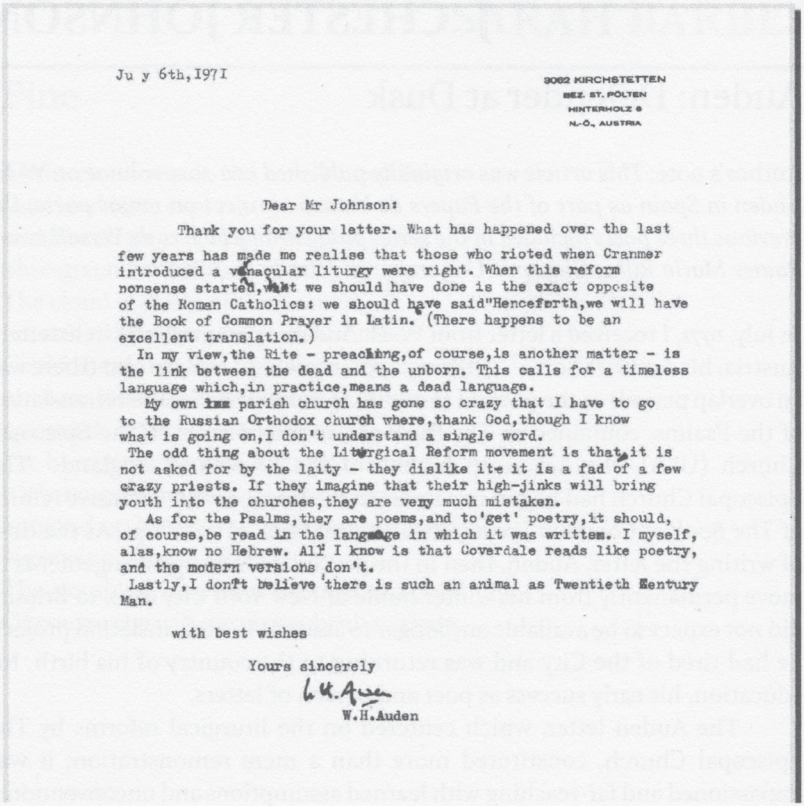
J. CHESTER JOHNSON

Auden: Defender at Dusk

Author's note: *This article was originally published in a 2014 volume on W. H. Auden in Spain as part of the Papers de Versalia project on major poets; the previous three poets included in the series published by Papers de Versalia were Rainer Maria Rilke, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Emily Dickinson.*

In July, 1971, I received a letter from W. H. Auden – postmarked Kirchstetten, Austria, his summer home—after my appointment to replace him (there was an overlap period) as the poet on the drafting committee for the retranslation of the Psalms, contained in *The Book of Common Prayer* of The Episcopal Church (USA), the American branch of the Church of England. The Episcopal Church had begun in earnest in the late 1960s an extensive reform of *The Book of Common Prayer*, its liturgical book of worship. At the time of writing the letter, Auden, then in the process of making arrangements to move permanently from his winter home of New York City back to Britain, did not expect to be available any longer to assist in the retranslation project; he had tired of the City and was returning to the country of his birth, his education, his early success as poet and person of letters.

The Auden letter, which centered on the liturgical reforms by The Episcopal Church, constituted more than a mere remonstration; it was impassioned and far-reaching with learned assumptions and unconventional propositions, involving "the Rite," the "link between the dead and the unborn," and the usefulness of employing "a dead language" in the form of Latin for "the Rite" and for *The Book of Common Prayer* generally; he also excoriated the "high-jinks," as he put it, being perpetrated by The Episcopal Church through its liturgical revision program, inciting him to refuse attendance at his own neighborhood Episcopal church in favor of a Russian Orthodox church, where he couldn't "understand a single word":



Ju y 6th, 1971

3062 KIRCHSTETTEN
BEZ. ST. PÖLTEN
HINTERHOLZ 8
N.-Ö., AUSTRIA

Dear Mr Johnson:

Thank you for your letter. What has happened over the last few years has made me realise that those who rioted when Cranmer introduced a vernacular liturgy were right. When this reform nonsense started, what we should have done is the exact opposite of the Roman Catholics: we should have said "Henceforth, we will have the Book of Common Prayer in Latin." (There happens to be an excellent translation.)

In my view, the Rite - preaching, of course, is another matter - is the link between the dead and the unborn. This calls for a timeless language which, in practice, means a dead language.

My own parish church has gone so crazy that I have to go to the Russian Orthodox church where, thank God, though I know what is going on, I don't understand a single word.

The odd thing about the Liturgical Reform movement is that it is not asked for by the laity - they dislike it: it is a fad of a few crazy priests. If they imagine that their high-jinks will bring youth into the churches, they are very much mistaken.

As for the Psalms, they are poems, and to get poetry, it should, of course, be read in the language in which it was written. I myself, alas, know no Hebrew. All I know is that Coverdale reads like poetry, and the modern versions don't.

Lastly, I don't believe there is such an animal as Twentieth Century Man.

with best wishes

Yours sincerely

W.H. Auden

Anyone taking even a cursory read of the missive would have to conclude that by the summer of 1971, Auden had become more than a little annoyed with the entire liturgical reform movement of The Episcopal Church. Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor and principal biographer, ends his most recent biography on the poet, *Later Auden*, with excerpts from this letter as part of a discussion about Auden's refractory views toward The Episcopal Church's revisions.

Looking at the verse in Auden's final two volumes of poetry, *Epistle To A Godson* and *Thank You, Fog,* with an eye for any poems that reflected his attitude at that time toward *The Book of Common Prayer*, it seems only fitting this quatrain appeared in the poem, "Doggerel by a Senior Citizen," from the volume, *Epistle To A Godson*, published in 1972:

> *The Book of Common Prayer* we knew
> Was that of 1662:
> Though with-it sermons may be well,
> Liturgical reforms are hell.

Also, the poem, "Address to the Beasts," included in *Thank You, Fog*, published posthumously in 1974, probably even more effectively confirmed his irritation:

> and, though unconscious of God,
> your Sung Eucharists are
> more hallowed than ours.

Last year, I wrote a couple of articles for *Best American Poetry* on my experiences in working with Auden on the retranslation of the Psalter. One of the more unforeseen outcomes of those articles was the response of amazement I received from many people, who were simply unaware of Auden's intense engagement, intellectually and emotionally, in The Episcopal Church's revision of *The Book of Common Prayer* that had begun in the 1960s.

So how engaged was he? He wrote to the chairman of the Psalter retranslation project, penned other letters and at least one article, and contributed measurably to the retranslation, which was published in 1979 in the revised prayer book, currently being used in Episcopal churches throughout the United States. Moreover, the Psalms on which Auden and I worked were adopted for worship books and services by Lutherans in Canada and the United States and by the Anglican Church of Canada. Auden's July, 1971 letter to me speaks for itself in terms of personal engagement—toward the end of his days, at the "dusk" of his daylight; he died two years later in September, 1973. Here was a preeminent English poet—perhaps, the preeminent poet of the English language for the 20th century—sending a letter of consequential thinking and spiritual reflection to a 20-something

poet at the time, who had no professional name to speak of and whose only nexus with Auden consisted of our roles in the retranslation of the Psalms for *The Book of Common Prayer*. We exchanged letters three times on subjects dealing with the project; his written responses on two occasions being cordial, but perfunctory. The July, 1971 reply was far different; this one had a mission, a purpose. Why me? I have my suspicions. He assumed, I believe, that I would, more than likely, be involved in the Psalter retranslation project to its very completion (which I was—to publication in 1979) and, as a result of my age, be witness, in one way or another, to the overall liturgical reform program of The Episcopal Church for years to come. He wanted the subsequent generation to know his attitude and considerable reservations.

The writings of Edward Mendelson and Arthur Kirsch, both of whom have brought substantive insight to the religious and spiritual focus in Auden's verse, are clear exceptions to my criticism that some literary commentators today frequently "miss" a good deal of Auden by paying too little attention to the pervasive theological underpinnings of his poetic art. In my opinion, a couple of reasons can explain this avoidance. First, a tendency at present exists to eschew, to the extent possible and credible, the relationship between Auden's faith and his poetic composition. The word, religion, and the term, Christianity, regularly carry an air of fustiness and superannuation in literary quarters. Second, and as pertinent, there is often a lack of familiarity with the language and related history that characterized Auden's religious and spiritual convictions and theology—his devotion, if you will. Should one therefore be devoid of a grasp of certain essential history and language illustrative of Auden's reliance on religious and spiritual "reason," then it is surely much better to leave things unsaid—just abandon the whole subject largely untouched. However, it is, I believe, impossible to understand much of Auden's poetry without an appreciation for this faithful and worshipful element of his life and work. Ironically, he described a somewhat analogous situation in *Forewords and Afterwards* when discussing the theological language of the Catholic mystics and the prospects for misunderstanding the meaning of some of their writings without background in their traditional language. The same warning could be given, in some respects, about W. H. Auden himself.

Over time, the meaning and message of the special Auden missive came into additional focus, as I learned more about his theological and liturgical opinions and as I grew increasingly familiar with the effects of Charles Williams' beliefs and writings on Auden; the connection between Williams and the contents of the July, 1971 letter became rather obvious. Indeed, Auden gave voice in 1956 to that conclusion in the introduction to Williams' classic, *The Descent of the Dove*, which originally appeared in 1939: "I have been reading and rereading *The Descent of the Dove* for some sixteen years now and I find it a source of intellectual delight and spiritual nourishment which remains inexhaustible." It is rumored that Auden read Williams' book annually. Mendelson reports that Auden told friends that he had met two saints, Charles Williams and Dorothy Day, and Arthur Kirsch mentions in *Auden and Christianity* that upon meeting Charles Williams in the late 1930s, Auden remarked, "...for the first time in my life I felt myself in the presence of personal sanctity." Williams, twenty years senior to Auden, died in 1945.

In *The Descent of the Dove*, Charles Williams refers to "the Rite" as the Eucharist Food—elements of bread and wine served to Christian congregations to share in the body and blood of Christ. It is to this meaning that Auden returns in his use of "the Rite" in the July, 1971 letter, referencing "the Rite" being "the link between the dead and the unborn." Auden had previously made use of a similar phrase in his introduction to *The Descent of the Dove*—"the already dead and the as yet unborn"—alluding to requisite regard not being limited to those souls who just happen to live in one's own time. Williams had previously made the judgment that "the great Rite soared to its climax in the eternal and yet communicated the eternal to time... History and contemporaneity and futurity were joined"; Williams expanded this Eucharistic thought, reiterated conceptually by Auden in the letter, by quoting the words of Gregory the Great, "things lowest are brought into communion with the highest, things earthly are united with the heavenly, and the things that are seen and those which are unseen become one."

Auden proposed in the letter that rather than completing its planned prayer book revision, The Episcopal Church "should have said 'Henceforth, we will have the *Book of Common Prayer* in Latin'." Because Latin constitutes a "dead language," then it would also serve the purpose of satisfying Auden's

criterion as a language for "the Rite" in linking "the dead and the unborn"—and thereby additionally reducing the problem of time in eternity that had historically plagued Christianity. Both Auden and Williams shared a recognition that Christianity traditionally faced a significant tension, if not a conundrum, with time in eternity; rather, time depended on eternity, or, as Williams had also stated about this continuous stress, "Christendom was dealing on one side with temporal and on the other with eternal affairs, but it was one Christendom."Auden further refined the unreconciled nature of time in eternity in his "*For the Time Being—A Christmas Oratorio*" with the Chorus asking this question:

> How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
> The Infinite become a finite fact?

In the same piece, the Narrator attempts a partial answer:

> . . .the Kingdom of Heaven may come, not in our present
> And not in our future, but in the Fullness of Time.

Without getting into high weeds through too much deliberation on Christology, parousia, eschatology and the like, it is reasonable to conclude that Auden thought the expanded populations (i.e., the dead and the unborn) that he and Williams believed were incorporate in "the Rite" of the Eucharist would help to supply at least a partial reconciliation to the thorny issue of "time in eternity." To mitigate the complexity of "time in eternity," it was necessary for time and eternity to move toward oneness. Thus, as stated in the July, 1971 letter, Auden recommended that "the Rite" employ a dead language, to wit: Latin. Beyond the fact that Latin had ceased to be employed in any determinative, communal sense, there were certain other features about the language that would have made Latin the preferred Eucharistic form of communication. Williams had espoused Latin as the principal language of the inherited Faith, drawing much on the flight of the Greek language that occurred in the Western world, when Latin inherited its inimitable role for Christians; in addition, there was Latin's reliance on peasant rhythms, assonance, and folk poetry—"The Faith had to talk Latin," Williams said in explaining the Christian Church's historically heavy dependence on the language. It would, therefore, be logical, considering the multiplicity of reasons, for Auden to name Latin the choice dead language for the Eucharist.

In his own poems and writings, Auden often pushed and enlarged the parameters of word meanings and use. It is well-known that he routinely examined old, if not ancient, usage of individual words to justify unusual word forms. In turn, however, Auden did not appear to have any problem embracing neologisms Williams enlisted to empower and clarify particular theological points. One conspicuous example is the word, co-inherence, and its verb, co-inhere; to Williams, the concept meant to have or to share inherent aspects of one another, to reflect as scripturally, "He in us and we in him." Toward unity—whether that be in the form of a dead language for capturing the expanded populations of the "dead and the unborn" or bringing time and eternity more closely together through Latin or combining body, blood and spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist—Auden could accept and apply Williams' term, "co-inherence." The term also coincided well with Auden's own personal experience with and attitude toward the Christian concept of agape love, that multiple love, that love shared with other humans, the love that Auden had said was expressed to him one summer night in June, 1933, on the verge of his being "done with Christianity for good"; sitting on a lawn with three colleagues, he felt invaded by a power that was irresistible and not his own, and he then knew exactly "what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself."

The co-inherence construct extended beyond the Incarnational between God and human to the broad human community in the form of "the City," which emerged in the Williams' book, *The Image of the City*. The name of "the City" to Williams was Union, and any exclusion from "the City" became hell... "it is the doctrine that no man lives to himself or indeed *from* himself...We are, simply, utterly dependent on others." "Bear ye one another's burdens." C. S. Lewis, a fellow member of the "Inklings" along with Williams and J. R. R. Tolkien, once said of Williams: "On many of us the prevailing impression made by the London streets is one of chaos; but Williams, looking on the same spectacle, saw chiefly an image—an imperfect, pathetic, heroic, and majestic image of Order." After World War II, Auden didn't quite apprehend "the City" the same way Williams had—in *Memorial for the City*, which Auden composed "In memoriam Charles Williams, d. April 1945," he contended:

Sundered by reason and treason the City
Found invisible ground for concord in measured sound,
While wood and stone learned the shameless
Games of man, to flatter, to show off, be pompous, to romp.

And, yet, more than two decades later, Auden, imagining the holy, human city, seized more fully Williams' stance on "the City," enlisting the neologism, co-inhering, in the poem, *United Nations Hymn*, contained in *Epistle To A Godson*:

. . .Not interfering
But co-inhering,
For all within
The cincture of the sound
Is holy ground,
Where all are Brothers,
None faceless Others.

Little did I realize over forty years ago when I started to work on the retranslation of the Psalms for The Episcopal Church that, in a small, but intense and virtually orphic way, my life would unwittingly be tied to W. H. Auden. I long ago lost count of the times I've been asked about him as a result of our respective work on the retranslation, though many of those inquiries had absolutely nothing to do with the project. This association with Auden caused me to learn much more about him than I otherwise would have, and that process has had its pleasurable and meaningful impacts. Once, I remarked to a friend that the association with Auden has meant not just getting to know his work and life better but getting to know his friends and the influences, mirrored in the realms of literature, literary criticism, and theology. Charles Williams proved to be one of the most fascinating and visionary of those friends and influences. The July, 1971 letter impelled me forward into an Auden world where he stood embattled at the gates with his confrere in arms, Charles Williams (though then perished, but still whispering and encouraging), against marauding Visigoths, who were, to Auden, prepared to vanquish the citadel of the Word—of the literary, spiritual and theological Word. It is not surprising that, at Auden's dusk, he would choose Williams to share, to "co-inhere," if you will, in a final defense.