



The  
Shield of  
Achilles

W. H.

Auden

W. H. AUDEN

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*The Shield of Achilles*

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EDITED BY  
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## PREFACE

This book is an edition of the volume of poems that Auden published in 1955, when he was at or near the height of his poetic powers. The introduction and notes focus on the profound and, until now, mostly unexplored structural coherence of the book; on the ways in which its three sections respond to each other; and on the ways in which the poems in each section respond to other poems. Like other volumes in the *W. H. Auden: Critical Editions* series, this one includes some excerpts from early drafts and later revision. A full record of printed variants from earlier and later printings of the poems may be found in the complete edition of Auden's *Poems: Volume II, 1940–1973* (2022).



## INTRODUCTION

*The Shield of Achilles* appeared in 1955, which for Auden was right on time: he tended to publish a collection of poems every five years or so, and the previous book, *Nones*, had appeared in 1951. The poems of *Nones* indicated the beginnings of a major transition in his work. Through the first half of the 1940s he had written long poems in which he worked through the implications of his newfound Christian faith for politics and history (*For the Time Being*), for art (*The Sea and the Mirror*), and for the psyches of people devastated by war and by the various dislocations of modernity (*The Age of Anxiety*). But in the major poems in *Nones* Auden began a reckoning with certain themes that, he came to realize, he had neglected: the embodied life that humans share with all other creatures, and the character of genuine human community. That he spent much of his time in these years living on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, around people whose language he knew imperfectly and whose habits he struggled to share, in a country that reminded him constantly of the complex relationship between Rome's empire and the great claims of the Christian faith, exercised a powerful influence on the course of his thinking. To Ischia he wrote, in 1948 when he was new there,

How well you correct  
Our injured eyes, how gently you train us to see  
Things and men in perspective  
Underneath your uniform light.

If in *Nones* Auden inaugurated his new quest to “see / Things and men in perspective,” in *The Shield of Achilles* he provides a powerful report

on the fruits of that quest. It is the boldest and most intellectually assured work of his career, an achievement that has not been sufficiently acknowledged, in large part because its poetic techniques are not easily perceived or assessed. It is the most unified of all Auden's collections, and indeed—once its intricate principles of organization are grasped—may be seen as the true successor of those long poems of the 1940s.

*The Shield of Achilles* is an integral work of art, basically chiasmic in structure, in three balanced sections, with multiple echoes and resonances (linguistic and thematic) linking poems to one another both within the sections and across them. The book's integral coherence makes it, I believe, unique among Auden's collections. The best way to introduce this book is to describe this intricate organization and to explain how the individual poems fit into it.

The book is divided into three parts: Part I is a sequence of seven poems called "Bucolics"; Part II is a series of 14 lyrics called, collectively, "In Sunshine and in Shade"; Part III is another sequence of seven poems called "Horae Canonicae." The 14 poems of the middle section do not constitute a sequence in the sense, or to the degree, that "Bucolics" and "Horae Canonicae" do, but it seems clear that their order was carefully chosen.

The major themes of the seven poems of "Bucolics" center on the natural world but also contain contrapuntal reflections on living-in-history; the major themes of "Horae Canonicae" center on living-in-history but also contain contrapuntal reflections on the natural world. The first poem of the collection's central section, "The Shield of Achilles," is a meditation on the tragedy of history that anticipates the concerns of the "Horae Canonicae"; the last poem of that central section, "Ode to Gaea," is a meditation on the mythological personification of the Earth that casts a retrospective look back at the "Bucolics." The second poem of the central section, "Fleet Visit," depicts a peacetime visit of American sailors to the Italian coast; the penultimate poem of that section is called "Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier." In at least

one case—"Barcarolle," which had been written in 1948 as part of the libretto that he and Chester Kallman wrote for *The Rake's Progress*—the inclusion of the poem seems to have been decided on the basis of the chiasmic scheme, because that eloquent and moving love-lyric is paired with "'The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning.'" All this will be explored in more depth below.

In 1955—the year that *The Shield of Achilles* was published—Auden wrote an essay about his own religious development. (He probably wrote the essay in New York City, where he spent part of every year; he tended to write prose, by which he made most of his living, in Manhattan and poetry on Ischia.) "Much as I owe to Kierkegaard," he said, "I cannot let this occasion pass without commenting on what seems to be his great limitation." In short: "a planetary visitor might read through the whole of his voluminous works without discovering that human beings are not ghosts but have bodies of flesh and blood." Like most of Auden's criticisms of other writers, this is a self-critique. Under Kierkegaard's influence, the first decade of his life as a Christian—he had begun speaking publicly as a Christian in 1941, though the process of arriving at faith was long—had been excessively "spiritualized": he had conceived of the religious life too completely as an *interior* matter. But now he realized that he had previously neglected the vital Christian doctrine that God created the world with all its embodied creatures "and saw that it was good," which means that every Christian should realize that "the laws of nature to which, whether he likes it or not, he must conform are of divine origin." And this in turn requires the Christian to think of the human body not as an impediment to a "spiritual" life but rather a part of that world of nature that is "of divine origin." "And it is with this body, with faith or without it, that all good works are done."

"In Praise of Limestone"—a poem which Auden described, in the sleeve notes to his recording of this and other poems, as a kind of "prelude" to the "Bucolics"—is the first major poem in which he reckons

seriously with embodied life. It continues his lifelong fascination with psychological types, but it also includes among those types “we the inconstant ones,” whose “common prayer” is “not, please! to resemble / The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water / Or stone whose conduct can be predicted.” That is, Auden and his fellow “inconstant ones” want to live in the ever-changing, ever-new world of history, not in the repetitive and predictable world of nature—the world not just of mind and will but also of body. And when Auden reflects on the hopes of the Christian faith, he specifies two in particular: “if / Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead”—two items juxtaposed in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body.” For Auden, a commitment to the embodied life inaugurates the mending of his inconstancy. And this commitment entails increased attentiveness not just to the human body itself but also to the world of “beasts who repeat themselves” and things “whose conduct can be predicted.” His first major step towards this spiritual and intellectual discipline is the writing of the poems that he would call “Bucolics.”

But these are not merely descriptive poems, “nature” poems in a simple sense. Indeed, as he says in the sleeve notes mentioned above, the poems of “Bucolics” “have in common the theme of the relation of man, as a historical, or history-making person, to nature.” Thus the first poem in the sequence, “Winds,” begins with a meditation on Creation and the unique, unrepeatable moment of “holy insufflation” when the Lord God breathes life into the man he has formed from the earth (Genesis 2:7). Auden knew Owen Barfield’s 1927 book *Poetic Diction* and probably remembered Barfield’s note that in Hebrew (*ruach*), Greek (*pneuma*), and Latin (*spiritus*) alike, one word can in different contexts mean breath, wind, and spirit—and moreover, Barfield argued, at some point in the distant past surely meant something now largely inaccessible to us, a meaning that preceded our threefold distinction. The very distinction between the “physical” and “spiritual” is for Barfield an unnecessary violation of an “ancient unity.”

Auden also wants to blur the lines we have drawn, and especially those that neatly separate “history” from “nature.”

Similarly, the word “bucolic” itself derives from the Greek *boukolikós*, meaning “cowherd,” which suggests that a bucolic environment is not mere wilderness but rather a place with human beings in it. And humans tend to perceive landscapes in light of their own concerns and beliefs. The tradition in painting that embraces and elaborates this tendency is the *paysage moralisé* or “moralized landscape,” a term coined in 1936 by the art historian Erwin Panofsky, writing on Piero di Cosimo. Auden invokes that painter in the second of the “Bucolics,” “Woods”: “Sylvan meant savage in those primal woods / Piero di Cosimo so loved to draw” (p. 7), a tip of the cap to Panofsky—indeed, almost a quotation from that essay. In September of 1939 he reviewed for *The New Republic* a new translation of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and noted that “While Shakespeare, for example, thought of the non-human world in terms of the human, Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human”; “Thus one of Rilke’s most characteristic devices is the expression of human life in terms of landscape”—a Panofskian insight. And when Auden was assembling his first *Collected Poems* in 1945, he took a 1933 poem that had been known only by its first line—“Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys”—revised it, and titled it “Paysage Moralisé.” But it was only a few years later, when he had begun his serious exploration of embodied life, that he began to grasp the full implications of this artistic tradition for his own thought. *The Shield of Achilles* contains many descriptions of landscapes, and all of them are moralized. This is Auden’s chief technique for illustrating how creatures who live in history understand and make use of their living-in-nature.

“In Praise of Limestone” serves as “a kind of prelude” to the “Bucolics” not just in its reckoning with the embodied life but also in its explorations of moralized landscapes. By associating certain personalities with certain landscapes, and with *aversion* to certain landscapes, it forms a kind of bridge between Auden’s earlier fascination with