusual lives as nurses, feeding
 Helpless machines, girls married off
 To typewriters, old men in love
 With prices they can never get

 Children inherited by slums
 And idiots by enormous sums. (185-86)

Here, the speaker depicts a crisis of humanity in similar terms to the crisis contrived by the Devil; the difference here, however, is that this crisis is grounded in a specific context surrounding economic inequality, sustained by widespread complicity with a corrupt status quo. Furthering this section's subjectivity is the potential that these derisions reflect Auden's political views at this particular moment in time; as Deane highlights in his critical analysis on *New Year Letter*, while Auden disavowed Communism as a viable method to bring about the future he envisioned in 1939, he nonetheless did not "cease to hold the political views he had held before that date" (177), yet the poem refrains from the supposedly propagandistic methods of the English Auden. The significance of all this is that, in depicting a subjective, temporally specific crisis, the sensational crisis expressed in *New Year Letter* which pits the Devil against humanity is rendered allegorical. By way of this subjectivity, humanity's true adversary becomes itself, the Devil being just one particular "mode of thought" (183) through which to understand it. Yet, in becoming one's own worst

enemy, humanity is also equipped with the knowledge, informed by that sense of isolation and self-interest, that change is necessary.

The speaker is careful to emphasize the sheer difficulty of fighting back against the divisive trends plaguing humanity. Their earlier considerations surrounding the shortcomings of art in bringing forth “Truth” are expanded to include those of language itself. Having previously remarked that “language may be useless, for / No words men write can stop the war” (166), they interrogate this matter further:

If in this letter that I send
I write ‘Elizabeth’s my friend,’
I cannot but express my faith
That I is not Elizabeth. (169)

In this vein, the speaker is suggesting that the very nature of language itself is based on delineation, and therefore division. The use of pronouns to distinguish between the speaker and their friend, Elizabeth, puts the two at a certain distance from one another—a distance which the speaker takes interest in, particularly regarding what might be possible if this distance is bridged. Yet with these considerations of language in tow, the speaker’s vision of unity becomes antithetical to some of the most basic elements of cultural experience. While the speaker does not deny that language imparts division, this does not discourage them in their endeavor, claiming instead that “our best protection is that we / In fact live in eternity” (169), stating further that “The sleepless counter of our breaths [...] / Has no direct experience / Of discontinuous events” (169). Above all else, this passage seeks to challenge constructed notions of divisions by suggesting that “eternity” exists outside the reach of human experience and is therefore unaffected by attempts to interfere with it. Conversely, all human experience exists within eternity, and for this reason all human experience

shares a genuine connection. Moreover, this elucidates the speaker's additional claim that "all our intuitions mock / The formal logic of the clock" (169). Here, the speaker pits "time"—itself another cultural notion—against inherent "intuitions," implying by their "mocking" that they exist in the realm of some instinctual truth ubiquitous to humankind. This distinctly metaphysical mode of thought, while suggestive of some large-scale overhaul of culture, exists only to emphasize humanity's natural inclination towards Truth; indeed, it is true that the Devil's mischief has granted humanity "half-truths" (176) by way of his False Association, suggesting their relative proximity to the whole Truth. The speaker proposes that humanity synthesize these half-truths, and therein

lies the gift of double focus,
 The magic lamp which looks so dull
 And utterly impractical
 Yet, if Aladdin use it right,
 Can be a sesame to light. (176)

This passage suggests a method by which to achieve "diversity in unity," particularly in synthesizing fragments of truth with other people. It is—as we have seen in the previous poems—a "solution" based around mundanity and gradual progress: the stipulation that the lamp must be used correctly makes the possibility of this solution rather conditional, and at its best it will function as a microscopic avenue through which to arrive at Truth. Yet the utility of "double focus" may, in fact, be the most viable candidate for the speaker in bringing about human progress in its most plausible sense.

The implications of "double focus," particularly in the context of marriage, are elucidated in the third part of the poem. This, however, is preceded by an important allusion to, and subsequent reconsideration of, Auden's vision of Agape. Parallel to his vision in 1933, the speaker

experiences their own vision spontaneously and in the company of others. Describing this vision as an “unexpected power” (177), they proceed, “Each felt the *placement* to be such / That he was honoured overmuch” (177). While the speaker emphasizes a feeling of unwavering certainty, or a sensation that all is apparently right in this particular moment, we do not receive the finer details of this sensation. While on the one hand this highlights the speaker’s general hesitance in putting forth definitions of such an experience—as they state much earlier regarding the interpretation of art, “each life must itself decide / To what and how it be applied” (162)—it also captures the speaker’s concerns in over-sensationalizing this experience, thereby rendering it inaccessible to a general audience. Reflecting further on this experience, the speaker notes that this experience is relatively common:

O but it happens every day
 To someone. [...]

 [...] anytime, how casually,
 Out of his organized distress
 An accidental happiness [...] (177)

Moreover, while this sensation appears to be happenstance, triggered by even the most ordinary circumstance, its effects are still powerful, serving as a glimpse into “Eternal Innocence” (177) wherein true “diversity in unity” might be achieved. The speaker is quick to highlight that this sensation’s purpose is to make the individual “re-aware” (178); it functions as a blissful reminder of what could be, but its resemblance to that prospective future is not that future in and of itself. Therefore, “man must eat it and depart / At once with gay and grateful heart” (178); in other words, man must appreciate but not bask in this unexpected moment of passion, for it serves to reinstate

their convictions. Indulging in this moment—as with pursuits of Truth that are apparently too direct—runs the risk of squandering this moment entirely, leaving one with a feeling of disappointment once it is gone.

Furthermore, the speaker delivers a vision that both builds upon the claims of the prior poems as well as Auden’s 1933 vision—it is a vision that, despite its upheaving qualities, is utterly commonplace and brief. The vision, too, is subjective; as the speaker states, their own envisioned future is merely “a given mode of thought” (183). In a characteristic moment of self-conscious boasting, they nonetheless elaborate on this mode:

No matter where, or whom I meet,

 Whenever I begin to think
 About the human creature we
 Must nurse to sense and decency,
 An English area comes to mind [...] (182)

Interspersed throughout this passage are lucid descriptions of the speaker’s travels, as well as recollections of his youth in England, both of which for obvious reasons draw inspiration from Auden’s life. These passages are not meant to be self-aggrandizing, nor are they to suggest that other visions must embody the qualities as the speaker’s visions. Instead, their existence in the poem is a matter of practicality, particularly by forging potential connections with future generations of readers; as Deane puts it, shifting out of focus from “the historically specified recipient of the letter, onto the unspecifiable reader who will encounter the poem at some uncertain point in history, we see that the gospel of process [...] will to some extent still be available to a reader even after conventional interpretation has become problematized by the alteration of historic

circumstances” (192). In other words, these passages effectively safeguard a particular mode of thought amidst a particular historical moment, which can be retrieved by future readers in the poem’s larger effort to “[make] something intentional ‘happen’” (184) beyond its literary confines.

Given the centrality of subjective experience in *New Year Letter*, in large part inspired by the poet’s own, it is not erroneous to suggest that Auden’s marriage informs the speaker’s expressed mode of thinking. One particular passage in the poem’s final stanza stands out amongst the rest; addressing Elizabeth Meyer directly, the speaker implores her, “bless / Me with your learned peacefulness,” so that they might emit “a warmth throughout the universe” and the knowledge “that each for better or for worse / Must carry round with him through life, / A judge, a landscape, and a wife” (193). The images of the “judge” and “landscape” are relatively familiar: earlier, the speaker describes the pursuit of the vision as akin to lifelong mountaineering, wherein upward movement is almost always grueling and prolonged, and the path is often lost; in this scenario, the “judge” might serve as our imperfect guide—or perhaps even the tribunal from Part One—and the “landscape” the summit that seems perpetually out of reach. This “wife,” however, is a novel concept within the confines of the poem, though we have certainly seen allusions to love and relationships in the poems discussed previously. It is very possible that Auden is invoking his own marriage in this passage, referring to Kallman as a “wife” in this context to suppress the homosexual nature of their relationship. While his concern for marriage appears to be a footnote in relation to the wider themes present throughout the poem, the professions of love expressed by the speakers in the previous poems offer potential insight when compared to *New Year Letter*. Akin to Gottlieb’s analysis of “In Sickness and in Health,” the speakers in these poems, “while identifiable, [are] nevertheless anonymous; [their voices], while sober, [are] nevertheless otherworldly” (37); yet at the same time, despite this otherworldliness, they “[make] no distinction

between a higher realm inhabited by the Great and the lower sphere of ordinary life” (36). Indeed, we witness this in “Like a Vocation,” wherein the titular vocation evokes selfless compassion in the second-person subject against the unremarkable backdrop of a cityscape; and in the case of “Law Like Love,” the speaker exclaims their belief that their romantic love resembles the Law, yet in the same breath they voice its inherently vain and imperfect qualities. From these excerpts, we receive a concept of love, and by extension marriage, that is deeply important to the speakers despite its ordinary nature.

In the context of love and marriage, particularly regarding the declaration that one must “carry round with him through life [...] / [...] a wife” (Auden 193), the aforementioned “double focus” takes on an entirely different meaning. This “wife,” and by extension marriage, becomes the means by which the speaker obtains “double focus.” Unsurprisingly given Auden’s previous depictions of love, the speaker protests the idea of marriage at first directly to Meyer: “may the truth / That no one marries lead my youth / Where you already are” (193). The implication here is that Meyer has already married, and despite the speaker’s previous apprehension regarding marriage, they suddenly and unexpectedly find themselves in the same position. Auden has made clear delineations between “Truth” and “truth” in this poem, and here we see the latter emerge, suggesting that his speaker has gained hindsight in matters related to marriage; in other words, they have cast off their previous beliefs that marriage, too, is dull and impractical, yet they still need guidance in order to sustain that belief indefinitely. Thus, the speaker links cautiously their “wife” amidst larger efforts to achieve their vision, and this spirit of fragile certainty undergirds much of the third part of the poem. For instance, in conceptualizing a way towards their vision, the speaker acknowledges their propensity to make mistakes along the way and the consequences those mistakes might have—and yet they declare,

Whatever wickedness we do

.

We can at least serve other ends,

Can love the *polis* of our friends

And pray that loyalty may come

To serve mankind's *imperium*. (180)

Here, the speaker confesses that those in search of this ultimate “*imperium*” (be it a collective or the union between the speaker and their “wife”) might fail in their own lifetimes to bring it about, yet they still stand to make meaningful differences in the lives of those closest to them; perhaps, the speaker suggests, such a microcosm can become a model for the world at large. Viewed through the lens of marriage, on the other hand, “wickedness” may refer not only to the human capacity for error, but also the moral repugnancy that homosexuality was, and certainly still is, associated with. While it is true that Auden’s own views on homosexuality wavered, this passage suggests that if same-sex marriage is inherently wicked, the harm it can supposedly inflict pales in comparison to the good that can come from it. The speaker expresses similar righteousness following their mountaineering allegory; in what serves as a blessing to this uphill journey, that speaker exclaims,

O once again let us set out,

Our faith well balanced by our doubt,

Admitting every step we make

Will certainly be a mistake,

.

And keep in order, [...]

.

A reverent frivolity [...] (179)

Again, while this call for cautious determination applies to any and all measures heading in the direction of Truth, they also function like marital vows. As discussed previously, the speaker in “Law Like Love” demonstrates a keen awareness of their, as well as their partner’s, vain tendencies, the likes of which pose a threat in preserving their relationship. This awareness equips the speaker with a certain wariness that is extended here; in equal measure the speaker of *New Year Letter* expresses faith and doubt, yet their awareness—perhaps amplified by their “double focus”—enables them to both identify their miscalculations and reassess previous strategies. Essentially, this awareness becomes their primary mode of defense against adversity, not only in the form of “the Devil” but also largescale pressures that deem their marriage to be deplorable and nonexistent. Additionally, this call for “reverent frivolity,” the likes of which appear later in “In Sickness and in Health,” applies to marriage itself, particularly in its “double” nature; as Gottlieb states, “the combination of seriousness and frivolity is doubtless due, in part, to the doubleness of marriage itself: it can be both a legal institution and a moral commitment, and the two need not overlap” (31).

“IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH”: THE UTILITY OF MARRIAGE

“In Sickness and in Health” (1940), beginning with its title, serves as Auden’s most direct reference to marriage of these four works. Amidst a state of calamity similarly found in *New Year Letter*, the speaker parses among other things the presence of Eros, the pervasiveness of which has served to blot out its Agapian counterpart, contributing further to the “shadow [cast] through the universe” (Auden 247). Linked closely to this concern is a recitation of the flaws present in the speaker’s romantic relationship; again, we see the speaker embracing these shortcomings and, in

a sense, sanctifying them “arbitrarily” through the institution of marriage. Ultimately, it is here where Auden’s larger concepts begin to align with one another: marriage becomes both the model and mode by which the speaker, along with their partner, will pave the way forward via an outpouring of love.

The first stanza of “In Sickness and in Health” functions in many ways as a re-visitation and consolidation of the themes of the last three poems, signaling that the speaker’s concerns revolve around those issues and goals aforementioned. Addressing an unspecified individual, the speaker begins, “Dear, all benevolence of fingering lips / That does not ask for forgiveness is a noise / [...] To serve some glittering generalities” (247). The presence of “fingering lips,” which suggests an eloquence (and perhaps duplicity) of speaking, feels keenly reminiscent of the “treble tongue” of grandsons found in “Law Like Love,” the likes of which also made similar generalities in search of the one true “Law.” This search is certainly driven by the assumption of benevolence, but perhaps also righteousness; for such reasons, to avoid forgiveness—which, as we have seen in *New Year Letter*, is an acknowledgment of one’s propensity to be wrong and commit wrongdoing—is to preclude genuine progress. The “noise” that results from this miscalculation appears to have an exponential effect, as the speaker states,

Now, more than ever, we distinctly hear
 The dreadful shuffle of a murderous year
 And all our senses roaring as the Black
 Dog leaps upon the individual back. (247)

Further comparisons can be drawn to the previous poems. First and foremost, the presence of noise (the “dreadful shuffle”) has, in a sense, been building up from poem to poem; with respect to “Like a Vocation,” we witness the partial muffling of the child’s crying by the bustle of the city, and in

breadth “Law Like Love” stands as a cacophony of competing voices. It is this same proliferation of noise that renders individuals vulnerable to the ominous “Black Dog,” who, like “The Thing” in *New Year Letter*, seems to favor a clandestine, gradual approach in targeting its prey. All of this is to say that the same elements of the works discussed previously appear to be at work here, most likely for the purposes of synthesis. Moreover, *New Year Letter* finds itself swept up in the same dilemmas and looking towards the same viable solutions to remedy them.

Indeed, almost as an extension of the ideas professed in “Law Like Love,” the poem puts forth “Love” as such a solution by positioning it in direct opposition to the dilemmas facing the speaker’s reality. On the one hand, Love is under fire by the combined force of noise and covert malice: “What figures of destruction unawares / Jump out on Love’s imagination” (247). The ambiguous diction of this passage indicates the speaker’s persistent uncertainty, serving as both an exclamation of horror at the identifiable “figures” (e.g., the “noise,” which unbeknownst to itself causes further harm the more it presents itself) as well as a desperate longing to know those which are not clearly “identifiable” (e.g., “the Black Dog,” who relies on mass sensory overload to remain hidden, as well as the source of the “noise”). Yet, even in its perpetually desecrating state, the speaker insists that reclaiming “Love’s imagination,” specifically by spreading Love itself, is an extremely delicate and painstaking process. Voicing familiar caution, the speaker insists, “Let no one say I Love until aware / What huge resources it will take to nurse / One ruining speck, one tiny hair” (247). Thus, we return to a scenario in which, akin to the mountaineering journey of *New Year Letter*, the individual sets out on a grueling, virtually endless path towards their vision, which in this case is the “imagination” brought forth by Love. That desire “to nurse,” mimicking the unexpected compassion found in “Like a Vocation,” drives this individual forward in spite of

the difficulties before them. Also at odds with this endeavor is the current state of the world, as the speaker describes it:

We are the deaf immured within a loud
 And foreign language of revolt, a crowd
 Of poaching hands and mouths who out of fear
 Have learned a safer life than we can bear. (247)

Here, the speaker seems to link the present sensory overload of the masses to a kind of anxious self-interest. This behavior is antithetical to human nature as, according to the speaker, it denies the default inclination of humans to exhibit empathy and compassion for even the most remote strangers. There remain, however, instances in which this inclination pierces through this “foreign [...] revolt,” as in the case of the second-person subject in “Like a Vocation,” whose desire to respond to a child’s crying “climbs towards [them]” (204) despite the blaring noises of the city. This small instance elucidates Love’s authentic form in accordance with the poem, as well as the difficulties in enacting that authentic Love amidst an environment that concertedly, yet unknowingly, pushes back against it.

Akin to its romantic themes, the poem also parses the relationship between erotic and Agapian love, finding that an imbalance has occurred between these two forces that is perpetuated by the dilemmas at hand. In the same way that the speaker’s reality operates under the auspices of a “foreign language,” they remark that “Nature by nature in unnature ends” (247), suggesting that humanity’s attempt to define reality, or more specifically to define what constitutes “nature,” only drives it further from what is truly natural. This process of defining nature may not be deliberate, but rather one’s sense of what is natural, and by extension what is normal, may be reinstated by an immobile fixation on the present, driven by the aforementioned need for safety. It is this rigid

existence that not only disables one's ability to think beyond their material environment—perhaps achieving that “imagination” instilled by Love—but also binds them to a limited repertoire of human interaction and expression. Such a hindrance bars Agapian love (i.e., love that is selfless and compassionate) and leaves room only for the erotic. This development seems to have been hinted throughout literary history; for instance, we witness “Tristan, Isolde, the great friends, / Make passion out of passion's obstacles, / Deliciously postponing their delight” (247), and “Don Juan, so terrified of death” “must find / Angels to keep him chaste” (247). In each of these scenarios, these characters apparently succumb wholeheartedly to the erotic, their reasoning having to do with fear and entrapment. In the case of Tristan and Isolde, their desperation for real passion entices them not to seek it out but to prefer the obstacles to that passion themselves, while Don Juan, rather than confront his own anxieties, chooses instead to exploit feminine innocence (i.e. “Angels”) as a means of protection. Moreover, these depictions are telltale signs that “Eros is politically adored” (248), and “New Machiavellis, flying through the air, / [...] Murder their last voluptuous sensation / All passion in one passionate negation” (248). These remarks are reminiscent of the speaker's skepticism towards “the Renaissance Man” in *New Year Letter*, particularly in its promulgation of occupation, rationality, and subsequently, isolation. Here, similar skepticism is directed towards Machiavellian behavior, of which self-interest and emotional unavailability are characteristic. In the case of these “New Machiavellis,” total resignation to the erotic—perhaps out of fear or stubborn refusal to pursue anything greater—is tantamount to murder. In other words, while the speaker's reality is averse to Agapian love, the act of fully succumbing to the erotic—thus giving up on recovering Agape entirely—has the effect of squandering the value of Eros as well. Moreover, this is not necessarily a critique in which Agape is positioned as overtly superior to its counterpart, suggesting the possibility that the two may be in balance with one another.

This is important to keep in mind when considering the speaker's personal investment in this reality, which comes in the form of an incipient marriage. Herein, the speaker in a familiar tone addresses their partner directly and unabashedly: "beloved, we are always in the wrong, / Handling so clumsily our stupid lives, / Suffering too little or too long" (248). The admittedly derisive humility found in this passage falls in line with the reality that the speaker has laid out for us; if this reality is utterly averse to Agapian love, then commitment is undoubtedly anathema to it. Thus, it is unsurprising that the speaker finds themselves, along with their partner, failing at every turn and succumbing to the same vices expressed previously. Their own fixation on the present moment, for instance, is made clear by their tendency to over-suffer and not suffer enough; in other words, like Tristan and Isolde, they nullify their own fears temporarily by "[making] passion out of passion's obstacles," yet this has the effect of prolonging their suffering unnecessarily. And yet, seemingly locked in this state of existence, the speaker suggests that the only way forward is acceptance, or conscious appreciation, of these tendencies:

The decorative manias we obey
 Die in grimaces round us every day,
 Yet through their tohu-bohu comes a voice
 Which utters an absurd command—Rejoice. (248)

Interestingly, the speaker defines their tendencies as part of the "tohu-bohu," a biblical phrase which captures the state of earth prior to the creation of light, which is characterized by emptiness, confusion, and more relevantly, vanity. In doing so, they situate the emergence of the "absurd command" parallel to the crying child in "Like a Vocation;" the command penetrates the chaos for no discernible reason, nevertheless providing a momentary glimpse of what reality could be. This seems to be what makes this command so absurd: it exists even though the speaker's relationship

is rife with flaws and is often—if not almost always—moving away from that imaginative plane which they strive for.

A sudden shift takes place a few stanzas on, wherein the couple's supposed misjudgments and egotism are suddenly rendered meaningless by an unknown force, likened to the capital-A-“Absurd.” The speaker proceeds, “Rejoice, dear love, in Love's peremptory word; / All chance, all love, all logic, you and I, / Exist by grace of the Absurd” (248). The insouciant nature of this passage is not to suggest genuine indifference towards their actions; instead, Love's unwavering authority—the “peremptory word”—trumps all other dissenting voices, even the speaker's (and thus Auden's) own. They recognize that their love is both genuine and rare, and—given the countless forces in place to try and stop it—should not exist. Essentially, this is what transfigures this Love, and the unknown force which bestowed it upon them, “Absurd.” Thus, the speaker seeks to savor this gift in all its unlikeness and by the only means they know possible. Insisting that “without conscious artifice we die” (248), in a self-mocking, yet triumphant tone, they continue, “describe round our chaotic malice now, / The arbitrary circle of a vow” (248). In this vein, the act of “conscious artifice” (here, through the artificial construction of marriage) becomes the only method of survival for the speaker's relationship, the likes of which are, by its artificial nature, inherently frivolous but nonetheless vital. Bringing to memory Auden's espoused belief in the “doubleness” (not to be confused with the “double-focus”) of marriage (Gottlieb 31), the speaker's resignation to and subsequent acceptance of the arbitrary nature of marital vows reveals their imbibement of that same “reverent frivolity” that emerges in *New Year Letter*. In regarding their marriage with equal seriousness and frivolity (Gottlieb 31), the speaker escapes suffocating feelings of wrongdoing and hopelessness, yet this same logic also enables them to face the adversity

before them and, from the Love which they have begun to cultivate in their marriage, move in the direction of “Love’s imagination” in its broadest sense.

What follows this passage is a benediction—or more accurately an explication of the vows mentioned previously—which situates the speaker’s marriage as a starting place in search of “Love’s imagination.” On the one hand, these “vows” are intended to be a protective measure in preserving the authenticity of the marriage itself; thus, the speaker expresses their conviction “that this round O of faithfulness [...] / [...] never wither to an empty nought” (Auden 249), as well as their determination never to “take [...] love for granted, [recognizing that] Love permit / Temptations always to endanger it” (249). In laying out the indefinite threats against this marriage, the speaker hopes to remain conscious of them so as to take the necessary steps in warding them off when necessary; “Temptation,” like the Devil in *New Year Letter*, functions in one sense to warn the speaker that something has gone wrong and that maintenance of some sort is required. It is this same logic of reiterative, conscious contemplation that underscores the journey towards “Love’s imagination,” an endeavor that will be equally as challenging as the speaker’s marriage. Indeed, the speaker links this logic to this larger effort in the final stanza; emboldened by the support of their partner, the speaker insists that “we try / To set up shop on Goodwin Sands, / That we, though lovers, may love soberly” (249), while nonetheless beseeching “fate [...] / [...] [to] hold [them] to the ordinary way” (249). It seems less likely that the speaker’s desire to reside on “Goodwin Sands” (a real sandbank in Kent, England) is literal; rather, it appears to be, like the invocation of English scenery in *New Year Letter*, a “mode of thought” through which they visualize that imaginative plane, that Good place brought forth by Love. The only route by which they will achieve or, at the very least, approach their destination is to resist sensationalism and temptation alike,

hence “the ordinary way.” In what appears to be a direct acknowledgment of the duo’s imperfections, this “ordinary way” becomes the only route through which Truth emerges.

CONCLUSION

Considering these four works of poetry in comparison to one another, the links become ever clearer in their contribution to Auden’s burgeoning ideologies throughout this period. Across these works, two modes of thought seem to be formulating in parallel: one which conceptualizes a total reconstitution of reality to serve the needs of all and the precise methods by which to achieve that reality; and another which explores the imperfect nature of private relationships and how those shortcomings can be redirected towards mutually productive ends. Nevertheless, almost immediately we witness these two modes of thought overlap. In “Like a Vocation,” the speaker’s search for the means by which to bring about real community that does not depart, reflected in part through the poem’s second-person subject, is interrupted by the irresistible force of childlike crying; immediately the second-person subject is overtaken by the desire to bring comfort to this voice, and it is here that the poem gestures towards Agapian love as a potential solution to departure. We see this potential solution built upon in “Law Like Love,” wherein speech itself is interrogated as a potential obstacle to the discovery of “Law,” the likes of which may play a vital role in bringing about the “unconcerned condition” the speaker describes. While reticence is at the heart of the poem, the speaker nonetheless voices their belief that “Law” resembles love, taking their own, albeit flawed, relationship as evidence. *New Year Letter*, among many other things, personifies the myriad forces which hold back reality from returning to its natural state, barring not only community but love itself. Additionally, we witness the speaker set a course forward in combatting these forces, acknowledging that—like the turbulent nature of their marriage—their

efforts will be rife with error and miscalculations that should not be denounced but instead accepted. And in what is effectively a revisiting of this impending quest, “In Sickness and in Health” situates marriage’s propensity for error at the core of progress. In other words, the speaker’s marriage is not simply a starting point through which Agapian love may come to fruition—it is also a model which highlights the calamitous route that love must traverse to be bring about that aforementioned community.

These same recurring themes highlight an incipient avenue of thought that accounts for queerness and Christianity in tandem, reflecting the core values of modern queer Christian theologians and people. Certainly, radical love, which transcends conditionality and borders, is undoubtedly at the heart of these works. The transformative power of this love—engendered through selfless compassion, the willingness to listen rather than speak, and the presumption of fallibility—is demonstrated in the way their speakers meticulously conceptualize a reality that accounts for this unconditionality, not in a utopian sense but in an approach that accounts for mundane, and thereby realistic, human experience. Amid this conceptualizing, the experiences of homosexuals, among other marginalized groups, are not overlooked. Indeed, the speaker’s efforts do not simply imply but advocate explicitly for an overhaul of the current system of affairs; this is a system that not only bars higher forms of love, and thereby community, but also inhibits disproportionately the livelihoods of specific groups based on their inability to fit within the conventions of that system. Moreover, these poems not only reject fractured community and demagogic rhetoric but conventional definitions of marriage as well, and this rejection is deliberate. As Gottlieb states, Auden’s views on marriage as institutional, and his “arbitrary” subversion of that institution in “In Sickness and in Health,” reflects his conviction that “everyone and anyone to create the circle, without reliance on commanding authorities and superior models [...] [Therefore] everyone is

thus enjoined to marry in his or her manner, to his or her liking; and no agent—whether religious, legal, or even aesthetic—is invested with the power to punctuate the present by pronouncing a marriage valid ‘now’” (40). As a further matter, rendering such an institution “arbitrary,” and subsequently likening the speaker’s relationship as bestowed by an “Absurd” force, queers heteronormative notions of marriage and religion, thereby enabling access to these institutions for all who desire it (and specifically those who have been denied it historically).

It should be noted that significant attention has been brought to Auden’s views on marriage in the past, suggesting similarly that it stands as a microcosmic model by which global crises may be remedied over time. Through marriage, Mendelson states in his critical biography, Auden identified “an alternative to the group and political life in which he had hoped to submerge his solitude [...] it was the personal love [his vision] had prophesied” (381). Nevertheless, these criticisms (Mendelson’s and Gottlieb’s notwithstanding) often overshadow Auden’s homosexuality in relation to this model of marriage or suggest that it serves as an opposing tension. On the contrary, at the height of Auden’s marriage to Chester Kallman do we find a bold, albeit subliminal, transgression of heteronormative oppression which, among other things, has, on the grounds of sexuality, barred access to genuine expressions of love and participation in community-based religion. Accounting for Auden’s supposedly uncertain views on the moral nature of homosexuality and erotic love, even, his characterization of Eros in “In Sickness and in Health” is admittedly forgiving. Certainly, the speaker suggests that the so-called political adoration of Eros is problematic; however, their solution is not to eradicate its presence but to reinstate balance between the erotic and the Agapian, sharing partial resemblance with Althaus-Reid’s claims. This problem, too, appears to span the whole of humanity regardless of individual sexual preference. All of this is to say that the positioning of homosexuality in relation to this model of marriage is by no means

supplementary; rather, it is an imperative component that in large part dictates its utility and relevance in a modern context. Akin to the “conscious artifice” underscoring the speaker’s marital vows in “In Sickness and in Health,” Auden’s use of marriage as a model is not so much an invocation or borrowing of this institution as it is a re-modeling.

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