

= In Praise of Limestone =

" In Praise of Limestone " is a poem written by W. H. Auden in Italy in May 1948 . Central to his canon and one of Auden 's finest poems , it has been the subject of diverse scholarly interpretations . Auden 's limestone landscape has been interpreted as an allegory of Mediterranean civilization and of the human body . The poem , sui generis , is not easily classified . As a topographical poem , it describes a landscape and infuses it with meaning . It has been called the " first ? postmodern pastoral " . In a letter , Auden wrote of limestone and the poem 's theme that " that rock creates the only human landscape . "

First published in Horizon in July 1948 , the poem then appeared in his important 1951 collection Nones . A revised version was published beginning in 1958 , and is prominently placed in the last chronological section of Auden 's Collected Shorter Poems , 1922 ? 1957 (1966) .

= = Themes = =

Auden summered on Ischia , an island in the Gulf of Naples , between 1948 and 1957 ; " In Praise of Limestone " was among the first poems he wrote there . The titular limestone is characteristic of the Mediterranean landscape and is considered an allegory of history in the poem ; the properties of this sedimentary rock invoke the sedentary and domestic picture of Mediterranean culture . The calcium in limestone makes it water @-@ soluble and easily eroded , yet limestone builds up over eons , a stratum at a time , out of organic matter , recalling the stratified history of Mediterranean civilisation . Interpreting the metaphor of ground in poetry , the critic Rainer Emig writes , " The ground [is] a perfect symbol of cultural , ethnic , and national identity , a signficatory confluence of the historical and the mythical , individual and collective . "

According to critic Alan W. France , the Mediterranean 's religious tradition and culture are contrasted in " Limestone " with the Protestant and rationalistic " Gothic North " . He views the poem as an attempt to " rediscover the sacramental quality of nature , a quality still animate in the ' under @-@ developed ' regions of the Mediterranean South ? in particular Italy below Rome , the Mezzogiorno ? but thoroughly extirpated in the Germanic North by Protestant asceticism and modern science . " Auden , then , is looking on this landscape from the outside , as a member of the Northern community , yet includes himself as one of the " inconstant ones " :

Other outsiders , however ? the constant and more single @-@ minded (the " best and worst ") ? do not share his appreciation for the landscape . Rather , they " never stayed here long but sought / Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so external " . The " granite wastes " attracted the ascetic " saints @-@ to @-@ be " , the " clays and gravels " tempted the would @-@ be tyrants (who " left , slamming the door " , an allusion to Goebbels ' taunt that if the Nazis failed , they would " slam the door " with a bang that would shake the universe) , and an " older colder voice , the oceanic whisper " beckoned the " really reckless " romantic solitaires who renounce or deny life :

The immoderate soils together represent the danger of humans " trying to be little gods on earth " , while the limestone landscape promises that life 's pleasures need not be incompatible with public responsibility and salvation . After seeming to dismiss the landscape as historically insignificant in these middle sections of the poem , Auden justifies it in theological terms at the end . In a world where " sins can be forgiven " and " bodies rise from the dead " , the limestone landscape makes " a further point : / The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from / Having nothing to hide . " The poem concludes by envisioning a realm like that of the Kingdom of God in physical , not idealistic terms :

Auden 's literary executor and biographer Edward Mendelson and others interpret the poem as an allegory of the human body , whose characteristics correspond to those of the limestone landscape . The poet recognises that this landscape , like the body , is not witness to great historical events , but exists at a scale most suitable to humans . " Limestone " questions the valuation of that which exists on a scale different from the body ? politics , the fascination with consciousness , and other abstractions . The poem 's ending lines , which justify the landscape in theological terms , are also a theological statement of the body 's sacred significance . The poem is thus an argument against

Platonic and idealistic theologies in which the body is inherently fallen and inferior to the spirit . This interpretation is consistent with Auden 's many prose statements about the theological importance of the body .

The Karst topography of Auden 's birthplace , Yorkshire , also contains limestone . Some readings of the poem have thus taken Auden to be describing his own homeland . Auden makes a connection between the two locales in a letter written from Italy in 1948 to Elizabeth Mayer : " I hadn 't realized how like Italy is to my ' Mutterland , ' the Pennines " . The maternal theme in the poem ?

? is a point of entry into the psychoanalytical interpretation of the poem , in which the limestone landscape is a suitable backdrop for narcissism . The poem 's " band of rivals " cavorting about the " steep stone gennels " exists in an aesthetic and spiritual torpor ? unable to " conceive a god whose temper @-@ tantrums are moral / And not to be pacified by a clever line / Or a good lay ? " . Lacking inner conflict , these youth will never " separate " or produce a new kind of art . Compared to the trait 's earlier literary treatments , " Limestone " ' s narcissism " bodes not so much the promise of a powerful aesthetic , but an artistic culture which , while it seduces , is ultimately stultified by the gratification of its own desire " .

= = Structure and narration = =

The narrator 's tone is informal and conversational , attempting to conjure the picture of a dialogue between the reader and the speaker (who is evidently Auden himself , speaking directly in the first person as he does in a large proportion of his work) . The informality is established syntactically by enjambment ? only 13 of the poem 's 93 lines are clearly end @-@ stopped . There are few instances of rhyme , and about half the lines end on unaccented syllables . The lines alternate 13 syllables incorporating five or six accents with 11 syllables and four accents . Auden adapted this syllabic construction from Marianne Moore . The pattern is reinforced by the line indentation and confirmed by Auden 's own reading . This structure mitigates the tendency of normally accented English speech to fall into the rhythm of iambic pentameter . Swift changes in the sophistication of diction also occur in the poem , as in conversation , and lend it an immediate , informal quality .

The poet 's audience seems to change between halves of the poem . He first addresses , in the first @-@ person plural , an audience of like @-@ minded readers or perhaps humans in general . He is discursive and speaks from a historical perspective , using imperatives such as " mark these rounded slopes " , " hear the springs " , and " examine this region " . At line 44 , his listener becomes a single beloved person , and the tone becomes more private . Auden now refers to himself , specifically , and addresses an intimate as " dear " , with a greater sense of urgency :

= = Legacy = =

Mendelson , Auden 's biographer , summarises the response to " In Praise of Limestone " in the years following its publication : " Readers found the poem memorable ? but even the critics who praised it did not pretend to understand it . Those who , without quite knowing why , felt grateful to it were perhaps responding to its secret , unexplicit defense of a part of themselves that almost everything else written in their century was teaching them to discredit or deny . "

The English poet Stephen Spender (1909 ? 1995) called " In Praise of Limestone " one of the century 's greatest poems , describing it as " the perfect fusion between Auden 's personality and the power of acute moral observation of a more generalized psychological situation , which is his great gift " . Literary critic David Daiches found it loose and unfulfilling . The poem became " In Praise of Sandstone " at the hand of Australian poet John Tranter (1943 ?) , who created a poetic form called the " terminal " in which only the line @-@ ending words of the source poem are kept in the writing of a new work .