5

W. H. Auden and me

> … we go back
> to 'Consider this and in our time';
> it's a key text, no doubt about it:
> the first garden party of the year,
> the leisurely conversation in the bar,
> the fact that it is later
> than we think. I set an essay
>
> on what exactly Auden meant –
> and in one month's time in this small room
> one way or other I will write 'See me'
> And in one way or another she will.
>
> Peter Sansom, 'Teaching Auden', *Everything You've Heard is True*, Carcanet, 1990.

I never taught Auden; or maybe a bit, in a tangential kind of way, to be later described. I do not believe I have ever wanted to know, or to find out, or even to think about, *what exactly Auden meant*; I *have* been puzzled; I haven't *got* his poetry; I have longed to know where it came from and where he was coming from; I want to know *how it works*. But I was taught, somehow, from my earliest days, that 'what does it really mean?', 'what did the author mean?', were not proper questions to put to texts. And after many a long internal struggle, historians know that there really is no orginary 'how it happened', no real 'once upon a time'; that things only happened as they have been told.

I was introduced to Auden's poetry – to one of his poems – in my O-level English literature class, South London, in the 1962–1963 school year. One of the set texts was an anthology of narrative poetry and ballads, from which were selected for examination some Child and Border ballads

('Edward', 'The Twa Corbies'), 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'The Journey of the Magi', and Auden's 'O what is that sound?', simply called 'Ballad' here.[1] The last came, somehow, with the absolute certainty of knowledge that the point of poetry was its ambiguity; that you just *couldn't* know what it meant. This I must have been taught, though possibly not in that particular classroom. Is it a man or woman who speaks? Who, in answer to the question about the sound of drumming coming closer from down in the valley, says: 'Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,/The soldiers coming.'? Who has betrayed whom? Who cries out 'O where are you going? Stay with me here!/ Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?'? Who replies: 'No, I promised to love you, dear,/But I must be leaving'? These questions were discussed; we knew that there wasn't an answer to any of them; that indeterminacy was the point of asking them. We wouldn't have put it like that. We were 15 years old. But we – probably – played about with the questions after class, just as a year later under the influence of our A-level French set-texts we devised a wet-your-knickers comic routine in which the romantic poets Hugo and de Musset ('Huggo and Mussett') were a seedy, down-at-heel music hall duo, doomed to play the Bingley Hippodrome, c.1909 and into all eternity, with sad, pathetic hopes of one day making the Bradford Empire.[2] With hindsight, it's clear that we knew

1 A. A. Evans (ed.), *The Poet's Tale. An Anthology of Narrative Verse (London English Literature)*, London University Press, London, 1957. Q. 10 of the Summer 1963 O-level paper asked us to 'Give an account of the ballad *Edward*. What similarities do you find between this poem and W. H. Auden's *Ballad* beginning '*O what is that sound* …': 'University of London, General Certificate of Education, Summer, 1963. Ordinary Level English Literature (Syllabus A). Two and a half hours'. This anthology is not discussed by Lionel Warner, 'Teaching Poetry to Teenagers', Michael Lockwood (ed.) *Bringing Poetry Alive. A Guide to Classroom Practice*, Sage, London, 2011, pp. 99–112; 108, though 'difficult and possibly inappropriate' poems by Auden in other school anthologies are.

2 Oh yes. Just as Auden and his school and university friends made their imaginary world 'Mortmere', we made ours, complete with funny voices in role and each part with character and genealogy. Ours, however, did not continue into our 20s for then we no longer knew each other; but there were new friends with whom to make new Mortmeres; a lifelong activity. A 'self-indulgence' lay behind 'every attitude that … [was] held and used for the sake of its rhetoric and with the consciousness of this use', says Frederick Buell of Mortmere: *W. H. Auden as a Social Poet*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY and London, 1973, pp. 33–76. It was the world that Christopher Isherwood and his friend Edward Upward lived during their Cambridge years and after. Isherwood recalled an earlier 'school-saga world' which he had shared with Auden during their time at St Edmund's: 'a kind of Mortmere – a Mortmere founded upon our preparatory school lives'. He was three years older than Auden. Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows*.

a lot – of things, ideas, history. We enjoyed bathos (and might have even known it by that name, for a list of figures of speech was committed to memory, sometime between 1960 and 1965). But we couldn't have made comedy out of 'Oh what is that sound', for it was a poem in the tragic mode, as we were shortly about to learn in our A-level class by reference to Aristotle's theory of the drama. The pictures in your head, the redcoats' boots thundering on the cottage floor, were your own private business, but in class you said: *It's Culloden isn't it? It's 1746. Those two had something to do with the Jacobite Rebellion*, simply because you could. The Fifteen and The Forty-five (the two Jacobite Rebellions) had been studied sometime before History O-level.[3] Sometime before 1962 I had written on the front cover of my history notebook, 'I refuse to learn any more English history until our rightful monarch is restored'. Me the Republican? Wrote that? Expressed allegiance to an exiled king? Yes; and I am ashamed. I have never before written this down. I *knew* I was a republican; it was more a joke than a statement of political principle; an ironic bit of snidery directed at what we thought of as an incompetent history teacher; we thought we knew more than she did, about democracy and popular feeling expressed in the face of aristocratic state power. Horrid girls! How unfortunate those who had to teach us! Though I'm sure they said we were a joy, what with our smart questions about states and governments, rebellion and revolution, the iambic tetrameter and the French alexandrine.

We *did* know what a tetrameter was. We might even have said of Auden's ballad: *ABCB quatrains with alternating four-stress and three-stress lines*; we

An Education in the Twenties (1938), Vintage, London, 2013, pp. 144–145. For 'funny voices' in everyday social interaction and in print, Jonathan Rée, 'Funny voices. Stories, punctuation and personal identity', *New Literary History*, 21:4 (1990), pp. 1039–1060.

3 The ballad was published in 1934, two years after Auden's Scottish time at Larchfield Academy; Andrew Thacker, 'Auden and the Little Magazines', Tony Sharpe (ed.), *W. H. Auden in Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 337. He knew R. L. Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, in which the Jacobite uprising is presented in something of the same way. But as every internet blogger analysing the poem says, it's about what may happen to personal relationships in any situation of political oppression. Isn't it? Or: it's about what Auden said it was in a 1971 lecture: 'a painting of the Agony in the Garden, where the soldiers in the background appear harmless', and "it is only because one has read the Gospel story, that one knows that, in fact, they are coming to arrest Jesus'; Katherine Bucknell, 'Phantasy and Reality in Poetry', Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (eds), *'In Solitude, for Company'. W. H. Auden after 1940*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 177–196; 193; quoted Edward Mendelson, 'Auden and God', *New York Review of Books*, 6 December 2007. Mendelson's piece is a review of Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2005.

had been provided with the vocabulary of scansion. In the O-level English literature class, the anthology on our desks, much more time was spent on form and structure than on the melodrama of our historical imagination. We scanned the lines and determined that the iambic tetrameters were insistently regular except for the last lines of most of the stanza, which were trimeters: 'The soldiers coming … Or perhaps a warning … Why are you kneeling? … And now they are running … But I must be leaving … And their eyes are burning'. Or maybe we said something like that. We must have been asked about the three four-beat lines followed by a two-beat line at the end of each stanza. We must have been asked for a little bit of reflection on the difference between this form and that of – say – 'The Twa Corbies':

> As I was walking all alane,
> I heard twa corbies makin a mane;
> The tane unto the ither say,
> 'Whar sall we gang and dine the-day?'

what with its perfect tetrameters and the horrible, cold insistence of its regularity. *Well. Girls. And what about the theme of betrayal in both?* (I speak Miss Jean Brodie here. I have no idea if this is what was said.) What about the new slain knight lying dead in a ditch ('His hound is tae the huntin gane,/His hawk tae fetch the wild-fowl hame,/His lady's tain anither mate,/So we may mak oor dinner swate'), compared with the vows he or she had sworn deceiving, deceiving, in Auden's ballad? We were sometimes asked to contemplate character and motivation in these (literally) bloody ballads. Earlier, or perhaps from a cyclostyled sheet to accompany *The Poet's Tale* (for it was not in the anthology), we were invited to observe the capriciousness of kings, as with poor Sir Patrick Spens who in retreat from court life at the seaside is sent over the wintry North Sea to fetch home the King of Norway's daughter simply because the Scots King wants it so.[4] The grim class analysis of the ballad suited well we daughters of post-War social democracy; we liked satire on elites; we were quite pleased that the nobility forced to accompany Sir Patrick got well drowned, that 'mony was the gude lord's son/That never mair cam hame': 'O laith, laith were our gude Scots lords/Tae weet their

4 'Sir Patrick Spens', one of the most popular of the Child Ballads (No. 58) is available all over the internet. Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (eds), David Nutt, London, 1905.

cork-heelt shuin;/But lang or aw the play wis playd/They wat their hats abuin'. I imagined Sir Patrick to be an old guy, a grizzled sea dog, so I was puzzled – in a detached kind of way; it's a poem! Isn't it? (or *Innit*, though the interrogative tag that isn't interrogative was not to be available for another twenty years. More's the pity)[5] – by the number of Dunfermline ladies playing with their fans and pointlessly combing their hair as they filled in the hours against his return. But the scansion was the best.

Scansion was the loveliest thing, far lovelier to do than clause analysis, into which we had been insistently inducted for two years past in preparation for the English Language O-level exam. Clause analysis provided something of the same sense of orderliness that scansion would afford, but it was materially a messy business if you drew your boxes headed Subject, Object; Article, Main Verb, Preposition, Conjunction; Clause, Subordinate Clause, with a ruler and an ink pen (no ball point pens allowed), for it was very difficult not to smudge the lines; but there was still the joy of neatness as you gently laid out the parts of speech on the page, each in its appointed place. Scansion – tapping out the line of verse and making those dear little marks ˘ and ´ to show the strong and light stress on the syllables – produced in me, at least, a sense of perfect control; of what I thought to be a sophisticated grasp of *how something worked*. The marking of *abba*, or *abab* down the right-hand side of a stanza to show the rhyme scheme, was baby-work compared with scansion. Derek Attridge remembers from his high school years in the US something of the same sense of orderliness and satisfaction when learning to scan Latin verse: 'what looked and sounded like a random arrangement of words into lines could, after mastering a few rules, be shown to be anything but random. A dactylic hexameter could be relied upon to have six feet made up of long and short syllables, according to strict rules governing their disposition across the line. There were no exceptions …'[6] He was also taught to scan English-language verse, but although the process involved some of the same technical terms, with English poetry there were 'all sorts of uncertainties about stressed and unstressed syllables … no clear rules about what kind of foot could occur where, elision was a mystery, and different poets … had different understandings of what constituted a metrical line'.

5 Heike Pichler, 'A Qualitative-quantitative Analysis of Negative Auxiliaries in a Northern English Dialect: I DON'T KNOW and I DON'T THINK, Innit?', PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2008. Personally, I don't think that question mark should be there at the end of the title; but it's an excellent thesis.

6 Derek Attridge, *Moving Words. Forms of English Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 1.

Scansion of English verse was a messy affair for him compared with Latin, which he much preferred. He enjoyed the lucid and pleasing patterns that then emerged in Latin verse, including the observation that the pattern did not coincide, at all, with the sound of the lines. For him, 'the pleasure was an intellectual one, not an aural one'. But for me, South London, c.1962, the pleasure of scanning English verse came *with* the untidiness, the exceptions, the blindingly obvious reasons for irregularity when it occurred. You did what you could; there was to be no perfection of analysis. Language was its own, obdurate thing. You could give it enough order to see what was going on in it.

This difference of attitude may be to do with my not being taught Latin. There was a rule, I believe, that said (Why?) that if you did not have competence in maths, you couldn't do Latin. In the summer examinations which determined this (1959? 1960? Can't remember) I got over 95% in every subject except maths, for which I was awarded 3% for writing my own name correctly. (I was, stupidly, rather proud of this: if you're not good at something, there's a lot of satisfaction in defiantly doing it *really badly*. If I'd read *Wuthering Heights* by then I could have claimed my first sisterhood with Nelly Dean: being Latin-less was all you could expect of a poor man's daughter.) Learning scansion without the means to compare Latin and English verse meant that its pleasures in and with English were not so much intellectual *as* aural. We were taught to read the poem out loud, to find its rhythm and beat by tapping on the desk, then to annotate a copied stanza in our notebook. It was visceral, this pleasure: it involved hands and eyes and ears. You, the reader, *worked* at it, to make its meaning by looking at the moving parts of this little engine of language; you took it into yourself along the way. And by this method, a lot of it did end up in you, for you acquired it, fixed it in your brain, to say aloud later on. I had been taught how to learn language (including poetry) by heart at primary school. But this secondary school teaching method embedded (some) verse much deeper in the heart and consciousness than did the technique imbued in 8-year-olds.

As a technology of analysis scansion placed a deal of emphasis on the sound-system of the English language. How this was understood, I cannot quite work out, for we had an extremely limited vocabulary for discussing sounds: just 'hard' and 'soft' and maybe 'strong' and 'silent'. I didn't learn about phonology or know what a phoneme was until my 20s, when I taught children to read by the modified phonetic method then in vogue. But the ideas of sound and the tonal occupied my literary imagination. From 1958 to 1965 my school was a London County Council (the LCC

became the Greater London Council in 1965) girls' grammar, run on the Dalton principle. We were told that it was the only secondary school in the country that still operated a system of learning by teacher-prepared syllabi or assignments, with children working individually in study spaces or rooms; there were relatively few class lessons in each subject. '*Modified* Dalton, girls! We operate a modified Dalton system' – which meant rather more lessons than the originators would have thought proper, but far fewer than in other local secondary schools.[7] English literature classes and private study hours spent scanning made me somewhat obsessed with sound and phonology. In the sixth form, studying for English A-level, I had great good fun in the library, or maybe it was at one of the tables in the hall set aside for individual study, with the week's cyclostyled syllabus and the instruction to comment on 'the sound qualities displayed by Miss Tilney' – in some early chapter or other of *Mansfield Park*, which was our Austen set text. I made a happy little analysis of the tonal qualities of the character's discourse, the soft and sibilant, persuasive and plosive sound – whatever – of what she said. In the lesson, I silently drew a line through my page of analysis, hid my notebook beneath my copy of the novel so that no one could see; for five minutes in it became clear that I had been meant to comment on the sound *moral* or *ethical* values of Miss Tilney's speech. You taught me about sound! And my profit on it is that it's often the only thing I do when confronted with a text! I do now understand that it was a not very well-framed question; but still.[8]

The education in poetry I was given resonates with what Maureen Duffy describes in her autobiographical novel *That's How It Was* (1962). Passing the scholarship exam and entering Trowbridge High School for Girls in the closing stages of the Second World War, she experienced 'the most enlightened liberal humanist tradition' which, she says, she took to as if her family had been enjoying it for generations; the pleasures of 'learning, of music and the visual arts took me over. Above all … there

7 Helen Parkhurst, *Education on the Dalton Plan*, G. Bell, London, 1922. My school was named after its former headmistress Rosa Bassett, who contributed to the volume by describing her experiment with the plan in 1920. Rosa Bassett, 'A Year's Experiment in an English Secondary School', idem, pp. 125–143. In the 1930s many primary and secondary state schools operated on the Dalton Plan.

8 'A trained speaker, my mother always told me, could recite the London telephone directory and make it interesting … The corollary of this, I noticed in adulthood, is that many actors say their lines as if reciting the London telephone directory, as if the words have no intrinsic meaning at all … I was damaged by my education.' Lynn Barber, *An Education*, Penguin, London, 2009, pp. 18, 56.

was literature in Latin, French and English … Poetry … was a source of the intensest pleasure.' Much of her time was spent 'in a dream of verse writing, reading and learning … impersonating John Keats and imitating his odes'.[9] I recognise the Keats; I can still recite the Keats poems I acquired at 14; 'Ode to a Nightingale' can sometimes work as well as any sleeping pill. But I did not and do not recognise the story of the scholarship girl Duffy also tells: the way in which a grammar school education set her apart from home and family. By the time I was 20 I had read enough sociology of education and class to know that the estrangement she discusses was a dominate theme of the literature, not least by reference to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, whose 'anxious and uprooted' scholarship boy of the 1930s is still used to account for working-class children's experience of education. I felt grammar school to be just … normal, as passing the 11-plus exam had been just … normal, though, of course, statistically it wasn't ordinary at all. Duffy was born in 1933, went to secondary school before the Education Act (1944) came into force; what I remember of the years after 1947 (when I was born) was that we were 'all the same' (as Auden told the readers of *Mademoiselle* that he and his friends, a different wartime generation of boys, were all the same); we all lived in the houses strung along the same endless South London streets; we had all had our due quota of orange juice and cod-liver oil. By 1958 and secondary school, we all looked pretty much alike as well: white to a girl and with the lean, wiry body that comes from spending your first seven years under a beneficent regime of food rationing.[10] We all had fluffy (pre-conditioner days) mousy hair, cut you might have thought, to match that sported by the girls in the infants' reading primers. There were a lot of us (when did we ever stop hearing that we were The Bulge?), but all institutions of the state were there for all of us: sitting around determining the metric structure of 'Edward' was probably what was

9 Maureen Duffy, *That's How It Was* (1962), Virago, London, 1983, pp. viii–ix.

10 All rationing in Britain came to an end in July 1954; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain. Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939–1955*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002. 'I was in London at the time when meat was taken off rationing and price controls', wrote Auden – about 4 July 1954 it must have been, for that's when it did. 'Immediately, as in New York in 1946, the prices soared but within one week they had fallen to a slightly lower level than under rationing because, instinctively and without any organisation, housewives abstained from buying.' W. H. Auden, 'A Self-Policing People', *Prose Volume III. 1949–1955*, Edward Mendelson (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2008, pp. 596–608. Review of Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character*, orig. pub. *The Griffin*, December 1955.

expected of us, and certainly good for us, like school milk and medical inspections.[11]

A schooling in poetry and poetics appears to produce highly individual mental and emotional frameworks in its learners. There is nothing in the Latin language itself that accounts for the very different attitudes towards metre and line legible in the writing of Auden and Attridge, for example. That *I* find Attridge's theory of poetry more legible than Auden's is due to my own education, which – despite its being Latin-less – was closer in time to Attridge's and provided me with the same vocabulary for comprehension as did his. And we have no first-hand account from Auden of his actual experience of being taught to scan verse, Latin or English. These constraints of experience have made it very hard for me to understand Auden's pronouncements on poetics as anything but confusing. He has been brilliantly explained as a collector of poetic forms: he used 'ballad, cabaret song, canzone, Skeltonics, sonnet, villanelle, iambic or syllabic meter, and the rest' because they were interesting in themselves as well as useful to someone entranced by verbal contraptions – little language-machines – in much the same way as he was entranced by mine and farm machinery, pumps and gasometers. I love to read about his 'imperious idiosyncrasy', especially over the question of syllables and syllabic verse.[12] I can be persuaded that even though the syllable has little aural or emotional resonance for most ordinary speakers of a stress-timed language like English, he does somehow, always (Oh! But how?) make it work, as poetry.[13] Is this because, as a once-upon-a-time Latin learner, little syllabo-neural (I've invented the term. Just now) pathways were laid down in St Edmunds' boys brains? A neural pathway that made syllables perceptually salient to them, for the rest of their English-speaking and -reading days? I spent five days a week over seven years with the French language (the Dalton principle became extremely modified when it came to language teaching); by the sixth form I knew French as a syllable-timed language (with that vocabulary) and could scan its syllabic verse structure like billy-oh. Oh so easy! What with the French metric line being determined by the number of syllables it contains. And saying French poetry aloud I could and can

11 'The Bulge' ('Baby-boomers' in the US) was the term identifying the massive increase in births following the Second World War.

12 Sean O'Brien, 'Auden and Prosody', Sharpe (ed.), *W. H. Auden in Context*, pp. 359–368; 359–360. For a somewhat sour – enchanting because it *is* sour – account of Auden and the syllable, Bonnie Costello and Rachel Galvin, 'Introduction', Costello and Galvin (eds), *Auden at Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, pp. 1–4.

13 O'Brien, 'Auden and Prosody', p. 363.

hear its organisation by syllables. I cannot do this with English verse that is formally arranged by syllables, as much of Auden's later work, including 'Homage to Clio', is. When I say 'Homage' out loud, my voice falls in pattern of stress determined by the deep structure of the language I am speaking. In his many discussions of prosody, Auden said that in English 'the criterion of emphasis [stress] can be (a) the length of the syllable (b) the degree of vocal accentuation, or (c) a mixture of both'. His praise for the syllabic poetry of Marianne Moore was accompanied by the warning that it was very hard 'to grasp at first hearing' because of its disregard for accents (stresses) and its 'rhyming on unaccented syllables', and he speculated, as we have seen, that the technique lay in her childhood, when she may have noticed that on the printed page metrically equivalent lines usually contained the same number of syllables; that she was never educated into recognising that they also contain the same number of metric feet.[14] He repeated these observations, often: 'a syllabic verse, like Miss Moore's, in which accents and feet are ignored and only the number of syllables count, is very difficult for the English ear to grasp'.[15]

If one wonders what this knowledge about syllabic verse is *for*, if you can't see syllables and can't hear them, and are going to English-it anyway (as they would have said in the eighteenth century), then what's with *the line* in Auden's theory of poetry? It is even more of a puzzle, though at first the propositions about *the line* appear simpler than those to do with metrical feet and syllables. He taught poetry – the analysis and appreciation of poetry – for a very long time, to schoolchildren in the 1930s and to university students and other adult learners for thirty years after that. 'In my first reading of a batch of poems,' he said in 1953, 'I look for one thing and one thing only, a few lines which are really lines and not arbitrary choppings. Poetry may be rhymed or unrhymed, metrically strict or free, but what distinguishes it as a medium from prose is that the words organise themselves into lines rather than into sentences.'[16] (These comments

14 W. H. Auden, 'Introduction to *Poets of the English Language*', (W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (eds), 1950), in *Prose Volume III*, pp. 103–154; 107; 'Miss Marianne Moore, Bless Her!', *Prose Volume IV. 1956–1962*, Edward Mendelson (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2010, pp. 226–229 (review of Moore, *How To Be a Dragon*, in *Mid-Century*, Fall 1959); 'A Marianne Moore Reader', *Prose Volume IV*, pp. 392–395 (review of *A Marianne Moore Reader*, in *Mid-Century*, February 1962).

15 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, Faber and Faber, London, 1963, pp. 296–297.

16 W. H. Auden, 'Foreword to *Various Jangling Keys* [1953] by Edgar Boardus', *Prose Volume III*, pp. 344–347.

are as much about reading poetry manuscripts for publishers and literary prizes as they are about teaching.) Six years later he said the same: 'The first time I go through … [a poem], I try to exclude from my mind any such considerations as originality, style, taste, or even sense, while I look for one thing only, *lines* of poetry. By this I mean a line which speaks for itself, which, as it were, no longer needs its author's help to exist.'[17] Much, much earlier than this, addressing children on the topic of reading and understanding poetry, he had also emphasised *the line*: 'Accents, long and short syllables, are really quite simple. You will always read a line of poetry right if you know its meaning.'[18]

What would we have made of it, we Rosa Bassett girls, 1958–1965, had we ever encountered such an opinion? Auden was writing for younger children than us, but still: to be told that our pursuit should be *meaning* before the effect on us of sound and rhythm? The line is not an arbitrary category of language, but it appears so arbitrarily flashed before us by Auden. You cannot know what a line (of print, or handwriting) *is* unless you can read, and most of the world, down the ages, has heard, recited, invented, thought … poetry, without benefit of literacy. We, on the other hand (South London, 1962) had learned that the poetry we read *was* the benefit of our literacy: its encapsulation; the measure of what we had been taught and what we had achieved. The achievement was to know enough not to mind that you'd never know who betrayed whom in 'O What is that Sound', or whether or not it had anything to do with the Battle of Culloden. To have been told to focus on *the idea of a line*, in order to decipher meaning would have removed from us the labour (all that marking up; all that getting it by heart, all that *a–b, b–a–ing*) that had made it ours by the processes of our analysis. Not that we could have put it like that; and the remark *is* unfair, for Auden was the last poet to say that a poem he had written was his own, or that his thoughts about it were particularly valuable. I find it deeply admirable that once he'd written something, he didn't care much about it: that done is done, and gone is gone.[19] Or, as

17 W. H. Auden, 'Foreword to *Of the Festivity*, by William Dickey' (1959), *Prose Volume IV*, pp. 179–183.

18 Naomi Mitchison (ed.), *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1932, pp. 853–868; 862. University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, MSS.318/4/7a: 'An outline for boys and girls' edited by Naomi Mitchison, (1932)'.

19 Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, pp. 13–27; above, p. 60. And of course, there is a large literature on Auden's revision of his own work, his attempts to change the moral import of 'September 1939', in particular. But those were political, ethical, and theological attempts to change what he had earlier done, not aesthetic ones. However, at the beginning of *W. H. Auden. Selected by the Author*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958, he does mention 'euphony and sense' as a reason for revising already published poems.

Edward Mendelson puts it when writing about Auden's earlier poems, he used language 'to cross an emptiness to a unity that cannot be found. [They] … report from a condition of absence, speak to no one, and have no place to go.'[20] But there can be no condition of absence, and Auden tells us so: 'It is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words and that words are products, not of nature, but of human society, which uses them for a thousand different purposes …'[21]

The teacher 'Teaching Auden' who opens this chapter doesn't want to know 'what exactly Auden meant', any more than I do. And I don't believe that Debbie his student really wants to know either. She wants, as her teacher says, to 'dip her fingers/in the open piano and sing something like/"I don't want to talk about it".' He, the teacher, wants to dip his fingers into Auden's verse and play (with) '"Consider this and in our time"' with quotation marks, and 'the fact that it is later/than we think', without them. Auden's poetry is *in* the teacher and poet, as it is in his verse; and it will be in Debbie's head too, like it or not, because she has been made to say, or write, some of his words. And I have learned from this, Sansom's poem, something about Auden's poems, something about *the line*, that has bothered me so much. I have learned that the best way of taking it into your head and your heart is to make your voice pause, by the slightest beat, at the end of each of Sansom's lines, faltering at the end of the written line rather than hesitating at the end of a unit of meaning; this makes it beautiful and not at all like everyday speech. I couldn't do this unless I could read, unless I had *Everything You've Heard Is True* open in front of me. Lines (and their ends; line-poetry) like this cannot be recited from memory like Tennyson's 'Morte d'Arthur' (also in *The Poet's Tale*) can be recited. The line is a function of written language; of the words resting on the page.

It's sad that the (fictional) Debbie has to see her teacher alone, 'in a room that gets no bigger'. The ordinary glory of the English literature and language classes I describe here was that we all did it together. We (including the teacher) worked together on a text that was freely available to all, and literally *there*, on our desks; in this little hour of social democracy, we

20 Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (1981), Faber and Faber, London, 1999, p. 26.

21 Auden, *Dyer's Hand*, p. 23.

worked on material freely provided by a beneficent local state, to *make* something. We could see and hear the product of our labour. We worked alone – homework, the tables set up in the hall – to write essays and analyses of novels, poetry, and plays, and stupidly elaborate accounts of a paragraph of *Mansfield Park*; but in the poetry lesson, something was made in common and together. In 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' Auden turns the joint enterprise, the labour in common of the poetry lesson, into the individualistic work of history. 'He wasn't clever at all,' he wrote of Freud; 'he merely told/the unhappy Present to recite the Past/like a poetry lesson till sooner/or later it faltered at the line where/long ago the accusations had begun,/and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged ...'.[22]

Being in the democratic workshop of the English class was rather unlike being in a history class where, from 1958 to 1962, we were always alone. We took notes from the history teacher's discourse (a lecture, it was, really), and then went away and wrote answers to questions on the syllabus, or composed essays on a set topic. I cannot remember a discussion of anything in any history class from first to fourth form, and there were certainly no history textbooks in use, in class or for written assignments. Your arguments about the execution of Charles I, or what on earth the Seven Years' War was about, or why Captain Jenkins' ear mattered, were written artefacts constructed by solitary workers out of material delivered verbally by the teacher. Things changed dramatically for A-level, when we were taught by the brilliant apparition of Miss Radice, fresh from Oxford with a shiny new degree;[23] and before that, wonderfully, in the fifth form and O-level year (after the demise of the not very good history teacher) – by Mrs Naipaul (Yes! South London in the swim of things!) who was living three streets away from me, in the house where V. S. Naipaul had written *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). We knew all of these things, except the title of the novel he was currently working on. One speech day in 1963 or 1964 he talked to the assembled school, and told us about a writer's life and what we should expect of it in the future: he measured out some days, he said, by putting a sheet of paper in the typewriter first thing in the morning, and taking it out, perfectly blank, at 5 pm. We *loved* that, though the face of the new headmistress sitting on the platform was a picture to see.[24] *Girls! I'm sure Mr Naipaul didn't mean that you should do that!*

22 W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud (d. Sept. 1939)', *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, pp. 166–170.

23 Margaret Drabble, *A Summer Birdcage* (1963), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 7.

24 Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is. The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*, Picador, London, 2008, pp. 189, 203–204. French's informant for the Naipauls' Streatham Hill years (via the Naipaul Archive at Tulsa) says that Mrs Naipaul must have found us 'rather ... dispiriting', as 'most of the girls pitched their aspirations so low'. University of Tulsa, McFarlin Library, Department of Special Collections and University Archives: Collection 1993–003. Well. Not in my opinion. I think we were stunningly aspirational.

Auden wasn't my first love as a poet. I had learned by heart most of R. L. Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* by the time I was 9. There was the perfection of its ending, which is the book's ending, the comforting knowledge that things will be over – you, the book, the world – in 'To Any Reader':

As from the house your mother sees
You playing round the garden trees,
So you may see, if you will look
Through the windows of this book,
Another child, far, far away,
And in another garden, play.
But do not think you can at all,
By knocking on the window, call
That child to hear you. He intent
Is all on his play-business bent.
He does not hear; he will not look,
Nor yet be lured out of this book.
For, long ago, the truth to say,
He has grown up and gone away,
And it is but a child of air
That lingers in the garden there.

Depressive? Me? Just a child with a very strong death-drive. That's all. Every time I walk by or cross a river, I say to myself: 'Dark brown is the river/Golden is the sand/It flows along forever/With trees on either hand', observing to myself, as I have done since 1956, that there are no golden or sandy banks to rivers in this land, or in Scotland; nowadays I speculate that maybe Stevenson meant to use 'strand', not 'sand', and maybe the 'golden' comes from the lesser celandine (the gardener's curse), or marsh marigolds ... whatever. Or: that the gold and the sand come from the demands of the metre and rhyme, not from somewhere outside the poem, not from any lost land of childhood. It's those spaces, between meanings, between the world and the words that purport to be about

the world, that you want poetry for; for its 'condition of absence', as Mendelson puts it.[25] But for me, Auden has been the most enduring poetic force. He must have been on a reading list when I was at university, for I have in my possession a Penguin *W. H. Auden. A Selection by the Author* (1958), in which I wrote my name and the address at which I was living in my second year at Sussex. It is old (obviously!) and used, but doesn't fall open at any particular page. I think it may have been bought for the 'Mass Communications and the Modern Novel' module I took in 1966–1967. This was not a significant encounter. The really significant one came in the summer of 1976 when, leaving the school I had been teaching in, a friend and colleague gave me a goodbye gift, Iona and Peter Opie's *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1974). On the first endpaper she had written out as inscription the last stanza of Auden's 'Schoolchildren':

> Yet the tyranny is so easy. An improper word
> scribbled on a fountain, is that all the rebellion?
> A storm of tears wept in a corner, are these
> the seeds of a new life?

We had often talked of these things. The teacher's easy tyranny over her small fiefdom, the way in which, out of love, the children dissented 'so little, so nearly content/with the dumb play of dogs, with licking and rushing'; we knew all about the bars of love ('the bars of love are so strong'), theirs and ours; that all the captivities – every single one of them – were there in the classroom. The storm of tears had been wept so many times, by us teachers in the lavatory, by the children in a corner, and now by me, who was weeping at what I so profoundly wanted to do, which was to leave. Some years later I tried to write about this time, which *went on* beyond 1976: 'I was a teacher. I never wanted to be, and now that I've stopped, I never will be again, but for several years it took my heart. I entered a place of darkness, a long tunnel of days: retreat from the world … a way of becoming Lucy Snowe's dormouse, rolled up in the prison-house, the schoolroom.'[26] When she gave me the book, my friend told me that Auden knew all about the prison house, for he had accompanied his

25 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'To Any Reader'; 'Where Go the Boats?', *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1885.

26 Carolyn Steedman, 'Prisonhouses', *Feminist Review*, 20 (1985), pp. 7–21. Lucy Snowe is the protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). If you want to know what the prison house is *really like*, read *Villette*.

father, a school doctor or something like that, driving around Yorkshire doing medical inspections in his horse and cart. Auden had seen these things, she said, when he was a child. The county was the wrong one (but correct as to the poet's birthplace); and biographers do not say that little Wystan *didn't* accompany Dr Auden when he went out to inspect sanitary arrangements in Birmingham schools.

Then began my adult encounter with Auden, reading 'Schoolchildren' in conjunction with W. B. Yeats' 'Among Schoolchildren' (1928). Yeats also thinks of grief and rage as he, the poet, walks among the children in a classroom; his poem knows the terrible intimacies of that place as well as Auden's does. I read a lot of Yeats and Auden together in the 1980s, have found the only annotation in my 1966 *Auden … Selected by the Author* collection to be 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', with red ink around the lines that begin and end with 'For poetry makes nothing happen … it survives,/A way of happening, a mouth'. I didn't underline the beginning of the stanza:'You were silly like us', either in 1966 or later; but have recently been charmed to read Basil Boothby's memory of Auden's 'snorting laughter at Yeats', which had made him, Boothby, 'think of Boswell's hero, that other strange Englishman from the Midlands'.[27] I love Auden being called a strange cove from the Midlands; there is *so much to do* with thinking of Samuel Johnson and Wystan Auden as Midlands Boys. I am very grateful for the fertility of the connection.[28] However, Auden denied the identity of Midlander to a journalist in 1966: 'I more or less left the Midlands, where I was born, at seven, when I went to boarding school', he told her, forgetting the county of his birth.[29] But there were school holidays, and university vacations: apart from a year in Berlin, time in London, and holidays in parts of the UK littered with decayed agricultural machinery and abandoned mines, he was based in Solihull and Birmingham until he left for the US in 1939; he spent quite as much

27 Basil Boothby, 'An Unofficial Visitor', Stephen Spender (ed.), *W. H. Auden. A Tribute*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1975, pp. 93–97; 97. Auden did not discuss Johnson (or himself) as a Midlander: W. H. Auden, 'Man before Myth. On James Clifford's *Young Sam Johnson*', Arthur Krystal (ed.), *A Company of Readers. Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling*, Free Press, New York NY, 2001, pp. 9–13. For Sam, Midland Man, Donald Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (1960), University of Georgia Press, Athens GA, 2009, pp. 22–34.

28 Carolyn Steedman, 'Wall in the Head' (Review of Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable*), *London Review of Books*, 38:15 (28 July 2016), pp. 29–30.

29 Polly Platt and W. H. Auden, 'Interview: W. H. Auden', *The American Scholar* 36:2 (1967), pp. 266–270; p. 269.

of his life in Birmingham and its environs as Johnson spent in Lichfield, Staffordshire. Auden may not have minded the connection between him and Johnson too much, for though he thought 'the eighteenth-century novels ... quite boring', and though he liked Defoe, and he wouldn't read Richardson or Fielding – 'Richardson is simply too long. Smollett is about the only eighteenth century novelist I can read'– he approved of Samuel Johnson, with qualifications:

> Who are the people one likes to read in the eighteenth century? Just Pope and Johnson, and Gay. I don't really like Swift at all. The *Directions for Servants* is good. The poetry is all right, but I find *Gulliver's Travels* one long bore. Oh, I can read the minor eighteenth century people with great pleasure. Akenside, Erasmus Darwin, Dyer. Oh yes, Young. Don't you think that's right though, about Johnson being the prince of middlebrows? But not so much his poetry. And those Johnsonians![30]

Auden was in the primary school classrooms I inhabited between 1974 and 1982 because of the long extracts I taped from Geoffrey Summerfield's *Junior Voices 1–4*, an inestimable series of poetry anthologies.[31] There were some Auden poems here – the usual: 'Musée des Beaux Arts', 'Epitaph on a Tyrant', 'Who's Who', and 'O What Is that Sound'. I could plug a child into the tape recorder, and bung on the headphones with the book in front of them. I thought, in an overweening way, of the pleasures of sitting in a lovely warm bath of words, prepared by me.[32] It was also a very fine form of babysitting, and often served to calm a child down after a storm of tears. I taped much Norse verse and other Norse curriculum material not only because teaching 'The Vikings' was required of me, but also because of the extraordinary fertility of the sources available, especially those of BBC Radio for Schools' *Stories and Rhymes*, which all through the summer of 1979 broadcast on the theme of 'The Northlands', 'The Whale Road', 'The Web of Fate', 'To Go A-Viking', and more.[33] I didn't have the

30 Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden* (1989), Nicholas Jenkins (ed.), Intro Richard Howard, Faber and Faber, London, 1990, p. 52.

31 Geoffrey Summerfield, *Junior Voices 1–4*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970.

32 *A Language for Life. Report of the Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA*, HMSO, London, 1975, had enjoined parents to bathe their children in language, and teachers, too, in the classroom. But I hated the word 'language' in the injunction, thinking it sounded far too much like 'sandwich' for comfort or seriousness.

33 BBC Radio for Schools, *Stories and Rhymes*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1979.

children listen to the radio, but rather constructed an entire social history of the Scandinavian peoples and their colonisation of the British Isles, in an attempt to insert the domestic into a relentless story told on the radio about wolfbane, heartsbane, cold dark seas, and the clash of swords. (I also much preferred the sound of my own voice over the incantatory *de haut en bas* of the radio actors going on about great warriors given up to the salt estranging sea.) I did a lot with Viking homes and food, and appear to have been particularly keen to explore the economic base of Viking migration and colonisation; there was quite a lot devoted to the topic of 'Poor Land'. This was not because I was against kings and queens and great warriors called Gunar, at least not in the historical–mythological realm. A few years later I produced quite elaborate arguments about the value of the princess with long hair – combing, combing; waiting, waiting; the warrior – slashing, slashing, grieving, dying – for the grand, elemental emotions they embody; the capacity of such figures, drawn in a project book, to link historical knowledge with the child's own experience of the dark sea of adult emotion battering the little ships of their growing up.[34] I was very much influenced by Bruno Bettelheim's theory of the fairytale: traditional fairytales speak of darkness, abandonment, hurt, and death; they allow children to think about their own experience in abstract, remote, symbolic terms, and thus – what? Confront them? *Deal with them*? Just think about them perhaps, and feel a bit more in control.[35] Hot classroom, summer afternoon, hours to go before we can leave: I wanted them to listen to Philip Larkin's 'Days', third poem of the third *Voices*: I'd taped that – nothing to do with Vikings – with its reassurance that it will be over; this day will end too, like all other days, and the last day. In the meantime, 'Where can we live but days?'[36]

On another poetry card to accompany a tape was 'This is how the Vikings/believed the world began':

> Ere were ages
> when naught was;

34 Carolyn Steedman, 'Battlegrounds. History and primary schools', *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (1984), pp. 102–112; 'Living historically now?', *Arena*, 97 (1991), pp. 48–64.

35 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (1976), Penguin, London, 1991.

36 Geoffrey Summerfield (ed.), *Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Pictures. The Third Book*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, No. 3; Philip Larkin, 'Days', *The Witsun Weddings*, Faber and Faber, London, 1964; István D. Rácz, 'The experience of reading and writing poetry. Auden and Philip Larkin', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 14:1 (2008), pp. 95–103.

neither sand nor sea
nor the cool waves.
Earth was not known
Nor the high heavens;

gaping the gap
and no grass grew.

I *was* enthusiastic about the dark, and not only from reading Auden's 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud': 'he would have us remember most of all/to be enthusiastic over the night,/not only for the sense of wonder/it alone has to offer, but also//because it needs our love …'.[37]

Anyway, the upshot of all of this was that for a class project on the Vikings, I taped verse from in and out of the BBC's *Stories and Rhymes* and prepared reading cards with cheery messages like 'This is what the Viking thought the end of the world would be like':

Brothers will battle
and be each other's bane;
all the bonds
of kin will be broken.
Cruel that age
and fierce for folk:
axe-age, sword-age;

shields will be split;

Wind-age, wolf-age,
when the world founders.

Where *did* I get that from? I must have done my preparation in a nearby university library, though nothing I read then told me about the alliterative form of Norse poetry, the marked caesura in the middle of a line, the line itself divided into two half-lines, the half-lines known as verses – as the *a-verse* and the *b-verse* – or the 'hemistich'; I learned nothing about the Norse and Anglo-Saxon forms, or their syllabic and alliterative devices which shape much of Auden's later poetry.[38] I had nothing then to tell me *why* the Norse poetry I taped and copied out as reading material was

37 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud', *Collected Shorter Poems*, pp. 166–170.
38 Auden, *Table Talk*, p. 70, where he mentions Nora Kershaw's *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922, as particularly informative.

so haunting. And – so they said – so very much liked by the children. Perhaps, though, the deep structure of Germanic and Nordic verse forms entered my teacherly unconscious: I find from my own records that I laid out reading material and information sheets (and taped them, the recorded voice to be followed whilst reading) in some odd obeisance to line-ending and rhythm. Or maybe I was copying the layout of many reading primers, where the line equates to a unit of meaning:

… they tried to grow crops
and keep animals.

But the land was very rocky and very stony.
Sometimes there was only
a thin layer of earth over the rocks.

The land was difficult to dig
and difficult to plough.
The crops that grew were very poor …

Sometimes there was not enough
for everyone to eat.

The Vikings went on raids
to steal food and farm animals.

Sometimes they liked the places
where they raided.
The land was good
and the coast was not rocky.

Sometimes they settled down
In a place where they raided … .

Do you see what I mean about *the line*? No poetic principle organises these lines – not stress, not metre, not syllables. Each line is – simply – a clause; a unit of thought.

I had all the means for my pursuit of Yeats and Auden in collected editions of their poetry. My volume of Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems* (1966) is very well worn, and falls open at many places. I do not know when I acquired it, but have kept in it for many years a newspaper cutting of a piece from the *Independent on Sunday* by Neal Ascherson ('From Moscow, on the brink of Great Nowheria'), dated late 1991. In it he quotes from Auden's 'The Fall of Rome (for Cyril Connolly)', telling his readers

that it is known as 'The Journalists' Poem' to many in the profession. He quoted three verses; the second, he said, is about the suspicions journalists entertain about their own detachment: 'Unendowed with wealth or pity,/ Little birds with scarlet legs,/Sitting on their speckled eggs,/Eye each flu-infected city'. Ascherson wrote of the way in which poems return to you, again and again, always finding a setting in a new place, the place where you are: he himself, at that moment, was writing from a 'vastness ... which has the misfortune to have become nameless. The family of giants who were once the Soviet Union have forgotten their surname and lost their identity cards.' I date my obsession with 'Homage to Clio' from 1991, when Ascherson quoted Auden.[39] A year later, Francis Fukuyama was to declare *The End of History and the Last Man*: the certainties of world conflict, the ceaseless struggle between ideologies that had held history in place as a narrative had ended with the fall of the Soviet Empire witnessed by Ascherson. Western liberal democracy had triumphed over Soviet communism: 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history,' he wrote, 'but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.'[40]

From 1991 onwards, I used lines from 'Homage to Clio' as an epigraph many, many times. I was a historian again now, teaching no one Auden, or poetry; forcing no one to listen to poetry. I attempted historiographical readings of the poem.[41] I used it in an attempt to understand what kind of thing history was: a Western thing (or at least, the history I had in mind was a Western thing), a form of thinking, a form of writing: a way of telling.[42] But mostly I just chucked in a few lines at the beginning of what I was writing ('You had nothing to say and did not, one could see,/ Observe where you were, Muse of the unique/Historical fact') because they were beautiful and paradoxical. I did not want to know what *Auden*

39 Neal Ascherson, 'From Moscow, on the Brink of Greater Nowheria', *Independent on Sunday*, 15 December 1991, p. 25; W. H Auden 'The Fall of Rome' (1940), *Collected Shorter Poems*, pp. 218–219.

40 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York NY, 1992. The book was an expanded version of an article written in 1989: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.

41 Carolyn Steedman, 'La Théorie qui n'en est pas une, or, Why Clio doesn't care', *History and Theory*, Beiheft 31 (1992), pp. 33–50.

42 Carolyn Steedman, 'About ends. On how the end is different from an ending', *History of the Human Sciences*, 9:4 (1996), pp. 99–114.

really meant; I wanted to know what the poem told me about *the thing I did*: history; about history's quiddity, its beingness in the world, its social and cultural function; *what it is*. I should have taken more notice than I did of Clio's silence. I certainly did bang on about the silence, but only because I found it charming that the grand pretensions of History to know all and say all were undermined by a dull girl who had nothing to say. I loved the irony of a History that did not speak and did not write and had no pretence to an opinion, about anything. I should have listened more to the silence. 'What mattered most to ... [Auden] in history was that which he could not describe because it was inaccessibly silent and unnameable', said Mendelson in 1999. 'In 1955 he wrote "Homage to Clio" a poem in which he gave that silence a personal voice and a proper name.' 1999 was too late for she who had already littered her work with quotations from it, in order to voice, over and over again, the poetic paradox of history. Nevertheless, the (historical) information provided by Mendelson, that 'the silence at the core of things was a noisily fashionable subject in the period', was very welcome.