SHADOWS OF FUTURITY:
YEATS, AUDEN, AND THE POETICS OF UTOPIA

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation works to illuminate modern poetry’s ambivalent stance toward the concept of utopia through the work of two of its most politically engaged practitioners. One of the most quoted literary maxims of the twentieth century is W.H. Auden’s assertion, in his 1939 elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” that “poetry makes nothing happen.” For Yeats, poets serve as harbingers of new worlds, imaging more ideal societal orders while working to actualize these private speculations in the public realm – a viewpoint which Auden, always concerned to define poetry’s social niche, finds both ludicrous and naggingly attractive. This dissertation examines this ambivalence, tracing the two poets’ modulating views on poetry’s world-building capacities, and their shifting stances toward the Shelleyan analogy between poetic forms and social formations.

Spanning a period from the 1880s of early Yeats to Auden’s death in 1973, and devoting two chapters to each poet, I take up the following questions: Why is their work so often concerned with the future? What images of better worlds does it present? And more expansively, how can lyric poetry – so often predicated upon solitude – work to embody social aspirations?
Given the sheer prevalence of an affirmative future-orientation in the two poets’ work, I see them as embodying (albeit in various ways at different stages in their careers) a *poetics of utopia*, whereby both poetry itself and the vocation of writing it stand as crucial manifestations of the impulse to strive after better ways of life in more ideal futures. Engaging with theorists of utopia from Lewis Mumford and his contemporary Ernst Bloch to, more recently, Fredric Jameson and Ruth Levitas, I work to mediate among the various senses of “utopia” with which the two poets engage in their work. Writing in dialogue with recent efforts to recuperate the drive for social change at the root of the utopian impulse, I highlight the centrality of this impulse not just to the work of Yeats and Auden, but to twentieth-century poetry more generally, as it strives to underscore its indispensability to our search for better futures.
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INTRODUCTION

Probably the most famous poetic aphorism of the 20th century is W.H. Auden’s claim that “poetry makes nothing happen.” Formulated in 1939 on the eve of World War II, it finds the poet facing the reality that his art can have no impact on the monstrous course of global affairs, that in times of military crisis poetry can amount to little more than (as he put it in another context) “fiddling while Rome burns” (EA 329). Furthermore, Auden makes his claim for poetry’s causal impotence in an elegy for W.B. Yeats, and so it must be read not only in its historical context, but in its poetic one, as one line amid a 65-line tribute not only to Yeats as an ambivalently influential predecessor, but as the great poet of Auden’s age most likely to disagree with it. For Yeats himself – as my first chapter will elaborate – often made extraordinary claims for poetry (and art in general) as exerting a patterning influence upon the course of history, repeating in many forms the assertion that “the laws of art […] are the hidden laws of the world” (EE 120). In the context of Yeats’s work, such an assertion implies not just that the extra-perceptive artist builds her work from what she gleans from a deep communion with the world, but that her work in fact helps determine world events. As he wrote in his 1900 essay “The Symbolism of Poetry”: “I am certainly never certain, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly” (Early 116). This is art – and throughout Yeats’s early writings, all art refers itself to poetry – unequivocally making something happen, and it is precisely against such assertions of art’s causal force that Auden formulates his famous aphorism.
But the picture set out in the preceding paragraph – of Yeats the late Romantic indulging in fantasies of poetry’s worldly power, with Auden the clear-eyed Modern arriving to straighten the record – is far from complete. When Auden claims, in his comic essay “The Public v. Mr. William Butler Yeats” (written just after the first draft of the elegy) that “if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged” (*Prose II 7*), any reader of his 1930s work must wonder if he really means it. For not only did he place this statement in the mouth of the Defence attorney in an essay whose dialogic form allows the Prosecution equal space to embody the opposite viewpoint, but he published the essay at the end of a decade during which he himself repeatedly expresses the hope that art might alter the moral landscape of the world, helping us distinguish between good and evil and thus leading us closer to social unity. His repudiation of such hopes comes only after his move to America – a move that precipitated his return to the Anglican communion and his subsequent shift in emphasis from social unity to personal union with the divine. Yeats actually follows a similar trajectory, with his work before the turn of the twentieth century embodying the hope that poetry might help to forge Ireland into unity while his later work reflects the abandonment of these cultural-nationalist aspirations in favour of a view of poetry as expressing the poet’s unique attunement to the cyclical forces of history – his status as harbinger “Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”

Even in their later periods, however – though having largely repudiated their youthful hopes for poetry as a force for concrete sociopolitical change – both Yeats and Auden persist in depicting in their verse worlds and states of being more ideal than the societies in which they lived, versions of paradise that evince both poets’ enduring
conviction that poetry has a crucial role to play in the imaging of better futures. This dissertation is built upon the premise that despite their considerable formal and ideological differences, what crucially unites Yeats and Auden is their propensity, throughout their bodies of work, to adopt poses of what I call affirmative futurity: desiring, wishing, hoping, aspiring – modes of looking forward that emphasize the future as above all a space of potential social and personal improvement. Given the sheer prevalence of this affirmative future-orientation in the two poets’ work, I see them as embodying (albeit in various ways at different stages in their careers) a poetics of utopia, whereby both poetry itself and the vocation of writing it stand as crucial manifestations of the impulse to strive after better ways of life in more ideal futures.

I have chosen to figure this striving through the term “utopia” for several reasons. First, its use in designating a literary genre allows it to encompass those texts – surprisingly frequent in the two poets’ oeuvres, like Yeats’s “Byzantium” and Auden’s “Atlantis” – which envision and describe the sorts of ideal “no places” (outopias) and “good places” (eutopias) to which the word pungently refers. Despite quite commonly depicting such places, modern poetry is not often acknowledged among the annals of utopian literature, and this dissertation aims to redress that omission. Second, the structural and organizational connotations that inhere to the word “utopia” – the idea of a society minutely planned down to the last detail – make it a useful way of figuring the similar rigour with which poems themselves are organized; and indeed the later Auden highlights this connection himself in his claim (which I examine in considerable detail in Chapter Four) that “every good poem is very nearly a utopia” (DH 71). In other words, a poem is like a little verbal society, which though it may present through its subject matter
any number of impressions from paradisal to hellish, nonetheless strives for internal
coherence – for harmoniousness, however defined by any given aesthetic occasion. Thus
the concept of utopia can shed light not only on poetry’s content, but on its foregrounding
of form as well, offering a means by which we might conceive of an inherent connection
between at least some acts of poetic composition and the drive for more ideal social
formations. Third, the concept of utopia is multivalent enough to encompass, or at least to
meaningfully inform, an investigation of all the instances of affirmative futurity that we
find in Yeats’s and Auden’s work. This multivalency is particularly evident in the
tendency among utopian theorists to distinguish between utopia as a genre – in a line
descending from Thomas More’s 1518 Utopia – and utopia as a future-oriented impulse
that manifests well beyond the genre’s fairly narrow parameters. This distinction is
elaborated by Fredric Jameson, who in his Archaeologies of the Future posits “two
distinct lines of descendancy from More’s inaugural text: the one intent on the realization
of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its
way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices” (3). In Jameson’s
schema, the programmatic line includes “revolutionary political practice, when it aims at
founding a whole new society” as well as “exercises in the literary genre,” while the line
of impulse includes more moderate “social democratic and ‘liberal’ forms” of political
theory – particularly “when they are merely allegorical of a wholesale transformation of
the social totality” – along with many “more obscure and more various” glimmerings of
“Utopian investment” (3-4). Rather than see these lines as fully discrete, however, I take
this basic distinction as setting out a continuum, with concrete utopian activism at one
end and the faintest of utopian desires at the other, along which Yeats’s and Auden’s
expressions of a utopian poetics might be variously situated. Nor do I take Jameson’s useful account as authoritative, as throughout this study I make use of the work of many prominent utopian theorists – Ernst Bloch, Russell Jacoby, Ruth Levitas, and Lewis Mumford, among others – who nuance or problematize the distinction between utopia as a genre and utopia an impulse in variously illuminating ways.

But with the exception of Bloch – whose account of poetry’s utopian dimension I briefly discuss in Chapter Four – none of these theorists specifically address poetry as an expression of a utopian impulse. Fortunately, however, one of the foundational texts of modern poetics does, or almost does, coming close enough to have served as one of the key initial inspirations for this dissertation. For though it never uses the word “utopia,” Percy Shelley’s 1819 Defence of Poetry attributes to poetry an inherent futurity, and accords it an indispensable role in the founding of more ideal societies. Shelley begins with a crucial distinction: “Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things” (480) – thus casting reason as a dividing and imagination as a harmonizing faculty. Poetry, he goes on to claim, “may be defined as ‘the expression of the Imagination’: and poetry is connate with the origin of man” (480). Positing within humanity an inherent principle of harmony, and exalting poetry as the expression of this principle, Shelley thus grants to poets – “in the most universal sense of the word” (481) – responsibility for all that is praiseworthy in human achievement, social and political as well as artistic. In their narrower sense, too, poets represent a crucial force for unity, as their “vitally metaphorical” language “marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension” (482), thus widening our spheres of inclusiveness. Later in the Defence he refines this formula, claiming of poetry that “It
awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (487). This enlargement has not only aesthetic but moral consequences; calling imagination “the great instrument of moral good,” Shelley broadly asserts that “Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb” (487). In other words, poetry stands as a chief agent of moral conditioning – itself a precondition for any more ideal society. And indeed, without poetry, Shelley claims, any more practical means of improving our societies could never have arisen:

It exceeds all imagination to conceive of what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of antient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the antient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself. (502)

Did Auden have this passage specifically in mind when he asserted the utter lack of material difference that art has made upon the world? Regardless, the contrast here is direct: Shelley sets out a catalogue of immortal poets (plus two painters, themselves
“poets” according to his extended definition) whose achievements improved both our moral and (it is implied) material condition to an unimaginable degree. For it is only through the “intervention” of poetry and its “excitements” that we have been “awakened” to the possibility of improving our world through the “application of analytical reasoning” – which now, forgetting its dependence upon poetry at its very nascency, we have come to value over the creative, moral, synthetic faculty which gave it birth.

While poetry may not itself effect practical change, then, the impulse to change – to effect affirmatively different futures – derives from it. When Shelley claims of the poet that “he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time” (482), he is not attributing to poetry any literally prophetic or future-telling role, but rather emphasizing that as an art reliant upon metaphor and thus always concerned with harmony, resemblance, and similitude, poetry always implicitly looks forward to a time of greater unity: its futurity is inherent in its rootedness in trope. It is on this basis that Shelley sets forth the connection – hugely influential on Yeats – between poetry and the forging of nations or peoples. Praising the English poets and philosophers of his own time for “surpass[ing] beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for religious and civil liberty” (508), he goes on in the last paragraph of the _Defence_ to more broadly eulogize the poet’s role as usher of any potential utopia:

The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions
respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World. (508)

Shelley’s claim that poetry both prefigures and arises out of great upsurges in political consciousness would be echoed continually by the early Yeats, who saw art as helping to forge the Irish people into a national consciousness while at the same time wondering whether the best art was not rather the result of such a consciousness – an ambiguity nicely captured in the climatic question of his 1903 essay “The Galway Plains”: “Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it?” (EE 158). Shelley’s figuration of “the spirit of good” of which poets are the often-unwitting “ministers,” and
of “the electric life which burns within their words” are also frequently echoed in Yeats’s early cultural-nationalist writings; in his 1898 essay “The Autumn of the Body,” for example, he rhapsodizes on the transfigurative “energies” of the arts, which “lie dreaming of things to come,” and asserts that “the arts are […] about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests” (EE 140-41).

If the influence of the Defence on Yeats is readily attested to by his echoes of it, any such echoes to be found in Auden speak to his disdain for Shelley’s grandiosity. Of the Defence’s famous last sentence Auden wrote: “How glad I am that the silliest remark ever made about poets, ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world,’ was made by a poet whose work I detest. Sounds more like the secret police to me” (Prose II 348). In response, Shelley or his advocates might point to that last paragraph’s repeated implicit assertion that the legislation of poets is not just “unacknowledged” by society at large, but by the poets themselves: they may “have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers” so that “even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul.” Indeed, as this dissertation will show, although Auden came to explicitly disavow his legislative ambitions, his 1930s writings abound in them. And much like Yeats, the later Auden – while overtly rejecting the Shelleyan assertion of poetry’s legislative potential – yet preserves some of Shelley’s conviction that poetry can indeed stand in some crucial relation to our strivings after social change. This is why I have drawn my title from a less renowned claim in that last paragraph of Shelley’s Defence, that poets are “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present”: because most broadly I attempt to show throughout this dissertation how Yeats and Auden did in fact
effect such mirroring, reflecting in surfaces variously cracked, distorted, and otherwise wrought by their minds and times, how loomingly persistent are our longings after better futures.

My first chapter begins with a close reading of the first poem in Yeats’s Collected Poems, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” – a work which inaugurates what I term the dominant “pastoral utopianism” of his early poetry. Though pre-nationalist in the sense of hearkening back to a classical image of Arcadia rather than to the indigenous Celtic myths that would dominate his 1890s poetry, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” nonetheless effects the key gesture of his cultural nationalist work in exhorting the reader to image a utopian future by looking to an idealized pastoral past. After briefly summarizing and mediating between a number of prominent theoretical views on both the differences between and the mutual inherency of the pastoral and utopian modes, I read several of Yeats’s most renowned early lyrics – “The Madness of King Goll,” “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” and “The Song of the Wandering Aengus” – alongside his essays of the period, with a view to highlighting how his early poetics aims at rendering inextricable the yearning of his solitary protagonists from the collective dream of Irish nationhood. In other words, I argue that Yeats’s early poetry metonymically conflates the singular lyric voice with the voice of the Irish nation, illuminating what Theodor Adorno calls the “collective substratum” upon which lyric is founded (217).

In the latter half of the chapter, I characterize this conflation of lyric and national striving as fulfilling the utopian function of “the education of desire,” arguing (with support from his essays) that Yeats’s early work aims to instill in its readers the yearning it itself embodies, and that in hearkening back to a Celticized pastoral Ireland, it hopes
that such images might resonate so heavily in the collective imagination as to model the nation’s future unity. After clarifying how Yeats found authoritative precedent in Shelley (and particularly in the *Defence*) for this notion of poetry as a unifying force, I then engage with two camps of critical commentators on Yeats’s early cultural nationalism: first, those who see in Yeats’s appeal to Celtic myth an attempt to locate authentic Irishness in pre-Catholic sources, and so to consolidate the precarious status of the Anglo-Irish Protestant class to which his family belonged; and second, those who find in the Celtic Twilight – no matter how historically dubious its characteristic images – a more authentic (and indeed successful) attempt to unite the Irish people by presenting a compensatory vision of a unified cultural past toward which the burgeoning nation might strive. In the chapter’s final section, however, I acknowledge that by the turn of the century even Yeats was disillusioned as to the prospect of such unity, that his focus was already shifting from images of community to images of coterie, and therefore that utopianism was dwindling from his aesthetic. As an index of this shift, I read his 1902 lyric “Adam’s Curse,” a poem which embodies both the burgeoning disdain for the middle classes that would dominate his bitter middle period and, concomitantly, his growing sense of poetry’s social inefficacy.

Yeats’s disdain for the middle classes lies at the centre of my second chapter, which explores how the poet’s well-documented anti-materialism issues in a hostility towards the concept of utopia. For the later Yeats, utopian social reformers suffered not from an excess of idealism, but from precisely the opposite: an overweening materialism, rooted in the wrong belief that societal ills could be eradicated by political or economic means. By contrast, Yeats’s cyclical view of history maintains the inevitability of social
strife, and the concomitant perpetuity of our desire to overcome it – a desire which gives art (including his own) its animating impetus. His hostility to utopia arises, I argue, not from lack of sympathy with the impulse to social betterment, but with utopians’ crassly materialistic conviction that a better world can be achieved once and for all. Building from Levitas’s definition of utopia as “the expression of desire for a better way of being” (8), I argue that while Yeats sees the utopians he disdains as seeking the achievement (and therefore the end) of their reformist desires, he himself seeks (and indeed relishes) the endless perpetuation of desire. Furthermore, I contend that this stance, reflecting both his cyclical view of history and his conviction that the end of desire would mean the end of art, in fact makes him an anti-utopian utopian, an ardent desirer of better worlds whose explicit repudiation of utopianism conceals a deep sympathy with the affirmative futurity that drives it.

In elaborating this argument, I read every occurrence of the word “utopia” in Yeats’s body of work, highlighting how his overwhelmingly pejorative treatment of the concept arises not only out of elitist sentiment – as many past commentators on Yeats’s politics have emphasized – but out of his conviction that the achievement of the socialist or mass-democratic utopia sought by reformers of his time would put an end to the antithetical striving out of which great art is generated. Through readings of several of Yeats’s landmark later poems – “Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation,” “September 1913,” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”– as well as essays, letters, and sections of his philosophical treatise A Vision, I illuminate how despite his overt hostility to the concept of utopia, his work repeatedly comments upon, engages with, and indeed embodies the aspirational impulse at the concept’s core. I end the chapter with a reading
of Yeats’s two Byzantium poems, focusing on how the poet’s varied depictions of the mytho-historical city find him both acknowledging the allure of eutopia (in the desire to reach the good place that animates “Sailing to Byzantium”) and concluding that all such desire ultimately leads to the static utopian realm of art (the roiling purgatorial no-place portrayed in “Byzantium”). Yeats thus exalts art’s capacity to embody the utopias he rejects in life, to afford us unachievable images of the desire on which the artistic imagination must never cease to feed.

This emphasis on desire carries over into Chapters Three and Four, on early and later Auden respectively. The first of these highlights how the desire for unity – both social and psychological – can be seen as the central animating impetus of Auden’s poetry from the beginning of his career until his move to America in 1939. Beginning with an examination of passages from his 1928 Berlin Journal which evidence the poet’s early belief in humanity’s essential dividedness – a doctrine which serves to implicitly justify the hermetic style of his early work – I then read his landmark 1927 poem “The Watershed” as a fraught embodiment of this doctrine, a text which both revels in the poet’s singularity and laments his aloneness. Mapping out the poem’s rootedness in Auden’s nostalgic love for the Pennine coal-mining region, I read it as a reflection upon the speaker’s inability not only to recapture the Edenic wholeness felt in his past encounters with the region’s landscape (as many other critics have emphasized), but to relate meaningfully to the people of the region, from whom he finds himself divided by vocation and class. “The Watershed” thus poetically depicts the tripartite state of division set out in the Berlin Journal – psychological, ecological, and social – and presages
Auden’s attempts throughout the 1930s to conceive of a role for poetry in both envisioning and bringing about a state of unity that would heal these divisions.

As with the early Yeats, I cast Auden’s quest for unity in this period as *utopian*, on the grounds that a) it thoroughly conforms to Levitas’s definition of utopia as “the expression of desire for a better way of being”; and b) the poems which best embody this desire often employ topographical motifs that ally them with the mainstream of utopian literature deriving from More. In exploring the precise contours of Auden’s desire for unity, I look at his 1930s essays “Writing” and “Psychology and Art To-day” as well as his Introduction to the 1935 anthology *The Poet’s Tongue*, to highlight how over the course of his early career he moved from diagnosing our disunity (which he saw as rooted in our excessive “self-consciousness” – a concept he borrows from D.H. Lawrence and Gerald Heard) to seeking to remedy it. Over the course of these writings, he casts poetry first as a symptom of our dissolution, then as refining our knowledge of good and evil, and finally as leading us to make more moral (and therefore more communally minded) choices. While becoming in his prose increasingly more hopeful of poetry’s educative capacities, however, in his poetry he registers such hope far more ambivalently. Two crucial close readings frame the second half of this chapter: first, of the 1933 sestina “Paysage Moralisé,” which I read as using the repeated end-words of the sestina form to suggest the tragic perpetual cyclicity of the human quest for utopia; and second, of the 1938 sonnet sequence *In Time of War*, which goes further to suggest that the universality of such questing – the striving of fallen beings after a lost unity – may be the only thing that ever unites us. Chapter Three thus ends by suggesting that by the end of the 1930s,
Auden’s growing conviction of humanity’s fallenness all but drained his work of the secular utopianism that had animated it throughout the previous decade.

Chapter Four sets out the consequences of this, charting how Auden came to believe instead that poetry’s chief extra-aesthetic role lay in illuminating the extent of our fallenness, and therefore the delusoriness of all our quests for earthly paradise. The chapter opens by examining Auden’s assertion (in his 1950s essay “The Virgin and the Dynamo”) that “Every good poem is very nearly a utopia” (DH 71), reading this claim within its context as evidence that despite his pejorative treatment of the concept of utopia earlier in his career, Auden came to find it a useful way of analogizing poetry’s capacity to embody our desire for more coherent, unified futures. The word analogizing is crucial here, however: for Auden continually warns against the mistaken belief that (as he puts it later in the same essay) “since all is well in the work of art, all is well in history” (71). Recognizing that the claim inherent in this warning – that art’s potential to embody coherence in no way implies its ability to actualize it in the real world – is simply a less overt version of what has become his most famous line, “poetry makes nothing happen,” I then move on to discuss both the 1939 elegy for Yeats in which the line appears and the contemporaneous essay “The Public v. Mr William Butler Yeats” – both of which engage much more ambivalently with poetry’s extra-aesthetic impact than is commonly appreciated. Reading the dialogic structures of both poem and essay as working to embody opposed but by no means exclusive views of poetry’s real-world efficacy, I ultimately argue that read in wider context, the elegy’s contention that “poetry makes nothing happen” serves to set out what I call a negative poetics. In presencing nonexistent possibility both formally and (often) through its subject matter, poetry makes
nothing a thing that happens, alerting us to the gap between utopian desire and its continually deferred fulfillment.

The second half of the chapter explores how throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, Auden conceives of this gap in explicitly religious terms. Reading his 1941 poem “Atlantis” and his 1944 opus The Sea and the Mirror alongside his prose writings of the period, I show how Auden’s engagement with the idea of a better world shifts from bearing a social emphasis to signalling a more strictly salvationary one. According to the Christian-existentialist Auden of the early 1940s, art’s function inheres in its capacity to flout what he calls “auto-idolatry” – the delusion that our existences are self-authorizing rather than dependent upon God’s grace – and to illuminate our mutual fallenness. Focusing on the way these works register God as an absence rather than as an entity with any positive qualities, I highlight their embodiment of a negative poetics that illuminates not as before our perpetual distance from utopia, but rather (as Caliban puts it in the climactic speech of The Sea and the Mirror) “the ungarnished offended gap between what you so questionably are and what you are commanded without any question to become” (50) – in other words, between fallenness and salvation. I close the chapter with a reading of “Vespers,” from Auden’s 1955 sequence Horae Canonicae, the last direct engagement with the concept of utopia in Auden’s oeuvre. Examining the poem’s dialogic structure as a conversation between the “Arcadian” speaker and his “Utopian” nemesis, I suggest that, contrary to many readings of the poem which accept the Arcadian’s playful hedonism as Auden’s personal viewpoint, one might read it as embodying his final acknowledgement of his own propensity to utopian striving – a striving henceforth banished from his aesthetic, as the work of his final decades finds him
more likely to gently revel in humanity’s imperfections than thirst after their improvement.

This project arose out of the observation that throughout their writings, Yeats and Auden both often evidence the desire that the world should be a better place. In what follows I have hoped to illuminate several key aspects of this desire. First, that it is not a straightforward one: that what each poet means by “better” (and indeed even “world”) varies at different points in his career, as each chafes against or falls in step with the shifting sociopolitical climate of his times, thinking in reaction to both his own prior beliefs and those imbibed from his predecessors both poetic and philosophical. And second, that there is an essential connection between each man’s desire for a better world and his vocation as a poet. Whether this connection is primarily selfish – wherein a better society simply means one in which more people read and heed poetry – or more authentically social – wherein it is hoped that poetry’s harmonious architecture might somehow model (or even help to actualize) the reconciliation of humanity – I do not attempt to conclude. I only hope to elaborate how absolutely integral is a stance of futurity to Yeats’s and Auden’s work, and to suggest that for both (albeit in widely varying ways), such a stance is largely inextricable from the role of Modern poet.
Yeats’s early work does not readily dwell in the present. For the young poet of the 1880s and 90s, the here and now resonates mainly in its potentiality, glimmering in a state of latency, on the verge of awakening. While believing that the nascent Irish nation lay “bound together by imaginative possessions […] and by a past of great passions” (*EE* 158), he also believed that “the arts lie dreaming of things to come” (*EE* 140), and that as a poet he could work to usher forth “that new great utterance for which the world is waiting” (*UP1* 250). Convinced that as an “imaginative artist” he inherently “belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation” (*EE* 143), this early Yeats not only embodies in his work the mythic and the millennial, the nostalgic and the hopeful, the pastoral and the utopian, but he consistently illuminates the inextricability of these past- and future-looking registers. Early Yeats embodies, in a sense, Schiller’s type of the elegiac poet, “in search of nature but as an idea and in a perfection in which it never existed” – except that one might substitute “nation” for “nature” in this formula (49). Yeats hearkens back to a mythic Celtic construct which, he hopes, might resonate so heavily in the Irish imagination as to model the nation’s future unity. The historical tenuousness of this construct posed little problem for a poet whose aesthetic depended so thoroughly, from his very earliest poems, on portraying states of unsatisfied (and indeed, largely unsatisfiable) desires. In this chapter I will focus on the world-building aspirations of Yeats’s early lyric speakers who, while often striving towards a pastoral ideal that resides in the impossible gap between “good place”
(eutopia) and “no place” (outopia), implicitly make an objective of desire itself, casting it as the space of affirmative futurity that must be occupied as a precondition to any more concrete communal reform, a kind of antechamber to nationhood.

1.

The first poem in Yeats’s Collected Poems as assembled under the poet’s supervision in 1933 – and still in all editions available today – begins with a characteristic proclamation: “The woods of Arcady are dead.” As an entry into a body of work, this opening line situates us in the post-pastoral, a world in which the consolation once held out by the imaginary idylls of old suddenly rings hollow. Like much of early Yeats, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” teems with dead kings, faded vistas, and a general sense of yearning conveyed through a dreamlike haze – as though the fallenness of the modern world made it impossible even to wish with any real precision. Originally given the elegiac title “The Song of the Last Arcadian,” the poem sets out in its opening lines a familiar Romantic opposition, lamenting the usurpation of imagination’s authority by the forces of empiricism:

The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy;
Of old the world on dreaming fed;
Grey Truth is now her painted toy;
Yet still she turns her restless head:
But O, sick children of the world,
Of all the many changing things
In dreary dancing past us whirled,

To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,

Words alone are certain good. (1-10)

First written in 1885, the poem doubtless exemplifies some of the more unfortunate tendencies of fin de siècle poetry, its buoyant four-beat line failing to fully counterbalance the prevailing undercurrent of morbidity, the sense one gets of the young poet’s revelling a little too indulgently in the approach of the century’s end, of his wanting too desperately to find apocalyptic resonance in the coming new era. On one hand, its vision of a fallen world reads like the maudlin fantasizing of an angst-ridden nineteen-year-old Anglo-Irishman still labouring under the earliest influences of his adolescent years, the moralistic Spenser and the visionary Shelley, both great forgers of compensatory myths. On the other hand, however, both its anti-materialist disdain and its concomitant faith in the evocative force of words would remain powerful motifs throughout the poet’s career. Yeats never relinquished the hope – inherited from Shelley and later Blake – that one day the coat of transfixing gloss would be stripped from the present age’s favourite “painted toy,” exposing “Grey Truth” in all its colourless sterility, and ushering in a new imaginative age. But how would such a revelation come about? Must the poets simply wait to be reinstated to their rightful legislative heights? Yeats’s earliest answer to these questions is contained, at least in kernel, in the provocatively absurd statement that closes the Happy Shepherd’s long first sentence: “Words alone are certain good.”

For a poet, of course, nothing could be better news, and so the self-servingness of this claim should perhaps lead us to dismiss it as the overreaching rhetoric of a young
man anxious to claim for his vocation an importance surpassing the world of action. The subsequent lines certainly support this dismissal, as the poem goes on to flout logic in implying that because the deeds of “warring kings” survive only in books, then words must do more good than kings. This leads into the poem’s climactic claim – and one of the more outrageous speculations in a poetic oeuvre full of them – as the speaker goes so far as to muse that “The wandering earth herself may be / A sudden flaming word.” In other words, not only do poets wield the one medium of “certain good,” but the world itself may be composed of just that medium. Poets are so much like gods in this context that it seems only logical to cast the world’s creator as a poet too. The narcissism here is hard to miss, but the fiery audacity of the wish for words to matter lends it an exhilarating quality despite (or perhaps because of) the power-fantasy it embodies.

The poem’s two remaining verse paragraphs play variations on the theme that words may utter forth worlds, literally and not just literarily. Claiming that “there is no truth / Saving in thine own heart,” the speaker exalts dreaming over a scientific knowledge epitomized (with a hint of Whitman’s Learned Astronomer) by the so-called “starry men,” whose hearts have been drained of such truth. Then, he exhorts his hearers to tell their stories to an “echo-harbouring shell” (presumably that they may abide a while in the repeated truths of their own hearts) before repeating his claim that “words alone are certain good.” Occurring as it does alongside an image of Romantic abandonment to one’s own endlessly reverberant voice, this third occurrence of the claim pushes us to read it against the grain, as a statement of radical relativism: “certain” and “good” may just be words after all, epistemology and ethics matters of empty semantics, meaningless amid the echoes of the solitary heart, where life is really lived.
The poem’s closing tableau finds this solipsism modulating into a more social longing, as the Shepherd returns us to the vacated woods of Arcadia, where he sings over the grave of a long-dead faun, envisioning the creature resurrected:

And still I dream he treads the lawn,
Walking ghostly in the dew,
Pierced by my glad singing through,
My songs of old earth’s dreamy youth:
But ah! she dreams not now; dream thou!
For fair are poppies on the brow:
Dream, dream, for this is also sooth. (51-57)

This profusion of dreams can be taken in several ways. Most simply, we might see them as a means of escape, the introvert’s way of coping with the desolations of the social realm. Finding Arcadia spent and joyless, the Shepherd retreats to the verdancy within himself, making explicit pastoral’s origins in the desire for a social harmony only achievable under the unifying force of the imagination. So while post-pastoral in one sense, the poem’s last verse paragraph is also a recapitulation of the originary pastoral gesture – what Williams Empson calls “the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple” (22) – in this case the distillation of myriad desires and dissatisfactions into a single simple dream set in the imaginary past. But the poem does not end in that past; its final lines shift from description to exhortation, urging the reader to do the dreaming the aging earth no longer does, an imaginative act not just soothing but “sooth” – not just escapist but capable of generating new truths, new realities. What began, then, as a proclamation of the death of pastoral, has become by the end an illumination of its basic
motives, and an affirmation of the renovating potential of imaginative song. This may explain the change in title: the Shepherd finds himself happy in his status as the Last Arcadian, sensing the power of his dreamy music to help sing new idylls into being.

This all sounds awfully airy, of course, and it is. The Yeats of 1885 possessed only the vaguest of ends on which to pin his aspirations, and so they remained in a sense inchoate, the ambitious daydreams of a recent teenager. But juvenilia though it may be, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” remains significant for more than just its status as the first piece in Yeats’s *Collected Poems*. Originally the epilogue of his little-read first play, *The Island of Statues: An Arcadian Romance*, the poem stands as the one canonized remnant of the earliest stage of Yeats’s writing, the imitative pastoral phase which also produced his other 1885 drama *The Seeker* – the period just before his concerns became explicitly nationalist, and his mythic subject matter distinctly Irish. Although it precedes the Celtic Twilight that would descend upon and define Yeats’s work from the later 1880s to the turn of the century, as an entry point into his poetry “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” serves to foreground how thoroughly the pastoral ethos pervades Yeats’s later Celticism. But rather than continue to hearken back through English (via Greece and Rome) literary history to hold up Arcadia as the ideal inverse of a excessively rational and materialistic social order, the Yeats of the Celtic Twilight era turns instead to myths and symbols indigenous to Ireland, the elements of which come to serve as foundation for both a literary tradition and a constructed historical image of pre-Christian Ireland as itself a kind of Arcadia, a land before the triumph of “Grey Truth” over dream.

Before going any further, I should clarify my use of the term “pastoral,” around which scholarly dispute continues to simmer. Views on the term can be split, broadly,
into two camps: those who (like Paul Alpers and Annabel Patterson) see pastoral as a fairly strictly delimited genre, deriving from the *Idylls* of Theocritus, which takes as its subject matter the lives of shepherds in a setting of simplicity and abundance, often called Arcadia; and those (like Empson, Paul Marinelli, and Terry Gifford) who aim more broadly to explore the partial or fragmentary manifestations of elements of this genre in works that cannot be placed strictly in the line deriving from Theocritus. These scholars—especially Marinelli and Gifford, who write theoretical surveys of the subject—concern themselves with identifying an impulse or (to re-use the term I borrowed from Marinelli earlier) an *ethos* at the heart of pastoral, and with exploring the ideological significance of this oft-iterated longing after bucolic simplicity. Crucially, both agree that the pastoral impulse embodies not only the nostalgic desire for a lost Golden Age, but also an implicit dissatisfaction with things as they are, and an attendant wish for a better future. Marinelli claims that “a note of criticism is inherent in all pastoral from the beginning of its existence” (22), while Gifford cites its “oppositional potential,” maintaining that “behind the idealisation of the pastoral there is an implicit future,” and more forcefully, that “at its best the pastoral will always imply that its vision of Arcadia has implications for a New Jerusalem” (35). The terms of this last pairing Gifford draws from W.H. Auden, who envisioned “a characterological gulf” between “the Arcadian whose favorite daydream is of Eden, and the Utopian whose favorite daydream is of New Jerusalem” (*DH* 409) – positing, in other words, the literary genres of pastoral and utopia as embodying inverse gestures, the former looking back while the latter looks ahead. Yeats himself echoes this dichotomy in his 1936 radio broadcast “Modern Poetry,” as he reminisces on himself and his Rhymers’ Club colleagues in the 1890s: “We did not look forward or look outward,
we left that to the prose writers. We thought it was in the very nature of poetry to look back, to resemble those Swedenborgian angels who are described as moving forever towards the dayspring of their youth” (LE 92). In fact, however, the young Yeats did a great deal of looking forward, and much of it inextricable from his looking back. Late in life, increasingly reactionary and disillusioned with his past cultural nationalist goals, he felt it necessary to repudiate the future orientation of much of his early thinking – a disavowal whose implications I will examine more closely in the next chapter. But for now I want to further examine how the pastoral impulse often necessarily embodies the utopian one so often figured as its inverse, and eventually, how this Janus-faced hybrid mode of discourse – searching back to find the way ahead – typifies the method of Yeats’s early poetry, as he looks to Ireland’s Celtic past to legitimate a nascent literary movement which, he hopes, will lay the foundation for future nationhood.

Gifford is one of the few scholars to posit the inherency of the utopian within the pastoral; when the connection between the two genres does get made, it is usually cast as an opposition along the lines of Auden’s. Northrop Frye’s 1965 essay “The Varieties of Literary Utopia” exemplifies this tendency. Although he slips readily into a discussion of pastoral from an exploration of the “social ideal” of “the greatly simplified life” implicit in some utopian texts, Frye ultimately (and it must be said, characteristically) makes this connection the basis of a finer distinction, contrasting the Arcadian ideal with the utopian along rural/urban lines: while the former concerns itself primarily with simplicity, abundance, and the satisfaction of what few desires remain in such an idyllic setting, the latter aims at structure, regularity, and the achievement of a happy and orderly metropolis (40-41). More recent scholars, however – wanting to recuperate the drive for social
change at the root of utopian thinking – have challenged the narrowness of this urban-centred, technocratic definition, which has so often allowed for a conflation of utopia and its dystopic inverse. Ruth Levitas’s 1989 book *The Concept of Utopia* stands at the vanguard of this new vein of utopian scholarship, which defines utopia broadly, not by appeal to its form or even its proposed function, but by its ontological source – namely, desire. “Utopia,” claims Levitas, “is the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (8). Rather than a strictly delimited literary genre defined by its formal characteristics, utopia in this view is a broad mode of expression accommodating myriad genres and aims, from the critical or pedagogical to the visionary or merely compensatory. A recent anthology of utopian scholarship in this expansive vein defines it as simply “social dreaming” – a formulation which appropriately foregrounds the communal nature of Levitas’s “better way of being”: though some utopias may take the form of private fantasies, they ultimately gesture towards a more ideal collective.

Along these lines, Levitas specifically takes issue with the critical tendency to cordon off Arcadia from utopia as somehow embodying a separate species of desire. To J.C. Davis, whose 1981 book *Utopia and the Ideal Society* excludes Arcadia from the category of utopia on the basis of it being “unrealistic” by contrast to the more tough-minded organizational approach of true utopian thought, Levitas argues that as a vision of abundance, simplicity, and universal fulfillment, Arcadia implies “the radical transformation of needs, of satisfactions, and the relationship between them,” thereby embodying the central utopian desire to address “the collective problem of the scarcity gap” (164). But addressing this gap, Levitas cautions, should not be confused with solving it; Arcadia cannot be disqualified from the category of utopia for being
“unrealistic,” because concrete applicability is not what utopia aims for: “Utopias are generally not convincing as political programmes,” she claims, “nor are they necessarily intended to be; the transition to the good society is frequently not addressed, because utopia is the expression of desire, and desire may outstrip hope while not necessarily outstripping possibility” (164). Hope, in this view, involves the expectation that one’s desires will be realized, while the broader concept of possibility lets those desires remain suspended in an ether of hypotheticality. But even possibility binds utopia too tightly to expectation, as Levitas later notes: “The problem of limiting utopia to the ‘possible world’ is that it conflates the categories of hope and desire. It limits utopia to the question ‘what may I hope?’ and refuses the question ‘what may I dream?’ […] The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of being” (190-91).

Arcadia is utopian, then, to the extent that its evocation embodies that desire, and following this line of thinking, the pastoral (pace Frye and his more genre-minded strand of critical opinion) always implicitly gestures to utopia’s “better way.”

Returning to Yeats’s early poetry in light of this expansive conception of utopia, one can more readily perceive its social or even political dimension. For although Yeats’s early career is often characterized as “cultural nationalist” in its aims, the chief points of evidence for this are usually marshalled from among his direct statements of purpose in published prose or private letters, or from explicitly nationalist plays like The Countess Cathleen or Cathleen Ni Houlihan, rather than from the field of creative endeavor for which he remains best known – his lyric poetry. Lyric, of course, is often cast as the inverse of political discourse, a mode of resolutely individual expression which exalts the very fact of subjectivity over a public realm serving, within the space of the poem, any
number of subordinate functions, from backdrop to active antagonist. In general, Yeats’s early lyrics fit this description in their abiding focus on individual speakers and characters whose dreamy sensibilities lead them to revolt against the world as it exists, to long, and pine, and wish themselves away. But I ask: is it not the case that even the most fiercely independent or woefully self-absorbed of lyric subjects weaves his escapist tapestries from the loose threads of the social fabric? Or put another way, are dreamers really separable from the societies that embed them? The broad definition of utopia offered by Levitas invites us to see the dream or desire for a better way of life, no matter how individually expressed, as a social phenomenon; in other words, it invites us to see such individual aspirations as inherently linked to those of the collective. In terms of Yeats’s early lyrics, this link can be fairly easily made: for if we see the more explicit statements of cultural nationalism laid out in the prose and plays as discursively preparing a social field into which the lyrics intervene at the level of desire, the dovetailing of the pastoral and utopian in the early poems becomes a matter of more than generic significance. Put simply, while the prose and plays directly communicate the hope for a unified and independent Irish nation, the poems repeatedly embody the desire for a better way of life, a more ideal social order, a place akin to paradise. After relinquishing the inherited pastoral imagery of shepherds and fauns (and thus truly admitting the death of Arcadia) in the mid-1880s, Yeats forges a new pastoral ideal from the myths of Ireland’s Celtic past – an ideal which, taken alongside his future-oriented nationalist endeavors, becomes not only a place to be nostalgic for personally, but a place to be aspired to socially. At this point, the lyric dreaming of his motley solitaries becomes functionally inextricable from the collective dream of Irish nationhood.¹
This is not to say that Yeats’s shift to Irish subjects automatically makes his poems more socially efficacious, but it does lend them at least the illusion of greater engagement when compared to the Arcadian and Indian set pieces that begin *Crossways* (1889), the first section of *The Collected Poems*. Yeats came to believe that his poetry could help guide the course of the national cause by embodying indigenous myths – that the unity of “word” and “world” he so radically proposed in “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” could at least partly come to pass. But he also understood the ephemerality of this ideal, and remained sensitive to poetry’s impotence even as he exalted its evocative force. This mingling of doubt and hope is thematized in the earliest piece in *The Collected Poems* to employ an Irish setting, “The Madness of King Goll.” The eponymous king stands at the beginning of a long line of Yeatsian exiles, from Oisin to Crazy Jane to the poet himself in late poems like “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”: figures who find themselves trapped irreconcilably between the world as it exists and the world of fantasy their visionary insight permits them to imagine. The poem begins with Goll being driven by a sudden onset of madness from a life of battle and temporal rule to one of communion with nature – another recapitulation of the pastoral search for the atavistic Golden Age. Wandering the woods prophet-like, Goll stumbles upon a sleepy town where he finds deserted an “old tympan” (*tiompán*, an ancient Irish stringed instrument related to the dulcimer) and takes it back to the woods (55). There, the “married voices” of Goll and the tympan sing of “some inhuman misery” (58-59), tapping through art into a Platonic realm of Forms transcending ephemeral human truths. As his hand passes over the instrument’s “wire[s],” he finds his restlessness “quenched,” the “whirling and the wandering fire” within him – the very force that drove him mad to
begin with – at peace (65-67). But the poem’s last few lines find the strings lying torn, and Goll ends bound to an ambivalent wandering, having lost both worldly and otherworldly mastery, exiled in a limbo between action and art.

At every stage of Goll’s journey, from kingship to prophethood to his final exile, a single-line refrain follows him, ending each of the poem’s six stanzas: “They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter around me, the beech leaves old.” First signalling his madness, then his attunement to the woods, and finally his lapse into a failed poet’s silence, the refrain manifests yet again the Romantic conviction of the purity of nature’s speaking voice, the “unpremeditated art” of Shelley’s skylark. Despite his debts to nearer contemporaries – Goll’s madness recalls much of Browning and Tennyson, and the refrain’s heavy stresses borrow the sprung rhythm of Hopkins, with its insistence on the immanent divinity of nature – Goll remains firmly rooted in the tradition of the Romantic vision-quest. As an inheritor of that tradition, Yeats would spend much of his career haunted by the spectre of a purer form of expression he could never quite achieve. The frustration of this is reflected in his hero’s fruitless trajectory: Goll’s flight from the heroic realm of epic to the idyllic one of pastoral only temporarily lends him visionary insight, and ends up being a sideways shift from one outmoded mythos to another. He finds brief peace with the tympan, but as a Celticized Aeolian harp with only Goll’s madness for wind, it must lie broken by the poem’s end, an emblem of the essential airlessness of his world. Nothing in Goll’s story gestures outside the insular literary realms of epic and pastoral between which he madly slips, and nothing lifts it from the realm of the anecdotal to that of the visionary: his flight back to nature fails because it ultimately sheds no light on where he should go next, imparting neither wisdom for the
future nor insight on the state of the civilization he forsook. The town where he finds the
tympan is left “sleeping” and not returned to, despite having afforded him his one means
of consolation. Whatever visions of coherence he may have glimpsed will serve only to
gird his solipsism, never to benefit the collective. His madness will never give way to
prophethood.

Put simply, one might say that “The Madness of King Goll” portrays the pastoral
impulse drained of the utopian desire so often inherent in it. Yeats depicts a mythic past
without wishing for its contemporaneity. Whereas the Happy Shepherd clearly longed for
the lost world of dream to re-emerge in a better future, Goll’s flight back to nature
ultimately renders him futureless. The story of his madness is myth for myth’s sake; like
much late nineteenth-century aestheticism, it upholds the Romantic exaltation of wild
nature and unbridled subjectivity while also highlighting the dangerous solipsism
inherent in the cult of the visionary. On one hand, Goll’s madness testifies to late
Romanticism’s decadent exhaustion, and in this sense presages Yeats’s later
characterization of his Rhymers’ Club compatriots in 1890s London – Ernest Dowson,
Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons – as “The Tragic Generation,” all of whom (in Yeats’s
account) drifted into dissipation at being unable to cope with the yawning gap between
art and the quotidian world.3 Along these lines, then, “The Madness of King Goll”
evinces the aimlessness of the pre-nationalist Yeats: incapable, as an Irishman, of fully
embracing the imported creeds of Symbolism and Aestheticism, but not yet sure on what
principles to construct an indigenous tradition to transcend the growing effeteness of l’art
pour l’art. Without the sense of purpose the national cause would lend his work, much of
Yeats’s earliest poetry finds him, like Goll, escaping to nowhere in particular, unsure of what to do when he arrives.

On the other hand, however, the very act of embodying an Irish myth in verse would come to serve as a first principle of the Celtic Revival, so that despite the lack of any explicit utopian thrust in Yeats’s retelling, his choice of subject matter itself could be cast as a nationalist gesture, an implicit manifestation of utopian desire. Such are the terms Yeats begins to set out in his earliest prose pieces. In the first of two 1886 tributes to the recently deceased poet Sir Samuel Ferguson – his first published essays – Yeats is already assuming the cultural nationalist mantle he would wear for at least two decades, linking the myths of Ireland’s deep history to its future prospects for independent nationhood:

Sir Samuel Ferguson’s special claim to our attention is that he went back to the Irish cycle, finding it, in truth, a fountain that, in the passage of centuries, was overgrown with weeds and grass, so that the very way to it was forgotten of the poets; but now that his feet have worn the pathway, many others will follow, and bring thence living waters for the healing of our nation, helping us to live the larger life of the Spirit, and lifting our souls away from their selfish joys and sorrows to be the companions of those who lived greatly among the woods and hills when the world was young. (UP1 82)

The movement from “weeds and grass” to “woods and hills” nicely encapsulates the pastoral impulse at the root of Yeats’s thinking here. The great cycle of Irish myths represents a subterranean spring that the next generation of poets must tap, letting flow its
“living waters” and returning the nation to its past verdancy. At the same time, Yeats manages to tacitly justify the misty symbolism that dominates his poetic approach throughout the 1880s and 90s, exalting “the larger life of the Spirit” as more closely allied to this verdant past, and thereby implying that the national cause is partly (and perhaps at this stage primarily) a spiritual one. The mythic landscapes of the Celtic past serve as *paysages moralisés*, externalizations of the pure unjaded idealism of the countryside’s atavistic spirit – a spirit the modern-day Irish must recapture as a precondition of actual nationhood. In his second Ferguson tribute, Yeats restates this conviction of myth’s importance in providing a metaphysical foundation for the national idea, writing that “Of all the many things the past bequeaths to the future, the greatest are great legends; they are the mothers of nations. I hold it the duty of every Irish reader to study those of his own country till they are familiar as his own hands, for in them is the Celtic heart” (*UP1* 104). Here Yeats’s propensity to model the future after the past, to envision utopia through the pastoral, is laid out almost diagrammatically. The spectre of the unborn nation demands that the “Irish reader” reclaim his “Celtic heart,” his buried ancestral inheritance. But the path of bequeathal from past directly to future that Yeats sets out here entirely elides the present, and so also elides the very existence of an “Irish reader” who might perform such an act of reclamation. In this scheme the present registers as little more than a void of instability, an index of the precariousness of Irish identity, a featurelessness that Yeats grants only a glimmer of existence – primarily as the place-in-time to be escaped from.

In the earliest work in the *Collected Poems*, the *Crossways* section and the long narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisin*, Yeats repeatedly depicts such escapes, leading
his figures to worlds of myth where higher concerns of life, death, and eternity predominate, showing up the pettiness of the quotidian. Oisin rides “out from the human lands,” journeying with his immortal lover Niamh to the Islands of Dancing and Victories and Forgetfulness, in a failed search for the Island of Content. *Crossways* presents us, in addition to the faded idylls of the Happy Shepherd and King Goll, with the childlike dream of flying off “To an Isle in the Water,” the vision of meeting a doomed love “Down by the Salley Gardens,” and the bittersweetness of “The Meditation of the Old Fisherman,” whose title character remembers, “*When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*” As with the latter, many of these early poems employ refrains that capture the strange persistence, both ritualistic and obsessive, of the call to escape the world, the shining promise of elsewhere so hauntingly embodied in the song of the faeries to “The Stolen Child” they lure away:

*Come away, O human child!*

*To the waters and the wild*

*With a faery, hand in hand,*

*For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.* (9-12)

In 1888, while correcting a manuscript for publication, Yeats wrote a letter to Katharine Tynan in which he singled out the refrain of “The Stolen Child” as typical of his early work’s shortcomings: “It is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight. […] it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint, the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge” (*L* 63). In later years Yeats felt himself to have achieved such insight only after deliberately hardening his style, and many critics have
agreed, relegating his early poetry (despite its enduring popularity) to minor status, casting its late-Romantic longing as merely an immature prelude to the more forcefully prophetic rhetoric of much of the later work. But I would argue that Yeats’s early poetry – written by a young man not yet grown into the stentorian voice of authority that so compellingly animates such later rhetorical performances as “Easter 1916,” “The Second Coming,” and “Under Ben Bulben” – communicates all the more powerfully the following twinned propositions: first, that every lyric utterance is rooted at its nascency in the basic force of desire; and second, that this same force of desire also lies at the root of every impulse for social change. To rephrase a point I made above: in Yeats’s early poetry, lyric desire is rendered inextricable from utopian desire. In the cultural nationalist contexts of late-nineteenth century Ireland in general and Yeats’s body of writing in particular, the tempting call to escape to fairyland unavoidably carries social resonance as a poetic iteration of the imperative Yeats issued in his second Ferguson essay: to learn the “Celtic heart” through the legends of the land.

2.

But how did Yeats conceive of poetry’s role in this educative process? Could the mere embodiment of utopian desire in poetry work to instill this desire societally? Phillip Marcus has elaborated at length upon what he terms Yeats’s aesthetic of “artistic power,” identifying its earliest roots in the Irish bardic tradition, then in Shelley and Blake, and finally in the Oscar Wilde of “The Decay of Lying” – with his claim that “Life is Art’s best, Art’s only pupil” (qtd. in Marcus 30). For the young poet of the 1880s, however, the majority of these influences had either not yet been encountered or not yet fully felt,
and Shelley alone remained the first word on poetry’s ultimate aims and potentials. If, as I have argued, Yeats’s early poetry presents lyric and utopian desire as inextricable, Shelley stands as the predecessor who not only most fervently expresses this inextricability, but goes further in imputing to poetry a formative social role.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Shelley’s exalted view of poetry on Yeats’s early career. In his *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* Yeats tells us that by the age of eighteen he had made *Prometheus Unbound* his “sacred book” (95), and in his essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” begun in 1899 when he was thirty-four, he amplifies that earlier judgment, claiming that “it [*Prometheus*] seems me to have an even more certain place than I had thought, among the sacred books of the world” (51). We know from the latter essay that the eschatological elements of Shelley’s work particularly appealed to Yeats, as he compares the prophetic faith embodied in *Prometheus* to the ancient faith of the “country people” in the west of Ireland, which held that a battle would be fought on Slieve-dan-Orr, the Golden Mountain, to usher in a thousand years of peace. (This is the subject of Yeats’s oblique lyric “The Valley of the Black Pig,” written around the same time as the Shelley essay.) For the Yeats of 1900, already well embarked on his project of cultural nationalism, Shelley’s vision of “Man, oh, not men! a chain of linked thought, / Of love and might to be divided not” (*Prometheus* IV.394-95) represented a practical end to be actively sought. This maturing Yeats interpreted Shelley in a way that lent authoritative support to his notion that Ireland might be molded into unity through exposure to a calculatedly national literature. Writing of Shelley’s conviction that the path to liberty lay through beauty, Yeats claims: “He does not believe that the
reformation of society can bring this beauty, this divine order, among men without the regeneration of the hearts of men” (54).

Even by the time of his 1898 essay “The Autumn of the Body,” Yeats was convinced that the path to such a regeneration lay through the arts, and that it was the artist’s responsibility to shepherd the people out of the petty materialism of the present into a future unified by ideals: “The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things” (141-42). He remains characteristically vague as to the nature of these “essences,” though one can point to his insistence on the foundational importance of Celtic myth as evidence of his meaning. He reaffirms this Shelleyan analogy between artists and priests in his 1901 essay “Ireland and the Arts,” in which he writes that “We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and fervour of a priesthood” (150). In specifying what is to be achieved by this priestly winning of the people, Yeats appeals to the prestige of ancientness to legitimate his vision for the still-nascent Irish state: “I would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood in Judea, in India, in Scandinavia, in Greece and Rome, in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business” (152). In other words, by the turn of the century Yeats sees the arts – and in writing of “the arts” he always gestures specifically to poetry – as capable of unifying the masses, of forging a people out of disparate individuals, and therefore of laying the foundation of nationhood.
The Yeats of the 1880s – the escapist Yeats of the Happy Shepherd and the Stolen Child – had only just begun to phrase his hopes for poetry in such explicitly nationalistic terms. Yet even in this nascent nationalist phase, he proceeds upon the assumption that poetry which holds out the promise of alternate realities, however futile their pursuit may seem, can somehow work to bring those realities about. This assumption no doubt derives in large part from Shelley’s exalted conception (present in much of his work but laid out most forcefully in his *Defence of Poetry*) of poets as not only “unacknowledged legislators” (508), but more specifically as “the institutors of laws, the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion” (482). The terms of this formulation bear examining more closely. Tacit throughout Shelley’s *Defence* is an analogy between poetic form and social formations, as though the beauty woven out of metrical language, in its unity and resolute musicality, might present a model of the harmoniousness we should strive for in our societies. Although Shelley remains vague as to how specifically poetry institutes laws, founds civil societies, and reveals the timeless beauty inherent in religion, this does not detract from his essay’s importance for my purposes. Most crucially, his stated conviction that poetry does in fact do these things indicates his ardent desire that poetry *should* have such a profound impact on political, social, and spiritual life. Looked at in this way, Shelley’s *Defence* stands not so much as a coherent descriptive theory as a set of aspirations, an exemplary codification of the central role played by desire both in prodding the imagination to poetic expression, and in reforming communal institutions. If poetry, as Shelley claims in one of his many formulations of the
idea, “enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight” (487), it embodies the potential to do no less than renovate our perceptions, and thereby to renovate the world.

But in Shelley’s essay, the precise nature of these perceptions matters little: as long as they be “new” or “unapprehended,” they widen our circle of love, and so act as a unifying force. Yeats’s early work arises out of this same conception of poetry’s potential. The call to escape, especially escape to impossible lands, does indeed represent “the cry of the heart against necessity,” but not in the impotent sense of “longing and complaint” that Yeats so condemned in himself. On the contrary, such a cry sounds a tragic awareness of the shortcomings of the present world, an implicit recognition of the Marxian insight that the realm of freedom begins only where that of necessity ends. The poems of Crossways (and to some extent of The Rose and The Wind among the Reeds), in longing for past idylls of beauty and harmony, register the strength of desire at the centre of the young poet’s impetus to write, even when that desire has only childish faery visions to strive toward. Yeats’s early poetry – with its endless urging to escapes seemingly doomed to failure – obeys the injunction of Shelley’s Demogorgon in the moving final speech of Prometheus Unbound: “to hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (IV.573-74).

This last quotation points once again to the relationship, so crucial to understanding Yeats’s cultural nationalism, between desire and hope. According to Levitas and other writers on the subject, hope can be roughly defined as desire bolstered by the force of expectation, or more firmly, by the reasonable belief that what is desired may actually come to pass. But as I discussed earlier, Levitas finds hope too limiting a
concept by which to define utopia, and so links it to desire instead. In terms of Yeats’s early poetry, this expansive definition allows even its most outlandish dreams of other worlds to qualify as utopian, without regard for their achievability: their desirous origins suffice. As the intervening discussion has made clear, however, Yeats increasingly came to see his poetry’s engagement with the pastoralisms of Celtic myth as actually working in the service of the Irish cause, helping to lay down the nation’s imaginative substratum. Though still rooted most firmly in desire, his aesthetic begins to be tinged with the expectation intrinsic to hope – a tendency for which he found an authoritative precedent in Shelley.

Put simply, Yeats inherited from Shelley a conception of poetry as a potentially revelatory manifestation of hope: a combination of desire and expectation, the forces of affirmative futurity through which the world is changed. As the earliest work in Yeats’s canon, the poems of *Crossways* embody this hope at its initial inchoate stage as pure desire, a wishfulness with only the vaguest of concrete ends. Moving into the poems of *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), however, we can see that desire begin to take on the more explicitly nationalist orientation of his plays and prose writings of the period, and thereby to engage more directly with hope. Yeats’s active involvement in nationalist causes deepened throughout the late 1880s and especially into the 1890s, as the Irish cultural renaissance initiated by him and his circle attempted to fill the vacuum left by the death of the pro-Home Rule leader Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891. This renaissance came to be known as the Celtic Twilight, a name that suits both the work’s prevailing pastoralism – of a mythic past grasped at through a haze – and its transfigured subject matter. Whereas the poems of *Crossways* paraded mythic figures from the Greek
and Indian traditions alongside King Goll and the child-stealing faeries of Irish lore, the myriad heroes that populate this later work remain exclusively indigenous: Cuchulain, Fergus, the Wandering Aengus, the Countess Cathleen, and the wind-dwelling Sidhe. This same shift is reflected in the poems’ geographies: the call to escape remains paramount, but the lands to be escaped to become more present and earth-bound – and like the characters that inhabit them, more explicitly Irish.5

The most famous of Yeats’s nineteenth-century poems, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” stands as perhaps the earliest work to register this shift. In the section of his autobiography entitled *Four Years 1887-1891*, Yeats gives an evocative account of the poem’s genesis in London in 1890:

> I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem ‘Innisfree’, my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. (*Au* 138)

This passage charts, in progressing from ambition to image to remembrance and finally to composition, one of the habitual movements of Yeats’s aesthetic in this period. His visions of the future (ambitions) often find emblems in the present (images) which evoke the glories of a mythic past (remembrances). Typically, though, the present setting – in this case downtown London, the colonial metropole – functions as little more than the place to be escaped from: the image in the shop window serves merely to launch his
memoried ambition, his utopian longing after pastoral bliss. Or to put this in a new way: the early Yeats, in aspiring to escape to so many Arcadias, Indias, or Irelands, comes to inhabit a curious epistemological position, and one he never fully abandons: he is nostalgic for the future. In the very earliest work, this future nostalgia manifests itself as the repeated call to escape to some mythic pastoral idyll, to live out the Rousseauist dream of communion with nature and its spirits, free to dance and sing the pagan way, without the possibility of censure or the looming responsibilities of adulthood. But as a late Romantic brooding toward the new millennium, even the teenage Yeats understood the futility, if not the silliness, of this vision. In the poems of The Rose, we find a Yeats who has more fully embraced Shelley’s characterization of poets as “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present” (508), as possessing what George Bornstein has called “a vision of the ideal order on which society should be patterned” (63). And so his emphasis begins to shift, as the desire to escape to another world becomes alloyed with the more explicitly utopian hope of altering the future one – with at first only the fuzziest of boundaries between these two aspirations. It is this shift that “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” evinces.

Hazard Adams singles the poem out as “a startling statement […] because the poet suddenly speaks out strongly and directly and because for the first time we sense that he is speaking from a real place” (54). In the terms of my discussion, this sudden placefulness is crucial not only in locating the poet himself, but in spatializing the object of his utopian desire, in putting the topos back in utopia:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (1-4)

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” stands as the most traditionally utopian of Yeats’s early poems, embodying not only utopia’s ontological basis in desire (as emphasized by Levitas), but also its status as literal place one might travel to (and most crucially, an island, which links it to the utopian lineage beginning with More). On the other hand, it could seem odd to classify the poem as “utopian” at all, for though it undoubtedly embodies the desire for a better way of being (to an extent that it has often been cast as the paradigmatic utterance of the early ‘escapist’ Yeats), the “better way” it envisions may seem too resoundingly solitary to be properly utopian. The speaker’s wish to “live alone in the bee-loud glade” reads like an assertion of the lush possibilities of seclusion (those insistent Ls look so much like 1s), a repudiation of collective life. And yet the poem remains so obviously dependent for its effect on the implied presence of the very collective it threatens to abandon. “I will arise and go now” signals not only a speaker just about to leave, but a poet repeatedly vowing to relinquish the very audience upon which his lyric status depends. By the time he reiterates that he “will arise and go now” at the beginning of the third quatrain, the promise sounds convictionless, with the word “now” hollowed of its performative force, serving only as a rhetorical instantaneity, a platform upon which the poet can proclaim his dissatisfaction with the urban world of “roadway[s]” and “pavements grey” (11). But this spatial and temporal extension of “now” from the realm of the immediate moment to a more encompassing sense of situation or milieu is crucial to the poem’s status as utopian: for with this extension of “now” comes a corresponding vagueness in the nature of the circumstances revolted
against, and thus an implicit invitation to share in the poet’s dissatisfaction and to desire with him the peace we all (it is implied) lack. This dynamic recalls Adorno’s claim that the modern lyric utterance, so often predicated upon solitude, is nonetheless “grounded in a collective substratum” (217). “From a condition of unrestrained individuation,” Adorno writes, “the lyric work strives for, awaits the realm of the general” (214). We can see this striving at work in Yeats, whose poetics so often depends on a metonymic blending of individual desires with those of an implied collective.

In “Innisfree” in particular – besides the speaker’s rhetorical extension of the realm of “now” – this blending involves both spatial and temporalizing gestures. Spatially, the speaker’s dream destination is not just an island, but an island in Ireland, a smaller gem within the Emerald Isle. This matroushka-like spatial nesting works to emphasize both the poem’s Romantic inheritance (by setting doubly definite boundaries around the speaker’s solitude), and the metonymic substitution at its centre: Innisfree is Ireland. This works with both the circumstances of the poem’s composition and in the wider context of Yeats’s early cultural nationalism, so often rooted in the myth of a pastoral Ireland whose loss lies rooted in the “deep heart’s core” of all true Irish, who must aspire together to return there. In later years Yeats criticized several of his compositional choices in the poem, particularly the “conventional archaism” of “I will arise and go now” and the syntactic inversion of “pavements grey.” But the antiquated tone produced by such choices serves to highlight the temporal paradox that haunts the speaker’s aspirations: In the future, he seems to say, I will go to the past. In displacing his pastoral utopia in both space and time, the poet of “Innisfree” dooms himself to dwell in the elastic “now” of a desire with no prospect of fulfillment, a kind of utopic purgatory, a
glorious falling-short that even finds its formal embodiment in each quatrain’s truncated last line. This exemplifies in structural terms Jahan Ramazani’s observation that “Yeats’s nationalism ironizes itself in the knowledge that fulfillment would come at a great cost to a poetry built on melancholic desire” (“Postcolonial” 30). In other words, while national goals themselves remain paramount, Yeats builds in to his poetics the implicit concession that (pace Shelley) art cannot reasonably expect to directly alter social institutions. By so compellingly expressing desire, however, it can hope to condition the desires of its audience. Ramazani neatly summarizes the dependence of Yeats’s cultural nationalist aesthetic on this virtual fetishization of desire: “Desire,” he writes, “is the basic unit of the communal imaginary, without which there can be no national aspiration or hope. Without the constitutive force of culture giving force to dreams, ‘the indomitable Irishry’ would fall under domination once again” (29). Ramazani’s formulation here gestures toward the manner in which, in early Yeats, individual desire comes to metonymically embody national hope. By so often expressing their desire to reinhabit a lost pastoral Ireland, Yeats’s lyric speakers model such an idyll as the ideal after which nationalists must (rather paradoxically) strive. The “lake water lapping” heard in the heart of the yearning poet posits an analagous echo in the chests of all true Irish, an impossible call emanating from past and future at once.

In light of how it embodies all these aspects of Yeats’s early aesthetics – its simultaneous call to past and future, its engagement with the inherency of the utopian within the pastoral, and its implicit awareness that to fail may be inevitable or even itself desirable – the curious prominence of “Innisfree” amid Yeats’s canon comes to seem more justified. Coming at a point in the young poet’s career at which he stood poised
almost equally between an artistic preoccupation with the lost world of myth and an increasing determination to alter the future course of the real Ireland of his time, it aptly conveys this ambivalence. As a Romantic stranded in modernity – a pose he would never fully relinquish – Yeats must, to remain relevant, constantly seek ways to highlight the utopian element within his pastoral nostalgia, and to infuse his desire with the force of expectation that sets it glimmering with hope. In casting Innisfree as a real island, distant in space rather than time from the present of himself and his readers, he imbues his longing with a sense of achievability. At the same time, however, the archaic tinge of his language and the way the stanzas truncate imply that part of what the speaker hearkens back to may in fact be irrecoverable. Believing, with Blake, that “all art is a labour to bring again the Golden Age” (EE 123), Yeats constantly seeks not innovation, but renovation. Never fully Modern, he accepts Pound’s famous directive only with a crucial amendment, perhaps explicit in it all along: “Make it new, again.”

One might reasonably assert that the object of this renovating impulse in early Yeats is not (as Pound would have it) poetic expression itself, nor even (as my discussion so far would imply) the Irish nation, but rather the minds of his readers. One might say the early poetry aims primarily at what Levitas has called “the education of desire” (124). This is a crucial term for understanding Yeats’s early aesthetics. As I have discussed, Levitas’s inclusive definition of utopia as “the expression of desire for a better way of being” precludes any definition in terms of ends or functions – though as she herself points out this does not therefore preclude the existence of such functions. In expressing desire so powerfully, utopian texts can have the effect of educating the desires of their audiences, “encouraging the sense that it does not have to be like this, it could be
otherwise” (124). That Yeats hoped his poetry would operate this way, shaping the minds of his readers, is obvious: I have already highlighted the Shelleyan grandiosity with which he conceived of the poet’s role in forging a culture — and indeed, one might see the phrase “the education of desire” as itself an incisive clarification of how precisely Shelley’s legislator-poets might go about enacting their social visions. In the section of his *Autobiographies* entitled *Four Years: 1887-91*, Yeats delivers his most direct and forceful statement of poetry’s educating and unifying potential. It is a passage worth quoting at length:

> Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new
> *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in
> Prometheus’ stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulben?
> Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them
to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the
uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make these
stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work’s
sake what I have called ‘the applied arts of literature’, the association of
literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance; and at last, it might be, so
depen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman
and day-labourer would accept a common design? (166-67)

This lays out the dynamics of “the education of desire” almost programmatically:
“imaginative stories,” disseminated widely enough, will “so deepen the political passion
of the nation” that all will accept “a common design,” fulfilling at last the elusive,
shining, ill-defined promise of “unity.” The mythmaking impulses of Shelley and Blake
here combine (as perhaps they always do) with the more bluntly manipulative goals of propaganda – a concept which, though he frequently railed against it late in life, the younger Yeats was not at all averse to deploying in a positive light. This early attitude is captured in an 1897 letter to a journalist profiling him for the *Bookman*: “I shall look forward to your article with great interest. If you find it hard to fill up you might say something of my work as a propagandist of Celtic ideas among the Irish people. I have never written simply as a poet but always as a poet whose poems are an action as well as a thought” (5 August 1897). This attempt to cast poetry as an “action” evinces Yeats’s intense anxiety that his life’s work should contribute, however ephemerally, to the national cause – even at the cost of sacrificing its purity as conceived of by the Symbolist and Aestheticist movements of the era. Ideally, however, Yeats sought in his poetry to achieve a seamlessness between the expression of desire and the education of it, to propagandize covertly, subtly transfiguring individual desire into national hope. For Terry Eagleton, Yeats stands as a representative of the view that “symbolist poetry can be nationalist too, since the purity, unity and autonomy of the work of art can be seen to mirror the ideal qualities of nationhood” (*Heathcliff* 240). Such poetry, then, can educate the desires of its readers not just by its mythic subject matter, but (echoes of Shelley again) by the very coherence of its form.

Many critics have pointed out the strong element of false consciousness inherent in Yeats’s cultural nationalist aesthetic, particularly in its escapist willingness to turn away from the fractiousness of the present to focus instead on the myths of the past. In addition to condemning the general element of (to borrow a phrase from Ramazani) “aestheticist fantasy” in the idea that poetry can meaningfully influence social formations
(“Postcolonial” 28), several recent critics have pointed to the rootedness of Yeats’s aesthetic in the changing position within Irish society of the class from which he emerged. R.F. Foster highlights the degree to which Yeats’s Celticism (and that of the Revival in general) cannot be understood without reference to his Anglo-Irishness, and the increasing marginalization of the Anglo-Irish with the gradual rise to prominence of a Catholic middle class. In Foster’s view, the Anglo-Irish architects of the Revival appeal to Celtic myth as a way of locating the roots of true Irish identity prior to Catholicism, to reassert their own precarious class identity (214). Yeats’s frequent recourse to the pastoral mode, then, represents not just the utopian desire for a more poetically coherent collective but, more historically, it registers his nostalgia for “the long-lost world of social dominance” – the elitist “race memory” of a dwindling aristocracy (228, 232).

Along similar lines, Eagleton claims that the Revivalists sought in art an “Archimedean point” from which “they could transcend the social, ethnic and religious differences which estranged them from the majority of the common people, and so buttress their own position as a declining breed” (Heathcliff 245). At their most extreme, such views drain the aesthetics of the Celtic Revival of much of their utopian content, attributing their appeal to pastoral myth not to an authentic longing, however impractical, for societal unity, but to a desperate bid to restore the lost class power of the once-proud Anglo-Irish minority. While the latter motivation certainly resounds clearly through Yeats’s later work, it is virtually absent (or at least heavily repressed) from the early work I have been discussing here.

Conversely, other critics have emphasized the more authentically national aspect of Yeats’s aesthetic, seeing in his appeal to Celtic myth a decolonizing attempt to reclaim
Ireland for the Irish, a manoeuvre rooted in identarian striving. Rather than focus on the
delusoriness of Yeats’s appeals to the mythic past, such critics have chosen to judge
Yeats more along the Shelleyan lines he himself followed, crediting him with actually
having succeeded in using his art to forward social goals. Again, Ramazani – while
acknowledging that the full effect of Yeats’s poetry depends on its desires remaining
unfulfilled or even unfulfillable – recognizes the crucial role his work played in
presenting the Irish a new liberatory image of themselves: “Since Cathleen Ni Houlihan
helped to inspire the Easter rebels to martyrdom and his early nationalist poetry and
activism helped to foment rioting and resistance to British imperialism, Yeats’s art should
be credited with being partly formative of the postcolonial nation” (28). Edward Said
goes further, casting him as one of the “great nationalist artists of decolonization” (73),
and claiming that “Yeats’s poetry joins his people to its history” through its assumption
that “the narrative and density of personal experience are equivalent to the experience of
his people” (92). Declan Kiberd, meanwhile, counts Yeats prominently among those
whose art helped “invent” Ireland, and finds in his utopian escapism an ultimately noble
purpose: “Art in this context might be seen as man’s constant effort to create for himself
a different order of reality from that which is given to him […] Fictions, though they treat
of the non-existent, by that very virtue help people make sense of the world around them”
(118). Like Ramazani and Said, Kiberd here emphasizes the effects of Yeats’s poetry
upon its (particularly national) audience, and more fundamentally, the role of Yeats’s art
in helping to constitute Ireland as a nation – on however fictitious, mythical, or purely
symbolic a ground.
To summarize: two main strands of critical opinion proliferate in regards to Yeats’s cultural nationalist aesthetic. The more condemnatory one focuses on Yeats’s ignoble motives for attempting to forge an image of Ireland through its Celtic myths: his class insecurities, his inveterate idealism, his neo-Romantic readiness to favour the metaphysical over the material realm. From this point of view Yeats’s pastoral utopianism adds up to little more than false consciousness and empty escapism – the poet’s easy retreat into a world of his own making. To unify a nation through symbols does little to resolve the cultural, economic, and religious disparities within that nation, and may just work to obscure them in the interests of a status quo. For the more laudatory critics, on the other hand, Yeats’s utopianism serves more as invitation than escape. The atavistic pastoral worlds he conjures serve to highlight the strife and disunity of our own times, and in the historical context of Ireland’s national struggles, present a compensatory vision toward which the nascent nation might aspire. Even when Yeats’s early poems lack the explicitly political vision his essays and plays present, they viscerally embody the desire that drives not just the social dreaming of utopia, but all efforts towards a better collective.

One might see the two aforementioned strands of critical opinion on Yeats’s cultural nationalism as roughly corresponding to two opposed outlooks on the relation of poetry (and particularly lyric poetry) to the social realm. One side emphasizes above all the historically specific subjectivity of the lyric voice, while the other stresses the communal thrust of lyric, its objectivization of ostensibly individual emotion. Or to inflect this dichotomy in a way more specifically related to Yeats’s early work, one might reassert the distinction between the expression of desire and its education – a distinction
which highlights the inextricability of the individual and communal resonances of early Yeatsian lyric. As I have been arguing, Yeats’s speakers express certain longings (often directed towards a Celticized pastoral idyll) in order to model the ends toward which the Irish nation might strive, thus attempting a conflation of individual and communal desire. That such desire takes as its object a vague mystical ideal with little substantive content speaks not only to the young poet’s anti-empirical predilections, but also to the ephemerality of nationhood itself.⁸

This ephemerality is memorably personified in “The Song of the Wandering Aengus,” from the 1899 volume The Wind among the Reeds. The poem presents Yeats’s take on the Gaelic aisling lyric, wherein a magical woman embodying the nation appears in a vision to the dazzled speaker:

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And some one called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun. (1-24)

Along with “Innisfree,” this poem best encapsulates the affective conflation of individual desire and national hope upon which Yeats’s early poetry relies. *Aisling* is the Irish word for “dream,” and at its seventeenth-century origins the genre had more in common with the Chaucerian dream-vision than the sort of mythopoetic lyric Yeats creates here. In these earlier examples of the genre, the poet-figure would fall asleep and be visited by a beautiful woman (called the *spéirbhean*, or “sky-walker,” and usually identified as Ireland herself) who would recount her many sufferings and shifts of fortune. Briona Nic Dhiarmada notes that the seventeenth-century *aisling* marked the entry of utopian longing into Irish-language literature, and that this longing arose out of the collapse of the Gaelic
polity in Ireland as a result of the Tudor conquests. The *aisling*’s feminized Ireland-figure often claimed to be awaiting the return of her lover, an event metaphorically identified with the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and so the genre embodied very specific political circumstances (365). By contrast, and in keeping with Yeats’s early pastoral utopianism, his adaptation of the *aisling* voids it of any specific political referent; the Catholic slant is removed, of course, but even the magical girl’s identification with Ireland is muted, left implied only by the residue of generic convention that clings to the narrative shape of Yeats’s paganized update. As a result, the poem becomes more about the pursuit of an ideal than the lamenting of its loss: the speaker quests after a girl who, though her potential symbolic function remains implicit in the genre’s tradition, slips free of firm identification with the Irish essence. Rather than allegorizing the traumas of the colonized nation, then, the poem acknowledges that no such nation yet exists: it still must be sought like quarry and possessed. The poem ends, as so many of Yeats’s early lyrics do, suspended in the future tense. Diffusing the traditionally nationalist elements of the *aisling* from the girl herself into the poem’s Celticized landscape of hazel woods, moth-like stars, hills, hollows and dappled grass, the poet creates a pastoral backdrop that serves to amplify this trajectory of desire and pursuit.

In his explanatory note on the poem, Yeats quotes the accounts of various Galway peasants regarding “the spirits that are in Ireland,” a hodgepodge of mystical hearsay, strange sightings, and sudden disappearances, all involving shape-shifting spirits masquerading as women. Towards the end of his note, however, Yeats somewhat undermines this assertion of the indigenousness of the poem’s subject matter when he admits that, “the poem was suggested to me by a Greek folk song; but the folk belief of
Greece is very like that of Ireland, and I certainly thought, when I wrote it, of Ireland” (VP 806). Yeats casts the poem, then, as rooted not only in the living pastoral of western Irish peasant lore, but in the parallel tradition of Greece, the cradle of pastoral and thus the birthplace of the very notion of a Golden Age. His point is that Ireland and Greece both possess an autochthonous idealism, an inborn unwillingness to abide in the material status quo. Indeed, beneath his comparison lies the implicit assertion that those countries with vital folk traditions hold the key to unlocking a new social order – that the glimpses of peasants into the supernatural realm work to expand the horizons of possibility toward worlds of concord and fulfillment as yet only dreamt of by most.

Throughout the 1890s, as anticipation of the approaching new century built to a millennial pitch, Yeats set forth an ambitious vision of Ireland’s potentially revelatory role. As early as his 1892 essay “Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature,” Yeats had speculated that “If we can take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems, and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie, we may deliver that new great utterance for which the world is waiting” (UP). By his 1897 essay “The Celtic Movement in Literature” – with his own place in the burgeoning movement much more secure – he continued to pursue this millennial vein, casting the Irish revival as crucial in issuing forth “a new fountain of legends” which “may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols” (137-38). The literature of Ireland, Yeats hoped, would mark the culmination of the counter-movement against the dominant rationalism and materialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, helping to restore art to its rightful authority, a place akin to religion in the people’s hearts. The French Symbolist movement and its influence
throughout Europe had set the pendulum swinging back in this direction, but in its overriding concern with pure linguistic evocativeness it lacked the practicality and authentic sense of struggle that enriched the Irish context. For Yeats, Irish literature’s great potential at the turn of the century lay in its combination of idealism and authenticity, or more properly, in the authenticity of its idealism: the otherworldly longings of Irish poets carried greater resonance both because Ireland really did have a lost Golden Age to appeal to, and because the stories of that past tradition positively teemed with other, better worlds.

“The Song of the Wandering Aengus” depicts just such a better world – not only in its Celticized landscape, but also in the degree to which the eponymous singer exercises his creative agency to alter that landscape. The most significant (and typically Yeatsian) alteration Yeats effects upon the aisling genre involves this shift in the speaker’s status from passive dreamer in the older versions to active creator, possessed by the force of inspiration: “I went out the hazel wood / Because a fire was in my head.” Aengus, variously characterized by Yeats and his critics as “the Irish god of love,” “the eternal male principle,” and “the Irish Apollo, the god of poetry,” occupies all of the above roles in the poem, both as a lyric lover seeking unity with a mate of his own conjuration, and more implicitly as an ardent nationalist seeking to unify the image of the Irish nation as he conceives it with its manifestation in reality. Seen in these terms, the Ireland-girl becomes another embodiment of the poet’s pursuit of a mutually foundational relationship between word and world: the bard is born of an Ireland which he then tries to reshape to the sympathies of his art. While it would be too much to read “The Song of the Wandering Aengus” as strict allegory, the dynamic it sets out of inspiration, creation, and
pursuit does analogize the dynamic of Yeats’s early cultural nationalism. Born Irish and yet, as a Protestant, fundamentally apart, he sets out to retell Ireland’s stories to itself, to image a new nation and, (perhaps most importantly) a new national audience for his art – to aestheticize a clergy-dominated Ireland, transfiguring the dominant Catholicism’s apple of sin into the paganized (and thereby more authentically Celtic) “golden apples of the sun.” But the idiosyncrasy of his vision for Ireland – particularly its dependence upon the myths and symbols of a premodern Celticism of dubious historicity – meant that Yeats increasingly found himself, like Aengus, out of step with the entity he helped bring into being, repeatedly confronting the disparity his poems had worked so hard to efface, between his own lyric desires and those of the nation at large.

3.

After the turn of the century, the pastoral impetus animating so much of Yeats’s early work gradually dissipates, with idyllic landscapes giving over prominence to the more insular spaces that typify his later work: country houses, royal courts, solitary towers. This spatial contraction entails a concomitant reining-in of lyric desire, as Yeats’s speakers increasingly express their individuality more specifically, rather than dwelling in the mythic haze that once allowed personal and communal aspirations to blur together. Put another way, Yeats’s speakers come more and more to express opinions rather than tell tales, making his poetry increasingly resistant to the allegorization upon which his cultural nationalist aesthetic depends. This means, of course, that at some point Yeats’s poetry stops being utopian, forsaking its investment in a better way of life for the collective and instead assuming toward the mass of the Irish people an aristocratic
hauteur often verging on disdain. Indeed, the word “utopia” never appears in Yeats’s writings until the 1920s – long after most traces of utopianism had been vanquished from his work – and only ever derogatorily. He increasingly repudiated, too, the Shelleyan conviction of poetry’s formative social role, as he came to see the inexorable cycles of history itself as the driving force of historical change, and thus to regard most projects for sociopolitical reform as contemptible in their futility. These three points – the repudiation of utopian desire, the evaporation of the pastoral ethos from Yeats’s work, and the political implications of the increasing insularity of his lyric spaces – will provide the next chapter’s trajectory. For now, however, I want to focus on one final poem, from just after the turn of the century, which portrays the later anti-utopian Yeats in his nascency.

As the predominant narrative of his career has it, the years just after 1900 found Yeats feeling more and more keenly the bitterness of having failed to shape the tastes of the Irish public to his satisfaction. *The Wind among the Reeds* would stand as his last full-length collection of poetry for eleven years, until *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910, as the first decade of the new century found him focusing his energies primarily on drama, both authoring his own plays and working to administrate the nascent Abbey Theatre. Among the poems he did produce in this interim period, “Adam’s Curse” – published in the 1903 mini-volume *In the Seven Woods* – has found the most exalted place in his canon. Part love poem and part ars poetica, it starkly diverges from earlier work both in its plain-spokenness and in its clear-eyed vision of poetry’s less than exalted place in contemporary society. The poem’s first few lines recall a summer evening spent discussing poetry with Maud Gonne and her sister, before Yeats quotes himself:

I said, ‘A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.’ (4-14)

Several new notes are struck here. First, poetry is work: its effects may still transcend the quotidian – indeed, later stanzas link it to the surpassing labours of beauty and love – but its creation entails drudgery. Second, Yeats’s claim that a well-made poem must “seem a moment’s thought,” finds him both repudiating the deliberate ornateness of much of his earlier poetry, and celebrating the aristocratic ideal of sprezzatura, whereby (as Castiglione puts it in his sixteenth-century Book of the Courtier) “true art is what does not seem to be art” and “to reveal intense application and skill robs everything of grace” (67). The poet may “work harder” than any manual labourer, but his cultural status depends on his giving no evidence of it, on never sweating in public.

Castiglione’s text and the ideals it celebrates came to exert an increasing influence on Yeats, with its depiction of the court at Urbino as a haven of refinement, harmony, and civilized conversation effectively coming to replace the mythopoetic vision of a lost pastoral Ireland as the social ideal toward which his poetry strove.¹⁰ Though he would
continue to occasionally hearken back to the idyllic countryside – in “The Wild Swans at Coole,” for example – by and large the images he deploys no longer aspire to Celtic folkiness, but rather appeal to a more specifically Anglo-Irish sense of loss: the Big House and its hallowed grounds figure prominently in the later Yeats’s infrequent appeals to the pastoral ethos.

As a transitional poem, however, “Adam’s Curse” finds Yeats’s burgeoning enthusiasm for the trappings of aristocracy partly tempered by a sense of loyalty to his solitary vocation as poet; he might share with Castiglione and his Anglo-Irish inheritors a disdain for the bourgeois materialism of the “bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen / The martyrs call the world,” but the poem hinges on an ambivalence that suggests his unreadiness to fully ally himself with his ancestral class just yet. After all, while on the one hand he asserts that a poet must not betray his labour, on the other he gives the game away, affirming that poetry is in fact hard work, akin to “scrub[bing] a kitchen pavement, or break[ing] stones.” This contradictory stance Yeats takes on the poet’s relation to society – wanting to affirm his place among the mass of labourers, yet needing to assert his exceptional status as artist – is recapitulated in the poem’s second half, this time in relation to love. When Gonne’s sister implicitly compares women to poets, saying “we must labour to be beautiful,” the poet responds:

I said, “It’s certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam’s fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'

We sat grown quiet in the name of love;
We saw the last embers of the daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time’s waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years. (21-33)

The first of these stanzas hinges on the contrast between love as on one hand
“compounded by high courtesy,” and on the other as “idle trade enough.” Love was once,
Yeats implies, one of those “fine thing[s]” requiring “much labouring” to come to
fruition. And again one doubts the extent to which Yeats had internalized his own
doctrine of sprezzatura here, as in addition to emphasizing the fact of love’s labour, he
depicts the lovers themselves as “sigh[ing] and quot[ing] with learned looks” – betraying
rather more of their exertion than would likely be permitted by the tenets of courtly
nonchalance.

The transition to the next stanza embodies a similar ambivalence; though modern
love has just been characterized as “an idle trade,” the first line past the gap finds the
three companions hushed in a kind of pagan awe: “We sat grown silent in the name of
love.” Though not capitalized here, love is nonetheless accorded “name[d]” status and so
virtually personified, an indication that the three still hold love in the deific esteem it
warranted in premodern, precommercial times. Rather than express desire or even hope
for the possible return of such times, however, the rest of the poem merely conveys a
resigned despondency. The image of the moon “worn as if it had been a shell” recalls the
“echo-harbouring shell” of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” though rather than
resonate with the heart’s regenerative desires, carrying forward the singer’s hopes for
renewal, the shell here ends up “hollow,” filled only by silence. Viewed from a wider
perspective, “Adam’s Curse” marks a major point at which we can see Yeats unrooting
his aesthetics from utopianism; a new note of inconsolability enters his tone, especially
acute in the oddly-tensed final stanza:

I had a thought for no one’s but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we’d grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. (34-38)

By affirming the pastness of his pursuit of Maud Gonne – always herself an emblem of
the once and future nation – the poet relinquishes his usual stance of what I have called
nostalgia for the future for a plainer form of nostalgia, void of fervency, a maudlin
disappointment at the passing of the past, acquiescent in its irrecoverability. Something
important is over: though he “strove” and “it had all seemed happy,” the poet strands
himself and his companions in the past perfect, “weary-hearted,” facing sadly backward
without any prospect of hope’s future turn.
Notes

1 Theodor Adorno’s essay “Lyric Poetry and Society” lurks behind my analysis throughout this chapter, both positively – in its insistence that all lyric poetry is essentially social, that “all individual lyric poetry is indeed grounded in a collective substratum” – and negatively – in its condemnation of Romanticism as artificially “transfusing the collective into the individual,” and thus producing “a technical illusion of generality” rather than an authentically social utterance (217). Adorno’s essay is thus useful both in contextualizing Yeats’s early lyrics within the explicitly communal context of his cultural nationalism, and in illuminating the Romantic tenuousness of Yeats’s attempt to conflate the lyric desires of his individual speakers with the Irish nation’s quest for self-determination.

2 My terminology here owes a good deal to Bloom, who situates Yeats so firmly in the Romantic tradition that his magisterial 1970 study proceeds upon the idiosyncratic premises that “Yeats’s most typical poem is a dramatic lyric that behaves as though it were a fragment in a mythological romance, as though the poet himself as quest-hero undertook continually an odyssey of the spirit,” and that “the single poem that most affected his life and art […] is Shelley’s Alastor” (7-8). Though my own critical outlook places greater emphasis upon historical factors as opposed to the strictly literary-historical lineage in which Bloom places Yeats, I do find his readings of the pre-nationalist poetry convincing, particularly in the way they emphasize the poet as a figure driven to quest after an ephemeral coherence with at best a spectral connection to concrete social and political aims.

3 See The Trembling of the Veil. Book IV. The Tragic Generation, in Yeats’s Autobiographies, which attributes the decline of especially Dowson and Johnson not just to their dissolute lifestyles, but to the fruitless striving after spiritual fulfillment of which those lifestyles were a symptom. Writing of the two men, Yeats’s tone is elegiac throughout:

   Why are these strange souls born everywhere to-day, with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy? […] Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by ‘the trembling of the veil of the Temple’, or that ‘our whole age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book’? Some of us though that book near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again.

4 Marcus’s 1992 book Yeats and Artistic Power builds its reading of Yeats’s early career on the premise that because he felt himself unsuited or unable to produce work with immediate political relevance to the Irish cause, Yeats developed an aesthetic which “provided the compensatory thought that the real forces behind the great political events of the day might not in fact be the obvious ones” (10). Marcus focuses largely on Yeats’s bardic inspiration in the development of this aesthetic, and on his evolving conception of his own political power as an artist. While my emphasis remains more on Yeats’s lyrics as utopian creations than on the creator himself, and more on the expression and education of desire than the assertion of power, I find Marcus’s study valuable in the way it shares my concern with how Yeats conceived of the political efficacy of his aesthetic.

5 Edward Said points to the “cartographic” impulse in Yeats’s early poetry, particularly the poems of The Rose, as embodying an anti-imperial strategy by which the native
restores the sense of geographical identity usurped in the process of colonization (79). Though I collude with Said in ascribing great importance to Yeats’s imagined landscapes, I find it problematic to attribute their prominence primarily to motives of decolonization, especially in light of the evidence that the unity Yeats sought was always more of an artistic rather than a nationalistic sort. As I have been arguing, politics provided an outlet for the hope inherent in Yeats’s poetry from the outset. The emergence of Byzantium as a figure for the utopian fusion of art and life in Yeats’s late post-nationalist work would seem to support this. Nonetheless, Said remains one of the few critics to draw explicit attention to the central importance of place-making in Yeats.

6 Unbeknownst to me when I wrote this chapter, Edward Mendelson characterizes utopianism as “nostalgia for the future” in condemning Auden’s “Spain” and the “Commentary” to In Time of War “not as public poems but as utopian poems” – poems which “envision a world only imagination can build” (Early 202). Thus Mendelson joins the chorus of modern critics who dismiss utopia as unproductive dreaming rather than seeing it (as I do) as a potentially productive manifestation of desire.

7 Declan Kiberd cuts to the nostalgic core of Yeats’s myth of Innisfree with the following anecdote:

“The more he sought to recapture the dream, the more it seemed to elude him. When the much older man finally brought his newly-wed English wife on a boat-trip across Lough Gill, he failed ignominiously to locate, much less land on, the lake isle of Innisfree: a sign, perhaps, that the past in that simple-minded version was not easily recoverable. (102-03)

8 The classic statement of the ephemerality of nationhood is of course Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book Imagined Communities, which claims of the nation: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Compare Yeats, in his 1909 journal: “One cannot love a nation struggling to realize itself without an idea of the nation as a whole being present in one’s mind. One could always appeal to it in the minds of others” (Mem 180). Of Yeats’s critics, Eagleton has most forcefully asserted the aesthetic roots of nationalism, claiming in this discussion of the Celtic Revival that “the kind of fulfillment one reaps from belonging to a community of national sentiment is akin to the pleasure the Kantian subject derives from the sensus communis of aesthetic taste” (Heathcliff 232). This analogy is absolutely crucial to Yeats’s cultural nationalism, which strives to reverse the causality of Eagleton’s formulation, attempting to build Irish national sentiment by drawing on an ostensibly shared symbolism, working to blur the distinction between aesthetic and political consensus.

9 The first characterization of Aengus (“the Irish god of love”) comes from the footnotes of Volume 2 of Intelex’s electronic edition of The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, where it occurs three times. The second (“the eternal male principle”) comes from the same footnotes, but is a quotation from Yeats himself, in an unpublished mystical manuscript on “The Initiation of the Sword” held in the National Library of Ireland. The third of Aengus’s epithets (“the Irish Apollo, the god of poetry”) is from Vendler, Secret p. 105.

10 It is not entirely clear when Yeats read Castiglione’s work. In her book Yeats and Castiglione: Poet and Courtier, Corinna Salvadori – drawing on Yeats’s account in his
autobiographical 1922 essay “The Bounty of Sweden” – claims that Lady Gregory introduced *The Book of the Courtier* to the poet in 1903. Since “Adam’s Curse” is usually thought to have been composed in 1902, this would mean that Yeats’s exposition of *sprezzatura* in the poem actually precedes his encounter with the concept in the Italian original. Salvodori concludes, therefore, “that the Italian work gave Yeats nothing new in this respect but helped him, rather, to develop and define something he had already conceived” (40). I have nonetheless felt it necessary to emphasize Castiglione in discussing “Adam’s Curse” both because of the exactitude of the correspondence between his and Yeats’s conceptions of *sprezzatura*, and because he did in fact become, in the years after Yeats read him, one of the poet’s most cited authors.
Yeats has much to teach us about what “utopia” might mean. His early work has occasionally been characterized as utopian simply because it seems to aspire after impossibilities, reflecting a (perhaps the) prominent pejorative view of utopia as signifying an unrealizable – and implicitly therefore pointless – ideal. To a certain extent, as we will see, Yeats shared this view of utopia; living in an era that abounded in projects and ideologies liable to be characterized as “utopian,” he disdained the majority of these for what he saw as their excessive materialism, their conviction that societal ills could be eradicated by political or economic means. Consequently he would never (contrary to today’s colloquial usage) have dismissed such utopians as idealist – a label he frequently applied to himself with pride, and which registered his belief that subjective states of mind and feeling figure at least as prominently as material conditions in altering the course of history. As much as he would have repudiated the label, this makes Yeats a utopian according to theorizers of the concept in both our time and his own. This chapter engages with the Yeats of the later work as an anti-utopian utopian, an ambivalent desirer of better worlds who at the same time repudiates his era’s most earnest attempts to construct such worlds, whose work uniquely illuminates the grounds upon which the term “utopia” – and the artist’s relationship to the dreams of social harmony it embodies – has been and continues to be contested. I begin with a brief account of the most prominent theorization, during his own lifetime, of Yeats as a utopian artist, a text that touches upon the key dichotomies that structure what follows.
1.

Published in Modernism’s *annus mirabilis* of 1922, Lewis Mumford’s *The Story of Utopias* surveys the history of utopian thought from a disillusioned vantage. In taking stock of prominent literary utopias from Plato to Morris, Mumford finds them too often rooted not in the facts of culture and geography upon which any new societal order must be founded, but rather in the boundlessness of authorial fancy; even where their blueprints are richest in practical details, “their projections have nevertheless literally been up in the air, since they did not usually arise out of any real environment presented” (185). Similarly, contemporary political creeds informed by the utopian desire to “effect a change in the economic order” – the mostly leftist movements which Mumford labels “partisan utopias” – too often view personal relations in purely transactional terms, neglecting the “social inheritance” that binds us as human beings: those shared faculties of imagination, reason, and ingenuity that run beneath any “irrelevant partisanisms” that might divide us (182).

Thus condemning as impracticable the bulk of extant literary and political utopias, Mumford moves to theorize how utopian thought might contribute more concretely to his oft-iterated though rather hazy liberal-humanist vision of “the greater good.” His key rhetorical gesture in laying the conceptual foundations for such a theorization is to divide the word “utopia” into its two punned-upon cognates, *outopia* and *eutopia*, no-place and good place. Favouring (of course) the latter, Mumford exalts humanity’s “will-to-eutopia” as the sole force preventing our societies from sinking into a kind of late-Imperial dissolution. In attempting to identify the key manifestations of this eutopian thrust, Mumford turns first to the sciences, which, although they have developed endless
means of transforming the physical world, have often seemed unguided by an ethical vision in their application. “Indeed,” he writes, “scientific knowledge has not merely heightened the possibilities of life in the modern world: it has lowered the depths. When science is not touched by a sense of values it works – as it fairly consistently has worked during the past century – towards a complete dehumanization of the social order” (192). The “sense of values” Mumford proscribes entails scientists applying the impersonal breadth of their knowledge (“that vast over-world of scientific effort which is the product of no single place or people or time”) to the concrete improvement of local communities. The balancing of an encyclopedic trans-historical erudition with the desire to bring this learning minutely to bear on specific geographical regions stands for Mumford as the key to actualizing the eutopian impulse, and bringing the good place down to earth.

But precisely how might our communities be improved? As so often throughout the theoretical sections of his treatise, Mumford remains vague on this point, repeatedly referencing “the good life” without ever detailing its contours. He comes closest to specificity when he elaborates his vision of the eutopian citizen, contrasting this ideal being with the scatter-minded denizens of modern cities: “The inhabitants of our eutopias will have a familiarity with their local environment and its resources, and a sense of historic continuity, which those who dwell within the paper world of Megalopolis and who touch their environment mainly through the newspaper and the printed book, have completely lost” (212). This concept of the “local” is central to the climactic chapters of The Story of Utopias; but far from recommending an insular parochialism, Mumford demands that our local foci be enriched, both vertically and horizontally, by the “sense of historic continuity” that perceives both the depth of tradition that abides in any given
place, and the way that each rich locale is woven into the wider tapestry of human history. (In this Mumford stands as an implicit early formulator of the progressive exhortation to ‘think globally, and act locally’.) In Mumford’s view the impetus for this local-historical mode of citizenship must come from the arts, which though they have gradually loosened their once-inextricable ties to one another and to the community, still hold the capability to “to equip us with patterns, with images and ideals, by means of which we might react creatively upon our environment” (201). Artists, therefore, when fully embracing their “proper relation to the community,” work to generate the images after which eutopias are modelled (204).

As his one archetypal example of the properly eutopian artist, Mumford offers W.B. Yeats, citing the poet’s cultural nationalist hope that the imaginative arts might “so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day laborer, would accept a common design” (205). The text Mumford cites from, *Four Years*, finds Yeats reflecting back on his very early career, from 1887 to 1891, when the “common design” he aspired towards would have been very different from that he upheld by the time he wrote the text in the early 1920s, when his thinking was becoming increasingly hierarchical. Nonetheless, while Yeats’s definition of national “unity” may have changed from the more holistic vision of the Celtic Revival years, his belief that art’s atavistic reservoir of images might work to produce such a unity never did, and this is what Mumford exalts. While not discounting the value of purely aesthetic experience, Mumford emphasizes the didactic force of such images, going so far as to assert that “Pure art is inevitably propaganda. I mean by this that it is meant to be propagated, and that in so far as it fails to impregnate the community in which it exists with its ideas and
images, in so far as the community is not changed for better or worse by its existence, its claims are spurious” (203). In this view, “pure art” proves itself by its power to plant seeds of change among its audience. That Yeats strove to create such transfigurative art throughout his poetic career is not in doubt; in his 1897 essay “The Celtic Element in Literature” he speculates: “It may be the arts are founded on the life beyond the world, and that they must cry in the ears of our penury until the world has been consumed and become a vision” (EE 136). This stance helped produce the early faery poetry, full of romance and distant beckoning lands. But even by the time of his 1939 tract On the Boiler, written in the final months of his life, he acknowledges his altered vision of the arts’ imperatives while clearly remaining convinced of their proliferative force:

In my savage youth I was accustomed to say that no man should be permitted to open his mouth in Parliament until he had sung or written his Utopia, for lacking that we could not know where he was taking us, and I still think that artists of all kinds should once again praise or represent great or happy people. (LE 249-50)

The imaging of states to which we might aspire remains for Yeats one of the artist’s chief roles, despite the fact that he has abandoned the more explicitly topographical or place-based visions of his younger self in favour of a Nietzschean exaltation of the galvanic individual. His youth was “savage” because in it he believed that political re-organization held the promise of social harmony, whereas his later years are marked by the conviction that disharmony is in fact inevitable, and that the key to happiness lies in aesthetic self-cultivation. In other words, he comes to favour states of being over nation-states; the communal “good place” largely gives way, as he ages, to the more exclusive “good life.”
The aristocratic emphasis of the later Yeats sets him at odds not only with Mumford, whose conception of the good life is always a societal rather than an individual one, but with the earlier version of himself Mumford praises: the young eutopian whose dreams of Irish harmony, though never fully extinguished, come to the older poet to seem naïve in their neglect of the inevitability of conflict and suffering, their lack of the “Vision of Evil” so crucial to his later thought. Yeats came to perceive the same lack in figures like Shelley and William Morris whom he had spent his youth admiring, finding behind their reformist fervour an excessively optimistic view of human nature and historical progress. His disillusionment is memorably conveyed in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” as he meditates on the ravages of the Irish Civil War:

O but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (84-88)

One might wonder whether such repudiations of past social dreams, common throughout the later Yeats, render Mumford’s characterization of him as quintessentially eutopian more or less obsolete. For while the Yeats of the early 1920s maintains his early-held belief that “nations, races and individual men are unified by an image, or a bundle of related images” (Au 167), his thought is already emphasizing the absolute precariousness of all such unities, the inevitability of their dissolution. One of the central formulations of the first edition of A Vision published in 1925 – and a motif that recurs time and again throughout the last two decades of his career – is the image of “all things dying each
other’s life, living each other’s death” (Va 152). The cyclical model of historical change as laid out in A Vision and upheld by Yeats the rest of his career seems inimical to the eutopian pursuit of the good life, positing as it does the inevitability of perpetual strife.

“History is very simple,” he wrote in a letter of 1933, “the rule of the many, then the rule of the few, day and night, night and day” (L 812). This image of endless class warfare stands as a rebuttal not only to utopians of a Marxist stripe, who await the synthetic resolution of such antinomies in the permanent peace of communism, but even to moderate eutopians like Mumford himself, who – though sharing Yeats’s disdain for the delusion that any such harmonious stasis might be reached – still clearly believed that humanity might progress, not just technologically but morally. The later Yeats would have scoffed at Anatole France’s assertion, quoted approvingly by Mumford, that “Utopia is the principle of all progress, and the essay into a better future” (27). Indeed, the distinction Mumford draws between his own brand of locally-rooted, historically-informed eutopianism and the abstract, unhinged utopianism of those he critiques (from contemporary socialists back to Plato) would likely have struck the Vision-era Yeats as virtually meaningless. To the extent that both hold out the possibility for lasting social betterment, both are insupportable.

And yet Yeats’s later work cannot be simply characterized as anti-utopian in stance. Granted, Yeats himself only ever used the word pejoratively, associating it not only with futile political projects, but more broadly with the rationalist materialism that lay behind such projects: the modern tendency to believe that a perfect societal order could be achieved through the right calibration of political and economic factors. For him socialists were susceptible not to the charge of idealism, but to that of excessive
materialism. Throughout his life he proudly considered himself an idealist at odds with “the filthy modern tide” – the levelling, democratic dispensation of which the calculating plots of utopians represented the apogee. Of course, many have criticized utopian thought along the same lines; the tendency to characterize the totalitarian regimes of twentieth-century Europe as utopias gone wrong has given rise to the widespread perception that all utopias are ultimately dystopias, or will be revealed as such the moment their strictly mediated internal coherencies come under threat. But in fact this criticism applies only to one branch of utopian thought: the hyper-rationalist, engineering strain characterized by Russell Jacoby as “blueprint utopianism,” a designation under which might fall the central tradition of the utopian novel from More through Bellamy and Morris to Huxley’s Island, works which map out their ideal futures down to the minutiae of domestic arrangements, systems of education and commerce, and even the improved physical attributes of their fortunate inhabitants. As Jacoby notes, however, in their very detailedness, such blueprints can “not only appear repressive, they also rapidly become dated […] History soon eclipses them” (32).

There exists, however, another strain of utopianism, running parallel to that of the blueprinters, which rather than specifying the final detailed shape the perfect society will take, abides instead in the very impulse that gives rise to social reform. Its emphasis is not phenomenological, but ontological; utopia is not a place, but a stance – what Ernst Bloch (whom Jacoby places at the centre of this “iconoclastic” utopianism) calls “anticipatory consciousness.” It is out of this tradition, which works to refute the notion of utopia as a literary genre strictly concerned with the modelling of good- or no-places, that the recent utopian theorist Ruth Levitas derives her expansive definition of utopia as
“the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (8). According to Levitas, “this definition goes beyond that of an alternative world, possible or otherwise” because “the pursuit of a better way of being does not always involve the alteration of external conditions, but may mean the pursuance of spiritual or psychological states” (191). According to Levitas’s definition, Yeats is certainly a utopian thinker: not just in his early work, with its hazy longings after ideal Irelands and the nympherean women that embody them, but also in the aristocratic emphases of much of his middle- and later-period work, with its country houses, towers, and royal courts. Paradoxically, it is in his confrontations after the turn of the century with what he saw as the crassly materialist utopianism of mass democratic movements – with the kind of “blueprint utopias” decried by Mumford and Jacoby – that his own aesthetics of aspiration, of utopia-as-desire, emerges most fully. This is not only to say that Yeats is anti-utopian according to one definition while being quintessentially utopian according to another, vastly different one. More compellingly, it is to claim that the later Yeats’s most distinctly utopian sentiments take shape dialectically, in the teeth of his explicit anti-utopianism. For Yeats, those he labels ‘utopian’ seek the obsolescence of desire, the impossible stamping-out of want in the establishment of a permanent socialistic stasis. He responds by asserting the endlessness of desire, thus embodying a paradoxical brand of idealism – one which aspires towards perfection without the deluded hope of its achievement, convinced that to arrive at an ideal is to shatter it.³
The word “utopia” appears in Yeats’s actual poetry only once, in the 1927 elegy “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” but its usage there typifies his animosity toward the concept. Looking back on his years of rocky acquaintanceship with the two sisters, Yeats blames the falling-away of their youthful beauty on the withering influence of the political causes to which they came to devote much of their lives. After a caustic depiction of the elder sister Constance “drag[ging] out the years / Conspiring among the ignorant,” he writes of Eva:

I know not what the younger dreams –
Some vague Utopia – and she seems,
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
An image of such politics. (10-13)

In actuality Eva Gore-Booth’s politics could hardly be called utopian, at least in the dismissive sense Yeats intends; most of her activism served the suffragette movement, as with her partner Esther Roper she worked tirelessly to better the lives of England’s urban women, taking up unconventional and often thankless causes: the unionization of Manchester barmaids, of performing gymnasts, and of the flower sellers at Oxford Circus. She spoke at rallies, wrote stirring tracts, and brought to the women’s movement (in the words of her biographer Gifford Lewis) “something of the burning sense of injustice which was entirely new in the humdrum round of British suffrage societies” (3). Only a man as deeply cynical about concrete political action as the later Yeats could accuse her goals of vagueness, though the history of his relationship with the Gore-
Booths suggests that the criticism has much earlier roots, and that its upshot is at least as much aesthetic as political.  

Yeats became aware of the Gore-Booth sisters long before he actually met them. His childhood walks in Sligo had often furnished him glimpses of their ancestral grounds, a weave of trees and lanes presided over by the austere neoclassical mansion called Lissadell. As an established Ascendancy family, the Gore-Booths stood as full-fledged representatives of a Protestant aristocratic class to which Yeats’s own “merchant people” could never gain access. So when his rising literary fame led him to their drawing room in late 1894, he could feel he had arrived somewhere: not quite utopia, but a place rather more rarefied than his usual social circles at the time. That November Yeats stayed a few days at Lissadell, which he found “an exceedingly impressive house inside with a great sitting room as high as a church & all things in good taste.” He discovered among the family and the local community both an audience for and a source of old Irish stories; he lectured on fairy lore to local parishioners, and the Gore-Booths brought him to a local tenant “who poured out quantities of tales.” Yeats found Eva particularly congenial, as both eager listener and aspiring poet herself, noting in a letter to his sister that “Miss Eva Gore-Booth shows some promise as a writer of verse. Her work is very formless as yet but it is full of telling little phrases” (Le 240-41). Five months later he wrote to his novelist friend Olivia Shakespear about Eva:

She has some literary talent, and much literary ambition, and has met no literary people. I have told her about you and, if the chance arise, would like you to meet her. I am always ransacking Ireland for people to set writing at Irish things. She does not know that she is the last victim – but
is deep in some books of Irish legends I sent her – and may take fire. She needs however, like all Irish literary people, a proper respect for craftsmanship and that she must get in England. (Le 256-57)

Setting aside the very Protestant irony of the claim that one would need to get in England the proper craftsmanship to write about “Irish things,” we can see here Yeats’s paternalistic stance toward Eva’s literary education – introducing her to the right people, lending her books, setting her artistic priorities. Given that Yeats later admitted being attracted enough to Eva’s “gazelle-like beauty” that he actually considered proposing marriage to her (Mem 78-79), one might see mixed motives in his encouragement of her poetry. No doubt her apparent formlessness and inexperience made her seem malleable to Yeats, fresh to be turned to his own cultural nationalist hopes.

As it turned out, Eva Gore-Booth did end up in England, but not to roam in literary circles learning the “respect for craftsmanship” Yeats prescribed. Instead, she emigrated for love. In the summer of 1895, while sojourning in Italy for a misdiagnosed case of consumption, Gore-Booth met Esther Roper, a university graduate and suffragist who would become her partner for life. By 1897 the pair had set up house in Roper’s home city of Manchester, where they worked together for women’s causes, with Eva continuing to write poetry at a prolific rate and publishing her first book, Poems, in 1898. In a letter to Gore-Booth about the book, Yeats praised it as “full of poetical feeling” [sic] and showing “very great promise,” while issuing a caution which, though standard advice from Yeats to any poet at the time, typifies his stance toward the Gore-Booth sisters in particular: “Avoid every touch of rhetoric every tendency to teach [sic]” (CL 26 Dec. 1898). Eva of course ignored this advice, in both her life and her poetry. In the nine more
books of verse she published, one encounters – in addition to much of the sort of delicate lyric Yeats singled out for praise – much passionate didacticizing, on subjects ranging from women’s rights to urban alienation to the evils of war. She adapted many Irish tales as well, though not in the way Yeats would have done, de-emphasizing the Romantic individualism of heroes like Oisin and Cuchulain and giving centre stage to the close relationships among the women characters left peripheral in most accounts.⁵

All this – her involvement in labour issues, her particular compassion for women’s rights, and her willingness to preach these causes through literature – lies behind Yeats’s dismissal, all those years later, of Eva’s “vague Utopia.” Nor can this stance towards Eva be separated from his much more thoroughly documented relationship with her sister Constance, who as the Countess Markiewicz spent decades in the Irish public eye. After leading a Citizen’s Army that held Dublin’s Stephen’s Green against the British during the Easter Rising of 1916, she was sentenced to death – a term lowered to life and then remanded entirely the following year. Upon her free return, she became the first woman to be elected an MP and served as Minister of Labour in the first Dáil (Assembly of the Irish Republic) from 1919-22. Yeats watched Constance closely throughout this period of turmoil, remembering her role in the Easter Rising in both “On a Political Prisoner” – where he invokes “the years before her mind / Became a bitter, an abstract thing” – and, most famously, “Easter 1916”:

That woman’s days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers? (17-23)

As in the elegy of ten years later, Yeats’s criticisms of Constance in these two poems hinge on his memory of her past beauty and dignity, now warped into hysteria. And indeed, the few mentions of the Gore-Booths in Yeats’s letters and journals after the turn of the century all imply a similar narrative of decline: the story of the fall of two sisters (“Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle”) from the pristine realm of the aesthetic to the maculate one of political action.

In the first draft of his memoirs written in the early 1920s, Yeats recalls that “Con Gore-Booth all through my later boyhood had been romantic to me […] She had often passed me on horseback, going or coming from hunt, and was acknowledged beauty of the country” (Mem 77-78). As he had done in “Easter 1916,” Yeats emphasizes Con’s aristocratic pedigree in depicting her at the hunt, further evidence that his admiration attached to her class as much as her beauty. That this and all traces of the Gore-Booths came to be expunged from the final published Autobiographies illustrates the degree to which their commitment to radical political causes disturbed him, not so much for the supposed utopias they pursued – neither of which, Irish revolution or female equality, particularly offended Yeats – but rather (as the nostalgic tone of his remembrances repeatedly suggests) for the utopia they abandoned. Increasingly after the turn of the century, Yeats idealized the aristocracy as a preserve of aesthetic purity, seeing the rituals of class as one of beauty’s principal manifestations:
Three types of men have made all beautiful things. Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. (EE 183)

The urban working and middle classes’ conspicuous absence from this picture makes perfect sense given Yeats’s emphasis on fear. For if the making of beautiful things requires fearlessness, then the average city-dweller – living amidst an ever-shifting grid of concrete, crowds, and credit – must find such making next to impossible. There is more than a hint of Platonic idealism here: caught up in crass material concerns, the urban classes neglect the timeless forms of beauty. What binds Yeats’s sacred trinity of aristocrat, peasant, and artist is an almost metaphysical reverence for tradition, a sense that the manners, stories, and creations of past ancestors represent not just an inheritance but a refuge – a sphere of legitimacy, dignity, and purity in which to escape the uncertain taint of the masses. That Eva and Constance Gore-Booth should willingly choose to leave this place of safety, to give up the sanctity of Lissadell for the vulgarity of crowded cities – and by analogy, to abandon art for action – was incomprehensible to Yeats.⁶

The above analogy is crucial here: for it is as an artist that Yeats comes to admire the peace and comfort of aristocratic life. In this period Yeats’s earlier utopian hopes contract from their wider societal scope to focus instead on the pristine microcosms of the Renaissance court and its contemporary analogue in courtesy, the Protestant Big House, epitomized by Coole. The single poem that best illuminates Yeats’s aesthetic motives for
this contraction is “Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation,” written in 1910 and presenting the culture of the Anglo-Irish Big House as having given rise to the best of Irish politics and (most crucially for Yeats) art. The first two quatrains run:

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one
Time out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best? Although
Mean roof-trees were sturdier for its fall [...] (1-8)

Within Coole’s hallowed confines, “passion and precision” transcend their merely consonantal proximity into the purer fusion of sprezzatura. This has been the case since “Time out of mind”: a phrase that evokes the stately procession of generations while also implying that the (Catholic) masses have forgotten these noble (Protestant) forebears, egregiously putting “out of mind” the class whose role it has been “To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun.” This line encapsulates the emergent aristocratic aesthetic of Yeats’s middle period. With the infinitive “to breed” embodying the purely carnal aspect of generation, while also implying the nominal aristocratic trait of ‘breeding,’ the poem stands as early evidence of Yeats’s nascent interest in eugenics, a foretaste of his eventual conviction – not stated explicitly until On the Boiler, a year before his death – that “unless there is a change in the public mind every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and, as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly” (LE 229).
In fostering the idealistic mindset (“the lidless eye that loves the sun”), the aristocracy stands for Yeats as the primary bastion against the ever-encroaching materialism of the modern age: deeply ironic, of course, given how much aristocratic status depends upon the possession of land, estates, and other material assets which help to insulate their bearers against the necessity of working for a living, thus freeing their minds for “the sweet laughing eagle thoughts” that supposedly place them at Irish society’s aspirational vanguard.⁷

“Upon a House” exemplifies Yeats’s tendency, especially after the turn of the century, to elide economic questions into aesthetic ones. The note on the poem he offered in his diary illuminates his willingness to tolerate systemic societal inequality as long as it means preserving the “high laughter, loveliness, and ease” that allows the aristocracy to persist as a beacon of grace and refinement:

I wrote this poem on hearing the result of reduction of rent by the courts. One feels that when all must make their living they will live nor for life’s sake but the work’s and all be the poorer. […] This house has enriched my soul out of measure because here life moves within restraint through gracious forms. Here there has been no compelled labour, no poverty-thwarted impulse. (qtd. in Jeffares 109)

Rather than see the lowering of Lady Gregory’s tenants’ rents as compassionately affording the labouring classes an opportunity to exert greater control over their livelihoods, Yeats worries about the consequences for art. Lacking inherited wealth – both material and, presumably, genetic – the “[m]ean roof-trees” must rely on the
exigencies of “luck” to gain from the rent reduction any benefit beyond the basely economic. Ultimately, their enfranchisement forebodes the deterioration of Irish culture:

   How should their luck run high enough to reach
   The gifts that govern men, and after these
   To gradual Time’s last gift, a written speech
   Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease? (9-12)

This final quatrain figures the aristocracy’s superiority both spatially (“high enough”) and temporally (“Time’s last gift”), positioning the inhabitants of Coole and their class compatriots at both the hierarchical summit and the eschatological end-point of moral and artistic development. The achievement of “written speech” – the natural and yet poetic language Yeats strove for in this middle period – stands as both a gift of time and an artefact consciously crafted out of a lifestyle rife with leisure, free of the stultifying effects of “compelled labour.”

Yeats thus casts the Protestant Big House as a kind of utopia, gesturing to its spatio-temporal boundaries and foundations, and elaborating how the place itself fosters the admirable character traits of its inhabitants. But this utopia, of course, depends for its maintenance on the exploitation of a rentier class whose sphere of existence serves as its necessary antithesis: not quite dystopian, but insidious to the extent that Yeats can so readily judge it to be lacking in the idealistic impulses that birth the finest in politics and art. The fearless idealistic freedom of the aristocracy is born, paradoxically perhaps, out of their insularity – a fact reflected not just in the curiously circular way Yeats phrases their virtues (“Where wings have memory of wings, and all / That comes of the best knit to the best”) but also by the poem’s formal delimitation. As a douzain – a Shakespearian
sonnet shorn of its couplet – “Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation” relinquishes the twist or about-face traditionally afforded by the final two-line tag, instead relying on the interrogative mode to provide the illusion of ambiguity. For despite consisting of three questions, the poem is rhetorically closed, a series of assertions feigning uncertainty. This does not mean, however, that we should read it as purely conservative in impetus, especially in formal terms. Helen Vendler highlights the politicized aspect of Yeats’s refusal to fully adopt the Shakespearean sonnet, claiming that in “foregoing a formal ‘match’ between Coole and English Renaissance form, Yeats will be an Irish douzain-writer, not an English sonneteer” (Discipline 167). So while reactionary in the context of Irish politics, the poem embodies a formal subversiveness in relation to English-language poetic tradition which speaks to Yeats’s pride in the very specific virtues of the Protestant Ascendancy. Despite being written out of ideas of courtly sprezzatura derived from the Italian Renaissance, “Upon a House” stands not as a celebration of the aristocracy per se, but rather of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and the inhabitants of Coole in particular.

At the same time, Yeats implies the universal worth of the traits he exalts (after all, the poem asks “How should the world be luckier”?), lending his portrait a field of implication beyond that of the country-house poem as inaugurated by Jonson’s “To Penshurst” by building it not around an ekphrastic enumeration of the house’s attributes or the verdancy of its estate, but instead around a celebration of the class whose virtues the house serves to foster and (precariously) protect. In addition to practically voiding the country-house poem of its topographical content, Yeats alloys its traditional panegyric emphasis with polemic, condemning the meanness of those who would have the
aristocracy forfeit part of their inherited privilege. This touch of polemic helps the poem become utopian; for it introduces a tension between praise and criticism, ensuring that the poem’s animating dynamic is not one which posits a laudatory poet rhapsodizing to a passively receptive audience; instead the poem implies a frustrated speaker propagandizing to an audience he imagines as resistant. Rather than hinging its effectiveness upon pleasing imagistic depictions, it achieves what resonance it manages primarily through a rhetorical embodiment of desire: desire to preserve the titular House as a microcosm of “passion and precision” – virtues which, if united in a ruling aristocracy recognized as such, will save the cultured world from the degradation to which it seems to be ever more inexorably giving way.

This sense of degradation is memorably captured in the famous refrain of “September 1913,” which claims that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave.” Written three years after “Upon a House,” the poem finds Yeats directing his disdain toward the urban mass whose material striving—a mockery of authentic aspiration—has drained Ireland of the idealism that once set it apart:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone;
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
It’s with O’Leary in the grave. (1-8)
This first stanza’s anaphoric linkage of “And add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer” suggests that the Catholic middle classes have lost the urge to transcendence at the root of their faith, that the lure of the ideal – whether spiritual, or more crucially for the poem, national – no longer exerts its pull upon their souls; inured so thoroughly to a market ethic, even their prayers involve money. The second stanza begins with a hinge of contrast (“Yet they were of a different kind, / The names that stilled your childish play”), and the remainder of the poem eulogizes the uncompromising idealism of the eighteenth-century Irish nationalists Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, and Wolfe Tone, all of whom died in pursuit of the national cause. While the “you” to whom the poem is addressed have “come to sense,” these revolutionaries exemplified “the delirium of the brave” – a distinction which highlights the radicalism of Yeats’s anti-empirical rhetoric here, implying that it is better to die in pursuit of the unseen than to live in a world of mere “sense” (and cents). The final stanza casts this idealistic delirium as a form of desire verging on madness:

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You’d cry, ‘Some woman’s yellow hair
Has maddened every mother’s son’:
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
But let them be, they’re dead and gone,
They’re with O’Leary in the grave. (25-32)
Because he attributes it to his disdained addressees, it remains ambiguous whether the speaker approves of this comparison between the heroes’ nationalistic fervour and the carnal desire for an actual woman. On one hand, Yeats could be using it to point up the inveterate gutter-mindedness of his satirical targets, who mistake the “delirium of the brave” for basic lust. On the other hand, however, at least until the 1920s lust in Yeats’s poetry is rarely without some hint of transcendence, and so the woman’s “yellow hair” might signal her as a sort of Helen-figure, an emblem of disastrous desire along the lines of the earlier Gonne/Helen in “No Second Troy,” and a prefiguration of the societal apocalypse obliquely imaged in “Leda and the Swan.” Regardless, the claim that “They weighed so lightly what they gave” resonates with both the political and amorous contexts; as the revolutionaries gave their lives, so “maddened” lovers give their sanity, each willingly relinquishing their attachment to this-worldly existence in desirous pursuit of what Bloch calls “the Not-Yet.” A readiness to shirk the actual for the possible lies at the conceptual heart of Yeats’s image of “Romantic Ireland,” and it is this readiness that he believes is increasingly lacking in the Irish middle classes – whose literal, democratic, and indeed utopian proclivities make them unwilling to abide in a state of unrequitement, to seek an end to desire rather than acknowledging its necessary endlessness, its status as the engine of the nation’s cultural greatness.

3.

As much as the aesthetics of aspiration it exemplifies dovetails with Levitas’s ontological conception of utopia as desire, Yeats would never have seen his idealization of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and their Big Houses as “utopian,” per se. As in the Gore-
Booth elegy, the few occurrences of the word “utopia” throughout his writings show him always implicitly linking it to mass democracy and socialism, ideologies that Yeats, like Nietzsche, disdained for their leveling impetus, their attempt to impose an equality that flouts the existence of the truly exceptional. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Yeats sees this exceptionality as embodied in groups as much as individuals. In the 1919 essay “If I Were Four and Twenty,” for example, he condemns the “Utopian vapours” that delude so many into upholding the rights of individuals over those of families, and valuing “equal opportunity” over “social privilege” (*LE* 38-39). By the revised 1937 edition of his philosophical treatise *A Vision*, however, he has recast this dichotomy, critiquing the “Utopian dreams” that infect Greek society in the shift from the warrior-hero Achilles to the state-builder Aeneas (206). Common to both instances is his exaltation of the natural over the legislative realm: families and heroes embody the possibility of inherent (or at least inherited) superiority, while the discourses of statehood and individual rights rely on a legally-imposed equality. According to this view, then, aristocracy hews more closely to the natural order than democracy, which comes to look artificial and naïvely utopian by comparison. Or to put it in terms more resonant with Yeats’s concerns: aristocracy is artful, while democracy is philistine.

This dichotomy resonates with the poet’s lifelong project of cultural nationalism, and to the distinction he draws between nation and state. To Yeats, the nation emerges as a natural formation, a body of humanity unified into order by a common geographic and cultural inheritance, blossoming plantlike up from the land and its myths. Yeats would have readily assented to Benedict Anderson’s conception, over half a century later, of the nation as an “imagined community”; in 1909 the poet wrote in his journal that “One
cannot love a nation struggling to realize itself without an idea of the nation as a whole being present in one’s mind. One could always appeal to it in the minds of others” (Mem 180). For Yeats, nation and aristocracy line up on one side of a divide with state and democracy on the other, the forces of idealism ranged against those of crass materialism – with “utopia” and its advocates standing firmly with the latter.

As Elizabeth Cullingford has elaborated at length, his flirtation with fascism arose partly out of the misconception that it entailed the rule of an idealistic elite with an almost paternal attitude to authority, and that such an arrangement would foster the best possible environment for art. Despite its apparent rootedness in wishful thinking, however, such a view remains for Yeats firmly anti-utopian, because regardless of his feelings as to its potential auspiciousness, the ascendency of some form of authoritarianism was for him historically inevitable. His cyclical philosophy of history as set forth in A Vision foretells the imminent dawn of an age of violence and authoritarian rule; as the poet’s alter ego Michael Robartes declaims: “After an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace, comes an age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war. Has our age burned to the socket?” (Vb 52). The rise to prominence of Mussolini, then, seemed to affirm the mytho-historical speculations Yeats had begun consolidating as far back as 1917, when automatic writing sessions undertaken with his wife George produced the first scribblings that would become A Vision. This helps explain Yeats’s mistaken willingness to see Italian fascism as the rule of a cultured elite that would banish philistinism and allow the national spirit to flourish, rather than the violent and stifling totalitarianism it was. But fascism appealed to Yeats for more than seeming to prove him right. Lifetimes of political instability in Ireland, culminating for
Yeats in the civil war of 1922-23 and the Irish Free State’s subsequent failure to produce the enlightened cultural haven he so ardently desired, had produced in him a thirst for stability – a willingness to concede, with minimal lament, the imminence of tyranny. As he put it in a 1924 interview with The Irish Times: “Authoritative government is certainly coming, if for no other reason than that the modern State is so complex that it must find some kind of expert government, a government firm enough, tyrannical enough if you will, to spend years in carrying out its plans” (UP2 433). A decade later, when the emergence of the Irish fascist “blueshirts” made such authoritarianism an imminent possibility for Ireland, Yeats ominously declared: “We are about to exhaust our last Utopia the state” (Le 813). Again – in this, the only occurrence of the word in Yeats’s thousands of letters – “utopia” signals the artificial nature of the state, its status as a bureaucratic accrual that must be swept aside to make way for the nation’s upsurge.

Yeats’s objection to both “utopia” and “the state” centres on the fact that inherent in each lies the promise of a lasting harmony, and so both concepts conflict with Yeats’s antithetical vision of both history and (equally crucially) the poet’s struggle. If the ascendancy of fascism across Europe signals to him the imminent disintegration of the democratic state apparatus – thus apparently confirming his vision of the cyclical antagonism between democracy and aristocracy, the many and the few – it also dovetails with his view of the poet as engaged in an unending generative conflict with himself, a dynamic rendered most succinctly in Yeats’s famous claim that “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (LE 8). Though often isolated as a statement against overt didacticism or argumentation in poetry – a proscription Yeats disregarded again and again – in context it works to assert the primacy
of individual self-actualization over sociopolitical striving. Furthermore, it implicitly forges a distinction between rhetoric, which works to overcome conflict by outconvincing its opponents, and poetry, which depends upon the perpetuation of conflict for its genesis. In other words, rhetoric seeks the establishment of a status quo, while poetry abides in a state of continual overthrow. Or unsatisfied desire: for the long “Anima Hominis” section of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, the 1917 treatise in which the maxim on rhetoric and poetry appears, is largely a meditation on the poet’s endless thirst to become his opposite, and the necessity that this thirst never truly be quenched. Naming this opposite the poet’s “anti-self,” “antithetical self,” or “Daemon,” Yeats repeatedly casts the generative dialectic between the two in terms of desire. Unlike the Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, however, Yeats’s daemonic desire seeks no fulfillment; he writes of the “hollow image of fulfilled desire” that characterizes “happy art” (*LE* 7), claiming that “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat. The desire that is satisfied is not a great desire” (12). Poetry, in Yeats’s view, is the fruit of unrelenting failure.  

Though phrased here in personal terms, the political dimension of this fetishization of unrequited desire is made explicit in many places elsewhere in Yeats’s writings. Most basically, it stands as the most radical formulation of Yeats’s anti-materialism, a tacit admission that his brand of idealism never actually seeks to attain its quested-after ideals. Just as he had characterized Lady Gregory and her aristocratic ilk as “Bred to a harder thing / Than Triumph” (*CP* 109) – thus twisting the decline of the Ascendancy class in the face of encroaching democracy into evidence of their status as the stewards of idealism – so Yeats sets out, during the first section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” an inversely proportionate relation between political harmony
and poetic integrity. In the midst of Ireland’s civil war, he reflects back upon the “pretty toys” of the Celtic Revival years, the “law,” “habits,” and “Public opinion” that he and his compatriots deluded themselves into thinking “would outlive all future days,” hubristically seeing themselves at the vanguard of a new peaceful dawn: “O what fine thought we had because we thought / That the worst rogues and rascals had died out” (9-16). The repetition of “thought” here issues in a kind of cancelling double-positive, both tacitly condemning the thought’s wrongness, and implying that it had less to do with actual thinking and more with merely wanting to believe. Lacking the “Vision of Evil” – the capacity to “conceive of the world as a continual conflict” (Va 65) – the young Revivalists let their utopian hopes take the place of authentic perception. As a result, they find themselves unprepared for the sectarian violence of civil war, when “days are dragon-ridden” (25) – i.e., when the ruthlessness they thought had been consigned to the mythic dustbin of history re-rears its head to breathe destruction. In a milieu so brutal that the “drunken soldiery” of either side “Can leave the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free,” those who in their youthful fervour “planned to bring the world under a rule” find themselves “but weasels fighting in a hole” (26-32). Made joltingly aware that their strife-driven world can obey no singular “rule,” they find themselves reformed of their utopianism, confronted with the shifting amoral animality that constitutes the impulse to survive at all costs – the weasel within. The poetic temperament does not find himself disillusioned by this endless state of violent overturn, however; instead he abides half-satisfied in the knowledge that the factional conflict in the outside world serves to mirror his inner artistic battle:

He who can read the signs nor sink outmanned
Into the half-deceit of some intoxicant
From shallow wits; who knows no work can stand,
Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent
On master-work of intellect or hand,
No honour leave its mighty monument,
Has but one comfort left: all triumph would
But break upon his ghostly solitude. (33-40)

The poet can “read the signs” that “shallow wits” who find themselves “outmanned / Into the half-deceit of such intoxicant” cannot; such signs point to the bleak and simple fact that “no work can stand.” This sweeping caveat applies of course to both political and poetic works, and so Yeats is asserting the extreme contingency not only of his youthful utopian self, but of his current, presumably more clear-eyed, incarnation. According to the later Yeats’s antithetical poetics, however, such conflictual contingency lies at the root of artistic identity. In taking comfort in the fact that “all triumph would / But break upon his ghostly solitude,” Yeats implies that any political stability of the utopian sort he once hoped for would set the world at odds with his inner dissonance, with potentially deleterious effects upon the work that dissonance produces. The key phrase here is “ghostly solitude,” which alludes to yet another epithet for the poet’s daemonic foil, the ghost. A crucial passage in Per Amica runs:

[T]he Daemon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daemon feed the hunger in one another’s hearts. Because the ghost is simple, the man heterogeneous and confused, they are but knit together when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permit the
expression of all the man most lacks […] The more insatiable in all desire, the more resolute to refuse deception or an easy victory, the more close will be the bond, the more violent and definite the antipathy. (LE 11)

Only when the poet deliberately and theatrically dons the mask of that which he most lacks can he achieve that coveted paradox of antithetical unity; only by questing to become the opposite of what he knows himself to be can he bind the daemon into intimate antipathy with him, achieving the conflictual coherence out of which the greatest poetry is birthed. Considered in the context of this antithetical poetics, the “triumph” referenced in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” represents the “easy victory” – political or aesthetic – that the poet must avoid if he hopes to reap the half-fallow bounty of his “ghostly solitude,” his haunted communion with personified lack. He repeats the formula in part III, this time making the poet’s solitary pluralness explicit: “For triumph can but mar our solitude” (78; emphasis added).

Like most of Yeats’s overtly political poems from The Tower and after, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” finds him adopting the mask of the clear-eyed perceptor of violence’s inevitability, delivering the news of perpetual disunity. And yet – just as his own antithetical poetics would mandate – something in Yeats remains ill-suited to this role. He never entirely quells the thirst for unity that informed his early cultural nationalism and led him to spend the early part of his career projecting an image of the Irish as “a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions […] and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action” (EE 158). Seeking as a poet to illuminate the imaginative bonds of Irishness, the young Yeats sought coherence on a personal level as well, striving to draw together his literary,
philosophical, and nationalist interests according to the mantric directive to “Hammer your thoughts into unity” \( (LE\ 34) \). This command, though attributed retrospectively to himself at “twenty-three or twenty-four” in an essay written when he was in his fifties \( (LE\ 34) \), resurfaced in transfigured form throughout his writings of the 1920s and beyond, inherent in the much-exalted concept of “Unity of Being.”

To understand what Yeats intends by “Unity of Being” – a phrase he first encounters in an automatic writing session with George in 1918, and which reappears insistentlly throughout the remainder of his work – we must return to the dichotomy, foundational to his later thought, between democracy and aristocracy. In the final revised edition of \textit{A Vision} published in 1937, two years before his death, Yeats places under the heading “THE TWO CONDITIONS” the following almost-couplet: “\textit{Primary means democratic. / Antithetical means aristocratic}” \( (Vb\ 104) \). Although he first elaborates the phrase “Unity of Being” in relation specifically to Dante – whom he says thought of it as a kind of aesthetic self-organicism, “the subordination of all parts to the whole as in a perfectly proportioned human body” \( (Ex\ 250) \) – it comes to take on a sociopolitical aspect as well, as in the early 1920s Yeats claims that as men in places of power attained to Unity of Being “in great numbers” during the Renaissance, “their nations had it too, prince and ploughman sharing that thought and feeling” \( (Au\ 227) \). A nation achieves Unity of Being by preserving the political trappings of aristocracy while somehow having its leaders – antetypes of what we now know as the Renaissance Man – share their perfect inner proportions with their subjects, as if democratically. By the time of the first edition of \textit{A Vision} in 1925, Yeats more directly idealizes this balance between aristocracy and democracy, writing that Unity of Being “implies a harmony of antithetical and primary
life” (Va 51; emphasis in original). As the above examples imply, this harmony can manifest both politically and personally – or more to the point, poetically. In terms of politics, we can be reasonably clear from Yeats’s examples of “nations” under Renaissance princes on what a balance of antithetical and primary elements might entail (notwithstanding the pre-Westphalian anachronism of referring to them as such). In terms of the individual poet, however, the meaning of this balance is not immediately evident; throughout A Vision Yeats associates the primary with objectivity and the antithetical with subjectivity, claiming that “All men are characterised upon a first analysis by the proportion in which these characters of Tinctures, the objective or primary, the subjective or antithetical, are combined” (Va 13). Yeats thus sets out two strings of dichotomous terms according to which all personalities and all societies are proportionately structured: democracy-primary-objective, and aristocracy-antithetical-subjective. And though he characterizes socialism, communism, and hence utopia as symptoms of the increasingly primary dispensation that defines the early twentieth century – as gusts of the “levelling wind” that “mock[s] at the great” in the final section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” – his own ideal of a harmonious “Unity of Being” is ultimately no less utopian. As I have discussed, what lies behind Yeats’s condemnation of his era’s apparent drive to democratic equality is not an opposition to the widespread improvement of humanity’s material conditions per se, but a fear that such reforms would entail the virtual extinguishment of the conflictual conditions necessary for art.
Perhaps the most cogent claim to be extracted from *A Vision* – Yeats’s grand mystical opus wherein historical eras and personality types alike correspond to the 28 phases of the moon – is that the artist (and especially the poet) is archetypal, embodying the dispensation of the age, or, as in Yeats’s case, embodying the drive toward a more favourable dispensation. In brief, Yeats’s system sees history as progressing around a great wheel, through phases numbered from 1 to 28, with phase 1 (and its circumferential neighbour phase 28) representing complete objectivity or passivity, and phase 15 (its diametric opposite) representing complete subjectivity. The phases in the half of the wheel aligned around phase 1, from 1 to 7 and 23 to 28, Yeats labels the *primary* phases. Those in the half around phase 15, from 9 to 21, he labels the *antithetical* phases. The world of 1927 stands somewhere between phases 23 and 25, near the apogee of primariness, moving gradually towards the near-total objectivity of phase 28, a stultifyingly literal and spiritually-impoverished state that sees the death of idealism, when “men will no longer separate the idea of God from that of human genius, human productivity in all its forms” (*Va* 177). This evokes the proletarian goals of Russian communism, a state of art-as-labour: not the nobler labour Yeats Platonically distinguishes from gruntwork in “Adam’s Curse,” but rather a labour hierarchically indistinguishable from farming or the forging of steel girders, a mechanistically levelled state where work is work, and art has forfeited its autonomy.

This also recalls his disdain for Eva Gore-Booth’s “vague Utopia” and his portrait of her socialist sister Constance “conspiring among the ignorant”; written just two years after the first publication of *A Vision*, his 1927 elegy casts them as emblems of their over-
democratized age, “image[s] of such politics,” true denizens of the late objective phases. By contrast, Yeats himself walks out of step with such an age, inhabiting with Dante and Shelley the visionary phase 17, where “Unity of Being […] is now more easy than at any other phase” (63). It is important to note here that although Yeats represents Unity of Being as a state of balance or harmony between the primary and antithetical dispensations, it is only achievable by individuals occupying the thoroughly antithetical phases 16, 17, and 18 – and so despite its pretensions to historical detachment, his system clearly privileges one hemisphere of the great wheel. The element of dispensational balance enters only through the re-introduction of his earlier concept of the Daemon (now spelled “Daimon”), which is cast as a kind of dialectical foil, at its most primary the more antithetical an individual is, and vice versa. Those occupying the primary phases – tending as they do toward democracy, objectivity, a general condition of uniformity – will tend to try to quell or let themselves be quelled by the Daimon, needing to live in either light or dark, unwilling to abide in perpetual conflict. By contrast, Yeats claims, “he who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest” (Va 26). The utopias pursued by Eva Gore-Booth and her socialist--leaning compatriots can be described as “vague” because they require their inhabitants to forego this generative struggle, allowing their own destinies to be subsumed into the common aim.

For Yeats, with the further advance of contemporary history through the primary phases, a time will arrive when “all personality will seem an impunity,” until finally “with the last gyre must come a desire to be ruled or rather, seeing that desire is all but
dead, an adoration of force spiritual or physical, and society as mechanical force be complete at last” (Va 175-76). This nightmarish vision of the end of desire and the “adoration of force” resonates with much twentieth-century dystopian thought that sees socialism as almost inevitably hinging into totalitarianism, recalling for instance Orwell’s roomfuls of servile Party drones praising telescreen projections of Big Brother. But again in *A Vision* as elsewhere, Yeats’s thinking cannot straightforwardly be classified as anti-utopian, no matter how much he himself would have thought of it as such. For his famous account of Byzantium in the “Dove and Swan” chapter resounds with utopian longing:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I could find in some little wine shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions […] I think that in early Byzantium, and maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter and the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of Sacred Books were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people. (Va 158-59)

This passage is utopian in both a generic and an ontological sense: first, the dramatic situation of a visitor’s question-and-answer encounter with a wise and eloquent
Byzantine craftsman recalls the basic formula of the utopian narrative, from More to Bellamy and Morris; and second, the image of a society so organically unified that every artistic gesture expresses “the vision of a whole people” represents the apotheosis of Yeats’s Romantic idealism. Whereas the socialistic fulfillment of the primary gyre entails the erasure of subjectivity by the objective mass, Yeats’s Byzantium entails a harmony between the subjective and objective, antithetical and primary, that verges on fusion, gesturing beyond even Unity of Being to the “complete beauty” of phase 15, where “contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has a bodily form, and every bodily form is loved” (Va 58-59). Although phase 15, as the full moon of absolute subjectivity, has no human equivalent in A Vision’s system of personalities (with Yeats’s own phase 17 the nearest one can get), according to the book’s historical scheme, civilizations may coincide with the 15th phase as with any other, and Justinian’s Byzantium may well have achieved such fleeting perfection.

The tension between the permanence of the twenty-eight phases in relation to personality types (or “embodiments” as Yeats calls them), and the utter transience of those same twenty-eight phases in relation to the cyclical movements of history is illuminated in Yeats’s poetic journey to his Byzantine utopia, “Sailing to Byzantium.” Simply put, the poem delineates the difference between old age and ancientness, recasting the clichéd dichotomy between life’s transience and art’s permanence – given perhaps its quintessential expression in the figures on Keats’s urn, “[f]orever panting and forever young” – as the poet’s voyage between two countries: modern democratic Ireland (“no country for old men”) and ancient imperial Byzantium (“the artifice of eternity”). The former place swelters with a fecundity memorably captured in the image of
“mackerel-crowded seas,” its youthful inhabitants revelling in the cycle of conception, birth and decay, rapt in artless ecstasy: “Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect” (1-8). This spectacle incites in the ageing speaker a curious mixture of self-deprecation and aesthetic superiority; he is only “a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” until “Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress” (9-12). In other words, the very agedness that makes him a scarecrow-like object of aesthetic repulsion works to louden any song of transcendence his soul might sing. Despite this virtue of age and experience, however, singing is still a talent his soul must learn:

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore have I sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium. (13-16)

Notwithstanding some grammatical awkwardness in the service of meter here – as the subjectless gerund “studying” works to cloud the first line – the “therefore” exerts a clarifying influence over the passage: the poet has come to Byzantium to study “Monuments of its [the soul’s] own magnificence.” The recurrence of the word “Monuments” (again at the beginning of a line and so capitalized), returns us to the first stanza’s antithesis between “sensual music” and “Monuments of unageing intellect,” a reminder that the poet’s journey leads him away from the transience of carnal life towards an artefactual monumentality. His Byzantium exists less as a historical place than as a projection of the desire to be immortal; he wants to sail out of time.
The third stanza clarifies this trajectory. Beginning with an apostrophic “O,” the speaker calls upon the “sages standing in God’s holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall.” Yeats deploys simile here to suggest that the state of saintly conflagration, of being engulfed in God’s everlasting grace, is somehow akin to being an artwork upon a Byzantine wall. When the speaker asks these saints to “perne in a gyre” and “be the singing masters of [his] soul,” he means that they should spiral down into history and teach his soul to sing itself up to their condition, yes, but a misspelled pun conceals a more urgent version of this request: that they should be “singeing masters,” should burn him into permanence:

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. (21-24)

That the poet’s heart “knows not what it is” speaks to the heart’s dual signification, as chambered blood-pump on the one hand (“fastened to a dying animal”) and as metaphysical seat of love and aspiration on the other (“sick with desire”). Desire, of course, implies both lack and plasticity, relying upon the human ability to alter one’s circumstances in pursuit of that missing fullness. Locked in a perpetual organic wholeness, art remains exempt from desire, and so “the artifice of eternity” into which the speaker wishes to be “gather[ed]” – brought together unto himself, into a state of wholeness, without lack – is anathema to his humanity. As hinted at by the inescapable connotation of falseness inherent in “artifice,” at this point the speaker’s utopian journey begins to seem delusory, perhaps even to himself.
A diversion back into *A Vision* might be helpful here. In describing the twenty-eight phases Yeats consistently focuses on the condition of desire within each phase; his own 17th phase, for example, is dominated by the spectre of a self-inflicted loss which forces the imagination to endlessly “substitute some new image of desire; and in the degree of its power and of its attainment of unity, relate that which is lost, that which has snatched it away, to the new image of desire, that which threatens the new image to the being’s unity” (*V* 64). In other words, and using the poet himself as an example, one might say that Yeats must forever find substitutes for Maud Gonne as a lost object of desire (he does after all specify the initial loss as “some woman perhaps”), and must recognize these substitutes as integral not only to her, but to the part of himself that caused him to lose her – and indeed revels in the loss – in the first place. As I have pointed out, Yeats’s antithetical poetics virtually mandates the constant pursuance of unrequitable desires; this, paradoxically, is what Unity of Being entails. Contrast, then, this endless generative incompletion with Yeats’s description of the “complete beauty” of phase 15, a wholly subjective state impossible for any human to embody:

> Now contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has a bodily form, and every bodily form is loved. This love knows nothing of desire, for desire implies effort, and though there is still separation from the loved object, love accepts the separation as necessary to its own existence. (58-59)

Here desire’s inextricability from the simple act of contemplation renders desire effortless, thereby absenting it from the definition of love, if not disappearing it altogether. Such a state would seem to be the remedy sought by desire-sick speaker of
“Sailing to Byzantium,” though the poem’s conclusion implies the impossibility, at least in mortal terms, of such relief.

The final stanza shifts to the future tense “I shall,” with the speaker imagining himself ensconced “out of nature,” his “bodily form” distinct from “any natural thing.” The repetition of “nature” and its derived adjective within the stanza’s first two lines evokes the related word “nation” and their common Latin root in the verb *nasci*, to be born; and indeed the speaker’s journey entails his being both un-nationed – the “no country for old men” from which he departs in the first stanza is widely thought to allude to pastoral Celtic myths of Ireland’s preternatural fertility – and unborn, shedding his carnality to become a golden bird, “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make […] To keep a drowsy Emperor awake.” The poet-bird’s function here returns us to the poem’s concern with the extent to which art can flout mortality. The Emperor is “drowsy” because he is mortal; like all rulers, he must eventually secede from life and throne alike.

To secure even the most precarious of immortalities, he must leave monuments behind as testimony to his kingdom’s grandeur – like the gold mosaics Yeats had seen at Ravenna in 1907, which inspired so much of the poem’s imagery. In thus emphasizing the temporality of the Emperor’s rule, the speaker highlights not just Byzantium’s historical contingency, but his own; what began as an old man’s journey out of time has become a subtle paean to the impossibility of such a journey, as the speaker envisions one last potential role for his golden-birded self:

Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (30-32)
What is “passing,” of course, is Byzantium itself. The poet might achieve a state of artefactual stasis, but such a transfiguration leaves him locked “out of nature,” trapped inside a burnished body while the world declines and falls, rises and exults anew, before his always-open eyes. What might have been utopia becomes a gold-lit nightmare.

“Sailing to Byzantium” takes utopian longing as its launching point, and yet ends by underlining the impossibility of attaining the state of ageless, desireless stasis its speaker initially sought. The ideal Byzantium eulogized in A Vision may indeed have achieved the nearest-ever unity of “religious, aesthetic and practical life” (Va 158), but according to Yeats’s cyclical philosophy such social unity cannot be reached through concerted human effort: peoples must simply abide in their destined point along the gyres of history; only those fortunate enough to live at the civilizational apogee of the antithetical phases will ever experience such unity – and even then it soon passes:

Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound, and it amuses one to remember that before Phidias, and his westward moving art, Persia fell, and that when full moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and that at the outset of our westward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell; all things dying each other’s life, living each other’s death. (V 152)

This final chiasmus – reminiscent of the ouroboros, the serpent devouring its own tail – is one of the signal motifs of Yeats’s later work, encapsulating his conviction that both history and the individual lifespan proceed through antithetical struggle. In historical terms this struggle expresses itself through the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations; in individual terms it is generative, both of art and (in the most propitious cases) of Unity of
Being – that paradoxical state of harmony-in-antinomy accorded those who commit to an endless lustful war of attrition with the daimonic opposite within them.

Fredric Jameson ends his essay on “The Politics of Utopia” with an examination of “the fear of utopia, of the anxiety with which the utopian impulse confronts us” (51). As a prominent manifestation of this anxiety he highlights “fear of aphanisis, or loss of desire” (53): in seeming to promise a lasting solution to the scarcity problem and the permanent satisfaction of all worldly needs (and thereby perhaps the elimination of all otherworldly ones), utopia confronts us with the spectre of desire’s obsolescence. That this spectre menaced Yeats is evidenced throughout his later career in the way his narratives of poetic actualization – whether of individuals, classes, or nations – depend so thoroughly on antithetical striving. Furthermore, Yeats repeatedly links the idealistic aspects of such striving to the sexual urge – as in, for instance, his eugenicist emphasis on the need for aristocrats to literally out-breed their inferiors so that they may continue to infuse the culture at large with the more ephemeral refinements of ‘good breeding’. His Unity of Being, too, has a sexual aspect, as in A Vision he writes that the “perpetual conflict or embrace” between man and Daimon “may create a passion like that of sexual love” (Va 25). For Yeats, to actively desire is to resist succumbing to the levelling pressures exerted by the primary, objective, democratic forces of the age.

At the same time, Yeats recognizes the universality of the urge to free oneself from desire. Depicting this urge acted-upon in “Sailing to Byzantium,” however – and virtually conflating it with the wish to escape time itself – he can only conclude by undermining it, implying that to be free from desire is to be a passive observer, a spectator rather than an agent of history, a static work of art rather than a shaping artist.
In his later poem “Byzantium,” Yeats further refines this anti-utopian strain, portraying his one-time ideal as a place ultimately unfit for human habitation. What begins as a continuation of the earlier poem’s austere vision of art’s immortality – contrasting the artefactual solidity of a “moonlit dome” or a bird of “changeless metal” with the “complexities of mire or blood” that define human embodiment – becomes by the last stanza a hallucinatory rush of underworldly imagery, a roiling Yeatsian purgatory:

Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood,

Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,

The golden smithies of the Emperor!

Marbles of the dancing floor

Break bitter furies of complexity,

Those images that yet,

Fresh images beget,

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea. (33-40)

The theme here is still the breaking of complexity (a word whose variants appear in four of the poem’s five stanzas), but unlike at the poem’s beginning, it is broached in a fragmentary syntax, rife with asyndeton, that creates an impressionistic effect seemingly at odds with the paradisal simplicity towards which the dolphin-riding spirits surge.

Byzantium’s impetus is both iconoclastic and transcendent: not only to break images, but to shatter them into an artefactual apotheosis. This creative destruction – this “death-in-life and life-in-death” – can only be told in poetry, however, through a glut of rhythmic language so abundant as to be almost torturous. The closing image of “That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea” – a sea disturbed by crashes of wordless noise – evokes the
inhospitality of a world becoming pure image, empty of any mortal hand to strike the gong. As the one residual form of life remaining amid this tumult of rarefaction, the dolphins represent not just the mammalian inverse of the denizens of the earlier poem’s “mackerel-crowded seas” (making this final Byzantium perhaps ‘no country for young men’), but also – because they become the possessors of the “mire and blood” that belong to humans earlier in the poem – they represent the gradual dissolution of humanity, an amphibious stage along our regression back to the nothingness of pure spirit, free of all complexity.

Taking up utopia’s cognates, one might say that what begins in “Sailing to Byzantium” as a journey to eutopia – an old poet’s voyage of hope toward the good place where immortal works of art reside – becomes in “Byzantium” a depiction of outopia, the true no-place where all such journeys must end. In the shift from the earlier poem to the later, then, one may sense the poet’s conviction that eutopia cannot in fact be distinguished from outopia, that such places lose in humanity what they gain in perfection. This is not a new insight, of course; not only is it implicit in the combinatorial nature of the word “utopia,” but more explicitly, many twentieth-century thinkers call the distinction between utopia and dystopia into question, claiming that the permanence utopia implies can only be achieved by dehumanizing means. For Yeats, what begins in the first, 1925 edition of A Vision as a portrait of the historical Byzantium’s exemplary Unity of Being has become by the 1933 poem “Byzantium” a hallucinatory exemplar of the 15th phase’s utter inhumanity, of the corruption its perfection must suffer when looked at through imperfect eyes.
And yet the amorphous ideals behind all Yeats’s versions of Byzantium – of a more complete integration of art into life, of a people more fully unified across classes and occupations, and more audaciously, of spiritual immortality – inflect his later work with a desire that can readily be called utopian. That he himself would never have characterized it as such is important only insofar as it serves to clarify that for him, utopians were materialists who sought the impossible achievement of a state of permanent perfection, while he was as an idealist seeking unities beneath and beyond the inevitable violences of material history. On one hand this may make him a quietist, an obscurantist, a fatalist, and an apologist for any status quo that may happen to prevail. On the other hand it makes him (and he certainly would have seen it this way) a certain brand of realist, one who accepts the evidence of history-as-strife, and so seeks out ahistorical sources of harmony: ways of perceiving the interconnectedness of humankind without appealing to the objectivizing platitudes of democratic rhetoric, and thus preserving subjectivity – and particularly the artist’s subjectivity – as an overriding value. This last emphasis is what he claims most distinguishes him from utopians:

We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography, and with Plotinus that every soul is unique; that these souls, these eternal archetypes, combine into greater units as days and nights into months, months into years, and at last into the final unit that differs in nothing from that which they were at the beginning; everywhere that antinomy of the One and the Many that Plato thought in his Parmenides insoluble, though Blake thought it soluble ‘at the bottom of the graves’. Such belief may arise from Communism by antithesis,
declaring at last even to the common ear that all things have value according to the clarity of their expression of themselves, and not as functions of changing economic conditions or as a preparation for some Utopia. There is perhaps no final state except in so far as men may gradually grow better; escape may be for individuals alone who know how to exhaust their possible lives, to set, as it were, the hands of the clock racing. (Ex 397)

This passage – containing his latest published use of the word “utopia” – finds him combining a vision of the deep spiritual unity of all humankind with a valorization of uniqueness. It remains unclear whether in claiming that “men may gradually grow better” Yeats means “men” as in humanity, or as in the most persistently ambitious and aspiring of individuals. This ambiguity is rich: for if his vision of unique souls ultimately combining into a balanced one-in-manyness represents the antithesis of communism – a system which for Yeats aimed at the virtual dissolution of individual uniqueness into an objectivized mass – then “men” here clearly resonates in both the inclusive and exceptionalist senses.

As evinced in the above passage, and in the antithetical system of thought that dominated his later work, Yeats believed that our social and solitary selves exist at odds, and he revelled in the generative potential of the strife between the two. His universally pejorative use of the word “utopia” has its roots in his perception that utopia would entail the dissolution of the solitary into the social, the exceptional into the inclusive, and thus the extinguishment of the desirous struggle out of which art is produced. His conception of utopia is a limited and yet prominent one, and so it serves to illuminate the grounds
upon which the concept is defined and contested. A key alternate strain of thinking about utopia would locate the utopian impulse in precisely the desire for a more complete harmony between art and politics, and the individual and society, that Yeats evinces in, for example, his original tribute to Byzantium in *A Vision*. If, as this strain of thinking would have it, utopia inheres in desire itself and not in its requitement, then Yeats is undoubtedly utopian. His explicit anti-utopianism arose not out of any enmity to visions of social improvement, but out of his hatred of the doctrines of his time which equated the good place with both an achievable material prosperity for all, and a concomitant levelling-down of individuals into an objectivized mass. Though sharing with many tyrants a stringent idealism, he lacked their mania for permanence. Despite its frequently fatalistic tinge, Yeats’s later work consistently presents us with the prospect, however distant, of transfiguring change. Not blueprints, but the glimmering lure of past and future worlds more rich in harmony, beauty, and unity than the fractious dissonance his own lifetime afforded. If his utopias are often naïve, ahistorical, or even (as in the case of “Byzantium”) inhospitable – in other words, if they turn out to be no-places – this is understandable, for art itself cannot be inhabited.
Notes

1 For an eloquent elaboration of this viewpoint, see John Gray’s *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, in which the author repeatedly defines utopia by its impossibility, claiming (for example), that “a project is utopian if there are no circumstances under which it can be realized” (20).

2 Although as we will see, Yeats’s late interest in eugenics (outlined most thoroughly in *On the Boiler*, for which see *Later Essays*) allies him in at least one aspect with the blueprint utopian tradition.

3 My emphasis on desire in this chapter owes a debt to the work of Jahan Ramazani, who points to the crucial function of desire in Yeats’s aesthetic on several levels. First, in discussing Yeats’s anti-colonial work, Ramazani highlights how “Yeats’s nationalism ironizes itself in the knowledge that fulfillment would come at a great cost to a poetry built on melancholic desire” (“Postcolonial” 30). Second, Ramazani makes a similar point at greater length in relation to Yeats’s love poems, claiming that they are “conscious that they depend on loss to produce their desire,” and therefore “depict the psychic economy of traditional love poetry: erotic loss results in aesthetic gain, at least in an economy based on the loss, lack, absence, or death of woman” (“A Little Space” 68).

4 In her recuperative essay on Gore-Booth’s work, Emma Donoghue writes that “without ever (as far as I can tell) casting herself as a political or sexual dissident, this woman quietly subverted her whole heritage” (17-18). As I will go on to show, it is this subversion of “heritage” – rather than the fact of her devotion to the women’s labour movement – that most bothered Yeats about Eva.

5 There may indeed be a utopian aspect to Gore-Booth’s writing. Donoghue identifies Eva’s “central image” as “that of one woman coming to rescue another from an urban prison, and leading her by the hand into a pastoral paradise” (18). This accords with Donoghue’s emphasis on Gore-Booth as a sexual revisionist who “feminised and lesbianised the stories handed down to her” (17). While this revisionism no doubt holds a prominent place among Gore-Booth’s concerns, her First World War poem actually entitled “Utopia” displays a much less adventurous take on paradise:

> Cruelty, bloodshed and hate
> Rule the night and the day,
> The whole earth is desolate,
> To what God shall one pray?

> Is there a force that can end
> The woe of the world's war?
> Yea, when a friend meets a friend
> There shall be peace once more.

> For love at the heart of the storm
> Breaks the waves of wild air,
> And God in our human form
> Is life's answer to prayer. (*Poems*)

I suppose one could argue for the subversiveness, in the context of the poet’s biography, of “when a friend meets a friend” and “God in our human form,” but overall the poem’s
presentation of “love at the heart of the storm” as a utopian oasis strikes a resoundingly conventional note. Indeed one might, with Yeats, perceive some vagueness in the vision of utopia here presented – though this particular poem was almost certainly not in his mind when he levelled the accusation a decade later.

6 In the chapter of his *Romantic Image* entitled “The Dancer,” Frank Kermode discusses how Yeats came to take the female body as a physical analogue of the organic beauty sought by the poet in imagery. Putting it bluntly, Kermode claims that for Yeats, “girls are like poems” (51). Or at least the pretty ones: for as Kermode notes, Yeats believed that intellectual labours worked to undermine the shapeliness and grace of the female body, breeding shrillness and – the trait most anathema to poetry – abstraction.

Kermode’s discussion illuminates how the basic fact of Constance and Eva Gore-Booth’s political activities, rather than the specific nature of their chosen causes, runs contrary to Yeats’s view of women as aesthetic objects, embodiments of the symbolist notion of the transcendent poetic image.

7 Seamus Deane explores this irony at length in his *Celtic Revivals*, particularly in the chapter on “Literary Myths of the Revival,” where he illustrates the degree to which, in order to associate the Protestant Ascendancy with Irishness, and Irishness in turn with anti-materialism, Yeats “distorted history in the service of myth” (32). More specifically, Deane claims that “Yeats’s account of the Anglo-Irish tradition blurs an important distinction between the terms ‘aristocracy’ and ‘Ascendancy’,” and that “had he known a little more about the eighteenth century, he would have recognized that the Protestant Ascendancy was, then and since, a predominantly bourgeois social formation” (30).

9 In his 1917 poem “Ego Dominus Tuus” (which also serves as the prologue to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*), Yeats characterizes Dante as having forged his artistic identity upon “A hunger for the apple on the bough / Most out of reach” (*CP* 160). As we will see, Dante becomes a figure of supreme importance in Yeats’s later work, as both originator and exemplar of the crucial concept of Unity of Being.

"My emphasis here partly accords with (and partly diverges from) Helen Vendler’s view of *A Vision* as essentially a poetics, “a stylistic arrangement of experience” (*Yeats’s A Vision* 2). According to Vendler, the differences Yeats draws between historical dispensations are merely code for the differences between types of poetry, with the more florid conventionalities of his early verse hewing more closely to the waning “primary” dispensation, and the more chiselled vatic utterance of his later work corresponding to the incoming “antithetical” dispensation. “For Yeats,” Vendler writes, “historical change is often a symbol for mental and artistic cataclysms” (107). While this reading contains a great deal of insight – for Yeats saw everything through a poet’s lens – it does neglect the extent to which, as he repeatedly demonstrated in his comments on actual politics, Yeats really did believe that great historical changes were imminent. So although his historical chapters may amount to (as Vendler puts it) “nonsense at worst and wildly intuitive guesses at best” (109), we cannot write them off as literary-historical allegory simply for convenience’s sake. The fact is, Yeats sincerely held (to put it mildly) some strange beliefs.
In his *Faber Book of Utopias*, John Carey isolates this passage on Byzantium (along with the early poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”) as Yeats’s signal contributions to the history of utopian literature. See pp. 390-92.

Thomas Whitaker memorably characterizes the entire “Dove and Swan” chapter of *A Vision* as “a typically romantic achievement: a vision of history as art” (78).

There is a well-established tradition of seeing the Byzantines of the two poems as two different places, both in their sources and in their execution. Curtis Bradford, in his seminal essay “Yeats’s Byzantium Poems: A Study of their Development,” demonstrates through the evidence of Yeats’s unpublished manuscript books that “Sailing to Byzantium” emerges out of Justinian’s Byzantium as Yeats described it in “Dove and Swan,” while “Byzantium” takes as its jumping-off point the Byzantium of over 400 years later, at the end of the tenth century. Symbolically, Bradford interprets the two poems as respectively exploring the temporal and eternal aspects of Unity of Being. Harold Bloom cites the same disparate historical Byzantines as sources for the poem, yet characterizes the symbolic distinction between them more succinctly than Bradford, noting that “The cities are both of the mind, but they are not quite the same city, the second being at a still further remove from nature than the first” (344). As will be seen, this last claim readily accords with my own emphasis on “Byzantium” as depicting *outopian* no-placeness as compared to the *eutopian* good-placeness of the earlier poem.

Richard Ellmann traces this line of thinking back to Yeats’s father J.B. Yeats, who wrote that “the work of art is the social act of a solitary man” (qtd. in Ellmann 17).
CHAPTER THREE

“The Good Place has not been”:
The Pursuit of Unity in Early Auden

Like Yeats before about 1910, Auden in his early career upholds unity as among the highest of values. But while Yeats’s goal arose from nationalist motives, and so aimed specifically at social unity, Auden’s pursuit of unity has psychological and even anthropological elements. Though Auden likewise wanted to see his own society unified, he also sought personal unity – to see healed the psychic wounds inflicted by the modern age – and the wider unity of humanity – to grasp and uphold the commonalities that define us as a moral species. In this chapter I work to illuminate both Auden’s various motives for desiring these forms of unity and the myriad sources from which he drew his conceptions of these forms. As himself an alienated subject, as a young man with a thirst for social justice, and as a poet seeking the largest possible audience for his increasingly marginal art – Auden sought unity in all these guises over the course of his early career, drawing inspiration from contemporary psychological, political, and even mystical discourses in conceiving of ways to mend us back to whole. As should be clear from the context of my study, I contend that Auden’s pursuit of unity is essentially a utopian pursuit, rooted in the desire for a better way of life, both as individuals and together. Beginning with a discussion of Auden’s diagnoses, in the poetry and prose of the late 1920s and early 1930s, of humanity’s essential dividedness, I then move to explore his abortive attempts in essays of the mid-30s to theorize for poetry a role in curing this condition, before concluding with an examination of his 1938 sonnet sequence In Time of War – a work which forcefully implies a conclusion toward which Auden had long been
building, and which would increasingly dominate his thinking after his full return to the Christian faith in the 1940s: that our only true unity derives from our shared status as fallen beings, improving and sliding back in tragic increments, doomed forever to strive after unachieved utopias.

1.

In Auden’s early writings, the human condition is cast as one of ever-increasing alienation, division, and severance. In the diary of 1928 that has come to be known as the Berlin Journal, he makes the sweeping claim that “Man is the product of the refined disintegration of nature by time” (EA 298). Far from being simply a diaristic flourish scribbled in a fit of existential indulgence, this vision undergirds much of Auden’s thought into the early 1930s. Elsewhere in the journal he elaborates three interconnected ways that our alienated condition manifests itself. First (and as the above quotation suggests), if we are in fact a product of nature’s dis-integration, this implies that we are somehow separate from the rest of nature, that what once existed as an integral whole including our proto-human ancestors is now irrevocably divided – and that this division is a condition of our humanity. Second, we are increasingly separate from each other: we have atomized ourselves virtually free of the communal feeling that defined earlier human societies, a fact which affords the individual unprecedented opportunities for self-actualization, but at the risk of teetering forever on the verge of pathology, having been forced to deny the communal urge to the point of feeling somehow unwhole. This brings us to the third manifestation of our dis-integration, the wound of dualism. “It is the body’s job to make,” Auden writes, “the mind’s to destroy” (EA 298). Throughout the
journal he casts the body as “communistic,” a “Not-self” that yearns to be united with its fellow bodies (EA 298-99). The mind, by contrast, is the essence of individuality and therefore identity, the “Me” that strives to differentiate itself from other human beings (298).

This tripartite dividedness – from nature, from each other, from within – holds both liberating and oppressive significance for the poet. In responding to Freud’s vision, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of our drive to rejoin the state of union-in-stasis from whence we all emerge, Auden claims that “the real ‘life-wish’ is one of separation, from family, from one’s literary predecessors” (EA 299). In thus stressing the pursuit of individual distinctness, Auden implicitly exalts the writer’s struggle to set himself apart from his influences as a paradigmatic life-gesture, a way of fulfilling the modern mind’s drive to discrete selfhood. On the other hand, however, that very drive to discreteness works against the writer’s desire to *share* his art, as it pushes him to define himself too starkly apart from his fellows. Indeed, Auden goes so far as to claim that “Only body can be communicated” (EA 299). For a poet, of course, this raises the question of whether body can be conveyed in writing, and if not, whether poetry can actually be said to “communicate” – at least in the way the word occurs in the Berlin Journal, in a context that links it to “communal,” “communistic,” and “community.”

Auden does not directly address either of these questions, but does provide some clue as to how he might answer them in a passage that serves as a kind of interpretive skeleton key to his early poetics:

> Mind has been evolved from body, i.e. from the Not-self, whose thinking is community-thinking, and therefore symbolic. While Yeats is right that
great poetry in the past has been symbolic, I think we are reaching the point in the development of the mind where symbols are becoming obsolete in poetry, as the mind, or non-communistic self, does not think in this way. This does not invalidate its use in past poetry, but it does invalidate it in modern poetry, just as an attempt to write in Chaucerian English would be academic. (EA 298)

In attempting to outline the communicative dilemma of the modern poet, Auden refers specifically to Yeats’s 1900 essay “The Symbolism of Poetry,” and more generally to Yeats’s early aesthetic as a whole which, as I explore in Chapter One, is largely predicated upon the belief that poetic symbols unite us by appealing to the deep underlying commonalities within the human psyche. For Yeats – enthralled, at the turn of the century, with the French Symbolists’ numinous view of poetic language – all words are possibly symbolic; all hold almost mystical powers of evocation: “All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions” (115-16). Yeats’s persistent use of the first-person plural here and throughout the essay demonstrates his conviction that the emotional impact of poetic symbols is widespread if not universal; that poetry might actually serve to illuminate our dimmed sense of unity to one another and the world; and that (as he puts it later in the essay) “the laws of art […] are the hidden laws of the world” (120). By contrast, Auden asserts that the “community-thinking” of symbolism is becoming “obsolete in poetry,” as a result of the “development of the mind” (or “non-communistic self”) beyond the communal pull of the body. If for
Yeats, symbolism linked poetry not just to the public but to the cosmic realm, for Auden its obsolescence consigns poetry to the realm of tête-à-tête, with the poem addressing the reader not in her humanity, but in her individuality, inviting her to twist its coded meanings according to her psyche’s private needs.

Of course, such readerly freedom has always dwelt at the heart of lyric’s appeal. But Auden’s explicit rejection of poetry’s equally long-standing communal attraction seems designed not to release readers into an interpretative jouissance, but rather to release the writer from the obligation to communicate, allowing him to cavort debtlessly in the fenced meadows of his own psycho-aesthetic preoccupations. After all, if (as Auden claims throughout the Berlin Journal) the eclipse of the communal body by the individuating mind is an historical fact, then originality becomes the artist’s highest achievable end. Seen from this point of view, Auden’s focus on the mind’s development seems an attempt to provide a biologized justification for Pound’s imperative to “Make it new” – to claim with objective force that the modern poet must in fact do so, or else find himself swimming obscurely against the current of historical development. The model of poetry that emerges from the Journal, then, is as follows: anti-symbolic, relentlessly original, and written in the conviction that any interpersonal communication beyond the bodily is virtually impossible. Auden’s early poetry – particularly in Poems (1930), his first commercially published volume – exemplifies this model, with its clipped, hermetic style, the sense one gets of urgent subject matter honed down into an emotionless code. His most enduring poem from this period opens with a rigidity of voice that serves to highlight the barrenness of the landscape it describes:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
On the wet road between the chafing grass
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
Snatches of tramline running to the wood,
An industry already comatose,
Yet sparsely living. (1-6)¹

Written in 1927, “The Watershed” prefigures both formally and thematically the Berlin Journal’s abiding concern with humanity’s dividedness. As many commentators have pointed out, the poem’s opening introduces multiple disorienting uncertainties. The first line deliberately leaves our expectations hung between question and statement, and the individual words within it abound in ambiguity. Should we read “crux” in literal Latin, as cross, or metaphorically, as puzzle? Is it to the left of the watershed, or what’s left of it?

Geographically speaking, the poem describes a vantage in the northern English lead-mining district near Alston Moor, a region crucial to Auden’s boyhood, and which he would later refer to as his “Great Good Place.”² The poem’s opening becomes markedly less mysterious when we trace its regional origins: the “crux” is likely Killhope Cross, a monument near the highest point of the Pennines; “washing-floors” are platformed areas at the surface of mines, equipped with troughed sinks for cleaning chunks of ore; and the “snatches of tramline” are vestiges of the abandoned transport routes so crucial to the mines’ 19th-century boom period. While these facts clarify some of the imagery of these first lines, however, the key phrase “left of the watershed” resists such denotative unpacking. We know “watershed” can be taken as both a geographical division between waterways and an existential turning-point, and the relative accuracy of concrete detail elsewhere in the poem might cause us to favour the former. On the other
hand, both the lack of any significant waterway in the vicinity of Killhope, and the
imprecision of “left” – not a compass direction, but a thoroughly subjective one – make a
psychologized reading attractive: the figure has returned to a site that changed him to
scan the landscape for what of its life-altering force might remain.

I refer to the poem’s central agent as ‘the figure’ because he is denied full
subjecthood, granted only the objective pronoun “him,” left marooned as a spectral
“Who.” Had the poem been written in the first person (“Here I stand, at the crux left of
the watershed…”), it would readily fit into a Romantic tradition of lyric meditation on
landscape whose _locus classicus_ is Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” But by setting the
speaker at an indistinct remove from the protagonist – beginning in third person, and
shifting in the last section to second – the poem occupies a liminal generic space between
lyric and narrative. This lends the impression (reinforced by the Pennine lead mines’
biographical significance to Auden) of a speaker recounting himself at a distance,
oberving himself observe. This self-objectifying poetic voice nicely exemplifies the
formal implications of Auden’s belief in the dividedness of mind from body: the figure
yearning for communion with the landscape and the speaker who undermines that
yearning are aspects of the same person.

Along these lines, Edward Callan sees the poem as exemplifying the common
warning, reiterated throughout Auden’s 1928 poems, “against the temptation to seek rest
in natural harmony” (45). Callan develops this reading of the early poetry (as I do mine)
through an analysis of the Berlin Journal, though he limits his focus to those passages in
which Auden takes issue with Freud’s characterization of the pleasure principle as
“progress towards a state of rest” (EA 299). Positing his own quick theory of fulfillment,
Auden claims that “This is only one half of pleasure and the least important half. Creative pleasure is, like pain, an increase in tension” (299). I have already discussed the implications of this attitude above, in relation to Auden’s claim that “the real life-wish is one of separation” – a claim that glorifies the artist’s struggle for originality as a positive symptom of modern alienation. This exaltation of artistic striving is further evinced in Auden’s isolation of “creative pleasure” as a separate category, beyond the purview of the Freudian schema. And indeed, this is the basis of Auden’s refutation of Freud: that in casting pleasure’s goal as a kind of regressive unity, Freud leaves room for the artist’s strenuous pursuit of singularity to be dismissed as little more than a specially generative brand of neurosis. Callan’s reading of the early poetry hinges on this tension; he vastly extends the implications of Auden’s brief account of creative pleasure as an increase in tension, using it to support a reading of the poems as embodying a vitalist worldview according to which peace, stagnation, and death are virtually synonymous, and the temptation to rest is a potentially fatal obstacle to self-actualization. Situating “The Watershed” within this framework, Callan claims that it exemplifies Auden’s early concern with “the disaster resulting from the attempt to regress to a simpler state,” reading the poem as depicting a failed attempt “to return to Eden, to restore the ‘wholeness’ of nature before the Fall” (52). Before evaluating this reading, we should look at the rest of the poem:

A ramshackle engine

At Cashwell raises water; for ten years
It lay in flooded workings until this,
Its latter office, grudgingly performed,
And further here and there, though many dead
Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen
Taken from recent winters; two there were
Cleaned out from a damaged shaft by hand, clutching
The winch the gale would tear them from; one died
During a storm, the fells impassable,
Not at his village, but in wooden shape
Through long abandoned levels nosed his way
And in his final valley went to ground.

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
 Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
Be no accessory content to one
Aimless for faces rather there than here.
Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind
Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm
Where sap unbaffled rises, being Spring;
But seldom this. Near you, taller than grass,
Ears poise before decision, scenting danger. (6-31)
Callan’s reading of the poem as “Freudian allegory” focuses largely on the last verse paragraph, in which the “stranger” is informed in no uncertain terms that he will never achieve the Edenic connectedness to this landscape he evidently seeks: “This land, cut off, will not communicate.” Auden’s theory of creative tension is embodied, Callan claims, not only in the speaker’s repudiation of the stranger’s regressive desire – which the poem’s final “danger” links to the Freudian death drive – but in the patterning of assonance and internal rhyme that tightens Auden’s blank verse into a tensile sonic web, straining beyond conversational ease.

I engage Callan’s analysis at some length because it embodies two rare and crucial strengths among critics of the early work: first, it takes seriously Auden’s interest in Freudian theory in this period, and particularly his direct engagement with Beyond the Pleasure Principle and The Ego and the Id in the Berlin Journal just months after “The Watershed” was written; and second, it directly employs passages from the Journal to illuminate both thematic and formal aspects of the poems written in the years around it – and does so quite convincingly within its limited purview. I would, however, like to redress the limits of this analysis in regards to “The Watershed,” particularly its neglect of the nascent sense of class-consciousness to be detected in the poem, and the way this sense allows us to read the poem as more thoroughly bound up in the concerns of the Berlin Journal than Callan or any other critic has yet acknowledged, as a prefiguration of the more explicit social critiques Auden would set forth throughout the 1930s.

The poem’s first verse paragraph deals half with the equipment and machinery the stranger can see from his promontory, and half with people he cannot actually see, but only foggily remember by stories of their hardships and deaths. The presence of the
“ramshackle engine,” personified as performing its work “grudgingly,” highlights the absence of the people it carries on without – though whether because the workday is over or because it has displaced them in this “comatose” industry we cannot know. The fact that “many dead / Lie under the poor soil” hints at both the danger and the low pay of mine work, but the figure is insulated from such arduousness: among the myriad broken lives that the scattered dead represent, “some acts are chosen / Taken from recent winters.” The passive voice here implies the distance not only between the figure and the labourers – whose stories he likely hears at several removes – but between the figure and the speaker, divided aspects of the same post-Wordsworthian vista-gazer: while the former seeks warmth and solace in the minescape as his youth romanticized it, the latter knows such seeking can only be in vain. The miners’ anonymity (“two there were,” “one died”) undercuts the mythologizing impetus behind the figure’s remembrance of them, as the vagueness of his memory stiffens them into “wooden shape.” Finally, the description of the dying miner who “in his final valley went to ground” compounds the spatial distance between the perching figure and those he beholds, hinting that not only are they behind him in time and below him in space, but beneath him by dint of being working-class. Thus the first verse paragraph of “The Watershed” not only bodies-forth a divided speaker-figure through its use of the passive voice and its objectifying avoidance of the first person, but it also depicts a divided society by starkly distancing that figure from the world of labour he observes but cannot commune with.4

The figure’s dual state of dividedness – from himself and from those he eulogizes – is underlined at the beginning of the second verse paragraph, as the speaker shifts to the second-person imperative mood, telling the figure to “Go home” and calling him
“stranger” twice in the first two lines. The next line deepens this portrayal of the figure’s alienation, adding a third aspect to his dividedness – his severance from nature: “This land, cut off, will not communicate.” Nothing this vista presents to his sight can be meaningfully integrated into his experience; he can take “no accessory content” home from his touristic vigil. Nor, vice-versa, does his presence register upon either the human or elemental inhabitants of the scene; his incursion “wake[s] no sleeper,” the sea remains “ignorant,” and “sap unabaffled rises, being Spring” (this last detail underlining the comfortlessness here of that archetypal season of renewal, as well as the futility of the figure’s attempt to revisit his youth). “The Watershed” thus depicts the three levels of dis-integration he would begin to explore more systematically in the Berlin Journal less than a year later. So as not to model a merely extractive method of reading Auden’s poetry, however – prosaically mining its interiors for conceptual content and tossing aside the verse-shaped husk – I must reiterate more explicitly a point I have earlier implied: namely that the style of Auden’s early poetry conveys his conviction of humanity’s essential dividedness as forcefully as its subject matter does. If, as Callan claims in analyzing the sonic patterning of “The Watershed” in terms of creative tension, such patterning formally allegorizes the poet’s desire to keep at bay the death drive’s stultifying push towards a state of rest – then by analogy it also allegorizes his sense of a society out of harmony with itself, of living amid disunity.

As indicated by his comments in the Berlin Journal on the obsolescence of symbolism and the incommunicability of the mind, the young Auden saw the semantic aspects of poetic language as a kind of code, its meanings no longer drawn from a common reservoir, now consigned to transmit hopefully resonant privacies. An exclusive
focus on this private view of poetry defines readings of “The Watershed” like Callan’s – which interprets the poem through a psychoanalytic lens of self-revelation, ignoring its concern with social incohesion – or that of Edward Mendelson, who claims of the poem’s central figure that “His estranged condition, not the landscape of the mines, is true Auden country,” while neglecting to make explicit that it is estrangement from “the landscape of the mines” and its inhabitants that defines the figure’s “condition,” instead treating it as a kind of metaphysical burden, vaguely dissociated from any material cause (Early 34). Such readings dominate critical treatment of Auden’s early work, whose speakers are often cast as clear-eyed diagnosticians of modern alienation, rather than the more ambivalent and regretful elegists of lost unity – personal, natural, and especially social – that they can just as easily seem. In terms of “The Watershed,” for example, one might as readily read the dense patterning of stresses and echoed vowels as working to offset the bleak subject matter and enigmatic syntax by appealing to a more communal sense of aural response: as the repeated sounds tighten the weave of the poem, they hope as well to bind the reader more tightly to the poetic voice. To take this analogy further, if on the level of subject matter the poem concerns itself with the death drive’s dangerous pull toward what Freud calls in Beyond the Pleasure Principle “the inertia inherent in organic life” (309), then its sonic patterning might embody the counter-push exerted by the life instincts, an expression of “the efforts of Eros to combine organic substances into ever-larger unities” (315). Rather than see the taut aural fabric of Auden’s early poems as simply betokening the young poet’s struggle to extricate himself from his web of influences and achieve distinctness as a literary individual, one might also find – recalling
the Berlin Journal’s maxim that “Only body can be communicated” – a unifying gesture from poet to audience, a sonic appeal to the common ground of the body.

“The Watershed” exemplifies, both thematically and formally, the thrust of all of Auden’s poetry written before 1930. Explicitly concerned with uncrossable borders, insuperable divisions, and irrecoverable turning points, it repeatedly hints through both its sonic patterning and its range of tones – clinical, laconic, portentous, yet tinged with pathos – at wishing the world might be otherwise. Although in the earliest work this wish remains at the level of implication, it becomes more explicit as the political upheavals of the 1930s increasingly capture Auden’s attention. Whereas the Berlin Journal finds the young writer balancing the caustic aspects of his account of human alienation with an acknowledgment of the unparalleled opportunities for self-actualization allowed for by the breakdown of psycho-social cohesion, by the time of his 1932 essay “Writing” this hint of the celebratory has vanished: the loss of social unity is tragic for all of us, but especially for the artist, whose audience has shrunk to a mere niche among many.

I discussed in Chapter One how Yeats, recognizing much the same problem in Ireland at the fin de siècle, sought to appeal through Celtic myth to underlying commonalities that might forge the Irish – and thus his audience – into a copious whole. In solving the problem of social disunity, then, poetry could also solve the problem of its own marginality. Rather than wallow bitterly in his sense of apartness from ‘the masses’ who did not read his work, Yeats hoped to enjoy a special status – no less apart, but exalted rather than exiled – as an artist among the more harmonious formation of ‘the people,’ who would acknowledge him as having helped them into being. Although Auden lacks Yeats’s crucial nationalistic impetus, the trajectory of his thinking over the course
of the 1930s on poetry’s relation to social unity remains remarkably similar to that of his Irish precursor. While Yeats appealed to the pastoral ideal of a lost Celtic Ireland to form the basis of his utopian vision for the emergent nation, Auden hearkened to an even less well-defined ideal of a lost social unity drawn from a mixture of sources both historical and theoretical: past European societies that purportedly embodied a “unity of interests” long since fractured; the Marxist vision of the classless society; the unselfconscious worship-groups of the early Christian church; and the unifying force of Freudian Eros all intertwine in Auden’s myriad sketches of how humanity might – and the paradox is intentional – return anew to a less fragmentary social mode. Like Yeats, Auden comes to entertain the notion that poetry might help usher in this new unified future, and this constitutes one aspect of the utopian element in his thinking. The other, earlier aspect resides in his repeated gestures backward to a lost past of social unity, and it is with these gestures that I will deal in the next section.

2.

Written for a children’s encyclopedia entitled An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents rather than for any explicitly literary venue, Auden’s 1932 essay “Writing” nonetheless stands as his key work of early prose, what Mendelson calls “a manifesto of his private ideology” which (key to my purpose here) shows that “dissociation from a longed-for unity” was the young poet’s “sole subject at the time” (Early 15). It begins with a theory of the development of language, which Auden claims began because human beings, who once felt themselves a part of “a larger whole,” found that their sense of wholeness had left them:
At some time or other in human history, when and how we don’t know, man became self-conscious; he began to feel, I am I, and you are not I; we are shut inside ourselves and apart from each other. […]

The more this feeling grew, the more man felt the need to bridge over the gulf, to recover the sense of being as much part of life as the cells in his body are part of him. Before he had lost it, when he was still doing things together in a group, such as hunting, when the feeling was strongest, as when, say, the quarry was first sighted, the group had made noises, grunts, howls, grimaces. Noise and this feeling he had now lost had gone together; then, if he made the noise, could he not recover the feeling?

In some way like this language began. (303)

The origin story Auden presents here can readily be placed in dialogue with his earlier thoughts, in the Berlin Journal of four years previous, on the human condition of severance. Whereas there he identified a tension between the body’s communal longing and the mind’s drive to individuation, here he abandons the dualistic terms of this formulation in favour of a more holist language, casting humanity’s emergent self-consciousness not as deriving from the mind as opposed to the body, but as a matter of “feeling,” a mingling of the mental and corporeal. There are two distinct feelings in the above passage, with opposite trajectories: on the one hand, the feeling of emergent self-consciousness, of “I am I”; on the other, the feeling that this self-consciousness deprives us of and which must then be recovered, “of being as much part of life as the cells in his body are part of him.” In contrast to the affirmative stance he adopted toward our separation in the Berlin Journal, “Writing” finds him comparing the impact upon the
social whole of this entrance into self-consciousness with “a cancer growth in the body” (303). Furthermore, in place of the pessimism he espoused regarding language’s ability to communicate amid such dividedness, he now casts language – in what seems a tacit response to the images of breaches, rifts, and gaps that proliferate in his earlier poetry – as “a bridge between speaker and listener,” as a palliative if not a full-on remedy for the fissured psyches of the self-conscious (304).

The pseudo-anthropology Auden dabbles in here – and particularly his pinpointing of *self-consciousness* as the agent of humanity’s division – is largely drawn from two of his most potent early influences: his crucial Modernist predecessor D.H. Lawrence, and the more obscure (but for Auden’s thinking even more influential) philosopher-historian Gerald Heard. As Auden’s biographer Richard Davenport-Hines notes, Lawrence’s 1923 book *Fantasia of the Unconscious* “enjoyed a powerful vogue” both among the literati at large and specifically with Auden and his group during the Berlin year of 1928 (94), and Mendelson confirms that “certainly he was quoting it a year or so later” (*Early* 57). Despite widespread acknowledgement of the book’s influence on Auden, however, no critic has yet pointed out that the signal importance he accords to self-consciousness in “Writing” derives at least partly from Lawrence. Throughout *Fantasia*, Lawrence links self-consciousness to the triumph of idea over being, and to the modern tendency to mould ourselves into projections of our own self-images so that we forget to simply live. Lawrence’s polemic largely focuses on how self-consciousness, in leading us to suppress our “sensual will” (62), reverberates this dysfunction through the modern family: from the parents, whose “sex in the head” drains their marriage of any “vital interchange” (121), to the child, whose familial and institutional education virtually
ensures that the “spark of wholeness” will be swiftly quelled in her, reducing her to “another unit of self-conscious love-will” (143-44).

Though Lawrence’s characterization of self-consciousness differs significantly from Auden’s in seeing it as a product of modern culture, he does hint at its potential inherency to the human condition: “Every race which has become self-conscious and idea-bound in the past has perished. And then it has all started afresh, in a different way, with another race. And man has never learnt any better” (86). Still, Lawrence implies that humanity might indeed learn its way out of self-consciousness, while Auden allows for no such possibility, only that we might bridge through language the divisions it opens between us. Furthermore, Lawrence sees self-consciousness as anathema to individuality, and claims that “the polarizing of passionate blood in the individual towards life, and towards leader, this must be the dynamic of the last civilization” (183) – thus rooting his critique of self-consciousness in the belief that it has spawned the communal notions of love and brotherhood that weaken our sense of ourselves as individuals, and championing a fascistic emphasis on “the intense passionate yearning of the soul towards the soul of a stronger, greater individual” as that which will “give men the next motive for life” (183). While an earlier Auden, from the Berlin Journal even up until a year before, may have been attracted to this ethic of leader-worship – indeed, looking back years later on his 1931 long poem *The Orators* Auden opined that it seemed to have been written by a young man “who might, in a year or two, become a Nazi” – the Auden of “Writing” evinces a marked yearning in the opposite direction, toward the communal. At this point the debt to Lawrence is lexical rather than ideological.
A much more directly influential account of self-consciousness comes from Gerald Heard’s book *Social Substance of Religion*, published in 1931. In setting out “The Problem” of his inquiry in the book’s first chapter, Heard outlines a scenario whose contours resonate all too thoroughly with Auden’s account in “Writing” of the compensatory origins of language:

In all the thinking of mankind since the rise of reflective consciousness two assumptions are continually present: that the state in which he finds himself is not happy, but that he was made for happiness, and therefore he might again be so in the future. From these assumptions he also never fails to draw two conclusions: that he must have been happy in the past, and that therefore in order to be happy in the future he must know what his past state was, and thus learn how he may recreate that condition. (21)

Recall that in Auden’s schema language arises out of the attempt to recapture the feeling of communality we lost with the development of self-consciousness. Similarly, in Heard’s account, the “past state” of happiness whose loss we feel intuitively and which we strive to recreate is precisely “a state of unselfconsciousness and a completely diffused authority through a direct unreflective sense of the community” (38). Over the course of his psycho-historical survey, Heard charts the nature of human consciousness from its originary state of singleness to its present division into “a subjective and an objective mind,” the result of which fragmentation is “the present individual, with his acute selfconsciousness and conflict” (63). Attributing this division to the competing pulls of family and community, the domestic and gregarious instincts, Heard posits the need for “refusion” (65): the unification of humankind through the reattainment of a past
psychic state of “group identity,” and the restoration of “the constant conviction that life has justified itself because we have recovered the immediate sense of our eternity in it” (58). As the key historical instance of this primordial sense of unity having been restored, Heard isolates the very early form of Christianity he calls Charitism, which through its feast-ritual of Agape freed from individuality the consciousness of all involved, harnessing “a love which is so intense that it is more than self-forgetful, it is more even than self-destructive, it takes the self and expands it over a whole community, and (this is the step beyond) opens it out so that it can embrace and be embraced by the whole of life” (208-09). This concept of Agape – an all-encompassing communal love, devoid of the selfishness of erotic relations – would become extremely influential in Auden’s thinking for the rest of the decade and into the 1940s, serving to image the social unity whose absence his work so often laments.

Within the essay “Writing,” however, Heard’s influence is registered more subtly; although Auden’s emphasis on the fissuring effects of self-consciousness derives largely from Heard and more ephemerally from Lawrence, neither is explicitly acknowledged. Furthermore, while Heard prescribes a return to group consciousness – or what he elsewhere calls “co-consciousness” – as a remedy for modern isolation, Auden focuses on the palliative attempts of language. However much it ends up as one, Auden’s essay does not set itself out as an exploration of humanity’s condition of mutual severance; as the title implies, it takes up the ostensibly more modest question of why people write. Even here, however, Heard’s influence is strongly felt, for in enumerating the writer’s motives Auden concludes that “Books are written for money, to convert the world, to pass the time; but these reasons are always trivial, beside the first two—company and
creation” (309). In highlighting the motive of “company” Auden tacitly appeals to his earlier metaphor of language as a “bridge,” claiming of writers that “They feel alone, cut off from each other in an indifferent world where they do not live for very long,” and are driven by the question “How can they get in touch again?” (309). Similarly, Heard characterizes the Agape-group of early Christianity as “a way, the only way, a perilous bridge, but the only one, that could lead the individual back, through a higher, more purely psychic level, to a state when he might be resolved in the reunion of his consciousness as a whole” (66; emphasis mine). While Heard offers a psychological interpretation of history, choosing to frame the problem of social disunity in terms of the increasing dividedness of the human psyche, Auden focuses – in keeping with his complementary emphasis on “creation” – on the fate of a common language amid such fracture, seeing the division of the literary arts into innumerable niche markets as a symptom of a more thoroughgoing societal dysfunction. The closing paragraph of “Writing” cements this connection:

Whenever society breaks up into classes, sects, townspeople and peasants, rich and poor, literature suffers. There is writing for the gentle and writing for the simple, for the highbrow and the lowbrow; the latter gets cruder and coarser, the former more and more refined. And so, to-day, writing gets shut up in a circle of clever people writing about themselves for themselves, or ekes out an underworld existence, cheap and nasty. Talent does not die out, but it cannot make itself understood. Since the underlying reason for writing is to bridge the gulf between one person and another, as the sense of loneliness increases, more and more books are written by
more and more people, most of them with little or no talent. Forests are cut down, rivers of ink absorbed, but the lust to write is still unsatisfied. What is going to happen? If it were only a question of writing it wouldn’t matter; but it is an index of our health. It’s not only books, but our lives, that are going to pot. (312)

Instead of focusing on psychic fracture, Auden here singles out social stratification on the basis of beliefs, values, and most of all, wealth – though one might rather say capital, since his reference to “classes” might just as readily refer to units defined by relative cultural status as by sheer money power. Still, Auden’s critique here embodies a materialist slant largely absent from his sources in Heard and Lawrence, reflecting his well-documented interest in Marx and communism at the time. Of the beginning of the above passage Mendelson writes that “Auden’s complaint is political only in the broadest sense, not specifically partisan” (Early 18) – a claim that embodies an egregiously narrow sense of what constitutes ‘politics.’ For what Mendelson means is that Auden is not here espousing a card-carrying doctrinaire brand of communism – indeed his characterization of the poet’s position as one of “fraternal visionary communism” is apt (18) – but what his caveat implies is that we should not take too seriously Auden’s critique of social disunity and class disparity in “Writing,” that because “Auden had no political program for resolving town and country, highbrow and lowbrow,” then his concerns are scarcely ‘political’ at all.

This is where the concept of utopia proves useful, serving to signify the force of desire apart from any specific strategy to see it realized. In previous chapters I have cited Ernst Bloch’s concept of utopia as “anticipatory consciousness”; Russell Jacoby’s
championing of an “iconoclastic” brand of utopianism as opposed to the meticulously planned “blueprint” utopianism that characterizes the prose narratives of the mainstream utopian tradition; and Ruth Levitas’s ontological definition of utopia-as-desire – all in the interest of theorizing more robustly the aspirational impulse that so often drives modern poetry, and helps lend much of the work of Yeats and Auden in particular its enduring vitality and relevance: even when not explicitly political, their poems often thrum with a desirous energy, driven that the world might be different. Rather than dismiss this pervasive energy as betraying a false consciousness – the artist’s mistaken conviction that history will mend itself into harmony according to the visionary dictates of his art – I take seriously the impulse behind it, hoping to shed insight on the particularly potent mode of utopian striving toward which modern poetry tends. This mode deals less with what is possible than with what is imaginable; or to reiterate this distinction through Levitas, “the essential element in utopia is not hope but desire – the desire for a better way of being” (191). The OED defines hope as “desire and expectation combined,” so putting Levitas’s distinction in terms of Auden, one might say that his lack of a political programme diminishes only his hope for social unity, since he has little active reason to expect his desire to be achieved. But the crucial kernel of desire remains.

It is worth quoting Levitas further, as her work helps to illuminate the utopian impetus behind much of Auden’s early writing. In continuing the passage cited above, she writes that utopia “involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the ‘collective problem’ solved” (191). Auden’s confrontation with his era’s lack of social unity is what
marks his writing as utopian, and his work throughout the 1930s constitutes a sustained reflection on the “collective problem.” While the Berlin Journal and the early published prose broach this problem directly, the early poetry’s fixation on images of division and failed crossings-over lends the whole of Auden’s Poems (1930) a combined air of diagnosis and neurosis, as though its speakers suspect that what they cast as society’s ills may just be projections of their own inner schisms. In the poems of his second volume, published in 1936 and entitled Look, Stranger! in England and On This Island in America, Auden the diagnostician of severance shifts further along his utopian continuum to become Auden the chronicler of those desires for unity – sexual, social, and an inextricable mix of the two – to which our severed condition gives rise. Rather than clinically depict his figures’ estrangement, leaving implicit their desire for connectedness, his speakers come to more overtly wish for escape, for both themselves and all of us.

The wishfulness that animates the poems of Look, Stranger! is evident from the first lines of its “Prologue,” which immediately strike the volume’s dominant tone:

O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven,
Make simpler daily the beating of man’s heart; within,
There in the ring where name and image meet,

Inspire them with such a longing as will make his thought
Alive like patterns a murmuration of starlings
Rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave (1-6)

Thus the poem opens in atheistic prayer, with a personified Freudian Eros in place of God. Heaven is “thoughtless” both because it represents a realm beyond thought, and
because (at least according to the speaker’s worldview) it is indifferent – a place not of omnibenevolence but of utter rarefaction, purged of categories. Indeed, the first line’s appositional phrase defines Love as “the interest” in this place, implying the neo-Platonic doctrine that all small-L love merely shadows a grander yearning for transcendence. The speaker calls upon this personified Love to “Make simpler daily the beating of man’s heart,” and goes on to specify a location where this blissful simplifying should take place: “within, / There in the ring where name and image meet.” John Fuller notes how this poem seems to have developed out of an abandoned line penned a month earlier – “O Love, sustainer of the unbreakable atomic ring” – and how “this ring is primarily the psychic field formed by the early Christians at their agape or love-feast” (146). This of course returns us to Heard’s *Social Substance of Religion*, though while acknowledging this source Fuller chooses not to mine its explanatory value. For Heard, Agape served as a means by which each participant could recapture the state of unity that precedes the fracturing development of self-consciousness, generating a force of “immense love” which “can break down the barriers of his individualism, making him one with itself and with it” (212). The image in the third line of the finished poem, of “the ring where name and image meet,” hearkens to this agapic unity, alluding not just to Heard but also to Auden’s own earlier-stated ideas on the development of language out of self-consciousness: the speaker prays for a return to that “simpler” state before the dissociation of name and image compelled the development of word.

Recognizing the place of the “Prologue” amid the evolving discourse of lost social unity in Auden’s writing helps to clarify the odd pronoun shift in the poem’s fourth line, “Inspire them with such a longing as will make his thought” (emphasis mine). In
inquiring what the antecedent of “them” might be in this line, a perplexed Anthony Hecht offers that “the only possibility seems to be ‘name and image,’ but how can they feel ‘longings’?” (42). Not taking account of the poem’s roots in Heard and Auden’s own speculative anthropology, Hecht misses a much simpler reading. The “them” refers to those gathered in the agapic ring, whose inspiration by Love might generate such a force of “longings” as to lead “his thought” – the “man” of the first line individualized – into the patterned aliveness described by the subsequent lines. In other words, the blending of “them” into “his” serves to figure the experience of co-consciousness described by Heard and repeatedly yearned for throughout Auden’s early work. Though the poem goes on to transmute this yearning from one for psycho-social connectedness to one for communion with a primordialized English landscape – asking Love to “make us as Newton was, who in his garden watching / The apple falling towards England, became aware / Between himself and her of an eternal tie” – this shift only deepens the poem’s status as a utopian artefact. For in addition to embodying, along with all the works I have been discussing, the utopian desire to see the collective problem solved, the symbolic rendering of England in the “Prologue” makes it a crucial instance of Auden’s tacit engagement with the utopian genre throughout On This Island. As its title suggests, Auden uses island-ness throughout the collection to metaphorize both psychological and social isolation, and the wishes for unity to which such isolation gives rise. In his book The English Utopia, A.F. Morton cites the fact that England is an island to explain why the utopian genre has been so richly treated there: “For it is always easier to imagine anything in proportion as it resembles what we are or know, and it is as an island that we always think of Utopia” (9). Though Morton treats the concept of utopia with more generic strictness than I do here,
his observation as to the prevalence of islands in utopian literature sheds valuable light on Auden’s work of this period. In the “Prologue,” England is variously designated as “these islands,” “our little reef,” and “This fortress perched on the edge of the Atlantic scarp, / The mole between all Europe and the exile-crowded sea” – a range of characterizations which emphasize its isolation and vulnerability, but also (and more positively) its singularity and liminality. Indeed, throughout the poem England’s island-ness registers its special status as a place where the poem’s opening prayer to an all-uniting Love might be answered, where our aspirations of social unity might come to fruition, emerging “out of the Future and into actual History.”

Island imagery figures centrally, and to similar purposes, in four of *On This Island*’s other poems: “Look, Stranger,” “The earth turns over, our side feels the cold,” “August for the people and for their favourite islands,” and most crucially to my discussion of utopia, the 1933 sestina beginning “Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys” and later titled “Paysage Moralisé.” Rather than directly express utopian longing, Auden here uses the strict patterning demanded by the sestina form to abstract from the utopian impulse, and to suggest a universal human propensity to aspire after paradise. The poem opens in a failing society:

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,
Round corners coming suddenly on water,
Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,
We honour founders of these starving cities,
Whose honour is the image of our sorrow.
Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow
That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys
Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities,
They reined their violent horses on the mountains,
Those fields like ships to castaways on islands,
Visions of green to them that craved for water. (1-12)

The first stanza depicts settlements plagued by famine and natural calamity, having sent out scouting parties they know will never return. The initial order of the end words is suggestive: “valleys,” “mountains,” “water,” “islands,” and “cities” are punctuated by “sorrow,” implying the ultimate futility of humanity’s attempts to civilize a niche for ourselves amid the tumult nature presents us with. The poem also suggests, however, that futile or not, the human flight from sorrow will continue into perpetuity. The “honour” of the cities’ founders is “the image of our sorrow,” and yet, as the first line of the second stanza adds, we cannot see this likeness of our sorrow in theirs. In other words, it was sorrow that drove the founders to seek out and build our civilization, which has only resulted in more sorrow, and the unwitting reemergence of that same founding drive – that same desire to launch out for new islands – in us. We flee from a sorrow that is already waiting to possess us at every new sanctum we reach. Having settled in the valleys, the founders almost immediately suffered in sorrow’s grip:

They built by rivers and at night the water
Running past windows comforted their sorrow;
Each in his little bed conceived of islands
Where every day was dancing in the valleys,
And all year trees blossomed on the mountains,
Where love was innocent, being far from cities. (13-18)

Auden here uses the sestina’s reconfiguration of end-words from stanza to stanza to suggest the tragic inexorable cyclicity of human striving, as the poem comes to depict our vacillation between the civilizing and pastoral impulses: the founders who had once dreamt of learned cities now decry the loss of innocence to which their own aspirations of urbanity have given rise. They lie in bed dreaming of an Arcadian paradise of abundance and unselfconscious love – a dream which, the poem suggests, can not only never be fulfilled, but will only bring sorrow in the wake of its unfulfillment, which in turn will dredge up the dream again, and then the sorrow, ad infinitum.

The poem’s second half finds this pattern repeated, depicting how hunger (“a more immediate sorrow”) sows the seed of another island-bound expedition, this time driven by religious proselytizing: “to moping villagers in valleys / Some waving pilgrims were describing islands.” From these islands, claim the pilgrims, gods come to deliver the settlers into a New Jerusalem: “Now is the time to leave your wretched valleys / And sail with them across the lime-green water.” As the sixth stanza suggests, however, some of the valley-dwellers have learned too much from history to plunge heedlessly into another cycle of sorrow begotten by unrequitable desire:

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains

Climbing up crags to get a view of islands;

So many, fearful, took with them their sorrow

Which stayed with them when they reached unhappy cities;
So many, careless, dived and drowned in water;
So many, wretched, would not leave their valleys. (31-36)

The anaphoric repetition of “So many” conveys a sense of a society wracked by internal division. That even those who choose not to heed the pilgrims’ false promises – the doubtful and the wretched – end up either dead or mired in sorrow bleakly epitomizes the poem’s pessimistic worldview, inextricable by this point from the sestina form that embodies it. The final three-line envoi, however, takes a hopeful turn:

It is the sorrow; shall it melt? Ah, water
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands. (37-39)

In one sense this ending marks the poem as explicitly anti-utopian, especially if one takes the proclivity to “dream of islands” as a quintessentially utopian one. In several other senses, however, it exemplifies Auden’s ambivalent utopianism in this period. The very suggestion that the sorrow might melt – while leaving the source of heat or happiness that might effect this melting unspecified – is a utopian gesture in the most colloquial and pejorative sense, as fruitless as the “dream[ing] of islands” it hopes to overcome. Furthermore, and more crucially, though the last line’s wish that we might “rebuild our cities, not dream of islands” might superficially be read as the choice of a ‘realistic’ option over a naïvely utopian one, the fact that both are equally predicated on the revelatory melting of sorrow might rather lead us to read them as two different manifestations of the utopian impulse: to escape, or to stay put and work toward change, constructing our way out of the sorrow that pervades our societies.
“Paysage Moralisé” ultimately suggests both the impotence of utopian striving and the universality of our propensity to strive nonetheless. Despite its veneer of pessimism, it clearly revels in the ceaselessness of humanity’s desire to better our societies. These are the poles between which Auden’s utopianism will shift throughout the latter half of the decade: beginning around 1935 he enters his most overtly political period – the period of topical poems like “Spain 1937” and the sonnet sequence *In Time of War* – and although during these years his poetry less often expresses the utopian longing for societal unity that characterizes his earlier work, in his prose writings he wonders if poetry might help effect change rather than simply expressing the wish for it. Having shifted from the late 1920s to the mid 30s from diagnosis to desire, the main tenor of Auden’s work now becomes more audience-oriented, concerned less with the expression of desire than with desire’s education. Like Yeats at the height of the Celtic Twilight, Auden comes to entertain a role for poetry in helping to overcome society’s dividedness; at the same time, however – and also like Yeats, though in much different historical circumstances – he comes to realize that such dividedness can never be fully overcome, and that the communal space to which poetry hearkens is an aesthetic one, never to be actualized politically.

3.

If the years from 1935 to 1938 find Auden at his most overtly political, they also find him at his most optimistic in thinking that the world can be changed. And indeed, politics for Auden in this period is not the judiciously nuanced matter implied by definitions such as that of the prominent leftist historian Bernard Crick – who describes it
as “the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share of power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community” (7) – but is rather an inherently revolutionary pursuit. Auden’s politics has little to do with balancing the competing claims of interest groups; rather, he launches from the premise that the status quo is broken, and therefore its perpetuation is ultimately in no one’s interest. In this charged context, to be political is to seek change. So while Auden’s diagnosis of society’s ills remains much the same in its contours as it was at the beginning of the decade – rooted in his sense of the dividedness of self and society – he becomes much more proactive in imagining how the gaps within and between us might be sutured, and in envisioning for poetry a healing role.

Critics have often noted how the predominantly psychological reading of social dividedness offered by Auden’s earliest work comes to be supplemented with a more materialist understanding of class disparity derived directly from Marx and (more generally) from the socialist fervour that gripped much of the European intelligentsia over the course of the 1930s. As Justin Replogle has put it: “In the 1930s, merely to be young, socially conscious, and outspoken was enough to mark one as a Marxist, or at least a ‘leftist,’ and Auden was all these things” (584). Though Replogle does well to highlight how the political climate of the era produced labels sounding much more decisive than the convictions behind them actually were, the fact is that Auden’s socialist (if not strictly Marxist) leanings extended well beyond being “young, socially conscious, and outspoken.” In his abiding concern with class disparity, especially – which as I have pointed out, resonates through poems as early as “The Watershed” (1927), and is first directly expressed in prose in “Writing” (1932) – Auden evinces at least one fundamental
point of concurrence with socialist thought. Of course it might be argued that this concern arises not out of a sense of economic or social justice, but rather because class divisions disrupt the societal unity he longs for, both as a divided subject himself and (more crucially perhaps) as an artist who believes that only in a unified society can art be produced or received with the sympathetic breadth it deserves. In other words, given that so many of Auden’s laments over social dividedness occur in the context of reflections on the place of art in contemporary societies, one might detect – as with the early Yeats – a good deal of self-interest behind his socialistic proclivities: the more unified his society, the larger his audience.

By the time of his 1935 essay “Psychology and Art To-day,” however, his endorsement of socialism rings very sincerely, and comes with an acknowledgement of the near irreconcilability of socialist goals with those of his other pet paradigm in this period, the psychoanalytic. Spelling out the essential conflict between Marx and Freud – whom he claims both “start from the failures of civilisation, one from the poor, one from the ill” – he writes:

Marx sees the direction of the relations between inner and outer world from without inwards, Freud vice versa. Both are therefore suspicious of each other. The socialist accuses the psychologist of caving to the status quo, trying to adapt the neurotic to the system, thus depriving him of a potential revolutionary: the psychologist retorts that the socialist is trying to lift himself by his own boot tags, that he fails to understand himself, or the fact that lust for money is only one form of the lust for power; and so that after he has won power by revolution he will recreate the same
conditions. Both are right. As long as civilisation remains as it is, the
number of patients the psychologist can cure are very few, and as soon as
socialism attains power, it must learn to direct its own interior energy and
will need the psychologist. (341)

Most immediately striking here is the definiteness with which he affirms socialism’s
eventual attainment of power. As throughout his essays of this period, Auden casts
socialism as the only just alternative to the status quo, and yet undermines its rootedness
in vulgar economics, claiming that “the lust for money is only one form of the lust for
power” – implying that socialists may just be riding poverty as an issue as the quickest
way to steed themselves into the power they truly (though perhaps unconsciously) lust
after. By helping us to understand ourselves, then, psychology might keep the revolution
honest, protecting the egalitarian goals of socialism from subsumption by the power-
mongering of its figureheads. Of course, as Auden points out, it might just as likely
convince us – wrongly – that the revolution is unnecessary, that the illness we attribute to
society is in fact our own.

This, in the essay, is where poetry comes in: as an educative force that, without
propagandizing us toward specific aims, makes us more likely to choose consciously and
therefore morally. Auden builds this notion of poetry’s social role out of his earlier ideas
about the birth of language out of humanity’s severance through self-consciousness.
While still believing that “the introduction of self-consciousness was a complete break in
development, and all that we recognise as evil or sin is its consequence” (339), Auden
now exalts the excessive self-consciousness of the artist as a kind of gift: “The artist like
eyery other kind of ‘highbrow’ is self-conscious, i.e., he is all of the time what everyone
is some of the time, a man who is active rather than passive to his experience” (334).
Believing that “perfect satisfaction would be complete unconsciousness” (334), Auden casts the self-conscious artist as sublimely dissatisfied, both at odds with society and of great value to it, seething with what could be rather than abiding half-consciously in what is. The literary artist’s potential significance derives from her choice of medium; not only is language the shared property of the collective, but – and here Auden credulously accepts Jung, who appears in the essay’s bibliography – “every word through fainter and fainter associations is ultimately a sign for the universe” (337), and so the communicative possibilities of linguistic art are virtually limitless. In the earlier writings, Auden cast language as a symptom of our essential dividedness, and averred that “only body can be communicated” (EA 299). Now, however, he has come to see art not only as deeply communicative, but as potentially able to reunite us – at least with ourselves:

The task of psychology, or art for that matter, is not to tell people how to behave, but by drawing their attention to what the impersonal unconscious is trying to tell them, and by increasing their knowledge of good and evil, to render them better able to choose, to become increasingly morally responsible for their destiny. (340-41)

Auden here allies psychology and art in their educative potential. In evoking the concept of the “impersonal unconscious,” Auden implies that both can illuminate communal truths to help us increase our moral awareness, crediting them with the rather vague benefit of making us “better able to choose.” Near the end of the essay he clarifies what sorts of choices this might entail, as he isolates “two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach
man to unlearn hatred and learn love” (341-42). As so often throughout his 1930s writings, “love” here functions as a panacea, in a rhetorical context that calls up Freud’s all-uniting Eros, Heard’s co-conscious Agape, and a Marxist sense of brotherhood and species-being. If art can teach us this sort of love, it can do no less than reunite us.

In “Psychology and Art To-day,” however, Auden generalizes his claims for “art” rather than attributing such potential specifically to poetry. But another essay of the same year affirms the connection; in the Introduction to the anthology *The Poet’s Tongue*, he calls poetry “the parabolic approach,” and repeats almost word for word the description of the task he elsewhere assigned more broadly to psychology and art:

> Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. (329)

Though at pains to affirm throughout the essay that “poetry may illuminate but it will not dictate” (330) – a stance that has proven of much use to critics determined to prove that Auden was never ‘really’ as political as he sometimes seems, and certainly no socialist – just as in “Psychology and Art To-day,” the rest of the essay makes clear what his use of the stark dichotomy of “good and evil” only hints at: that Auden had rather firm ideas of what “rational and moral choice” might entail. So although Mendelson cuts close to the truth when he claims of Auden’s stance here that “he could not liberate his readers into the future that he chose for them, but he might be able to help them learn to choose a future of their own” (*Early* 257), his pithy summary obscures the fact that Auden’s thematic preoccupations point to his desiring a specific quality of future for both him and
his readers – one no longer wracked with disunity. Elsewhere in his Introduction he returns to this theme, lamenting the industrial revolution’s division of society into two classes, the working and the leisured, which in turn tended to split literature “into two streams, one providing the first with a compensation and escape, the second with a religion and a drug” (328). This development debases all:

    Artistic creations may be produced by individuals, and because their work is only appreciated by a few it does not necessarily follow that it is not good: but a universal art can only be the product of a community united in sympathy, a sense of worth, and aspiration; and it is improbable that the artist can do his best except in such a society. (329)

The last half of this quotation could readily have been drawn from early Yeats.10 Like Yeats, Auden exalts the unified society on the grounds that only there can art reach its full potential. Though his vision of communal unity does resonate with socialism – particularly in his evocation of a shared “sense of worth” and “aspiration,” as opposed to the class hierarchies and rampant competitive individualism that mar capitalist societies – his emphasis derives first and foremost from his position as an artist. Still, Auden’s frequent paeans to the unified society throughout his 1930s writings strongly evidence his belief in the essential good of such a prospect, just as his equally frequent criticisms of class-divided societies speak to their evil. Despite Auden’s (and many of his critics’) attempts to cast his educative poetics as neutrally promoting “rational and moral choice,” it is clear that for him the exercise of true morality would result in a unity fundamentally at odds with the dividedness promoted by the status quo.
Auden also shares with Yeats a certain strain of what I have called in Chapter One “pastoral utopianism” – a proclivity to look backward to a lost coherent past for an image of the future on which to fix his desire. I have already highlighted his appeal to this atavistic coherence in “Writing,” where the development of language is cast as a symptom of its tragic dissolution, and in “Psychology and Art To-day,” where he evokes an “impersonal unconscious” that links us to our ancient communion. Indeed, in this latter essay he gestures to the supposed pacifism and sociability of “Man’s phylogenetic ancestors,” using Freud to affirm that “A golden age, comparatively speaking (and anthropological research tends to confirm this) is an historical fact” (340). I have tried to convey how Auden subtly cast poetry as a potential spur to return anew to this golden age through its capacity to increase our knowledge of good and evil. But even more compelling evidence for his belief in poetry’s connectedness to the lost communal world can be found in his brief review of Christopher Caudwell’s 1937 book *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*.

A neglected landmark of late-Modernist and Marxist criticism, Caudwell’s work traverses similar pseudo-anthropological territory to many of Auden’s early essays, but rather than emphasize language as a symptom of the communal tribe’s tragic fragmentation into discrete self-conscious entities, he argues for the centrality of poetry to group identity: “Poetry is the nascent self-consciousness of man, not as an individual but as a sharer with others of a whole world of common evolution” (25). Caudwell theorizes poetry as both an evolutionary mechanism, developed out of songs sung in unison to ease the burden of communal work, and a medium of aspiration, attempting to sing into vision “a world of superior reality—a world of more important reality not yet
realised, whose realisation demands the very poetry which phantastically anticipates it” (21). In contemporary terms, then, poetry embodies both an efflorescence of the dominant bourgeois ideology, and the urge to drive beyond it. On the one hand, for example, it increasingly foregrounds the insularity of the lyric “I” in its self-reflective quest for actualization over the communal world of the dramatic – thus echoing the sham individualism of the bourgeois class, who refuse to recognize that what they take as their inborn freedom in fact fully derives from the forced unfreedom of the majority. On the other hand, however, this same poetry frequently embodies “the prophetic and world-creating power of dream” – not a solipsistic dream, but because poetry is inherently social, a broadly revolutionary one: “It is the dream, not of an individual, but of a man reflecting in his individual consciousness the role of a whole class, whose movement is given in the material conditions of society” (298). This is the ideal of a communist art set out by Caudwell in his visionary final chapter, “The Future of Poetry,” in which he exhorts those bourgeois artists sympathetic to the proletariat (Auden is mentioned by name) to slough off their false ideas of artistic freedom and embrace the cause:

There is no neutral world of art, free from categories or determining causes. Art is a social activity. Yours is the fallacious freedom of a dream, which imagines itself spontaneous when it is rigidly determined by forces outside consciousness. You must choose between class art which is unconscious of its causality and is therefore to that extent false and unfree, and proletarian art which is becoming conscious of its causality and will therefore emerge as the truly free art of communism. There is no classless
art except communist art, and that is not yet born; and class art today, unless it is proletarian, can only be the art of a dying class. (318).

Being rooted in “the social solidarity of primitive communism,” poetry is particularly well-positioned to envision and help into being “a movement back to the collectivism and integrity of a society without coercion, where consciousness and freedom are equally shared by all” (323). Caudwell remains vague on what precisely might be the technical and thematic characteristics of art in such a society, but in his repeated insistence on the essential sociality of art, and that “the poet’s public must become gradually coincident with society” (324), he echoes (albeit in much more strictly doctrinaire terminology) several crucial fixations of Auden’s prose writings throughout the 1930s: that society suffers from its disunity; that only in a unified society can art reach its full integrity; and finally that art (and specifically poetry) can contribute to societal unification by resonating with our relict communal urge. Through its declamatory stance, its primal musicality, and its insistently desirous ethos, poetry echoes that part of us that senses the world was once a better place and wishes it to be so again.

Like Auden, then, Caudwell ascribes to a pastoral utopianism, appealing to a lost coherence to justify his over-hopeful vision of the future.¹¹ Though the latter regarded the former’s poetry as still clinging to bourgeois codes of self-actualization and personal striving, the critic clearly saw in the poet the potential to divest his art of such falsehoods, to “square art with life and life with art” and relinquish the illusion that any can be free when so many remain enslaved (318). Auden’s review of Illusion and Reality appeared in the May 1937 issue of New Verse magazine, and rather than respond to Caudwell’s targeting of him, he delivered his briefest and most unconditionally laudatory critical
assessment of the decade. Auden opens by casting the book as a major event: “We have waited a long time for a Marxist book on the aesthetics of poetry. *Axel’s Castle* [by Edmund Wilson] was a beginning but it was about individual matters, not fundamentals. Now at last Mr. Caudwell has given us such a book” (*Prose* 386). The two pages that follow consist of three-quarters quotation interspersed with brief summary, ending with the following: “I shall not attempt to criticise *Illusion and Reality* firstly because I am not competent to do so, and secondly because I agree with it. […] This is the most important book on poetry since the books of Dr. Richards, and, in my opinion, provides a more satisfactory answer to the many problems which poetry raises” (387). Though his concrete political involvement always remained superficial – the 1932 letter in which he announced that “No I am a bourgeois. I will not join the C.P.” is often cited as an index of his commitment – it is clear that he agreed with the essential elements of Marxist class-analysis, and especially as it applied to poetry’s history and its utopian potential.\(^\text{12}\)

It should be noted, however, that despite his obvious proclivities (and again like Yeats) Auden’s few uses of the word “utopia” throughout the 1930s are universally depreciatory, and reflective of a definition of the term much more rigid than the ontological one of utopia-as-desire that I have employed throughout this study. In the final canto of his 1936 *Letter to Lord Byron* he remarks that “The Great Utopia, free of all complexes, / The Withered State is, at the moment, such / A dream as that of being both the sexes” (*EA* 199) – thus reflecting the common pejorative view of utopia as inherently unachievable (though his interjection of “at the moment” does hold out a sliver of possibility). Several years later, in the account of his “personal philosophy” he contributed to the essay collection *I Believe*, he opines that “No society can be absolutely
good. Utopias, whether like Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World or Dante’s Paradiso, because they are static, only portray states of natural evil or good” (EA 375). Auden here conflates utopias and dystopias as both inhering in the realm of the static, thus being equally incapable of actualization. What he rejects is not the desire for social reform at the root of the utopian impulse, but rather the notion that any change can be effected once and for all – a delusion he links with fascism. Indeed, he affirms later in the same passage on utopia that “No society can be absolutely good; but some are better than others” (375), and further on that “I think that the Socialists are right and the Fascists are wrong in their view of society” (379), devoting much of the essay to setting out a counter-vision to fascism, a model of a more ideal society that owes much to the guild-socialism of William Morris. Throughout this discourse he cautions against absolutism, urging us for example “to remember that while an idea can be absolutely bad, a person can never be” (380) – a warning that embodies a larger point: while a better or worse society is possible, perfection and its hellish inverse are beyond our human capacities.

This is the generative dialectic of much of Auden’s work of the late 1930s: on the one hand his commitment in principle to a socialist vision of society, and his utopian desire to see that vision furthered; on the other hand his growing conviction – to put it in the religious terms he would soon explicitly adopt – of humanity’s fallenness, our essential imperfection, and his suspicion of how reformers across the political spectrum tend to adopt absolutist views of human nature. This dialectic reaches its fullest expression in Auden’s sonnet sequence In Time of War and its accompanying “Commentary,” originally included as part of Journey to a War, the collaborative travelogue he wrote with Christopher Isherwood as the two toured China during the Sino-
Japanese War of 1938. Though deriving some concrete detail from his frontline observations, Auden deals less with the particular historical war out of which the poems arose, and more with humanity’s trans-historical struggle against strife and violence – both psychological and physical, naturally occurring and human-caused. In fact, the sequence does much to call into question this latter distinction, repeatedly pointing out that just as humanity’s fate is inextricably bound to the natural world in which we inhere, our violences are no less a part of nature – human nature – than thunderstorms or floods. Over the course of 27 sonnets and a 283-line “Commentary,” spanning from creation and the Fall to the China of Auden’s present, the sequence traces humanity’s struggle to perfect itself in the face of its inveterate imperfection.

The first-person singular pronoun “I” does not appear in the sequence, a fact which helps In Time of War embody Auden’s own prior ideal of the “parabolic method” while at the same time taking up Caudwell’s challenge to divest his art of bourgeois tropes of individual actualization. Although not mentioning Caudwell, Stan Smith recognizes this, claiming that “By taking the personalized, self-regarding lover of the sonnet sequence, and dispersing him into the multitude of collective subjects who make a history, Auden deconstructs the political and literary traditions of bourgeois individualism” (110). The sequence tells the story, then, not of a lover’s tormented quest for unity with his beloved, but of humanity’s persistent desire to unify itself – psychologically, societally, and to nature – despite the apparent futility of this desire. Sonnet II chronicles the initial fracture, tracing the fate of a humanity who once “knew exactly what to do outside” as they enter the post-lapsarian era:

They left: immediately the memory faded
Of all they’d learnt; they could not understand
The dogs now who, before, had always aided;
The stream was dumb with whom they’d always planned.

They wept and quarrelled: freedom was so wild.
In front, maturity, as he ascended,
Retired like a horizon from the child.

The dangers and the punishments grew greater;
And the way back by angels was defended
Against the poet and the legislator. (5-14)

This poem recapitulates, a full decade later, the levels of dividedness the younger Auden set out in his Berlin Journal: the dogs and streams will no longer communicate; the newly ungardened humans quarrel with one another; and the ever-receding horizon of maturity leaves each at odds with herself. There are, however, some key points of divergence. First, the initial moment of severance is cast, for the first time in Auden’s writing, within the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Fall, rather than within a psychological or sociopolitical paradigm. Second, this moment is here cast as a choice (“They left”), rather than an imposition – a move which deviates both from scripture and from his own earlier account of the spontaneous emergence of self-consciousness. This emphasis on the torment of choice (“freedom was so wild”) continues throughout the sequence, and speaks to the gradually emerging Christian-existentialist strain in Auden’s thinking (upon which Kierkegaard would become the major influence throughout the 1940s). While
Auden has not entirely abandoned his vision of the poet’s utopian role – in a half-parody half-homage to Shelley he links “the poet and the legislator” as those who seek to help return us to the lost Garden – their “way back” is barred “by angels,” a fact which both hews to Genesis and additionally suggests that our proclivity for redemptive quests may in fact be destructive, something we need to be saved from by benign force.

This central contradiction is taken up again and again throughout the sequence: that humanity’s guiding desire has always remained a utopian one – in Levitas’s words, “the desire for a better way of life” – but that no improvement has ever been achieved widely or permanently enough to see that desire quelled by happiness. As Sonnet XIII puts it: “History opposes its grief to our buoyant song: / The Good Place has not been; our star has warmed to birth / A race of promise that has never proved its worth” (9-11). Even here, however, Auden sparks at the utopian torch; he could just as easily have written “The Good Place will never be,” and his gesture to the infinitesimally small twist of chance by which our planet harbours life rings as an affirmation that all hope, however miniscule the possibility of its achievement, ought to be kept alive. We are, after all, “A race of promise.” Auden again strikes this essential note of hopefulness (albeit in a darker timbre) in Sonnet XX; after meditating through the first two quatrains on war’s rootedness in the mutual fear of its antagonists (“They carry terror with them like a purse, / And flinch from the horizon like a gun”), he shifts in the sestet to the first-person plural:

We live here. We lie in the Present’s unopened Sorrow; its limits are what we are.

The prisoner ought never to pardon his cell.
Can future ages ever escape so far,

Yet feel derived from everything that happened,

Even from us, that even this was well? (9-14)

Bluntly asserting material presence (“We live here”), the speaker goes on to imply both that we are limited by what the present affords us and, more optimistically, that the present’s only limits are our own. Its sorrow remains “unopened” only as long as we acquiesce in its closure – which we should not do: “The prisoner ought never to pardon his cell.” In the final three lines the speaker grasps after a sense that present suffering is necessary to ensure humanity’s “escape,” and wonders hopefully whether “future ages” will look back and find “that even this was well.” A tension persists here between Auden’s emergent Christian worldview, which sees humanity as fallen and valorizes suffering in the name of future redemption, and his long-held secular reformism, that maintains that humanity can be the ultimate agent of that redemption. Common to both, however – and resonating through the dialectical interplay of the two – is utopian desire, the shared aspiration (emphasized by the prevalence of the pronoun “We”) for a better, more peaceful, more unified way of life.

The sequence ends in a way that lets this desire resound, while also acknowledging that it may never be satisfied. Sonnet XXVII stands as a crucial transition point between the early utopian Auden, guided by the hope that we might return anew to our past coherence, and the Christian-existentialist Auden of the 1940s, driven by the belief that our essential imperfection will never be overcome:

Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice,

Again and again we sigh for an ancient South,
For the warm nude ages of instinctive poise,
For the taste of joy in the innocent mouth.

Asleep in our huts, how we dream of a part
In the glorious balls of the future; each intricate maze
Has a plan, and the disciplined movements of the heart
Can follow for ever and ever its harmless ways.

We envy streams and houses that are sure:
But we are articled to error; we
Were never nude and calm like a great door,

And never will be perfect like the fountains;
We live in freedom by necessity,
A mountain people dwelling among mountains. (1-14)

If this poem stands as an example of the parabolic method, its intention is less to clarify the distinction between good and evil so that we might choose more morally, and more to assert that we cannot not choose – and that this necessity of choice, as much as our fallenness, defines us as humans. Indeed, because “we are articled to error,” there is no guarantee that we will ever be correct in our moral assessments, so that even when we try to choose rightly, history often proves us in the wrong. We quest after “an ancient South” – the “warm nude ages” once rife with “the taste of joy” – because we falsely believe this lost past to have been a place beyond morality, where choices are either always good or
entirely unnecessary. But such a state of choicelessness (as Auden would point out many
times during the 1940s, to be discussed in the next chapter) can only mean tyranny.
Although in the “Commentary” to *In Time of War* he attributes the claim that “*Man can
have Unity if Man can give up freedom*” to the fascists who “make their brazen offer”
across Europe – thus holding out the utopian hope that unity and freedom might one day
be fully achieved together – the sonnets themselves often imply that by the late 1930s
Auden was at least beginning to regard the two as mutually exclusive, and to suspect that
our tragically fruitless *desire* for unity might in fact be the only thing that ever unites us.
Notes

1 All citations of poems in this chapter are of the versions printed in *The English Auden.*
3 Many readers who have encountered the Berlin Journal only as excerpted in Edward Mendelson’s edited volume *The English Auden* are likely unaware of the full extent to which Auden used his diary to respond directly to Freud. In my own examination of the Journal manuscript at the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, I found for example that the comment about “the real ‘life-wish’” actually appears under the heading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The Ego and the Id* also serves as a heading in the Journal. Curiously, Mendelson chose not to reproduce these headings in his selective transcription. See *The English Auden,* pp. 297-301.
4 Both Fuller and Mendelson mention in passing the class divide that separates the poem’s speaker-figure from those he regards, but do not shape their readings in any significant way around this observation. See Fuller p. 9-10, Mendelson, *Early* p. 34.
5 The comment about his younger self “who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi” comes from the Preface to the third edition of *The Orators,* published in 1967, and is quoted in Stan Smith, *W.H. Auden,* p. 55.
6 In support of Fuller’s interpretation of the image of the ring, note Heard’s description of the early Christian Agape:

> It began with a real meal. Food, as the nucleus of the group, is therefore retained. After the feast there was singing. Rhythm is added, as we have seen it was added to the food interest in the building up of religion. The Primitive Church in its dynamic rite is recapitulating the history of religion’s evolution. The small group of about a dozen leant over the cushion of the pulvinus, or sigma, and so formed an inward-looking group—perhaps a ring. (*Social Substance of Religion,* p. 213)

7 Auden’s distinction between escape-art and parable-art resonates with one of the key distinctions of utopian theory, which in Levitas takes the form of a kind of continuum, along which might be plotted the compensatory, critical, and finally transformative functions of utopia. See *The Concept of Utopia,* esp. Ch. 8 “Future perfect: retheorizing utopia.”
8 On the subject of “love” as a panacea for the early Auden, Lucy McDiarmid comments that “One word for the spiritual richness [very similar to what I characterize as a sense of unity] that the poems cannot reach is ‘love’: this was the great unmentioned in the early essay ‘Writing,’ which traced the ‘urge to write’ to the ‘sense of personal loneliness.’” See *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry,* p. 39. In his seminal essay “Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden’s Ideology,” Randall Jarrell provides a memorable – if not entirely generous – summary of Auden’s politicized attitude to love in this period: “Love is a place we stop at when we should go on, a power or insight we bury selfishly or uselessly, instead of using in the social situation. It *should* be sublimated in social service. Eros is—at least potentially—a secular humanitarian Agape” (447).
9 For a particularly torturous (and unfortunately influential) attempt to undermine the political content of both essays, see Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation,* pp. 166-69.
Hynes’s book is valuable in many ways, but his insistence on transposing the later Christian Auden backward onto the early secular one seems, more than anything, an attempt to de-emphasize and trivialize Auden’s actual socialist sympathies because the critic himself finds them distasteful. This tendency can be seen in many of Auden’s most prominent critics until very recently. Granted, the poet himself encouraged this revisionism, but this academic form of what really amounts to red-baiting has marred much otherwise very fine scholarship.

10 See, for example, Yeats’s essay “Ireland and the Arts” (1901): “I would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts […] as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business” (Early Essays 152). Or “The Galway Plains” (1903), where he simply asks: “Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it?” (158).

11 In his Marxism and Literary Criticism, Terry Eagleton posits a fundamental contradictoriness in Caudwell’s view of art, disparaging him for being “unable to discover any more dialectical theory of art’s relation to reality than an efficient channelling of social energies on one hand, and a utopian dreaming on the other” (55). One might respond that the two are in fact dialectically related, according to the standard Marxist reading of history. For if capitalism produces in the proletariat the agents of its own overthrow, then the presence of a utopian impetus in art might emerge out of the artist’s marginalization (and indeed proletarianization) by the bourgeois order. This applies especially well to poetry, among the most marginal of the arts. In other words, poetry embodies both the ideology of the dominant order and, because its forced marginality allies it with the proletariat against that order, the utopian drive beyond it. The problem remains of whether one can reasonably assert such commonality between poet (no matter how marginal) and proletariat, but nonetheless Caudwell’s conception remains more thoroughly dialectical than Eagleton gives it credit for.

“The ungarnished offended gap”:
Utopia and Negative Poetics in Later Auden

After the 1930s Auden’s work becomes markedly less political; with his return to the Anglican communion in the early 1940s, the thirst for unity that characterized the first decade of his work becomes re-orientated more and more towards personal union with the divine. Though he is no less concerned with making the world a better place, his conception of ‘world’ becomes more circumscribed, less broadly social and more strictly salvationary. The only notion of human unity that survives in his work of this period is rooted in his conviction of our mutual fallenness, and of our shared erroneous tendency to behave as though our existences are self-authorizing when in fact they depend entirely on divine caprice – what he called in a 1940 poem the “grace of the Absurd” (CP 315). In this Christianized paradigm, the secular ideal of utopia is largely supplanted by dreamlike visions of a heavenly afterlife or a prelapsarian Eden. But curiously (and as with the later Yeats) it is in this period of having repudiated his earlier utopian longing for widespread human reconciliation – and his hope that poetry might help effect such a unity – that the word “utopia” begins to appear in Auden’s work. As expected, many of his uses occur in a pejorative context, with Auden joining the strong current of anti-utopian thinkers in the twentieth century who disdain the concept as inevitably fostering totalitarianism. But as we will see, he also uses the word in relation to poetry’s thrust toward formal and thematic integrity, to theorize his intuition that poetry can analogize the state of wholeness for which – whether in his early secular politicized stage or his later salvationary Christianized one – he never ceases to desire. This chapter examines
Auden’s ambivalent treatment of the concept of utopia from the time of his move to America in 1939 until the mid-1950s – a period during which the concept plays a crucial role in his formulation of what I am calling a negative poetics: a sense that rather than directly aid in the reconciliation of humanity (as his earlier writings maintained), poetry analogizes such a state of unity, thereby illuminating how achingly distant from it we always remain.

1.

In an essay composed in the early 1950s entitled “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” Auden comments on the relationship between poetic forms and social formations:

Every poem is an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony. Every good poem is very nearly a Utopia. Again, an analogy, not an imitation; the harmony is possible and verbal only. (DH 71)¹

Auden’s insistence upon the purely analogical relationship between poem and utopia presents an implicit response to the Romantic stance epitomized by Shelley’s Defence of Poetry, which exalts poetry as actually exerting a patterning or even directly causal influence over social formations. Though most notoriously embodied in his characterization of poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (508) – a phrase which Auden ridiculed as “describ[ing] the secret police, not poets” (DH 27) – Shelley asserts poetry’s foundational role more directly elsewhere in the Defence, in claiming for example that “a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,” and that poets are “the institutors of laws, the founders of civil society, and the inventors
of the arts of life” (482). For Shelley, the relationship between poetry and utopia transcends both the analogical one Auden allows for and the imitative one he refutes; in the Shelleyan schema, poetry so utterly embodies the drive toward utopia that the two words edge toward synonymity.

Auden regarded this exaltation of poetry promulgated by Shelley and his early twentieth-century inheritors (especially Yeats) as not only delusional but dangerous, albeit for ever-changing reasons over the course of his career. Throughout the 1930s he works to refute it on the basis that it seems to justify the production of propaganda, thus threatening poetry’s integrity as itself. As I discussed in Chapter Three, his 1935 introduction to the anthology The Poet’s Tongue finds Auden characterizing poetry’s proper approach as “parabolic,” and claiming that “poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil […] only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.” In other words, poetry helps prepare us for the moment of choice without ever telling us what to choose. Three years later, in the introduction to another anthology entitled Poems of Freedom, Auden downscales even this relatively modest vision of poetry’s social role, claiming rather vaguely that “the primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us,” and adding, “I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient: I hope not” (EA 371). While thus rescinding his previous claim for poetry’s positive contribution to our moral progress, he does go on to accord it at least a preventative role: “I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive, which is why, perhaps, all totalitarian theories of the State, from Plato’s downwards, have deeply
mistrusted the arts” (*EA* 371-72). From “extending our knowledge of good and evil” to “mak[ing] us more difficult to deceive” may not seem a drastic transition, but in shifting from the language of active improvement to that of reactive protection, Auden evinces a growing unwillingness to attribute any measurable effects of poetry upon the social and moral realms.

This unwillingness arises not only from poetry’s limitations, however, but also from the instability of society and morality themselves. In his contribution to the 1939 anthology *I Believe: the Personal Philosophies of Certain Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, Auden claims that:

> No society can be absolutely good. Utopias, […] because they are static, only portray states of natural evil or good. […] People committing acts in obedience to law or habit are not being moral. As voluntary action always turns, with repetition, into habit, morality is only possible in a world which is constantly changing and presenting a fresh series of choices. No society is absolutely good; but some are better than others. (*EA* 375)

In this passage, the earliest occurrence of the word “utopia” in Auden’s body of work, he implies that the realized utopia, at least the sort in which absolute goodness stands as an achieved fact, must by necessity be amoral – having voided goodness of its moral standing by transfiguring it into obedience. By the same token, if poetry were to make us “more moral,” it would contribute to this habituation of goodness, because morality is actualized only at the moment of choice, and is not otherwise measurable. Taken together with Auden’s earlier allusion to Plato’s *Republic* – often discussed as one of the earliest utopian texts – this warning against the statical aspirations of utopian thought serves to
highlight one of the deceptions to which poetry might make us less susceptible: the
notion that a perfect society is achievable or even desirable. Absolutist utopians like Plato
would do away with poetry not only because it fails to measurably contribute to our
social or moral advancement, but because it works to affirm that such advancement can at
best be intermittent, and may always be vitiated or regressed by bad future choices.

This alertness to contingency lies behind what has become Auden’s most-quoted
line, from the 1939 elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”: “poetry makes nothing happen.”
Against the colloquial tendency to engage with the line as a maxim shorn of its
surrounding context (both within the poem and within Auden’s career), and to treat it as
his culminating statement on poetry’s real-world efficacy, I would venture that it simply
marks another phase in his struggle to shun the megalomaniacal tendencies of Shelleyan
poetics, while still preserving a crucial role for poetry in the pursuit of the Good Place. It
is of course no accident that Auden should choose to offer such stark repudiation of
poetry’s causal force in an elegy for Yeats, Shelley’s most prominent Modern inheritor –
and this speaks in favour of reading the line literally, with all its aphoristic firmness. On
the other hand, if read as “poetry makes nothing happen” – as in, it opens up a space in
which inaction and non-occurrence take precedence – then the line offers another way of
conceptualizing the space of possibility that lends our active choices consequence. The
remainder of the stanza supports such a reading:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy grieves,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth. (36-41)

Poetry’s topographical distance from “executives” – linked to both the mortal act of execution and, in their deeper etymology, to following through – marks the poetic realm as a haven of inconsequence. Cradled down away from the urgent world of isolation, grief, belief, and death, poetry persists as a kind of anti-occurrence, “A way of happening, a mouth.” Stan Smith points to the way this “strange, dehumanizing metonymy,” embodied but not tied to any subjectivity, highlights the paradox of poetry’s “double historicity,” its status as both historical product and free-floating discursive utterance that re-enters history upon being read, with “the moment of the reader quite distinct from that of the originating author” (4). Reading the Yeats elegy alongside the much later essay I cited at the outset of this chapter – “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” with its claim that “every good poem is very nearly a Utopia” – Smith points to how poetry “reconciles the historical anxiety of its genesis with the utopian bliss of its reading.” In Smith’s view, then, poems are nearly-utopias in the way they insulate us from the historical circumstances that occasion their composition, offering us the assurance that – and here he cites one of the later Auden’s key statements of belief – “the historical world is a redeemable world” (71). In existing not as a causal force, but rather as an endlessly repeatable event-in-itself whose readerly impact may vary each time it re-enters history, a poem embodies a temporal space between the static and the kinetic, a no-place of possibility that is paradisal in its simultaneous insulation from and engagement with the vicissitudes of history.
Beyond just its second section, the overall structure of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” supports such a dialectical reading. When Auden first published the poem in *The New Republic* of March 8, 1939, it consisted only of its first and third sections; the second had not yet been written. Critics have often taken this original version as setting out two starkly contrasting views of poetry’s real-world impact – in Mendelson’s terms, the first section “acknowledges that the most a poet can achieve in the world is to be acknowledged by his admirers,” while the closing section “celebrates poetic language as a force more powerful than time or death” (*Later 3*) – and this standard reading does ring true to a certain extent. In terms of the first section, such interpretations hinge on the lack of objective impact the poet’s death has on the world around him; contrary to elegiac convention, for example, his loss does not resonate through the natural world – a fact ironically embodied in the refrain “O all the instruments agree / The day of this death was a dark cold day” (30-31). Furthermore, that Yeats’s death means nothing to his actual written works (“The death of the poet was kept from his poems”) implies that as a poet, his identity resides in his poems rather than his person, so that “he became his admirers” in the sense that, just as poems are revitalized with each new reading, so lives the figure of ‘Yeats’ in each of his readers’ guises. But if, as the section’s climax proclaims, “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living,” then this is just as much an assertion of poetry’s power as the poet’s powerlessness. Implicit throughout this entire first section is the point made more boldly in the later-added second: poetry, as distinct from the poet himself, *survives*. It may be “modified in the guts of the living,” but this says nothing (*pace* Mendelson) about its real-world importance or impotence, because we
are not told what it does once it gets to those guts – which for all we know may be very
great things indeed.

The first section thus presents less a stark contrast to the final one than a sober
prelude, taking objective stock of Yeats’s death while acknowledging his poems as an
enduring presence in the world, rumbling with potential. So while the exaltation of the
final section no doubt represents a marked shift – effected in large part by Auden’s
adoption of the same trochaic tetrameter catalectic line Yeats employed for his own self-
elegy in “Under Ben Bulben” – it should strike us less as a refutation of the first section’s
sobriety than as its logical next step, elevating its sombre refrain into a fuller-throated
lamentation. Beginning with an elemental apostrophe (“Earth, receive an honoured guest;
/ William Yeats is laid to rest”), the section eventually shifts to address the poet himself,
ending with a series of hopeful exhortations:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,

In the prison of his days

Teach the free man how to praise. (54-65)

The shift in apostrophic addressee from “Earth” to “poet” is accompanied by a concomitant shift from the personal to the archetypal: whereas the section started in singling Yeats out by name, he is now subsumed into his role. At the same time, however – and especially within the final three-part structure of the poem – this entails a degree of humanization: whereas the first section emphasized the poems “modified in the guts of the living,” and the second section declared that “poetry makes nothing happen,” in this section the weight falls on the figure of the poet and his “unconstraining voice.” This trajectory, from poems to poetry to poet, means that Auden’s tribute closes in a much more conventional elegiac mode than it began, moving from the specific to the general and finally to the archetypal, and thus vaguely spiritualizing Yeats in the process.³

Furthermore, these two trajectories are accompanied by a third, from words to mouth to voice. While on one level the poem abstracts ever further from the death of Yeats the man – moving from “The day of his death” in section one, to the trials of his life in “mad Ireland” in section two, before finally leading his shadow-self “To the bottom of the night” in section three – on another level it brings us ever closer to him, first showing us his inert words, then his disembodied mouth, and then at last allowing us to hear his voice (indeed almost literally, as by the end of the poem Auden has not only adopted a classic Yeatsian metre, but is also practically ventriloquizing Yeats’s stance on poetry’s ability to uplift and transfigure, to “Make a vineyard of the curse”).
Of course, this ending cannot be taken to summarize Auden’s actual views on poetry’s effectiveness any more than “poetry makes nothing happen” can. But while the subsequent insertion of this latter maxim and the second section that contains it no doubt serves to undermine somewhat the hopeful imperatives of section three – marking them as perhaps a temporary and insincere capitulation to Yeatsian notions of poetry-as-panacea, for tributary purposes only – the fact is that here, in the landmark first poem Auden wrote after moving to the United States, he chose to let such affirmations resound. Earlier in 1939 he had mildly characterized poetry as “mak[ing] us more aware of ourselves and the world around us,” but “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” finds him both revoking even that modest agential force and attributing to poetry a much more active, healing role. In its three-section movement from the objective present, to the subjectivized historical past, to the only glimmeringly hypothetical future, the poem at once affirms poetry’s causal powerlessness and displays its capacity to lend shape and coherence to hopeful possibilities – and thus to redefine causality for us. This capacity is reflected structurally as well, as the poem begins in free verse, becomes a pseudo-sonnet in section two, and finally ends in resolute elegiac quatrains that formally testify to the poet’s ability to defy (and beautify) our mortal dissolution, thus making a happening of nothingness despite its explicit protestations to the contrary.

The difficulty of determining exactly what Auden believes poetry can do in this period is only compounded by an essay he published in The Partisan Review soon after writing the original two-section version of the elegy, “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats.” The essay sets out a pair of dissenting statements, the first from The Public Prosecutor and the second from The Counsel for the Defence, to debate Yeats’s status as
“a great poet” (*Prose II* 3). The Prosecutor claims that such greatness hinges not only on the memorability of a poet’s language, but also on his having “a profound understanding of the age in which he lived,” and “a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time” (3). According to these criteria, claims the Prosecutor, Yeats is disqualified from greatness due to his “feudal mentality” in political matters, and his lifelong devotion to “irrational superstition,” from his early belief in “fairies” to his later turn to “the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India” (4-5). The Prosecutor even challenges Yeats on the level of linguistic mastery, pointedly asking “How many of his lines can you remember?”, and holding up his editorship of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* – which he calls “the most deplorable volume ever issued under the imprint of that highly respected firm which has done so much for the cause of poetry in this country, the Clarendon Press” – as evidence of his general bad taste (3).

The Defence directs the first portion of his counter-statement at the Prosecutor’s critique of Yeats’s political and spiritual beliefs, which rests on the assumption that poetry is little more than “the filling up of a social quiz; to pass with honours the poet must not score less than 75%” – an assumption the Defence dismisses as “utter nonsense” (5). But it is in his response to the other aspect of the Prosecutor’s critique – that relating to Yeats’s language and its memorability – that the essay dialogues most directly with the elegy and its concern with poetry’s real-world impact. The Defence cautions that he is “not trying to suggest that art exists independently of society” and affirms that “the relation between the two is just as intimate and important as the prosecution asserts” (6) – but the two sides differ greatly in the way they conceive the *nature* of this relation.
“Poetic talent,” claims the Defence, “is the power to make personal excitement socially available” (6). Great poets are thus those who a) react more strongly to the world than the average person; and b) are able to vividly communicate this reactive strength – and “the nature of the reaction, whether it be positive or negative, morally admirable or morally disgraceful, matters very little; what is essential is that the reaction should genuinely exist” (6). The Defence goes on to justify Yeats’s nationalism by calling it “a necessary stage toward socialism,” and points to his co-establishment of the Abbey Theatre as a “useful form of social action” (7). He even defends the early fairies and later “doctrine of Anima Mundi” as “attempt[s] to find through folk tradition a binding force for society,” noting of Yeats’s poems overall that “from first to last they express a sustained protest against the social atomisation caused by industrialism, and both in their ideas and their language a constant struggle to overcome it” (7). Auden’s Defence thus sets out poetry as capable of lending meaningful expression to social alternatives, if not itself effecting these alternatives. The essay’s closing paragraphs further nuance this distinction:

Art is a product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal. The case for the prosecution rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.
But there is one field in which the poet is a man of action, the field of language, and it is precisely in this that the greatness of the deceased is most obviously shown. However false or undemocratic his ideas, his diction shows a continuous evolution toward what one might call the true democratic style. The social virtues of a real democracy are brotherhood and intelligence, and the parallel linguistic virtues are strength and clarity, virtues which appear ever more clearly through successive volumes by the deceased.

The diction of the *Winding Stair* is the diction of a just man, and it is for this reason that just men will always recognise the author as a master.

(7)

The first of these paragraphs stands as Auden’s most extreme statement of the doctrine that poetry makes nothing happen, with the sheer exaggerated falseness of the claim that in the absence of art “the history of man would be materially unchanged” serving to remind us of the essay’s dialogic structure, and to implicitly caution us against assuming (as many critics have done) that just because the Defence is granted the final word, he must transparently represent Auden’s actual position. A less overtly doctrinal view of the relationship between poetry and the social realm comes in his characterization of Yeats’s “true democratic style.” While on one hand the phrase is simply a figurative way of praising the virtues of “strength and clarity” in Yeats’s mature diction, on the other it embodies Auden’s belief – displayed again over a decade later in his claim that “every good poem is very nearly a Utopia” – that political values can be analogically embodied in poetic elements. Again, an unmistakable whiff of falseness taints the claim that despite
Yeats’s beliefs being “undemocratic” (a word synonymous for the Auden of this period with “unjust”) his diction nonetheless marks him as a just man – and this discrepancy once again points to the essay’s formal ambivalence, hinting that Auden’s actual position lies in a synthesis of those of the Prosecution and Defence. In order to retrieve this position, then, we must be skeptical of poetry’s ability to exert any influence upon the social realm, while also remaining open-minded about its ability to analogically embody more ideal – i.e., true democracy, utopia – sociopolitical arrangements.

But, as Auden repeatedly cautions throughout his career, this embodiment can be verbal only. To shift forward once again to the early 1950s, and “The Virgin and the Dynamo”: in the final paragraph he underlines the potentially evil effect of poetry’s inner harmony, which might lead us to believe that “since all is well in the work of art, all is well in history. But all is not well there” (DH 71). Poetry does not urge us to dwell in the possible to the neglect of the actual; as what Auden calls a “verbal society,” a poem presents a model of a “natural organism,” a “pseudo-person” in which “meaning and being are identical” (67-68). As such, it embodies by analogy the possibility that “the unfreedom and disorder of the past can be reconciled in the future” (70); it embodies – but by analogy only – “the possibility of regaining paradise” (71). This string of co-analogies and qualifications serves both to clarify and to muddy what Auden means by “every good poem is very nearly a Utopia,” and as Lucy McDiarmid points out, this is likely intentional: “The proximity is teasing,” she writes, “it establishes, or rather reaffirms, the border between […] literary textuality and extraliterary value” (19). Auden did worry that his linkage of poetry and paradise might be taken to espouse too literally an excessively organizational definition of utopia:
A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars. (85)

Clearly Auden wishes to mitigate against the notion that poetry’s analogical relationship to utopia is purely or even primarily formal; this would issue, as the passage illustrates, in an archetypally dystopian model of society. At the same time, however, the poetry/utopia analogy still does reflect meaningfully upon how we might re-order and improve our societies. As I have argued, in claiming that both “mak[ing] us more difficult to deceive” and “mak[ing] nothing happen,” Auden points to how poetry foregrounds the contingency of the social order while opening up a space of as-yet unfilled possibility into which alternate contingent arrangements can be safely dreamed. And yet, poetry’s role is primarily not escapist or compensatory: as he claims in another essay of the early 1950s entitled simply “Writing”: “Poetry is not magic. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate” (27). In other words, to un-sing and un-poison: to coax us free of our immersive complacency, and remind us – through its “reconciling [of] contradictory feelings in an order of mutual propriety” (71) – how far from paradise we still are.

I have phased back and forth between the late 1930s and the early 1950s in order to highlight several crucial shifts in Auden’s attitude toward both utopia and,
concomitantly, poetry’s potential real-world effectiveness in the decade and a half after his move to America. First, between the initial occurrence of the word “utopia” in his *I Believe* essay of 1939 and his final sustained engagement with the concept in the early 1950s – both in the essays I have been citing and his poetic sequence *Horae Canonicae*, to be discussed at the end of this chapter – Auden’s treatment of “utopia” moves from one of total disdain for its impossibility and its totalitarian implications, to a more moderate position which (while still suspicious of these faults) sees the concept of utopia as a useful one through which to analogize both a poem’s formal organization as a “verbal society” and the way this organization reflects upon our existing societies, illuminating the distance between the actual and what is ideally possible. This relates very closely to the second shift I wish to emphasize: in the decade and a half after 1939, Auden’s statements on poetry’s relevance to the sociopolitical realm work to problematize any straightforward interpretation of “poetry makes nothing happen,” urging us to read this assertion as not only a dismissal or repudiation of poetry’s causal efficacy (in which case it would be more appropriately phrased “poetry doesn’t make anything happen”) but also as an affirmation of poetry’s ability to open up a no-place of possibility – to make “nothing” a thing that happens. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will argue that throughout the 1940s Auden sets forth (often tacitly, but sometimes quite explicitly) a *negative poetics*, whereby poetry’s utopian function consists precisely in its analogization, whether formally or thematically, of the more ideal states of existence from which we forever remain so far.
2.

This distance is explicitly thematized in Auden’s 1941 poem “Atlantis,” which begins by highlighting the futility of any attempt to actually reach utopia:

Being set on the idea

Of getting to Atlantis,

You have discovered of course

Only the Ship of Fools is

Making the voyage this year (1-5)⁶

Of the seven 12-line stanzas that comprise the poem, the speaker devotes each of the first six to detailing one of the imperfect places the addressed “You” may land along her or his quest. In each case, the speaker instructs the quester to fully imbibe the place’s imperfection: in Ionia, for example, whose “witty scholars […] have proved there cannot be / Such a place as Atlantis,” the quester must:

Learn their logic, but notice

How their subtlety betrays

A simple enormous grief;

Thus they shall teach you the ways

To doubt that you may believe. (20-24)

The void left when one subscribes solely to logic – the scholars’ “simple enormous grief” – might be described as spiritual, in keeping with Auden’s ongoing process of return to the Anglican communion at the time; but it might also (and more in keeping with the explicitly utopian character of the poem) be conceptualized as the absence of the possible. Observing the Ionians’ absolute abidance by the actual illuminates for the
quester what is missing behind their erudition, their utter dearth of the purposive futurity

Atlantis symbolizes. The doubt learned from them thus leads the quester – and by
second-person implication, the reader – ever more firmly onward.

Each stop along the quester’s way fulfills a similar negative function. When we
reach Thrace, “that stony savage shore,” the speaker tells us to:

    Strip off your clothes and dance, for
    Unless you are capable
    Of forgetting completely
    About Atlantis, you will
    Never finish your journey. (32-36)

The speaker similarly instructs us, while in “gay / Carthage or Corinth” to “take part / In
their endless gaiety,” for:

    unless
    You become acquainted now
    With each refuge that tries to
    Counterfeit Atlantis, how
    Will you recognize the true? (44-48)

Like the God of the via negativa to which Auden variously alluded throughout his
decades in America, Atlantis thus emerges as an entity without positive qualities, a no-
place taking its outline from our growing knowledge of what it is not. 7 In fact, the entire
poem hinges on the tension between the quester’s inferred desire to arrive at Atlantis, to
capture an image of it for her- or himself, and the speaker’s determination that Atlantis
should remain tantalizingly imageless. “Atlantis” thus embodies the dichotomy identified
by Russell Jacoby (and to which I have gestured in previous chapters) between “blueprint” utopianism – which demands utopia’s visualization – and an alternative “iconoclastic” utopianism, which emerges out of the Old Testament prohibition on graven images, and according to which “the refusal to describe God transmutes into the refusal to describe utopia, which can only be depicted in negative terms” (35).8

One might see “Atlantis” as effecting the inverse movement, as the poem shifts gradually away from its Greco-mythological context to become a recognizably Christian quest, and the refusal to describe Atlantis transmutes into the refusal to name God. The penultimate stanza begins with the speaker issuing the imperative to “Stagger onward rejoicing,” a phrase which hints at the poem’s Christianization, as the command “Rejoice” resonates loudly in the very next poem Auden wrote, the epithalamion “In Sickness and in Health” – an examination of marriage’s “round O of faithfulness” from an explicitly Christian perspective. Here he uses the word to prepare the quester for failure, and to encourage glorying in it: if nearing the end of our journey we should “collapse / With all Atlantis shining / below,” we should not despair but rather:

still be proud

Even to have been allowed

Just to peep at Atlantis

In a poetic vision:

Give thanks and lie down in peace,

Having seen your salvation. (67-72)

The introduction of the concept of “salvation” shifts the poem’s telos from one of harmonious social existence in this life – for Atlantis is an earthly kingdom counterfeited
by those less perfect societies the quester visits along the way – to one of individual deliverance from sin, and admission to the next life. God’s presence is inferred in the fact of our having “been allowed” to glimpse Atlantis, implying that the success or failure of our quest will have depended solely upon His grace. This sense of paradise deferred is compounded by the fact that salvation can only be “seen” rather than strictly arrived at, a further indication that the prospect of this-worldly bliss upon which the poem initially hinges has by this late stage been largely subsumed into the promise of afterlife. Whether we conceive of this as the poem’s shedding of its utopianism, or as its shifting from one utopian mode to another, will depend on exactly how we define utopia, and how strictly secularism figures in our definition. This much is certain, however; in transforming from a secular pagan to an explicitly religious poem, “Atlantis” both illuminates the connection between iconoclastic utopianism and negative theology gestured to by Jacoby, and highlights the two different modes of futurity these two ways of thinking embody: while the former sees the gap between our actual societies and any possible more harmonious future society as at least theoretically closeable through human intervention in this world, the latter sees this gap as a function of the unnameable divine.

The poem’s last stanza effects not just this philosophical or theological shift, but a narrative one as well, as it makes clear that the poem up until this point has abided in the realm of the hypothetical, and that the quester’s journey has not yet actually begun:

All the little household gods
Have started crying, but say
Good-bye now, and put to sea.
Farewell, my dear, farewell: may
Hermes, master of the roads
And the four dwarf Kabiri,
   Protect and serve you always;
   And may the Ancient of Days
Provide for all you must do
   His invisible guidance,
Lifting up, friend, upon you
   The light of His countenance. (73-84)

This coda serves as a kind of prayer, calling upon the relevant entities to protect a quester suddenly addressed as “my dear” – a move that simultaneously distances the “you” from the reader and brings her or him into a more intimate relation with the speaker – as s/he sets out on what we now see as an allegorical life’s journey toward salvation. The “household gods” further suggest some domestic relation between speaker and quester, while also nodding to the pagan context in which the poem began. Indeed, the appeal to “Hermes” and the “four dwarf Kabiri” – who John Fuller tells us “are thought to be Phrygian deities who protected sailors and promoted fertility,” though they are not traditionally dwarves (391) – affirms this sense of the speaker inhabiting a polytheistic world, with a presiding god for every eventuality. But just as the previous stanza ended with the resonantly Christian concept of “salvation,” this one invokes “the Ancient of Days” – a name for God which appears three times in the book of Daniel (and serves as the title for one of William Blake’s most well-known etchings) – before ending on the unmistakably hymnal “The light of His countenance.” This closing image echoes back to the previous stanza’s “Atlantis shining” – even spatially, as Atlantis is “Below” while
God is “Lifting up” His light. I have already discussed the convergence and slippage between utopian and theological discourse to which this resonance points, but it is worth focusing more closely on how the vague imaging of luminescence in both instances serves to displace any more concretely visual description of the phenomena in question. Neither Atlantis nor God is attributed any positive qualities beyond light; nothing about them is presented for our contemplation, and so they are left as functions of desire – one for social utopia, the other for personal salvation. The poem’s shift from one desire to the other can thus be interpreted in several (by no means exclusive) ways. On the one hand, “Atlantis” can be read as almost Christian propaganda, reflecting the increasingly devout Auden’s claim, in an essay of just a few months earlier, that “without an adequate and conscious metaphysics in the background, art’s imitation of life inevitably becomes, either a photostatic copy of the accidental details of life without pattern or significance, or a personal allegory of the artist’s individual dementia” (Prose II 87). According to this reading, the poem stands as a metaphysical refutation of the utopian impulse as a chimera, an assertion that the only paradise to be found inheres in one’s individual communion with God – and that the gap of desire that leads us to seek out more perfect societies is simply a measure of His present absence in our lives. This interpretation is borne out not only by the shift from a utopian to a theological emphasis, but narratively, in the shift from an addressed “you” that includes the poem’s readership to a “my dear” that seems designed to exclude us, to cast us back out upon our own salvationary roads.

This repudiation of social unity in favour of our isolated status as fallen individuals before God is supported by statements Auden made the next year, in the second of a series of Kierkegaardian “Lecture Notes” published in The Commonweal
under the pseudonym “Didymus,” on the poet’s relation to his audience. Here he claims that the poet’s purpose is not “to arouse or communicate emotions” but rather “to find out what his feelings really are, and, of course, most of these will be neither pleasant nor good” (Prose II 167). He then goes on to cast this exercise in self-discovery as potentially containing the seed of a wider – though precarious – solidarity, claiming of the poet that

He sings alone before God, but he may be overheard by other men and what they hear may cause them, one by one, to undergo a similar process of discovery. If the result is to make them feel in unity with each other, it is not because they are all filled with the same emotion, but because they share the same knowledge of weakness, and dare not therefore judge each other. (167)

This represents a drastic shift from the claim he made just three years earlier, that poetry “makes us more difficult to deceive” – much less his more ambitious assertion in the mid-1930s that it is concerned with “extending our knowledge of good and evil.” In both these statements, poetry’s effects are unambiguously registered in the first-person plural (“makes us,” “extending our knowledge”), whereas here in 1942, Auden casts any sense of unity that poetry might foster as almost incidental, the result of a chain-reaction of solitary self-discoversies, leading a series of individuals to realize that they “share the same knowledge of weakness.” Reading “Atlantis” alongside this view of poetry as at most working to illuminate our mutual fallenness only further suggests a reading of the poem as a repudiation of socially oriented utopian goals in favour of personal salvation.

Concurrent with this interpretation, however – with its emphasis on the contrast between secular utopia and divine salvation as goals of a quest – one might just as readily
emphasize their shared liberatory ends. I have already highlighted the negativity in which both Atlantis and God are cloaked, and how neither is granted positive qualities for the reader’s contemplation. In light of this fact, one can see “Atlantis” as enacting an implicit critique of the “bourgeois-classical aesthetics” of “contemplative appeasement” cast by Ernst Bloch (in volume two of his monumental *The Principle of Hope*) as the dominant mode in Western thinking about art since Kant (808). According to Bloch, the realm of contemplation conjured by such an aesthetics serves to stultify the utopian impulse: “Art is always a sedative here,” he writes, “not an appeal, not even a comforting song; for this too presupposes the restlessness of the will” (808). In its place Bloch longs for the ascendancy of the aesthetics of hope he sees embodied in the “wishful landscapes” that characterize what he calls “perspective art”: works which, instead of impressing upon us the sense of “fully-constructedness” characteristic of the Kantian aesthetics of contemplation, rather project “an unfinished world” which draws the will beyond its glimmering horizons (808-09). Bloch does not limit his use of the word “perspective” to the visual arts, and in fact points to literature (and elsewhere in his study, poetry in particular) as able to embody the aesthetics of hope he valorizes. In typically enigmatic fashion, he claims that “The word points differently from the start when it aims very far. It is taut, has a premonition which has nowhere yet become solid and enterable” (807). Exalting language’s capacity to present possibility as such without reifying it as false actuality, to embody futurity rather than any concrete future, Bloch illuminates how Jacoby’s concept of iconoclastic utopianism serves as a contrast not just to the blueprinting of utopian texts in the tradition descending from Thomas More, but as a critique of the aesthetics of completion such texts embody—an aesthetics which, in
striving to convey an holistic experience, betrays our crucial intuition of the world’s unfinishedness.

I would argue that “Atlantis,” in both its secular utopian and its Christian aspects, works to preserve this intuition, and thus displays the perspectival and even premonitory capacities of language that Bloch stresses as so vital to an unfolding aesthetics of hope. More broadly, I would also point out how the concept of an aesthetics of hope can help to further flesh out the paradoxical sense of “making nothing happen” that I am working with in this chapter, for in presencing possibility while also preserving it as possibility, such an aesthetics makes nothing happen in a double sense: first, it exhibits what has not yet been actualized, and second, it illuminates the gap between the actual and the possible, lighting the no-space of potential that all change requires. That Auden still ardently desires change at this point in his career is widely evident, even if the change he desires concerns less the social organism than the individual soul. Indeed, one might claim – as I did of the later Yeats in Chapter Two – that Auden shifts from seeking after the good place in the 1930s to the more exclusive good life in the 1940s (though the difference between Yeats’s and Auden’s visions of the good life is of course immense). For the Auden of 1942, firmly in the thrall of a Kierkegaardian existentialism, social ills are reducible to the sum of individuals who refuse to accept their own fallenness, and so behave as self-authorizing agents, dooming themselves to futility. Further on in his “Lecture Notes” as Didymus, he clearly delineates the role of art in such a fallen society: “Art cannot make a man want to become good,” he writes, “but it can prevent him from imagining that he already is; it cannot give him faith in God, but it can show him his despair” (Prose I 167). In positing both art’s limitations and its capabilities, this
formulation nicely captures the essence of Auden’s negative poetics in the 1940s; while admitting that art cannot create the will to goodness, he avers that it can open us to the emptiness that something better might fill.

Auden’s most concerted fleshing-out of art’s revealing negativity comes in what is often cast as his greatest work of the 1940s, the long poem *The Sea and the Mirror*. Composed between 1942 and 1944, in the midst of World War II, and subtitled “A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest,*” the poem re-inhabits the play’s characters to build a labyrinthine meditation on the relation of art (the titular *Mirror*) to the world we inhabit (the *Sea*). In a letter to Theodore Spencer he characterized the poem as “my Ars Poetica, in the same way I believe *The Tempest* was Shakespeare’s,” and added: “I am attempting, which is in a way absurd, to show, in a work of art, the limitations of art” (qtd. in Mendelson, *Later* 205; Kirsch 58). Taking as its starting point Prospero’s freeing of Ariel and his relinquishing of his magical powers at the end of Shakespeare’s play, the poem sets out to refute *The Tempest*’s treatment of “art” and “magic” as synonymous. Unlike what we normally mean by “magic,” art has no ability to actually conjure new realities, only to distort existing ones into shapes consolatory in their privileging of form, their commitment to what Caliban calls in his long speech at the end of the poem “a felicitous pattern” (33; emphasis in original). Indeed, art’s ability to console represents perhaps a greater danger than its being mistaken for magic, at least from the Christian perspective Auden inhabited at the time of writing *The Sea and the Mirror*: for in imaging alternate worlds more felicitously patterned than our own, it implicitly exalts the human ability to fashion such worlds for our actual lives, promoting the illusion that our existences can be self-authorizing, without need of God’s grace.
In his 1942 “Lecture Notes” Auden opined that “As a writer, who is also a would-be Christian, I cannot help feeling that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out” (Prose II 163). The Sea and the Mirror would seem to constitute his attempt to embody such a theory in his work, as he told Ursula Niebuhr in a letter after the poem’s completion that it was “really about the Christian conception of art” (qtd. in Mendelson, Later 205). So far, however, I have only discussed how The Sea and the Mirror highlights art’s potential falseness from a Christian perspective, and so the questions remain: What positive role might art fulfill within the Christian worldview? And how does the poem theorize this role? Auden provides a partial answer to the first of these questions in his 1943 essay “Purely Subjective,” a long meditation on the necessity of religious faith:

The religious function of art is the destruction of auto-idolatry, i.e. of the notion that the faith required to make a subjective decision is faith in myself. Since Art can only deal with what is manifested, it cannot say that the faith I require is a faith in God; it can only say: “Those who trust in themselves lose the power to react correctly to actual situations and are destroyed by what appear to them to be objects outside their own control.” That is why art deals in the exceptional and the unexpected, in heroes and reversals of fortune. (Prose II 190)

This veers precariously close to a view of art as fulfilling a proselytizing function. According to this view, tragedies are cautionary tales, the falls of their protagonists object-lessons in the perils of the faithless life. More moderately, however – and more in keeping with my theoretical emphasis – art in this view can be seen as a warning against
any attempt to actualize our utopian impulses in purely secular terms. As I discussed
above, “Atlantis” performs just such a warning role, insisting that utopia is attainable
only as a God-granted vision. With its long semi-dramatic form allowing for a greater
semblance of plot, *The Sea and the Mirror* sets out a similar insistence more circuitously,
refracting the folly of “auto-idolatry” through several different characters, each of whom
separately come to understand that the products of our own creativity cannot truly
ameliorate our existences, that they mostly serve as escape or consolation, realizing their
metaphysical purpose only if they illuminate our distance from the divine.

The poem embarks from its very beginning on an exploration of art’s limits, with
the opening Preface (*The Stage Manager to the Critics*) serving less to support or
promote what the audience has just witnessed – for the poem is meant to take place
immediately following a performance of *The Tempest* – than to undermine its potential
effectiveness. Wary of art’s ability to reside in hubristic fantasy (he imagines hero and
heroine “Waltzing across the tightrope / As if there were no death / And no hope of
falling down”) and to mesmerize its audiences into calculatedly irrational responses
(“How the dear little children laugh / When the drums roll and the lovely / Lady is sawn
in half”), the Stage Manager turns his attention almost immediately to actual lived
experience, inferring that it proves significantly less predictable than plot-driven artifice:
“O what authority / Gives existence its surprise?” (3). In thus pitting the ability of
divine “authority” to generate real “surprise” against the relative expectedness of the
effects generated by the artist’s creative magic, the Stage Manager lets God beat Prospero
at his own game, subordinating art to life in casting the former as at best able to caution
against the self-pride that can ruin the latter:
Art opens the fishiest eye
To the Flesh and the Devil who heat
The Chamber of Temptation
Where heroes roar and die. (3)

The odd epithet “fishiest” evokes a glazedness (Elizabeth Bishop would later memorably liken the glaze of a fish’s eyes to “old scratched isinglass”), implying that even those most mesmerized by art cannot help somehow imbibing its lesson on the dangerous “Temptation” of auto-idolatry: when “heroes roar” – i.e., when they attempt to embody a sublimity beyond their human limits – they meet only an unsaved death. The stanza goes on to further refine this claim:

We are wet with sympathy now;
Thanks for the evening; but how
Shall we satisfy when we meet,
Between Shall-I and I-Will,
The lion’s mouth whose hunger
No metaphors can fill? (3-4)

The “We” here is both the audience who weeps and the performers who bask in their tears. Both can successfully fill their roles (or “satisfy”) only within the action-driven theatrical economy, a world where heroes boldly authorize their own choices and suffer or reap the consequences. But confronted with the prospect that our decisions are not entirely ours to make, but also partly God’s to make for us through the precarious agency of faith, both performers and audience must fall stilly silent before the unportrayable. In other words, when confronted with the volitional paradox of active passivity inherent in
the concept of grace – a dilemma beautifully captured in Augustine’s cry to God to “Grant what you command, and command what you will” (202) – the theatrical economy stalls. Stealing the “roar” from the “lion’s mouth” does not abate its “hunger.”

The Preface closes by equating silence with the divine, praising Shakespeare for recognizing that “this world of fact we love / Is unsubstantial stuff” and affirming that

All the rest is silence
On the other side of the wall
And the silence ripeness
And the ripeness all. (4)

Auden here cobbles together lines from *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, transfiguring their various meditations on mortality and the acceptance of death into an assertion of the primacy of the divine realm of silence that art cannot portray. Where “ripeness” in *Lear* connotes a readiness to die, here it gestures toward the inassimilable richness on “the other side of the wall”: not the so-called ‘fourth wall’ between audience and performance, but that between creatures and creator of which the former is merely a porous travesty. Like the Preface as a whole, these lines contain much of the poem’s thematic thrust, with its central assertions recurring throughout the poem: in Chapter 1, for example, Prospero concedes that “I never suspected the way of truth / Was a way of silence” (11), while near the close of his Chapter 3 speech to the audience Caliban eulogizes “that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch—we understand them at last—are but feebly figurative signs” (52). Arthur Kirsch has deftly characterized this thematic thread of the poem as claiming that “art is doubly illusory, because it holds the mirror up to nature
rather than the truth that passes human understanding” (58). But in keeping with my own emphasis on Auden’s evolving negative poetics and its utopian implications, I would amend Kirsch’s formulation to acknowledge that although *The Sea and the Mirror* does cast art as illusory, it also stresses how this very illusoriness is itself illuminating, shedding light on the distance between us and the “Wholly Other Life” we strive towards.

Caliban acknowledges this illuminating function in the snippet from his speech quoted above (“we understand them at last”), and indeed his speech itself not only *theorizes* but *enacts* this illumination, a process which I shall explore in greater detail shortly. But although Caliban’s famously Jamesian sermon that comprises the whole of Chapter 3 no doubt serves as *The Sea and the Mirror*’s rhetorical climax and thematic culminating-point, its take on art’s capacity to light the gap between utopian desire and its fulfillment is well prepared for by the earlier sections. In Chapter 1, for instance, Prospero makes Ariel a metaphor for the force of artistic inspiration, and opines of him that “from your calm eyes, / With their lucid proof of apprehension and disorder, / All we are not stares back at what we are” (6). Here Ariel – whom Auden dubs in a later essay on *The Tempest* the “spirit of imagination” (*DH* 132) – symbolizes the orderly purity of art as against the “disorder” of lived experience: the word “apprehension” here draws on its etymological connotations of *laying hold of* in order to contrast the graspable placeness of “what we are” with the rarefied no-place of “All we are not.” Similarly, in Chapter 2 – devoted to *The Supporting Cast (Sotto Voce)* – Alonso, King of Naples, advises his son and heir Ferdinand to:

Learn from your dreams what you lack,

[stanza break]
For as your fears are, so you must hope.
The Way of Justice is a tightrope
Where no prince is safe for one instant
Unless he trust his embarrassment,
As in his left ear the siren sings
Meltingly of water and a night
Where all flesh had peace, and on his right
The efreet offers a brilliant void
Where his mind could be perfectly clear
And all his limitations destroyed:
Many young princes soon disappear
To join all the unjust kings. (20)

Here Alonso urges Ferdinand not to seek escape from the trials of princehood into either a sensual oceana or an intellectual ivory tower, but rather to gain from his “dreams” of these places a keener sense of his own hopes and fears, so that he may more deftly walk the “tightrope” of this-worldly “Justice.” The stanza break after “lack” not only emphasizes the word’s denotative meaning through whitespace, but also signals that the competing visions of utopia that follow both arise from a source of incompleteness in ourselves. The idea of dream-realms tempting from the left and right of this world was also used by Auden in a chart he prepared for his students at Swarthmore in the spring of 1943, while in the midst of writing The Sea and the Mirror. The chart is divided into three primary columns: the middle one labelled “This World,” the left representing the “Search for Salvation by finding refuge in Nature,” and the right the “Search for
Salvation by finding release from nature.” Down the full page, Auden fleshed out these antithetical headings in rows of categories ranging from “Metaphysical Condition” to “Sin” to “Political Slogan” to typify the denizens of each realm (the seekers of refuge in nature, for example, are given to the sin of sensuality, while their counterparts who seek refuge from nature are most susceptible to pride). Auden would later label these two categories of people “Arcadian” and “Utopian,” and his characterization of the two realms in Alonso’s speech certainly prefigures this distinction: to Ferdinand’s left “all flesh had peace,” while to his right “his mind could be perfectly clear” – a difference in tenses which accords with the Auden’s later conception of the Arcadian as yearning backward for Eden while the Utopian forges ahead to the New Jerusalem. Put simply, Alonso is advising Ferdinand to avoid both arcadian and utopian longing, while learning from the temptations each presents him with (his “dreams” of past solace or future reconciliation) how to better abide in the temporal present.

In a sense, Alonso’s counsel stands as a secularized microcosm of the argument finally set forth by Caliban in his Chapter 3 speech. While Alonso focuses on Ferdinand’s learning from his dreams what he lacks as a representative of the “Way of Justice,” Caliban emphasizes how we can all learn from art how distant we are from the divine “Wholly Other Life.” Similarly, the distinction between the arcadian realm where “all flesh had peace” and the utopian realm where the “mind could be perfectly clear” is recast in Caliban’s speech in the distinction between himself and Ariel. Most broadly, Caliban represents the body, the brute sensual nature in which refuge might be sought, while Ariel represents the spirit, the temptation of escape into rarefied unembodiment. Auden uses this symbolic contrast not just to illustrate the tension between the two
characters, or to recapitulate Alonso’s point that a tightrope-like balance between the two must be achieved, but most potently, to highlight how one or the other – an escape into sensuous nature or the utter transcendence of it – is usually sought from art, which can only provide a fragile illusion of either. This recognition of art’s inadequacy lies at the basis of the Christian conception of art that Auden sets forth in *The Sea and the Mirror*, and especially in this climactic chapter.

Chapter 3 (*Caliban to the Audience*) takes the form of the eponymous character’s circuitous pontification on the relationship between art and life from several adopted viewpoints: first he ventriloquizes the audience to itself, then he addresses as a mentor any potential artists in the audience, before finally speaking more directly as himself, experiencing his own revelatory awakening as to the religious function of art even as he reveals it to audience and reader. Overall, Caliban’s speech stands as the most complete exposition of Auden’s negative poetics as I have been elaborating it in this chapter, deftly embodying both the straightforward claim that art “makes nothing happen” and the more elusive one that it makes *nothing* happen – that is, it makes an event of nothingness. This ambivalence is most fully embodied in Caliban’s account of the audience’s response to art. In his opening ventriloquization of the audience, he has them detail some of the utopian discrepancies between the Muse’s world and the real world that attract them to art – it is a place, for example, where “it is the socially and physically unemphatic David who lays low the gorilla-chested Goliath with one well-aimed custard pie” – but also has them insist that they would never want to live in such a place: “Into that world of freedom without anxiety, sincerity without loss of vigour, feeling that loosens rather than ties the tongue, we are not, we re-iterate, so blinded by presumption to our proper status and
interest as to expect or even wish at any time to enter, far less to dwell there” (31; italics in original). As their reason for this rejection they (as Caliban) offer the need for conflict and contradiction to give individual existence meaning; chastising art for always presenting “the perfectly tidiable case of disorder” (31), they claim that “without our privacies of situation, […] our specific choices of which hill it would be romantic to fly away over or what sea it would be exciting to run away to, […] without, in short, our devoted pungent expression of the partial and contrasted, the Whole would have no importance and its Day or Night no interest” (32-33). This objection implies that the world of art – where all conflicts are dramatically interesting and aesthetically integrated – is a lot like the utopias imagined by fanatical social reformers, and susceptible to the same accusations of inhumanity-through-uniformity that such utopias have often been.

As this section of the speech continues, the audience/Caliban goes further to maintain that everything about the experience of art – the audience being there, the artist being who he is and not someone else – is dependent on the disorderly exigencies of real life, and so to abolish those exigencies (as artists and utopians in common can sometimes seem to want to do) would be to destroy what art feeds upon, to be left with a mirror with nothing to meaningfully reflect. Either that, or the intrusion of the ideals of art into the real world – the inverse of Caliban’s presence in The Tempest, intruding brute bodily reality into the world of magic – would lead to a kind of aestheticized anarchy:

For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and incommode[d] 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,
Caliban thus ventriloquizes the audience as holding the view that art should not make anything happen, at least in the sense of changing the material conditions of the real world. In rejecting the incursion of artistic ideals of fraternity, romance, and justice into their real lives, they/he imply that art’s relationship to utopia should remain entirely analogical – that any reformist elements of art should serve escapist rather than educative or (worse) revolutionary purposes.

The first section of Caliban’s speech, then, seems to confirm through the audience Auden’s repudiation, in the Yeats elegy and beyond, of his earlier life-altering hopes for poetry. But the subsequent sections offer several caveats to the escapist view of art promulgated by the audience/Caliban. In the second section, for example, Caliban points out to any potential artists that what they perceive as their Ariel-inspired “lyric praises of the more candid luxurious world to come” (41) are in fact transfigurations of Caliban himself, “a gibbering fist-clenched creature” who stands as “the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own” (39). In contrast to Auden’s own defense of art from this Freudian reductionism nearly a decade earlier in “Psychology and Art To-day,” Caliban here casts the artistic drive as above all a narcissistic one, revealing Ariel the muse to be, at root, simply a sublimated incarnation of Caliban the id. Such a view of art heavily problematizes the escapism sought by the audience in the first section, at least from the religious stance out of which The Sea and the Mirror develops: for if art is spawned from the artist’s attempt to ennoble and rarify her or his own raw bodily nature, then to escape
into such a construct entails escaping into a deception. Rather than working to shatter our auto-idolatrous illusions by forcing us to confront our flawed natures – as the Auden of this period thought art at its best should do – such an aesthetics allows both artist and audience to indulge in fantasies of self-authorization, believing the crucial gap to be that between their actual lives and those their desires imagine, rather than that between their fallenness and the divine.

It is these fantasies – and the extent to which art can seem to sanction them – that Caliban attacks in the speech’s final section. He splits the audience into two types, corresponding to the tempting left- and right-hand worlds of Alonso’s warning to Ferdinand: those Edenists who seek to be absorbed into “the whole rich incoherence of nature” (45), and those New Jerusalemites who long for “that blessed realm, so far above the twelve impertinent winds and the four unreliable seasons, that Heaven of the Really General Case” (47). Both mistakenly seek the Oneness of an “ultimately liberal condition” (45) – the former through regression to a kind of infantile pan-egoism, the latter through rarefaction to an intellectual shedding of the ego. And both searches lead to despair: “Such are the alternative routes,” Caliban proclaims, “the facile glad-handed highway or the virtuous averted track, by which the human effort to make its own fortune arrives all eager at its abruptly dreadful end” (49). Having returned to the poem’s major theme – that the human attempt to make meaning of our own lives without God’s help is doomed to futility – Caliban goes on to evaluate art’s role in illuminating our distance from the divine, and to isolate the dilemma of the religiously minded artist:

Having learnt his language, I begin to feel something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who, in representing to you
your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more
he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly
can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his
revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows the
picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham, and, worse
still, the more sharply he defines the estrangement itself—and, ultimately,
what other aim and justification has he, what else exactly is the artistic gift
which he is forbidden to hide, if not to make you unforgottably conscious
of the ungarnished offended gap between what you so questionably are
and what you are commanded without any question to become, of the
unqualified No that opposes your every step in any direction?—the more
he must strengthen your delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a
bridge, your interest in your imprisonment a release, so that, far from your
being led by him to contrition and surrender, the regarding of your defects
in his mirror, your dialogue, using his words, with yourself and about
yourself, becomes the one activity which never, like devouring or
collecting or spending, lets you down. (50)

Presented in its dramatic context as a revelation that dawns on Caliban rather than an
insight he possessed before he took the stage, the sudden urgency of “what you are
commanded without any question to become” marks the most explicitly religious
moment in the poem until this point. As in “Atlantis,” however, no direct reference is
made to the He who does the commanding, once again leaving God cloaked in negativity
so as to emphasize “the ungarnished offended gap” of which “the artistic gift” serves to
make us “unforgettably conscious.” But we must be cautious, Caliban warns, not to fall into the trap of believing that consciousness of the gap can be enough, as though awareness alone can save us from the necessity of “contrition and surrender.” This places the religious artist in a dilemma, whereby her or his art is ideally conversionary, but actually often exacerbates our tendencies to self-authorization, lending us a mirror in which to see our follies vainly reflected without providing the necessary prod towards spiritual reform. Through Caliban, Auden once again veers close here to the view of art as Christian propaganda exemplified by “Atlantis,” though this view is only ever theorized negatively. In the final paragraph of his speech Caliban evokes “that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf,” and once again stresses the gap revealed by the mirror of art as key to spiritually suturing the divide: “it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that we can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours” (52). The phrase “Wholly Other Life” bridges the concepts of God (who remains unnamed throughout The Sea and the Mirror) and utopia, highlighting that both take on greatest significance in our distance from them – a distance both the poem itself and art as theorized by it find their purpose in illuminating.

3.

So far in this chapter I have been drawing together two strands of Auden’s thought from the late 1930s to the 1950s, with the first strand embodied in a revisionist reading of the claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” – in the sense that it opens and illuminates a no-place of possibility into which alternatives can be imagined – and the
second inherent in the claim that “every good poem [or “every work of art” as the earlier iteration runs] is very nearly a utopia” – in the sense of providing a patterned analogue to a more perfect society. As I discussed in the last section, *The Sea and the Mirror* stands as the point in Auden’s work at which these two strands most explicitly and thoroughly intertwine into a fully fledged negative poetics, as the poem casts art’s felicitous mirror as serving to reflect our distance from what its last words call “the restored relation.” Because of *The Sea and the Mirror*’s religious impetus, however, this is a relation not to one another in a more perfect society, but rather to the divine unnameable. As in much of Auden’s work throughout the 1940s, religious imperatives largely subsume utopian ones, though the hope for a state of unity more broad than a strictly personal salvationary one consistently glimmers through. Implicit behind Auden’s 1940s stance on the function of art as “the destruction of auto-idolatry” lies the idea that a society in which all had come to realize, accept, and seek forgiveness for their essential fallenness would be a society of mutually loving neighbours – the fulfillment of utopia in a postlapsarian Eden.

I have already pointed to *The Sea and the Mirror*’s prefiguration of Auden’s later distinction between Arcadians and Utopians, Eden and the New Jerusalem. But these dichotomies are never made explicit in his work until later in the decade, mostconcertedly in the 1948 essay “Dingley Dell and the Fleet.” Asserting a “characterological gulf” between “the Arcadian whose favorite daydream is of Eden, and the Utopian whose favorite daydream is of the New Jerusalem” (*DH* 409), Auden goes on to flesh out these distinctions at length, focusing on the pastness of Eden as opposed to the futurity of the New Jerusalem. The “backward-looking Arcadian” accepts the irrevocability of his banishment from Eden, and so knows that his vision of the Good
Place must remain “a wish-dream that cannot become real” (410). By contrast, “the forward-looking Utopian” does not accept the impossibility of establishing the Good Place on earth, but in fact “believes that his New Jerusalem is a dream that ought to be realized so that the actions by which it could be realized are a necessary element in his dream” (410). According to Auden, such “actions” will almost inevitably be violent ones – revolution, purgation, even genocide – and so the Utopian temperament is marked by an “indulgence in aggressive fantasies” utterly foreign to the Arcadian (410). In one sense Auden concurs here with a persistent strain of anti-utopianism in the twentieth century, exemplified in Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper and more recent thinkers like John Gray, which sees impossibility as inherent in the definition of utopia and posits the virtual inevitability of totalitarianism whenever utopian ideals are actually implemented. In another sense, however, “Dingley Dell and the Fleet” finds Auden at last clearly delineating the distinction between religious and utopian hope implicit in much of his work for over a decade. The Arcadian – whose essential Christianity is hinted at by the name given to his Good Place, Eden – roots his hope in an acceptance of fallenness, and so his yearning serves primarily to image his redemption in the afterlife. By contrast, the Utopian’s fervour for the New Jerusalem may be religious in character, but is blasphemous in its auto-idolatry, its prideful conviction that heaven can be brought to earth.

Auden’s one explicit treatment of this distinction in his poetry comes in “Vespers,” written in 1954 as the fifth of his seven-poem sequence *Horae Canonicae* (CP 635). Structured according to the canonical hours of prayer, the sequence takes as its foundational event the crucifixion of Christ, extending the metaphoric resonance of that
specific historical murder to include any societally sanctioned act of violence.

Throughout the sequence, Auden’s speaker meditates on those upon whose invisibility, disenfranchisement, or death any peaceful civic existence depends. In keeping with this theme, “Vespers” – the formal name for evensong – recounts a twilight meeting between the speaker, who identifies himself as an Arcadian, and his “anti-type,” a Utopian – each with his own exclusionary vision of the perfect society. Structured in short blocks of prose, the poem proceeds through a series of comparisons which largely re-iterate the distinctions made in “Dingley Dell and the Fleet,” with the Arcadian speaker embodying harmless aesthetic values while the Utopian remains stridently political: “Glancing at a lampshade in a store window, I observe it is too hideous for anyone to buy: He observes it is too expensive for a peasant to buy” (CP 636). Though most of the poem finds the speaker obviously favouring his own playful vision of Eden (where “the only source of political news is gossip”) over the Utopian’s severe and rigorous New Jerusalem (where “a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born”), in its final third he reflects more equivocally on the meaning of their encounter:

Was it (as it must look to any god of cross-roads) simply a fortuitous intersection of life-paths, loyal to different fibs?

Or also a rendezvous between accomplices who, in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting

to remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth?) of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget,
forcing us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence)

on whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy, are alike founded:

For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand. (CP 637)

The suggestion that Arcadian and Utopian might simply be “loyal to different fibs” once again mitigates against taking the speaker to straightforwardly represent Auden’s viewpoint. That their meeting might be “fortuitous,” and indeed that they might even be “accomplices,” suggests a dialectical relation between the two, as if each is fully actualized only by the presence of the other. In speculating that each reminds the other “of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget” – in the Arcadian’s case, “the blood” without which his vision of Eden could never be safely dreamt; in the Utopian’s, “the innocence” that must be sacrificed to bring his New Jerusalem to fruition – the poem suggests that neither mode of conceiving of the Good Place can be coherent in itself, that both lack a fully rooted understanding of the present conditions from which their visions emanate. In emphasizing how each illuminates for the other the absent presence of their mutual “victim” – without whose “cement of blood […] no secular wall will safely stand” – “Vespers” tropes the very concept of negative poetics I have been
exploring in this chapter: Arcadian and Utopian each make nothing happen for the other, presencing the invisible suffering figure whose very existence both makes their visions of the Good Place necessary and proves how distant they remain from achievement.

To return to the idea with which I began this chapter – and which was formulated in the very same year “Vespers” was written – one might read the poem as exemplifying Auden’s claim that “every good poem is very nearly a utopia” in more than just a formal sense. One might also see it as highlighting the distance inherent in that concept of nearness; in suggesting that even the walls within which poetry is safely written are themselves cemented with blood, “Vespers” makes clear that a good poem can never be as insulated from the conditions of its composition as its formal coherence might suggest. Furthermore, from Auden’s claim that specifically good poems share this nearness to utopia, one might infer the critical assertion that an awareness of poetry’s inadequacy – and the inadequacy of the better worlds it analogizes – is an essential criterion of any poem’s goodness. In the years after *Horae Canonicae*, and especially from the 1960s onward, Auden’s poetic voice is increasingly defined by a modesty of tone, an indication that he had given up thinking of poetry as performing anything more ambitious than eulogizing our bodily and domestic existence, and admitting the utter impotence of any one individual in the face of the world’s many problems. The word “utopia” disappears from his writing, along with any hint that poetry can fill any more than a consolatory role. No longer concerned with negatively illuminating what our worlds – societal or personal – might be missing with an aim to filling those gaps, his work contents itself with gently chiding and forgiving us for our inevitable imperfections.
Notes

1 Although I quote from the final version of the essay in The Dyer’s Hand, first published in 1962, most of the material from “The Virgin and the Dynamo” was contained in successive versions of the essay “Nature, History, and Poetry,” first in 1949 (unpublished) and then in the September 1950 issue of the journal Thought. The utopia analogy does not appear, however, until a talk Auden gave at a Smith College symposium entitled “Art and Morals” on 23 and 24 April 1954, in which he claims that “every successful work of art is very nearly a utopia” (Prose III 666).

2 In the 1950 version of “Nature, History and Poetry,” for instance, Auden includes the following as the third of three “absolute presuppositions” that every poet holds (consciously or not) “as the dogmas of his art”: “(3) The historical world is a redeemable world. The unfreedom and disorder of the past can be reconciled in the future” (Prose III 232). He reiterates this belief again in “Art and Morals,” for which see Prose III, p. 666.

3 Jahan Ramazani highlights this renovatory aspect of Auden’s elegy, pointing out for example how in “With your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice,” he echoes “The Gyres” (“Out of Cavern comes a voice / And all it knows is that one word ‘Rejoice’”), and remarking how “Auden appropriates the harshest poem in the Yeats canon and assimilates it to the humanistic counsel of his elegy […] Apostrophizing Yeats as master, forgiving him his politics, recycling his elegiac method, and recirculating his words, Auden lets “the healing fountain start’ in the heart of his elegy” (Mourning 188).

4 For a thorough exploration of Yeats’s attempt to find in folk tradition a binding force for society, see my own Chapter One.

5 See for example Lucy McDiarmid’s reading of the essay’s relation to the poem, which claims that the Defence Counsel “announces an uncrossable border between poetry and the rest of life,” and then goes on to claim that Auden “paraphrase[d] his own prose” in adding the second section of the elegy, thus repudiating his previous vision of “a poet who persuades and teaches and causes agricultural miracles” (27). Of course, this ignores the fact that Auden chose to allow this latter vision to resonate at the end of the elegy. Curiously, though she and other critics are perfectly willing to read the essay according to this last-is-truest methodology, none to my knowledge is willing to read the elegy this way – which would of course entail positing the third section’s soaring Yeatsian affirmations of poetry’s ability to heal as Auden’s true position.

6 I refer to the version from the Selected Poems rather than the Collected, because this represents the earliest printed version of “Atlantis” rather than Auden’s final revision.

7 Though Auden never discusses the concept of the via negativa at length, he refers to it in letters and essays throughout his later writings. See for example his letter of 30 May 1957 to Ursula Niebuhr, in which he discusses Simone Weil’s book La Pesanteur et la Grace as “An exposition of the via negativa carried almost to heretical lengths, i.e. for her it is not the cross that is the stumbling block, but the Incarnation, or rather any of the references in the Gospel to Christ enjoying himself” (qtd. in Newlands, p. 114). See also his 1964 essay “The Protestant Mystics,” in Forewords and Afterwords, esp. pp. 73-74.

8 The rest of Jacoby’s passage runs: “Yet like the resistance to naming God, the reluctance to depict utopia does not diminish but exalts it. It bespeaks the gap between now and then. It refuses to reduce the unknown future to the well-known present, the
hope to its cause” (35-36). Jacoby’s use of “gap” here dovetails with my own use of the word throughout this chapter.

9 Prospero’s magic is referred to as “art” several times in *The Tempest*, for example when Miranda pleads: “If by your Art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them” (I.ii.1).

10 Because so much of *The Sea and the Mirror* is in prose, rather than citing line numbers, I cite page numbers from Arthur Kirsch’s 2005 edition of the work.

11 Alan Jacobs sees a critique of Romanticism inherent in this distinction between two paths: “As Caliban details his warnings to those who give themselves over to him or to Ariel, two of Auden’s convictions become increasingly clear: first, that the victims of both fates share the delusion that it is possible to exercise full control over their destinies; and second, that the desire for such self-determination is the characteristic disease of Romanticism” (21). Jacobs relates the Edenic impulse to Wordsworth and the obverse impulse to rarefaction to Shelley, and though I find this analogization very interesting, I cannot see any hint that Auden is taking aim at Romanticism in Caliban’s speech, rather than simply at the hubris of considering oneself a self-determining being rather than a creature indebted to a creator.

12 McDiarmid claims that *The Sea and the Mirror* is incapable of referring to a deity directly, “and that the point of this is not simply to show off a Jamesian circumlocutory style, but to dramatize the poem’s inability to refer to any extrapoetic reality” (99). That McDiarmid chooses the word “incapable” rather than “unwilling” evinces the voracity with which she pursues her conviction that “the poem’s only raison d’être is to undermine the spiritual significance of all art” (117). As should be clear from my own reading, I disagree, believing that *The Sea and the Mirror* portrays art’s spiritual significance as residing in its illumination of our perpetual distance from spiritual plenitude.

13 Gray, for example, claims that “Utopianism does not cause totalitarianism – for a totalitarian regime to come into being many other factors are necessary – but totalitarianism follows whenever the dream of a life without conflict is consistently pursued through the use of state power” (53).
AFTERWORD

So as not to end on a deflated note – with Auden having given up the utopian aspiration of improving the world through poetry – I would like to suggest the enduring persistence of this aspiration, beyond the work of Yeats and Auden, in their contemporaries and up to poets of the present day. I noted in my Introduction that this dissertation arose out of the observation that my two chosen poets often evidence a desire that the world should be a better place, but now I would like to go further and admit that the main impetus for the preceding chapters arose from my broader conviction that few poets in the Modern Anglo-American tradition (and here I include Ireland and Canada) are content with the world as they find it, and that their poetry largely arises out of this fundamental dissatisfaction. Or to put in the theoretical terms of my study – which repeatedly takes recourse to Levitas’s definition of utopia as “the expression of desire for a better way of being” – I believe that much of Modern and contemporary poetry (indeed much more than has heretofore been appreciated) is born of impulses that might reasonably be termed utopian.

I have alluded several times throughout this dissertation to how poetry’s marginality in Western societies makes it apt to take up adversarial stances, to adopt postures of suspicion towards the perceived status quo – in Yeats’s skewering of the emergent Catholic middle classes in “September 1913,” for instance, or Auden’s persistent appeal to unity amid the factionalism of the 1930s. I have also implied a certain sympathy with Shelley’s conception of poetry as an expression of a principle of harmony, as “awaken[ing] and enlarg[ing] the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (487) – as a combinatory, unifying
medium, and thereby particularly well-equipped to embody the desire for social unity. In
the preceding chapters I have attempted to highlight the immense extent to which such
adversarial and aspirational stances inform Yeats’s and Auden’s work throughout their
careers, but I would contend that this propensity to strive against the present and toward a
better future – to adopt postures of what I have called affirmative futurity – could be
fruitfully explored in many other Modern poets as well, from near-contemporaries of
Yeats and Auden like Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, to more recent writers
like Frank O’Hara, Adrienne Rich, and Geoffrey Hill.

The apparent randomness of the preceding list is intentional; there are many other
poets I might have named. Amid the vast diversity of approaches among those I did,
however, a future-conscious reader will detect a common restlessness, a critical
unwillingness to abide in the world as it is, and insistent hints of the conviction or hope or
wish that poetry might work to effect some extra-aesthetic change. So although this has
been a study of Yeats and Auden in their historically, biographically and poetically
specific relationships to the concept of utopia, my broader intent is to draw other critics’
attention to the prevalence of the futurity motif in Modern poetry, in order that we may
attend more thoroughly to, and theorize more robustly, the often-elusive ways in which it
argues for its own indispensability to our search for better futures.
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