

*Austin Warren (1899–1986) was an author and eminent literary critic, whom Hecht first encountered at Kenyon in the summer of 1948.*

April 27, 1979 Rochester NY

Dear Austin,

I've just returned home from the happy business of conferring the National Book Award for Poetry on James Merrill—a ritual I performed in the company of Elizabeth Bishop and Michael Harper—to find a copy of Sewanee Review [volume 87, Spring 1979] with your fine article on Auden. I thank you for it in the double sense of having first of all composed it, and then of seeing to it that the copy came my way. I have read it through with pleasure and assent. It seems to me you perform exactly the three tasks you set out for yourself—always allowing for the fact that an attempt to say “what kind of man” anyone was can never be quite perfectly realized. And in Auden’s case this task is complicated by a remarkable reticence regarding his own virtues. He is the only man I have ever known who went to the same contorted pains to conceal his kindnesses from public notice the way most of us conceal our vices. You cite his famous gift to Dorothy Day [“how, looking like a tramp, like her own ‘parishioners,’ Auden emerged from a crowd to give her a check for \$250 and then disappeared”—p. 244]<sup>9</sup>; he must have suffered agonies when that became widely known. But the stories I have heard, all second-hand, confirm both an unusual generosity and a fanatic desire to conceal it. I’ve heard, for example, that after World War II he adopted, anonymously and through some agency, two German war orphans, and quite simply undertook to guarantee their upbringing and education through college without ever meeting them. There is another story about a young man in Ischia who somehow got a fish-hook caught in his eyeball, and the physician having to be fetched by bicycle from another town, Auden was the only one willing and able to stay with the wounded stranger and hold his head and talk with him till help arrived. I cannot vouch for either of these representative tales, but they conform with my sense of the “kind of man” I think he must have been.

With regard to another question you raise—“how he could be at once a Christian and a practicing homosexual”—perhaps with years he arrived at the settled formula by which you explain that reconciliation, but I don’t entirely

<sup>9</sup>A fuller version of this anecdote can be found in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 382.

believe it, and at least have personal, first-hand knowledge that at one time it was not so. I knew him in Ischia for about a year in 1950, and once he ventured to speak candidly, movingly and briefly on this topic. Recollections from so far back are bound to be misty and likely to be distorted, but my sense of the conversation is that it began with Auden saying that in the absence of a church of his own he regularly attended the Roman Mass, and of course made his confession. There was some jest about the wisdom of seeking out a Franciscan, say, instead of a Dominican, if there were something especially burdensome to confess. It was in this context that the problem presented itself, and I remember very clearly that Auden said he took very solemnly the injunction against sodomy in Deuteronomy. He said it with such simple, unqualified force that all talk ceased for a very long interval until some altogether different topic presented itself for discussion. His declaration carried the weight it did because it was itself an open confession of spiritual unhappiness, and at that juncture in his life, as all of us who were there well knew, he was not enjoying domestic tranquility. And I can't help feeling that my recollections here are borne out by precisely the essay on [J. R.] Ackerly you cite, in which he [Auden] says, "Few, if any, homosexuals can honestly boast that their sex-life has been happy,"—which is admittedly not the same as saying it is contrary to the decrees of religion. Nevertheless, for someone like Auden I would guess there must have been some connection; why else should homosexual love be "damned" as unhappy? Not, for Auden at least, because it came under the public censure of parochial bigotry, for which he would have felt only contempt.

Finally, while agreeing with you that Auden was never an anti-semitic; that, as you said, "many of his best friends, early and late, were Jews;" yet I think that in his case the point has to be made positively rather than negatively: he was not merely not anti-semitic, he was "philo-judean," and some of his friends used to remark that he regarded himself as an honorary Jew. Whether he did indeed I don't know, but somehow, and perhaps not unlike Bonhoeffer, he meant to preserve himself and his Christian faith from any taint of complicity with what happened under the Nazis. And to do more than merely preserve himself and his faith out of some sense of fastidiousness; not so much to "set himself off from the wicked" as to embrace without reservation whatever the wicked condemned. And to do so for love. I believe he was personally stung by any expression of anti-semitism wherever he found it, and it was his especial humiliation to have to take account of its expression on the part of certain poets and teachers he revered. There is no doubt whatever, for example, in my mind that

he is referring to a barbaric sentiment of Eliot's when he allows the Narrator (in section IV of the part called "Summons" of the Christmas Oratorio) to say:

... and the recent restrictions  
Upon aliens and free-thinking Jews are beginning  
To have a salutary effect upon public morale.

He must have known, in writing that, that Eliot might take it as a slight. And it is by no means the only such gesture in that text.

As compared with your large and generous survey, my essay on [Auden's] "In Praise of Limestone" is narrowly circumscribed. It is due in the fall, and I shall certainly send you a copy. Meanwhile, I hope you will not find any impertinence in my comments here; none, certainly was intended. And I hope, moreover, that your eyesight is happily restored.

Affectionately,  
Tony

*I have not been able to discover the identity of this person beyond the fact that she lived in Montana when she wrote to Hecht.*

May 3, 1979 Rochester NY

Dear Phyllis Siegrist,

Your letter and accompanying poems arrived at what is for me, and perhaps for you, too, an especially busy and almost frantic juncture of the academic year; I'm up to my ears in term papers and poems from my own writing students and the hot breath of the registrar, calling in dragon-flame for my grades. So I cannot give you here what I think you may have hoped for: a detailed commentary on individual poems. I'm sorry if this disappoints you, but you were right in guessing that yours is by no means the only unsolicited manuscript that has recently come my way.

To speak generally of your work, of such work of yours as I've seen, let me say that I think you are genuinely talented, markedly gifted; though at the same time (and this is no disgrace, considering your youthfulness) your work is recognizably derivative, and excessively "influenced." At this early stage that is not in itself necessarily a bad thing; one probably always learns one's first writing skills by the sedulous aping of the styles and authors one most admires. Moreover, it is pointless and foolish to attempt earnestly to "be yourself" till you have