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TRAVERSING W.H. AUDEN'S RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC
STATES

TRINCULO Servant-monster! The folly of this island! They say there's but five upon this isle: we are three of them; if th'other two be brained like us, the state totters.¹

In the expanse of scholarship on W.H. Auden's oeuvre, direct comparisons of "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" and "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*"—and thus sustained treatments of *For the Time Being*² as a singular intra-related publication—are curiously scarce. Protracting the book's dichotomous reception in 1944-1945, when most critics gauged the poems as in essence unrelated and read "For the Time Being" as a hapless companion to "The Sea and the Mirror,"³ this lacuna in Auden studies is at odds with *For the Time Being*'s own textual history.

As Edward Mendelson notes, Auden reworked key abandoned portions of the Christmas oratorio for inclusion in his poetic commentary on *The Tempest*: thus, a deserted oratorio lyric in which the poet's aesthetic talent or literary "gift speaks in the first person" resurfaces in the commentary as the crucial "'Postscript' spoken by Ariel to Caliban: 'Weep no more but pity me, / Fleet persistent shadow cast / By your lameness'."⁴ Likewise, in replacing Simeon-as-poet with Simeon-as-theologian in the oratorio's final draft, Auden reworked the former's discarded lines and incorporated them into the commentary's second section, "Prospero to Ariel," which features a "lonely, self-isolating Prospero."⁵

Bibliographically and compositionally, therefore, "For the Time Being" is intricately linked to "The Sea and the Mirror." Nevertheless, in recent Auden scholarship, perceived distances between the poems appear to have all but crystallized, even to fallacious extents. For instance, Matthew Mutter aptly enlists Auden's "criticism of magical poetics" to appraise the scholarly return of "magic and occultism to prominence as categories for understanding the aspirations of modernist literature."⁶ Yet, after tracing the contours of

¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.2.4-6.

² W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945).

³ In *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1983), see Mark Schorer, "Auden's Beautiful Flights"; Harry Levin, "Through the Looking Glass"; Desmond MacCarthy, "Beauty and Bugbear"; Hugh Kingsmill, "On Auden's Self-Consciousness, Occluded Pastures"; Stephen Spender, "On Argument or Experience"; and R.G. Lienhardt, "Auden's Inverted Development." With the slender exception of Levin, all reviewers subordinate "For the Time Being" to "The Sea and the Mirror" and construe former as, in MacCarthy's words, superfluous "Bugbear" that is only bibliographically connected to the latter's "Beauty" (334).

⁴ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 213.

⁵ Ibid., 213.

⁶ Matthew Mutter, "'The Power to Enchant that Comes from Disillusion': W.H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 1 (2010): 58.

disenchantment through Auden's adaptations of Prospero and Caliban, Mutter writes: "Auden knew very well that Enlightenment rationalism could be complicit with imperialism and dramatized the problem in his Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being* (1942), which was published just two years before *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944)."⁷ Conspicuous in light of his esteem for Arthur Kirsch's *Auden and Christianity* as one of "the best books on the intellectual and poetic consequences of Auden's conversion to Christianity,"⁸ Mutter's ostensibly minor error on the poems' publication history derives from his consultation of Auden's *Collected Poems*,⁹ which Mendelson arranges chronologically.

In that volume, one conveniently finds dates of composition, not publication, italicized at the end of each poem. While this oversight does not compromise the rigor of Mutter's perspectives on each individual poem, it does hinder him from interlocking them in ways their very co-publication solicits. It deters him, in other words, from engaging Kirsch's shrewd perception as to why Auden "placed 'For the Time Being' last in the volume, though he wrote it first": he did so "because he thought that the secular, if religiously informed, exploration of art in *The Sea and the Mirror* should be a prelude to the manifestly religious representation of the Incarnation in 'For the Time Being'."¹⁰

Arguably, this organizational decision informs the poems individually by signposting their inverted trajectories in *For the Time Being* and *Collected Poems*. Without a scrupulous bibliographic trace, however, cross-pollination from one poem to the other does not become an exegetical priority. Mutter, that is, grants the poems only one flickering instance of continuity: "Prospero's desire to take revenge on the Romans for their grammar¹¹ and Herod's self-conscious linking of imperialism and secular rationality¹² disclose Auden's awareness of the fact that magical thinking is an understandable mode of resistance to the tyranny of secular empire."¹³ Sound as it is, this argument verges on the incidental; for, in "The Sea and the Mirror" and "For the Time Being," Prospero and Herod are respectively dwarfed by far grander figures—namely,

⁷ Mutter, 64.

⁸ Ibid., 79n2. Kirsch provides a bibliographic lead-in to his chapter on *For the Time Being* in *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): "The volume entitled *For the Time Being*, which was published in 1944, consists of 'For the Time Being', which Auden began writing towards the end of 1941 and finished in July 1942, and *The Sea and the Mirror*, which he wrote from October 1942 to February 1944, while he was teaching at Swarthmore College" (39).

⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976).

¹⁰ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 39.

¹¹ See "Prospero to Ariel" in *For the Time Being*, 10. "Roman grammar," Mutter suggests, "is the tyrannical mark of the ancient world's equivalent of secular imperialism. The Roman empire has often been associated with the sort of bureaucratic instrumentalism that characterizes the culture of modernity. The imposition of a disciplined, uniform grammar is a way of undermining the irrational excesses and irregularities of barbaric magic" (62).

¹² See "The Massacre of the Innocents" in *For the Time Being*, 113-14. In the notes to his critical edition of *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Alan Jacobs suggests that "Herod's speech parodies the *Meditations* of the philosopher and (from 161 to 180 CE) Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius" (89-90). Mendelson notes that "Herod's speech restates in dramatized form Auden's argument that liberalism, which exposed the workings of power behind moral systems, had left itself without an answer to Hitler, who went a giant step further by dropping all pretense of morality and acknowledging power as his sole means and motive" (*Later Auden*, 192).

¹³ Mutter, 65.

Caliban and Christ—who have surprisingly eluded cross-referencing in Auden studies.

To underline why such cross-referencing is important, I would counterpoise Mutter on Auden's aesthetics of disenchantment and Robert Caserio on Auden's aesthetics of queer citizenship in his American phase. Furthering Mendelson's view that Auden's poetry harbors "the voice of a citizen who knows the obligations of his citizenship,"¹⁴ Caserio does not misconstrue the bibliography of *For the Time Being*. Nevertheless, he does withhold the specificity of "The Sea and the Mirror" from his key argument:

Auden, even as he turns from one national citizenship to another, acts out...a conversion of citizenship itself, a new paradoxical—indeed perverse—characterization of it. Taking out American citizenship papers, Auden repudiates detached political neutrality; at the same time, by becoming a U.S. citizen during the wartime composition of *New Year Letter*, *For the Time Being*, and *The Age of Anxiety*, the poet uses the poems to redefine what it means to be a modern national. The redefinition limns the uncertainty of one's political passport. ...The subject and the origin of Auden's civic voice canonizes not a state of inclusion, but a state of allegiance-on-the-move, a refugeeism, whereby neutral citizenship is both cancelled and reinstated. The refugee isn't *settled* by citizenship papers...the poet's poems work to make his reader see that the dignity of citizenship inheres in a concretely enacted state of being *between* or *among* nations.¹⁵

Caserio here parses "*For the Time Being*" as a singular work (i.e. the oratorio), rather than as a book of two poems. Affording one reference to "The Sea and the Mirror" in its overlay with "*For the Time Being*,"¹⁶ this approach yields an attenuation of bibliography reminiscent of the lapse in Mutter's reading. More peculiar, however, is the leapfrogging effect that results from Caserio's interpretation: proceeding reverse-chronologically, from *The Age of Anxiety* (composed from July 1944 to November 1946 and published in 1946) to "*For the Time Being*," Caserio ultimately bypasses "The Sea and the Mirror" as Auden's intervening long poem.

Reading the latter's lean cameo in Caserio's elucidation, in which only "the start of *The Sea and the Mirror* belongs to the moment of [Auden's] draft board rejection [in 1942],"¹⁷ one is apt to inquire how the poem as a whole might factor into Auden's experience of citizenship. If as Kirsch suggests "the secular, if religiously informed, exploration of art in *The Sea and the Mirror*" both prefaces and presages "the manifestly religious representation of the Incarnation

¹⁴ Mendelson, preface to *Selected Poems* by Auden, ed. Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xi.

¹⁵ Caserio, "Auden's New Citizenship," *Raritan* 17, no. 1 (1997): 91.

¹⁶ Caserio observes that Auden "applied for citizenship, and registered for the draft in 1940, concurrent with the writing of *New Year Letter*. Auden's next long poem, *For the Time Being*, spans the end of 1941—not long after Auden discovered [Chester] Kallman's secret infidelity (since late 1940) with an English merchant marine sailor—and September, 1942, when Auden was rejected by the draft board on account of his homosexuality. *For the Time Being*, as we shall see, uses the Nativity story in order to meditate on fidelity and infidelity in gay marriage, and on citizenship and exile; and the start of *The Sea and the Mirror* belongs to the moment of the draft board rejection. During the composition of these poems, Auden's citizenship application was in suspense" (92).

¹⁷ Caserio, 92.

in 'For the Time Being,'"¹⁸ then this inquiry obliges us to dovetail the elisions in Mutter's account of disenchantment and in Caserio's analysis of citizenship in Auden's oeuvre.

Approached sans its suggestive imbrications with "For the Time Being," "The Sea and the Mirror" in Mutter's construal sheds its "religiously informed"¹⁹ character in favor of its secular-aesthetic dimensions. Thus, Mutter argues that "in Auden's re-telling, the problem of magic does not concern the primitive rationality of the native Caliban, but the despotic speech of the colonizer Prospero."²⁰ Effaced by Prospero's more troublesome "despotic" wizardry, Caliban's relatively unproblematic, "knotty, late Jamesian pastiche"²¹ recedes further from its textual interface with Christ in "For the Time Being."

Correspondingly, when Caserio sidesteps "The Sea and the Mirror" in his analysis of Auden's citizenship, pivotal lines from section four of "The Summons"—"the dream of a Perfect State or No State at all, / To which we fly for refuge, is part of our punishment"²²—garner a perhaps overly-religious gloss: "Moreover, it is to be remarked that the Perfect State probably is also the Perfect Religious State, which Auden encapsulates in *For the Time Being* in 'The Meditation of Simeon'."²³ Here, the Nativity's religious import for Auden's poetics of citizenship eclipses the secular undercurrents of "For the Time Being," which bind it intricately to "The Sea and the Mirror."

Consequently, in Caserio's reading "the Perfect Religious State" does not readily encounter the genesis of its own unraveling at the end of "For the Time Being"²⁴ and, far more baroquely, throughout "The Sea and the Mirror." In my view, Auden's agile strategy of cross-pollination from one poem to the other—predominantly, that is, from Christ to Caliban and vice versa—in fact offsets the perfect religious state via a secularly perfect aesthetic state. *For the Time Being* thus dialectically interfaces the "Perfect" states of the oratorio's Messiah and the commentary's Monster to ensure their mutual imperfections. As such, their textual interface, as I read it, supplements Caserio's view that for Auden "the dignity of citizenship inheres in a concretely enacted state of being *between* or *among* nations."²⁵

Interminably between or among the textual states of these long poems, whose under-examined cusp enables me to supplement my account of how Auden labors to queer the doctrine of the Incarnation,²⁶ I pursue movements of corporeality across "For the Time Being" and "The Sea and the Mirror," attending in particular to valences of embodiment as spirit materializes flesh through Christ's Incarnation; and as flesh materializes spirit through Caliban's carnality. Given the poems' textual history, whereby the commentary organizationally precedes the oratorio in *For the Time Being* and thereafter chronologically succeeds the oratorio in Auden's *Collected Poems*, studies may sequence analyses of these works in either direction²⁷—as long as a trace of the poems' bibliographic inversion

¹⁸ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 39.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mutter, 62.

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Auden quoted in Caserio, 102.

²³ Caserio, 102.

²⁴ Raji Singh Soni, "The Sleep of Christ: Incarnation and Queerness of Heresy in W.H. Auden's 'For the Time Being,'" *Religion and the Arts* 18, no. 4 (2014): 566-67.

²⁵ Caserio, 91.

²⁶ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ."

²⁷ That is, by treating "For the Time Being" before or after treating "The Sea and the Mirror." I imagine the organizational margin between the

is acknowledged. Tracking Auden's inversions of flesh and spirit, in either and therefore both directions, underscores the poems' bibliographic trace, thereby enabling one to see Christ and Caliban as immanent to one another in *For the Time Being* as one book of two long poems. Such immanence discloses, at least in the compass of Auden's poetics, how the Incarnation is empty without carnality, just as carnality is blind without the insights of spirit.²⁸

Mutatis mutandis the ostensible religious state of "For the Time Being" and the apparently secular aesthetic state of "The Sea and the Mirror" deconstruct one another via Auden's transfiguration of embodiment across the poems. Auden's poetics of citizenship, qua Caserio's model, unfolds precisely along this textual border—the permeable margin between Caliban's erotic yet "Drab mortality"²⁹ and the paradox of Christ's hallowed materialization. Gauging Auden's studies in existential Protestant theology, I liken this liaison of the drab and the hallowed to Søren Kierkegaard's ethically-interlocking aesthetic and religious spheres. This furtive interdependence of aesthetic and religious angles illustrates the import of theological doctrine for secular desire and of secular revisionism for religious conviction. Cross-hatching these poems, then, facilitates in my view a kind of syncretism, if not a heterodox collusion, between Christ's phenomenal Incarnation and Caliban's prodigal carnality.

In its "Preface (*The Stage Manager to the Critics*)" "The Sea and the Mirror" offers complex responses to Joseph's plea, relayed during the Holy Family's flight from Herod in "For the Time Being," for the "Mirror" to allow him, Mary, and Jesus to "pass through the glass / No authority can pass."³⁰ Hinging on Joseph's appeal to the "Mirror" and his sense of a political "authority" not held by the exiled Holy Family, the Preface poses questions grounded in "For the Time Being" that will haunt "The Sea and the Mirror":

O what authority gives
Existence its surprise?
Science is happy to answer
That the ghosts who haunt our lives
Are handy with mirrors and wire,
That song and sugar and fire,
Courage and come-hither eyes
Have a genius for taking pains.
But how does one think up a habit?
Our wonder, our terror remains.³¹

The Stage Manager's stanzas in "The Sea and the Mirror" complicate the stakes of Joseph's plea. Whereas in "For the Time Being" the Holy Family flees from an authority that is chiefly political,³² in "The Sea and the Mirror" authority pertains instantly to "Existence" and its more existentialist air of "surprise," "wonder," and "terror." Notably, as affects that crisscross the threshold between secularity and religiosity, these nouns extend the oratorio's theological focus on embodied anxiety, which Auden inflects via Kierkegaard's *The*

poems in *For the Time Being*—that is, where "The Sea and the Mirror" ends and "For the Time Being" begins—as continuous with both the beginning of "The Sea and the Mirror" and the end of "For the Time Being"; in other words, to mark the chronology of Auden's compositions, I see the end of "For the Time Being" as the opening margin of "The Sea and the Mirror," even though the latter textually precedes the former in *For the Time Being*.

²⁸ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A51/B76; 193-94.

²⁹ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 59.

³⁰ Ibid., 120.

³¹ Ibid., 7-8.

³² Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 554-55.

Concept of Anxiety and its anthropological trinity.³³ In the commentary's Preface, more specifically, surprise, wonder, and terror presuppose anxiety insofar as the latter ventures with the apprehensive Holy Family from the oratorio's texts of religious epiphany through the aesthetic plane of the commentary's mirror.

Moreover, in the oratorio's final movement, the mundane secularity of noontime³⁴ not only prefigures the surprised, wondrous, and terrified reflections to which anxiety is privy in the mirror of Auden's Shakespearean commentary; this secular poetics of noontime also anticipates the Stage Manager's recourse to "Science" for a possible answer to his own existential query on "authority." Drawing the Holy Family behind the surface of the "Mirror" through which they would pass, that is, the Stage Manager entertains empiricism's resolve to unveil the supernatural as smoke and mirrors: "the ghosts who haunt our lives," including perhaps the Holy Ghost of Trinitarian Christology, "Are handy with mirrors and [with the] wire" that allows us to frame and suspend the reflecting glass upon our household walls.

In other words, passing without authority (or *sans papiers*) from "For the Time Being" to "The Sea and the Mirror" or vice versa entails a rigorous "philosophy of reflection"³⁵ whose canvass is ample enough to address at once the objectivities of science and the subjectivities of existentialism, whereby the gap "Between Shall-I and I-Will" caves into "The lion's mouth whose hunger / No metaphors can fill."³⁶ As indicated by my reference to Gasché's classic study, *The Tain of the Mirror*, Auden's logic in this stanza pivots in my view on a concerted

breakthrough toward radical otherness (with respect to the philosophical concept—of the concept)...within philosophy, the form of an a posteriority or an empiricism. But this is an effect of the specular nature of philosophical reflection, philosophy being incapable of inscribing (comprehending) what is outside it otherwise than through the appropriating assimilation of a negative image of it, and dissemination is written on the back—the *tain*³⁷—of that mirror. Not on its inverted specter.³⁸

Like Derrida in *Dissemination*, Auden in "The Sea and the Mirror" initially situates us—as well as the Holy Family in its pursuit of safe passage—before the mirror's reflecting surface, where we achieve a "specular" presence to and a "spectral" manifestation of ourselves. Soon thereafter, however, Derrida and Auden in their very dissimilar ways place us behind the framework of the same mirror's physical apparatus, where our glassy images swiftly vanish into hard textures of tinfoil, wood, nail, and wire. To follow the seminal trace of signification in philosophy and poetics, we turn from the mirror's

³³ Ibid., 552-53.

³⁴ Ibid., 566-67.

³⁵ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 13-54.

³⁶ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 8.

³⁷ Gasché notes that "*Tain*, a word altered from the French *étain*, according to the OED, refers to the tinfoil, the silver lining, the lustreless back of the mirror. Derrida's philosophy, rather than being a philosophy of reflection, is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play" (5-6).

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 33.

surface to its dusty unreflecting apparatus, or *parerga*.³⁹ The narcissistic will to gaze softly into our own "come-hither eyes"⁴⁰ on the mirror's glassy facade is precisely what leads Derrida to locate Dissemination's sharpest traces "on the back—the *tain*—of that mirror. Not on its inverted *specter*".⁴¹ Concomitantly, this same temptation prompts Auden's Stage Manager to ask: "How does one think up a habit?"⁴² That is, how are we habituated to prefer one side of the mirror to the other? Why favor spitting images to the wire that backs them?

By implicitly gesturing the Holy Family and Shakespeare's theatergoing critics (to whom the Preface is addressed) toward the *tain* of the artistic mirror upon whose surface they now gaze, the Stage Manager leads us into the vivid nominal fold of "The Sea and the Mirror." As Auden strongly indicates in "Caliban to the Audience,"⁴³ the poem's title alludes to a meta-theatrical exchange between Hamlet and the First Player:

HAMLET: ... in the very torrent, *tempest*, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperature that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. *It out-Herods Herod.* Pray you avoid it.

FIRST PLAYER: I warrant your honour.

HAMLET: ... Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you *o'erstep not the modesty of nature*. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at first and now, was and is to hold, as 't were, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.⁴⁴

Curiously, when pinpointing Caliban's allusion to the meta-theatrical crux of *Hamlet*, Auden scholars tend to cite only lines 21-23.⁴⁵ By widening the compass of Caliban's allusion to *Hamlet*, however, I would emphasize Auden's own meta-theatrical, meta-poetic, and reflexive designs for "The Sea and the Mirror"—a work he organized via post- or meta-performance monologues from *The Tempest's* characters and producers, each of whom speaks in a discrete poetic

³⁹ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McCloud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 17-147; Soni, "In the Letter of Mere Reason: Rethinking the Universal Secular Intellectual with Immanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 2 (2013), 154-58.

⁴⁰ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 8.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 33. Emphasis added.

⁴² Auden, *For the Time Being*, 8.

⁴³ "You yourself," Caliban states in his post-performance address to the Bard, "we seem to remember, have spoken of the conjured spectacle as 'a mirror held up to nature,' a phrase misleading in its aphoristic sweep but indicative at least of one aspect of the relation between the real and the imagined, their mutual reversal of value." Auden, *For the Time Being*, 39.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.2.5-23. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, the textual range Kirsch allots to *Hamlet* when he glosses Caliban's allusion to "a mirror held up to nature." Auden and Christianity, 99.

form that appears in one of five divisions: "Preface (*Stage Manager to the Critics*)," "Chapter I: *Prospero to Ariel*," "Chapter II: *The Supporting Cast (Sotto Voce)*," "Chapter III: *Caliban to the Audience*," and "Postscript (*Ariel to Caliban. Echo by the Prompter*)."

More suggestively, by rereading "the mirror up to nature" in the broader context of *Hamlet* 3.2, we notice not only the Baudelairean deftness in Auden's substitution of "Sea" for "Nature,"⁴⁶ but also the proximity of "tempest" and "Herod" to the very Shakespearean metaphor that predicates Auden's poetic commentary. Near the end of "For the Time Being," as I noted above, Auden refers the Holy Family to a "Mirror" through which "No authority can pass." In *Hamlet* 3.2, Herod, the authority from whom the Holy Family flees, signifies the histrionic excess Hamlet's Players must circumvent by adhering to "the modesty of nature" and by holding "the mirror up to nature."⁴⁷ Consonantly, Hamlet's sense of dramatic passion as a "tempest," alongside "torrent" and "whirlwind," further spirits the Holy Family of "For the Time Being" beyond the oratorio's marginal threshold with "The Sea and the Mirror": by allegorically smuggling Joseph, Mary, and Jesus across this textual border, Auden implicitly situates the heterodox body of Christ⁴⁸ both before the mirror of art, which will reflect the Messiah's "form and pressure" in "the very age and body of the time";⁴⁹ and behind its reflective surface, where the mirror's "wire"⁵⁰ and *tain* bolster virtue's "own image"⁵¹ via the disseminative "ghosts who haunt our lives."⁵²

This admittedly circuitous reading of "The Sea and the Mirror" as an allegorical port of entry for the oratorio's rather queer Holy Family⁵³ pivots on two crucial remarks from Auden's correspondence and table talk, which highlight the commentary's aesthetic and religious aims. "The Sea and the Mirror," Mendelson explains,

is a poem about poetry. Its subtitle describes it as "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," as if it were a work of literary criticism. In form it is a long quasi-dramatic work in verse and prose in which the characters of Shakespeare's play comment on their experiences and most of them have strong opinions about the relation between art and life. Prospero and Caliban, who are given the longest speeches, talk about little else. Auden confirm this interpretation in letters to friends. He told Ursula Niebuhr that "The Sea and the Mirror" was "really about the Christian conception of art," and to Theodore Spencer he wrote that it was "my Ars Poetica, in the same way I believe *The Tempest* to be

⁴⁶ Cf. Charles Baudelaire, "Man and the Sea," poem 14 in *The Flowers of Evil*: "Free man, you'll love the ocean endlessly! / It is your mirror, you observe your soul / In how its billows endlessly unroll— / Your spirit's bitter depths are there to see. / You plunge in joy to your reflection's core, / With eyes and heart seizing it all along; / Your heart sometimes neglects its proper song / Distracted by the ocean's savage roar." Trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33.

⁴⁷ On Shakespeare's association of Herod with "a robustious periwig-pated fellow" whose poor acting skills "tear a passion to tatters, to very rags," Hibbard notes that "out-Herods Herod" means surpassing "the excesses of Herod. In the Coventry cycle, which Shakespeare when young could have seen, Herod, on hearing that the Magi have returned to their own lands without informing him of the whereabouts of the infant Christ, breaks into a violent rage" (248).

⁴⁸ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 556-60.

⁴⁹ *Hamlet*, 3.2.21-3.

⁵⁰ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 7.

⁵¹ *Hamlet*, 3.2.22.

⁵² Auden, *For the Time Being*, 7.

⁵³ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 562-66.

Shakespeare's, i.e., I am attempting, which in a way is absurd, to show, in a work of art, the limitation of art."⁵⁴

Pursuing "the limitation of art" through "a work of art," despite the latter's enticements to aesthetic liberation, Auden concedes that his Shakespearean commentary "in a way is absurd." Arguably, because Kierkegaard's writings serve as a dynamic backdrop for many of Auden's literary endeavors after 1940, the descriptor "absurd" ultimately resonates with the epistemology of faith in *Fear and Trembling*: "The absurd does not belong to the differences that lie within the domain of the understanding. It is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, [or] the unforeseen."⁵⁵ Rather, the absurd belongs outside the precincts, limits, and thus limitations of "the finite world where [the understanding] dominates."⁵⁶

Used by Auden in concert with "limitation" to qualify boundaries proper to secular aesthetics in modernity, the term "absurd" in its Kierkegaardian sense implies another precinct against which art and the artist will necessarily chafe in nonreligious domains of the understanding. Ultimately, as a lay, non-liturgical, and thus secular work of art that surreptitiously advances a "Christian conception" of aesthetics, "The Sea and the Mirror" delineates the zone of the absurd as wrought by a religious "paradox of faith"; bordering on the secularist understanding's "finite world" of aesthetic play, this domain of religious paradox and absurdity harbors "an interiority [or level of ineffable secrecy in the singular individual] that is incommensurable with [the] exteriority" that governs the worldly, secular, empirical understanding.⁵⁷

Amid the friction of these incommensurable realms, Christ's passage from the oratorio's Egyptian desert, through the titular mirror, and thence to the *tain* of the aesthetic commentary reinforces Auden's "absurd" effort to intertwine religion and secularity in *For the Time Being* as a book of two poems. Via his turn to Kierkegaardian existentialism, which imbricates while also differentiating between aesthetic, ethical, and religious "spheres,"⁵⁸ Auden in "The Sea and

⁵⁴ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 205.

⁵⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans.

Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 46.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans.

Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 69.

⁵⁸ In a key pseudonymous work, Kierkegaard writes: "The ethical is proud and declares: When I have judged, then nothing more is needed. This means that the ethical wants to be separated from the esthetic and the externality that is the latter's imperfection; it desires to enter into a more glorious alliance, and this is with the religious. The religious then plays the same role as the esthetic, but as the superior; it spaces out the limitless speed of the ethical, and development takes place there." *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 442. For Žižek, Kierkegaard's spherical existentialism overhauls "the 'modern age' opposition between external lifeless ritual and pure inner sentimental conviction: not through a pseudo-Hegelian synthesis, so that we re-establish an authentic social life in which 'external' social rituals are again permeated with authentic inner conviction...but by endorsing the paradox of authentic faith in which radical externality coincides with pure internality." *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 212. For a sense of Auden's critical appreciation of Kierkegaard's existentialism, see two essays collected in *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973): "Søren Kierkegaard" and "A Knight of Doleful Countenance." Also of note is the role of existential spheres in Auden's *The Enchafed Flood; or, the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 83-87. For discussion of Auden's Kierkegaardian turn, see

the Mirror" does not conflate religious interiority and secular exteriority. True to their Kierkegaardian form, these domains persist as incommensurable, even as Auden draws the Holy Family into the commentary through an implicitly Christian conception of art. The flight of the Incarnation's key players, as each is redrawn in "For the Time Being,"⁵⁹ into Auden's Shakespearean "work of art" on "the limitation of art"⁶⁰ thus interposes the two States in *For the Time Being* as a singular book: the imperfect "religious state" of the oratorio⁶¹ and the imperfect "aesthetic state" of the commentary. As Auden implies in conversation with Alan Ansen, the stakes of traversing such states are intriguingly novel:

The Catholics haven't really evolved a Christian aesthetic. They didn't take over Aristotle's metaphysics, so why persist in a pagan aesthetic? After all, they didn't condemn works of art as being unchristian. Even St. Thomas relies on Aristotle's aesthetic. In fact, one wonders just how Christian he was...And the unsureness of the Catholic Church in dealing with the movies is another example. They have a good answer for almost everything – contraception, for example. But their attitude towards manifestly heretical movies, which they let by, is thoroughly inconsistent. You know, I am beginning to feel that even Dante isn't really a Christian writer. He's really *the greatest poet*. It's amazing how much harder it gets when one has come to take things seriously. Before I became a believer it was easy to accept Dante's theology and suspend disbelief. But now I'm coming to doubt whether he really was a Christian. He doesn't realize that God suffers.⁶²

Auden's views here revolve around his Kierkegaardian distinction between an unelaborated "Christian aesthetic" and an established secular or "pagan aesthetic." For him, Christianity has not developed a coherent philosophy of art by which to mark its own aesthetic stances from those enshrined in Antiquity's pagan conventions and in the secularizing worldview of Renaissance Europe.⁶³ Corollaries of this argument include not only Auden's sense of the inconsistencies that mar Catholicism's aesthetic judgment of films that are "manifestly heretical," but also his provocative doubts as to the very Christianity of Aquinas and Dante; for, in the aesthetic sphere, Aquinas's Aristotelian baggage may inadvertently derail an ethical passage to the domain of religious faith and thus absurdity. Consonantly, following upon his own Patrilinear conviction as to the Trinity's quasi-creatively suffering,⁶⁴ Auden conjectures that Dante's theology is less Christian than we imagine; for, in the mediating ethical sphere, "Dante's Hell consists of punishments imposed from without, not of sinners who deliberately stay there, which is the Christian belief."⁶⁵ If Dante's ethical sphere is compromised, then so is his religious sphere: "He doesn't realize that God suffers."⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁶⁰ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 562-66.

⁶¹ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 205.

⁶² Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 566-67.

⁶³ Ansen, *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, ed. Nicholas Jenkins (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 33-34.

⁶⁴ Cf. Auden on the Newtonian "Great Chain of Being." *The Enchafèd Flood*, 49.

⁶⁵ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 556-62.

⁶⁶ Ansen, 34.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

By the mid-twentieth century Auden was not alone in his view that “[t]he Catholics haven’t really evolved a Christian aesthetic.”⁶⁷ Between 1961 and 1985, Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar completed a daunting sixteen-part study of Christianity, the first seven volumes of which he called *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. In *Volume I: Seeing the Form*, von Balthasar first traces “The Elimination of Aesthetics from Theology.” He then advances “From an Aesthetic Theology to a Theological Aesthetics” that will shape *The Glory of the Lord*’s remaining volumes.⁶⁸ Auden’s theological and aesthetic aims in *For the Time Being*, as I gauge its interfacing structure, dovetail with von Balthasar’s intentions in *The Glory of the Lord*.⁶⁹ Indeed, notwithstanding their differences in genre, both works ultimately grapple with secular modernity’s core “aesthetic contract”:

The conventions or terms of the [aesthetic] contract are precisely those problems an artistic or intellectual community is willing to undertake for the duration of the contract. Examples of particular aesthetic contracts include “German tragic drama,” “the Elizabethan sonnet,” décadence, modernism, and postmodernism...The aesthetic contract is in effect so long as its always provisional and tentative solutions are to problems whose relevance is agreed upon by some consensus...A new order of government or a new system of production or technology may so alter living and thinking conditions as to invalidate a particular aesthetic contract...Artworks that become the basis for aesthetic contracts hover between an exciting hypothesis regarding possibility and a plausible analysis of existing conditions...“Creative freedom” is itself a clause deriving from one particular aesthetic contract, a late-Enlightenment-Romantic one, whose terms are elaborated, among others, by Kant, Schlegel, and Kierkegaard.⁷⁰

For von Balthasar and Auden, the epicenter of modernity’s aesthetic contract is “the secular nature of the theological void,” which “the artist was constructed to fill”; for both authors, moreover, the artist—a “human-born deity of creative and intellectual endeavor”—is

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Brian McNeill C.V.R. and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

⁶⁹ “We here attempt,” von Balthasar writes, “to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful. This introduction will show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once so strongly informed theology. It is not, therefore, our intent to yield to some whim and force theology into a little travelled side-road, but rather to restore theology to a main artery which it has abandoned. But this is in no sense to imply that the aesthetic perspective ought now to dominate theology in the place of the logical and the ethical. It is true, however, that the transcendentals are inseparable, and that neglecting one can only have a devastating effect on the others...we recommend that this attempt...not be dismissed *a priori* as ‘aestheticism.’” *Seeing the Form*, 9. Notably, whereas von Balthasar pursues the aesthetic as a field long-neglected by theology, Auden perhaps overstates the case by arguing that Catholic philosophy has “not really evolved a Christian aesthetic.” Ansen, 33. Von Balthasar might counter Auden by positing that the aesthetic field in question merits reconstruction, rather than construction.

⁷⁰ Henry Sussman, *The Aesthetic Contract: Statutes of Art and Intellectual Work in Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 165-66.

"encrusted with metaphysical values so persistent that we are laboring at their productive illumination even today."⁷¹ However, relying "for its format on stipulations made by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*,"⁷² the aesthetic contract in Henry Sussman's account curiously elides a major "late-Enlightenment-Romantic" exemplar of "creative freedom" to whom *The Glory of the Lord* responds explicitly and to whom *For the Time Being*, I submit, implicitly responds.

In von Balthasar's *Seeing the Form*, Friedrich Schiller is among the first historical proper names we encounter. "When beauty becomes a form which is no longer understood as being identical with Being, spirit, and freedom," he writes, "we have entered an age of aestheticism."⁷³ "Borrowing from Kant," von Balthasar continues, Schiller ventures boldly into this age of aestheticism by elaborating "spirit's splendour in the beauty of form" and by arguing for "spirit's sovereign freedom" in "an existence fully governed by the aesthetic principle."⁷⁴ As von Balthasar explains in *Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, Schiller's thought-experiment culminates in a forceful secularization of "the Christian eschatology of the resurrection": Schiller's aesthetic prosthesis replaces "the miracle of the grace of the personal God" with "the miracle of the divine *charis* of man (who had always been divine)."⁷⁵ Von Balthasar thus echoes Auden's perspective on the force of aesthetics in Greek Antiquity when he pinpoints Schiller's

reduction of the infinite process of the becoming of the world towards God to the progress of mankind towards its highest (perhaps unattainable, only approachable) idea, and finally the provenance of the ideal from the Greeks. ...Thus the inquiry into Being and God is lost to sight, and the spotlight falls on man actively involved in the *agôn* and in tragedy: on a being who possesses ideals but not gods, on a being who possesses its majesty and its glory within itself. Man has no need of myth; he is his own myth.⁷⁶

Coupled with Paul de Man's theoretical critique of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* for its misreading of Kant,⁷⁷ von Balthasar's theological intervention ups the ante for "The Sea and the Mirror," whose clandestine aim—as a secular because non-liturgical work of art—is to delineate "a Christian aesthetic."⁷⁸ More precisely, because

⁷¹ Ibid., 135.

⁷² Ibid., 167.

⁷³ Von Balthasar, 22.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 22. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 5: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeill C.R.V., John Saward, and Rowan Williams, ed. Brian McNeill C.V.R. and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 538.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 540.

⁷⁷ "Schiller goes on to valorize," de Man writes: "And he will valorize the practical over the theoretical. The practical sublime, which is the only one he will keep talking about...is valorized completely at the expense of the theoretical sublime, where he got Kant right. So he adds something to Kant which is not in Kant, and then he valorizes what he has added as being more important than what really was in Kant" (140); Schiller, de Man continues, "goes much too far in the direction of establishing...the possibility of a pure intellect entirely separated from the material world, entirely separated from the sensory experience...[Schiller] posits pure intellect, which was unreachable in Kant...in Schiller, pure intellect comes in, as imagination comes in, to remedy our incapacity, whereas in Kant it is the failure of the imagination that leads to aesthetic contemplation." "Kant and Schiller," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 146.

⁷⁸ Ansen, 33.

Schiller develops "the earliest formal theory of an aesthetic state,"⁷⁹ Auden's absurd endeavor "to show, in a work of art, the limitation of art"⁸⁰ inevitably collides with Schiller's aesthetic state.

At closer range, this collision transpires through the poem Auden crafts for Gonzalo in "Chapter II: *The Supporting Cast (Sotto Voce)*." Described in *The Tempest* as "an honest old councillor"⁸¹ and by Auden as a "good but stupid character"⁸² "who fails to acknowledge the existence of evil,"⁸³ Gonzalo in "The Sea and the Mirror" admits to not having "trusted the Absurd."⁸⁴ As the stanza's sole capitalized abstraction, "the Absurd" is bound to evoke Auden's debts to Kierkegaard, whose epistemology of faith lends "the Absurd" its own interiorized domain of religious passion. "Had [Gonzalo] trusted the Absurd," we read, all of his fellow characters on the island "would have begun to dance / Jigs of self-deliverance."⁸⁵ Locked, however, in the island's verdant aesthetic field, where myriad surfaces obscure the all-important *tain* of human experience, Gonzalo encounters the world largely through the fancy of "speculation"; in turn, he merely freezes "Vision into an idea, / Irony into a joke."⁸⁶

Despite his newfound awareness of religious absurdity's more solemn vistas, Auden's Gonzalo basically resumes the mode of glassy speculation that originally lured him toward "Doubt and insufficient love":

Farewell, dear island of our wreck.
All have been restored to health,
All have seen the Commonwealth,
There is nothing to forgive.⁸⁷

By freezing Gonzalo's aesthetic "Vision into an idea" of "the Commonwealth," these lines at once introduce the specter of Schiller's "aesthetic state," allude deftly to Gonzalo's famous lines in the play's second act, and afford a dubious reading of *The Tempest's* conclusion. Consider how in *The Tempest* Sebastian and Antonio mock Gonzalo's vision of his aesthetic state:

GONZALO
I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things, for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation, all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty —

SEBASTIAN Yet he would be king on't.

ANTONIO The latter end of this commonwealth

⁷⁹ Josef Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 70.

⁸⁰ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 205.

⁸¹ *The Tempest*, 96.

⁸² Quoted in Kirsch, notes to *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, by Auden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 86.

⁸³ Kirsch, notes, 86.

⁸⁴ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 21.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 21.

forgets the beginning.⁸⁸

As Stephen Orgel observes, Gonzalo's aestheticized depiction of his very own colonial "plantation of this isle"⁸⁹ "is closely related to a section of Montaigne's essay 'Of the Cannibals'."⁹⁰ Carrying this vision to "prelapsarian"⁹¹ extremes with a twofold stipulation that "All things in common nature should produce / Without sweat or endeavour"⁹² and that "nature should bring forth / Of its own kind all foison, all abundance / To feed my innocent people,"⁹³ Gonzalo does not heed his jeering interlocutors: Sebastian signals the contradiction in Gonzalo's kingdom without sovereignty and Antonio dashes its lack of logic. Consequently, even after suggesting he winnowed a moment of "Irony into a joke" played at his own expense, Auden's Gonzalo nevertheless considers his "Commonwealth" as veritably "seen" rather than mocked as illusory.⁹⁴ Captivated by this aesthetic state, Auden's Gonzalo persists in his skepticism of the religious absurd, in turn misjudging the degree to which *The Tempest* resolves its moral conflict: "All have been restored to health," he says, for "There is nothing to forgive."⁹⁵

Reminiscent of de Man's critique of Schiller in "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," Auden shapes

⁸⁸ *The Tempest*, 2.1.145-56.

⁸⁹ *The Tempest*, 2.1.141.

⁹⁰ Orgel, notes to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 135. He quotes Montaigne: "It is a nation...that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate nor of political superiority, no use of service, of riches or of poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no occupation but idle, no respect of kindred but common, no apparel but natural, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corn, or metal. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard of amongst them."

⁹¹ Orgel, notes, 135.

⁹² *The Tempest*, 2.1.157-58.

⁹³ Ibid., 2.1.160-62.

⁹⁴ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 21. Cf. Gonzalo's effort to deflect the mockery he elicits. To Alonso, for whom Gonzalo "dost talk nothing" (2.1.170), Gonzalo replies: "I do well believe your highness, and did it to minister occasion to these gentlemen, who are of such sensible and nimble lungs that they always use to laugh at nothing" (171-3). "'Twas you we laughed at" (174), Antonio replies, prompting Gonzalo to underscore "nothing" rather than himself as mockery's object: "Who in this kind of merry fooling am nothing to you; so you may continue, and laugh at nothing still" (175-6). Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

⁹⁵ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 21. Auden notes that *The Tempest* "is not one of the plays in which, in a symbolic sense, harmony and concord finally triumph over dissonant disorder. The three romantic comedies which precede it, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, and which deal with similar themes, injustice, plots, separation, all end in a blaze of joy—the wrongers [sic] repent, the wronged forgive, the earthly music is a true reflection of the heavenly. *The Tempest* ends much more sourly. The only wrongdoer who expresses genuine repentance is Alonso; and what a world of difference there is between Cymbeline's 'Pardon's the word to all,' and Prospero's 'For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive / Thy rankest fault—all of them; and require / My dukedom of thee, which perforce I know / Thou must restore.' Justice has triumphed over injustice, not because it is more harmonious, but because it commands superior force." Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 526. Cf. Antonio's poem, aptly composed in Dante's *terza rima*, in "The Sea and the Mirror": "Antonio, sweet brother, has to laugh. / How easy you have made it to refuse / Peace to your greatness! Break your wand in half, / The fragments will join; burn your books or lose / Them in the sea, they will soon reappear, / Not even damaged: as long as I choose / To wear my fashion, whatever you wear / Is a magic robe; while I stand outside / Your circle, the will to charm is still there. / As I exist so you shall be denied." *For the Time Being*, 18.

Gonzalo's poem as a subtle parody of free-wheeling aestheticism.⁹⁶ In his meta-performance monologue, Gonzalo admits to the laughably un-ironic presentation of his ideal "Commonwealth" in *The Tempest*. Nevertheless, upon bidding farewell to the "dear island of our wreck," he suddenly undercuts his own self-reflexive criticism and lapses without irony into the outlandish pastures of his singular "Commonwealth," which in his estimation "All have seen."⁹⁷ The allure of perfection in the aesthetic state, Auden seems to indicate in Gonzalo's poem, is potent enough to undo even one's own discernment of irony's critical, self-reflexive merits.⁹⁸ In this context, an implicit target of "The Sea and the Mirror" is the political and ethical legacy of Schiller's aestheticism in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*:

In the midst of the awful realm of powers, and of the sacred realm of laws, the aesthetic creative impulse is building unawares a third joyous realm of play and of appearance, in which it releases mankind from all the shackles of circumstance and frees him from everything that may be called constraint, whether physical or moral. If in the *dynamic* state of rights man encounters man as force and restricts his activity, if in the *ethical* state of duties he opposes him with the majesty of law and fetters his will, in the sphere of cultivated society, in the *aesthetic* state, he need appear to him only as shape, confront him only as an object of free play. *To grant freedom by means of freedom* is the fundamental law of this kingdom.⁹⁹

This passage resonates strongly with the architecture of Gonzalo's Commonwealth in *The Tempest* 2.1.145-56. Just as Sebastian simpers at the contradiction in Gonzalo's kingdom without sovereignty, so might we question how the abstract "free play" in Schiller's aesthetic state could possibly unshackle us "from everything that may be called constraint, whether physical or moral"; similarly, just as Antonio punctures the logic of Gonzalo's idyllic plantation, whose "latter end...forgets the beginning" (2.1.156), so might we perforate the teleological reasoning that spirits us, sans irony, from "the *dynamic* state of rights" to "the *ethical* state of duties" to Schiller's "*aesthetic state*," with its lithe tautology of "*freedom by means of freedom*" and its slippery viewpoint on the human as a "shape."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Soni, "In the Letter of Mere Reason," 169n38.

⁹⁷ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 21. Emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Cf. Auden in conversation: "The thing that reconciles one to [St. Thomas] is the great vision he had in the closing days of his life when he said, about his work, 'It's all straw.' You remember what Kierkegaard said about Hegel: 'If he'd only said after he'd written his books, It's all a joke, Hegel would have been a great man.'" Ansen, 33.

⁹⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginal Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), 137.

¹⁰⁰ Schiller's evocation of "shape" recalls Auden's imagery of the (in)human as aesthetic object in Alonso's poem: "Remember as bells and cannon boom / The cold deep that does not envy you, / The sunburnt superficial kingdom / Where a king is an object"; as well as "the desert / Where an emperor stands in his shirt / While his diary is read by sneering / Beggars, and far off he notices / A lean horror flapping and hopping / Toward him with inhuman swiftness." *For the Time Being*, 23. Alongside these lines, Schiller's reduction of the human to mere form or shape bears emphasis because his aesthetic "is primarily a social and political model, ethically grounded in an assumedly Kantian notion of freedom" whose "'state' ...is not just a state of mind or of soul, but a principle of political value and authority that has its own claims on the shape and limits of our freedom." De Man, "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 264. For Schiller, the shape or formation of citizen-subjects is crucial because his "*Aesthetic Letters* is a political document.

Within this political legacy and its ambiguous geometry, Auden's most explicit response to the secularizing "aesthetic contract" that descends from Schiller appears in the aptly-titled essay, "Squares and Oblongs":

A society which really was like a poem and embodied all the esthetic values of beauty, order, economy, subordination of detail to the whole effect, would be a nightmare of horror, based on selective breeding, extermination of the physically or mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Dictator, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.¹⁰¹

Written in 1947, this passage countermands the aesthetic ideals of fascism while also glancing back to the Enlightenment's radicalization of the aesthetic: "Everything in the aesthetic State, even the subservient tool, is a free citizen having equal rights with the noblest";¹⁰² "and the intellect," Schiller maintains in his deviation from Kant, "which forcibly moulds the passive multitude to its designs, must here ask for assent."¹⁰³ Notably, Auden neither disarticulates nor bypasses this democratic kernel in aesthetic theory, even though he sees aestheticism as too-readily collaborative with ideological propaganda. In fact, in "The Sea and the Mirror," or rather in *For the Time Being* as a book of two interfacing poems, Auden consistently grapples with this democratic kernel. In my view, that is, he subtly regulates the emancipatory claims of secular aestheticism by way of a "Christian conception of art."¹⁰⁴

Smuggled across the Egyptian desert of "For the Time Being" and then through the mirror of Auden's Shakespearean commentary, at whose labyrinthine center we find not the fabled Minotaur but a monstrous figure named Caliban, the creaturely body of Christ¹⁰⁵ facilitates this regulation:

As a biological organism Man is a natural creature subject to the necessities of nature; as a being with consciousness and will, he is at the same time a historical person with the freedom of the spirit. *The Tempest* seems to me a manichean work, not because it shows the relation of Nature [Caliban] to Spirit [Ariel] as one of conflict and hostility, which in fallen man it is, but because it puts the blame for this upon Nature and makes the Spirit innocent... The natural, conforming to necessity, cannot imagine possibility. The closest it can come to a relation with the possible is as a vague dream; without Prospero, Ariel can only be known to Caliban as "sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not."¹⁰⁶

Auden's Pauline allegory of *The Tempest*, which he reinforces by alluding to Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and

Schiller makes this clear from the very outset when he asserts his concern for a concrete political problem to be solved through the aesthetic, since 'it is beauty through which the way is made to freedom.' The 'problem' to which Schiller refers is, of course, the condition of the French Revolution just after the execution of Louis XVI." Chytry, 77.

¹⁰¹ Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II, 1939-1948, ed. Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 349.

¹⁰² Schiller, 140.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 205.

¹⁰⁵ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 552-60.

¹⁰⁶ Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 130-31. Emphasis added.

Body,"¹⁰⁷ distinguishes "Caliban, the embodiment of the natural" from "Ariel, the invisible spirit of imagination."¹⁰⁸ For Auden, this allegory is intrinsic enough to Shakespeare's aesthetics for the polarity at hand to be standardized in performance:

In a stage production, Caliban should be as monstrously conspicuous as possible, and, indeed, suggest, as far as decency permits, the phallic. Ariel, on the other hand, except when he assumes a specific disguise at Prospero's order, e.g., when he appears as a harpy, should, ideally, be invisible, a disembodied voice, an ideal which, in these days of microphones and loud-speakers, should be realizable.¹⁰⁹

By attributing Manichaeism and thus radical dualism to *The Tempest's* worldview, Auden in his critical prose establishes a hermeneutic that he will unravel in his poetic commentary. Through the meta-theatrical designs of "The Sea and the Mirror," Auden develops an *ars poetica* that questions the aesthetic and religious positions of what he takes to be Shakespeare's "Ars Poetica."¹¹⁰ Consonant with his Patristic and thus anti-Manichean stance on the dialectics of Christian heresy,¹¹¹ Auden radicalizes Caliban's creaturely account of himself as monstrous, as "phallic," and as Prospero's "impervious disgrace" that "sprawls in the weeds and will not be repaired."¹¹² If indeed *The Tempest* and "The Sea and the Mirror" are extended cases of the body-soul dialogue, then Auden levels their aesthetic fields by having the body "present its own case objectively."¹¹³

As Julia Reinhard Lupton argues, Shakespeare's Caliban complicates our sense of what it means to be a creature or creaturely. "The world of creatures," Lupton posits,

constitutes an infinity rather than a totality, since it is made up of a series of singularities that do not congeal into a single set...By maintaining Caliban as creature, Shakespeare manages to isolate within the category of the human...a permanent state of emergency. As such, the creature materializes a profane moment within the idealism of theology, and thus defines in its very primitivism a possible face of modernity, understood not as the negation but as the remainder of a theological vision. If we want to find a new universalism in the

¹⁰⁷ In "Balaam and His Ass," Auden quotes eight lines of Marvell's 44-line poem: "Body: O who shall me deliver whole, / From bonds of this tyrannic soul? / Which, stretcht upright, impales me so, / That mine own Precipice I go... Soul: What Magick could me thus confine / Within another's grief to pine? / Where whatsoever it complain, / I feel, that cannot feel, the pain." *The Dyer's Hand*, 128. In "Hic Et Ille," to make a consonant point on body and soul with Marvell in the offing, Auden alludes to *The Tempest* 1.2.362-64: "You taught me language and my profit on't Is, I know to curse. In the debate between the Body and the Soul, if the former could present its own case objectively, it would always win. As it is, it can only protest the Soul's misstatement of its case by subjective acts of rebellion, coughs, belches, constipation, etc., which always put it in the wrong." *The Dyer's Hand*, 100. For further grounds on which to allegorize *The Tempest* as Auden does, see Nora Johnson, "Body and Spirit, Stage and Sexuality in *The Tempest*," *ELH* 64, no. 3 (1997): 683-701.

¹⁰⁸ Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 132.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 132-33. Cf. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, "Stage History" and "Screen History" in *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹¹⁰ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 205.

¹¹¹ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 555; 560-62.

¹¹² Auden, *For the Time Being*, 12-13.

¹¹³ Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 100.

play...it is not by reasserting that "Caliban is human," but rather by saying that 'all humans are creatures,' that all humans constitute an exception to their own set... [Shakespeare's] decisive crystallization of a certain material moment within the theology of the creature might help us find a postsecular solution to the predicament of modern humanity.¹¹⁴

The fleshy heresy of Auden's Patrilinearism¹¹⁵ intensifies Lupton's appeal for us to discern in the creature a profane materiality "within the idealism of theology." For, if Auden draws his creaturely Christ across *For the Time Being*'s compositional and textual margin into Caliban's realm, then both "the theological vision" and the religious "remainder" at stake are doubly heterodox: creaturely life, in Auden's materialist sense, becomes a definitive part of theology's idealism, rather than the latter's residue in the secular "face of modernity." As Auden would remind us, the Trinity and humanity do retain an ultimate distinction, but both still heretically partake of each other on the grounds of incarnated embodiment.¹¹⁶ Thus, Auden leads us to adapt one of Eric Santner's key insights: "Creature" is indeed "the signifier of an ongoing *exposure*, of being caught up in the process of *becoming creature* through the dictates of divine alterity";¹¹⁷ yet it is also, in my reading of *For the Time Being*, a heretical reversal of this exposure or becoming creature—from the creaturely *toward* the divine, or creaturely-divine.

In this light, consider how in "The Sea and the Mirror" Caliban-the-Body and Ariel-the-Spirit relate to one another, particularly in "Chapter III: *Caliban to the Audience*" and in the "Postscript (*Ariel to Caliban. Echo by the Prompter*)."¹¹⁸ At a key point in Chapter III, Auden articulates Caliban as "the voice of the inarticulate flesh"¹¹⁹ by focusing precisely on what would occur if we "really left [him] alone to go [his] whole "free-wheeling way to disorder, to be drunk every day before lunch, to jump stark naked from bed to bed, to have a fit every week or a major operation every other year, to forge cheques or water the widow's stock."¹²⁰

Without proper discipline and punishment, Caliban's bodily impulses turn to regular intoxication, sexual promiscuity, emotional breakdowns, mischief, self-harm, and even a few indictable counts of forgery. Through such "genuine escapades," Caliban-the-Body "might, after countless skids and punctures, have come by the bumpy third-class road of guilt and remorse."¹²¹ From this perspective of sheer anti-ascetic indulgence, however, corporeality's "free-wheeling way to disorder" might seem preferable to the havoc of attempting to regulate or structure the wild interplay of Caliban-the-Body and Ariel-the-Spirit, or artistic imagination. Auden's Caliban asks whether it is possible

that, not content with inveigling Caliban into Ariel's kingdom, you have also let loose Ariel in Caliban's? We

¹¹⁴ Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 178.

¹¹⁵ Soni, "The Sleep of Christ," 556-62.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 549-53; 566-67.

¹¹⁷ Santner, *On Creaturly Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 28.

¹¹⁸ Mendelson, "The Body," in *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 198. See also on this point Herman Servotte, "Auden's Caliban: Man's 'Drab Mortality,'" in *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character*, ed. Nadia Lie and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 199-210.

¹¹⁹ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 45-46.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 46. Emphasis added.

note with alarm that when the other members of the final tableau [i.e. of characters from *The Tempest*] were dismissed, He [Ariel] was not returned to His arboreal confinement as He should have been. Where is He now? For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and incommoded the poetic, that is a mere bagatelle compared to the damage which the poetic would inflict if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real. We want no Ariel here, breaking down our picket fences in the name of fraternity, seducing our wives in the name of romance, and robbing us of our sacred pecuniary deposits in the name of justice. Where is Ariel? What have you done with Him? For we won't, we daren't leave until you give us a satisfactory answer.¹²¹

Auden's comedic effects in this passage hinge on the litotes he reserves for visions of Ariel's intrusions "upon the real" of everyday corporeal life. As indicated by the excerpt from "Squares and Oblongs" tendered above, Auden's ultimate sense of the "damage which the poetic would inflict if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real" is not limited to suburban white-picket-fence-breaking, the seduction of others' wives, and the well-intentioned escapades of Robin Hood. Indeed, for Auden the poetic's *intrusion* upon a resistant reality is tantamount to the Schillerian aesthetic state in its violent, propagandistic, mid-twentieth-century forms.

Nevertheless, for Caliban-the-Real or Caliban-the-Body, the intrusive threat of Ariel's aesthetic state is hardly omnipresent. In fact, from the viewpoint of Auden's Caliban and thus in contradistinction to Robert Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos," the real body maintains a literal upper hand over the self-theologizing poetic spirit, precisely because it always-already brandishes the *tain* of the mirror that supports both the artist's reflection of herself and her reflection of nature in art.¹²² The artist's transformative moment, in moving from glassy surface to wiry *tain*, is "indicative at least of one aspect of the relation between the real and the imagined, their mutual reversal of value";¹²³ for, by realizing in ethical terms that embodiment, in whatever form or to whatever extent, predicates the abstract vistas of aesthetic production, the artist yields to an interpenetration and revaluation of existential spheres.

¹²¹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹²² Vaughan and Vaughan point out that Browning's "Caliban is an amphibian—half man, half fish—who lives on the margins of humanity but reveals essential human traits such as selfishness and self-deception. Browning's poem, a satire on Victorian [natural] theologians, describes the conception of God that might occur to a less-than-human creature. Caliban judges his god Setebos by himself; if he is capricious with crabs on the beach—sometimes ignoring them, sometimes cruelly toying with them—so must Setebos be cruel and capricious, favoring Prospero for no reason...Browning concludes his poem in resignation, observing that the best way to escape Setebos' ire 'Is, not to seem too happy'" (109-10). See lines 257-62, where Browning's Caliban "Sees, himself, / Yonder two flies, with purple films and pink, / Bask on the pompon-bell above: kills both. / 'Sees two black painful beetles roll their ball / On head and tail as if to save their lives: / Moves them the stick away they strive to clear." Browning, "Caliban upon Setebos," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43748>. Browning's Caliban performs the capriciousness he attributes to Setebos, thereby aligning humanity and divinity via the aesthetic formulism of analogy (*via analogia* as opposed to *via negativa*). By advancing a materialist challenge to aestheticism's unchecked, theologizing spirit and will-to-power, Auden's Caliban affords a rather non-self-deceiving counterpoint to Browning's Shakespearean persona.

¹²³ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 39.

In "Caliban to the Audience," this transformative moment occurs when the artist, much like Prospero in *The Tempest*, wishes finally to extricate herself from Ariel's lofty aesthetics:

Collecting all your strength for the distasteful task, you
finally manage to stammer or shout 'You are free,
Good-bye,' but to your dismay He whose obedience
through all the enchanted years has never been less
than perfect, now refuses to budge. Striding up to him
in fury, you glare into His unblinking eyes and stop
dead, transfixed with horror at seeing there, not what
you had always expected to see, a conqueror smiling at
a conqueror, both promising mountains and marvels,
but a *gibbering, fist-clenched creature* with which you are
all too familiar, for this is the first time indeed that you
have met the only subject that you have, who is not a
dream amenable to magic but *the too solid flesh you must
acknowledge as your own*; at last you have come face to
face with me, and are appalled to learn how far I am
from being, in any sense, your dish; how completely
lacking in that poise and calm and all forgiving because
all understanding good nature which to the critical eye
is so wonderfully and domestically present on every
page of your published inventions.¹²⁴

Ariel's eyes figure here as the artist's mirror, wherein she sees her embodied self—"the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own"¹²⁵ as opposed to "the dark thing you could never abide to be with"¹²⁶—as the unglamorous corporeal *tain* without which the mirror of art would come crashing to the floor. Caliban's self-deprecating language throughout the excerpt gauges the artist's creaturely recognition of her own embodiment as irreducible to "that poise and calm" by which her "published inventions" are aestheticized.

Significantly, however, the chasm between Ariel and Caliban turns out to be a figment of the artist's enchantment with the claims of aesthetic splendor and consequent shock at (re)discovering her own "all too solid flesh": in other words, the artist is Caliban-the-Body or Caliban-the-Real, a jolting perception that stems from the reflective gaze of Ariel-the-Spirit or Ariel-the-Poetic. A logical circuit thus governs this moment, for there is no artist and thus no art without the real body; and no real body without the imagination's capacity to configure a world in which to be real.

Ariel's understated response to Caliban in the commentary's "Postscript" reinforces this circuitry: the poetic spirit is "Helplessly in love" with the real body and "Fascinated by / Drab mortality";¹²⁷ Ariel's aesthetic "perfection" harbors an "entire devotion" to "the mercy of [Caliban's corporeal] will";¹²⁸ and when the dissonant "falsehoods" of both "sworn comrade[s]" are "divided," they "shall become, / One evaporating sigh."¹²⁹ To paraphrase Auden's Ariel via T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*: in death "body and soul begin to fall asunder,"¹³⁰ leading to a literal expiration of their anxious Kierkegaardian synthesis. Backed by the mirror's *tain* and thus allegorically by *For the Time Being*'s porous margin, the circuitry that links Caliban and Ariel is at once material and abstract, bodily and

¹²⁴ Ibid., 44. Emphasis added.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 59-60.

¹³⁰ Eliot, *Complete Poems & Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 194.

spiritual, aesthetic and religious—but only if we read *For the Time Being* as the singular book that it is.

"Religion and culture," Auden's Caliban baroquely speculates, "seem to be represented by a catholic belief that something is lacking which must be found:

but as to what that something is, the keys of heaven, the missing heir, genius, the smells of childhood, or a sense of humour, why it is lacking, whether it has been deliberately stolen, or accidentally lost or just hidden for a lark, and who is responsible, our ancestors, ourselves, the social structure, or mysterious wicked powers, there are as many faiths as there are searchers, and clues can be found behind every clock, under every stone, and in every hollow tree to support all of the them.¹³¹

If read in the context of *For the Time Being*, and thus across the threshold that links "For the Time Being" and "The Sea and the Mirror," this passage affords a textual "clue" as to what is lacking among "religious" and "cultural" (or aesthetic) approaches to two of Auden's major long poems. In my interpretation of *For the Time Being* as an intra-related book, the mutual unraveling of the oratorio's perfect religious state and the commentary's perfect aesthetic state pivots on what Auden's Caliban identifies as the "first big crisis" of disenchantment:

the breaking of the childish spell in which, so long as it enclosed you, there was, for you, no mirror, for everything that happened was a miracle—it was just as extraordinary for a chair to be a chair as for it to turn into a horse; it was no more absurd that the girding on of coal-scuttle and poker should transform you into noble Hector than that you should have a father and mother who called you Tommy—and it was therefore only necessary for you to presuppose one genius, one unrivalled I to wish these wonders in all their endless plenitude and novelty to be, is, in relation to your present, behind, that your singular transparent globes of enchantment have shattered one by one, and you have now all come together in the larger colder emptier room on this side of the mirror which does force your eyes to recognize and reckon with the two of us, your ears detect the irreconcilable difference between my reiterated affirmation of what your furnished circumstances categorically are, and His successive propositions as to everything else which they conditionally might be.¹³²

Unfastening the mirror's *tain*, pure aestheticism's bejeweled "childish spell"—whereby imaginative abstraction is unaccountable to ethical distinctions between "noble Hector" and veritable "Tommy"—shatters as "transparent globes of enchantment." Consequently, standing cautiously among the shards, we behold the fallen *tain* "in the larger colder emptier room on this side of the mirror." In this drafty space, where our sudden detachment from aestheticized images of ourselves is precisely as large, cold, and empty as the room that supported the mirror's dusty tinfoil and wire, Caliban-the-Body's "furnished circumstances" of being and Ariel-the-Spirit's "successive propositions" of subjunctive becoming achieve a

¹³¹ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 54.

¹³² Ibid., 47-48.

"restored relation."¹³³

This relation, I have argued, is set further into relief if we trace the margin that simultaneously crosshatches and singularizes "The Sea and the Mirror" and "For the Time Being." Situated on this border between two interdependent states, peering through "secular blur" of "our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch,"¹³⁴ we may parse *For the Time Being* as a particularly "fruitful / Island in the sea" of Auden's oeuvre. For, as a continuous book that as such is continuously overlooked, *For the Time Being* tenders a poetics wherein religious and aesthetic states of "flesh and mind / Are delivered from mistrust."¹³⁵

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¹³³ Ibid., 58.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.