THE BIRDS AND THE BEASTS IN AUDEN:

A STUDY OF THE USE OF ANIMAL IMAGERY IN
THE NON-DRAMATIC POETRY OF W. H. AUDEN FROM
1934 TO 1960

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The reputation of W. H. Auden as a poet rests not on the publication of several widely quoted and anthologized poems, but on a consistent and diversified output of technically excellent and relevant poetry over a number of years (1930-1964). Though many of Auden's individual poems and lines are memorable, it is rather the recurring patterns of his imagery which catch and hold the attention of his readers and critics. This paper will attempt to deal with one aspect of Auden's imagery: his images of the animal world, and to trace the changes in this imagery as it corresponds to Auden's ideological evolution from the position of left-wing, near-Marxist to his positive acceptance of Christianity in the early 1940's.

Though much has been written about various images which permeate the poetry of W. H. Auden—the early pervasive warfare motif, the detective and spy imagery, and the Rilke-like "human landscape" technique—critics have for the most part ignored what Randall Jarrell called Auden's "endless procession of birds and beasts"¹ as the

subject of more than passing reference. The reason for this lack of attention is probably that in Auden's verse animals, plants, and other non-human elements are not of prime importance. They form, in his words in Letters From Iceland, "a background for a torso." He uses such imagery as a comparative device. The flora and fauna of an Auden poem are not merely themselves, but archetypal images which are moralized in order to focus the reader's attention on the human condition. Auden is not interested in "picturing" a bird, a horse, or a lion nor is he interested in having his reader "see" them in a pictorial sense. His poetry is intensely man-centered: "Art's subject is the human clay." His birds and beasts, therefore, are held up as comparisons to man in a moralistic frame of reference. The lion is "innocent", ducks "indifferent", birds "tearless", while their salient physical qualities go unmentioned. They are juxtaposed with man in order that the human dilemma be underlined by contrast.

Despite the fact that the "creatures" in Auden's poetry have been ignored in criticism, however, does not mean that they necessarily play a very minor role. One of the continuing dramatizations of the human condition in Auden's poetry is the contrast between the animal world and the world of man. This contrast is not to be overlooked.


3Ibid.
even when it appears to be incidental or merely decorative, for it is relevant to a full understanding of a given poem and to the poet's ideological frame of mind.

In one of Auden's best known and most highly anthologized poems, "Musee de Beaux Arts", occurs significant and for the most part unnoticed statements of the condition of man as contrasted with that of the beasts. Here Auden notes that even "dreadful martyrdom" occurs "in some untidy spot/ Where dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse/ Scratches its innocent behind on a tree". Written at approximately the time of Auden's conversion to Christianity, this poem can be seen as a pivotal point in Auden's animal imagery corresponding to his change in ideology. The nature of this changing imagery will (hopefully) become more apparent as this paper progresses through a discussion of the animal motif as employed in various poems in Auden's non-dramatic poetry from the 1934 Poems to Homage to Clio, published in 1960.

In the Poems of 1934, Auden's emphasis is on man at war. Warfare is employed as the chief metaphor for the human condition. "We" are a small band of determined men fighting on against the "priggish ways" of English society.

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4W. H. Auden, "Musee de Beaux Arts", Another Time, London: Faber and Faber, June, 1940, p. 34.

"They" are by far the more numerous, but they are more complacent. We are the riskers, the questers, those who dare to endure "heat of day and winter danger,/ Journey from one place to another." We do have a chance for total victory. Society can be changed if the individual will dare to risk, will dare to love. The metaphor is two-edged, of course, each man is, in a sense, at war with himself. Anxiety is man's typical state, and it is only by love, an instinctual kind of love that he can gain the completeness, the perfection of the animals. That this is possible shows an early optimism in man's ability to gain the "evolutionary security" of the animals which later Auden poems do not express.

In this early volume, evolution is an underlying theme. Man is still linked to the animal world, and he remembers the linkage. In Poem IX, an invalid intended as the prototype of a sick man in a sick society asks of life, "What does it mean? What are we going to do?" No answer is forthcoming, but he recalls his heritage in the evolutionary pattern, "In my veins there is a wish, and a memory of a fish" and hopelessly concludes that man has come "a very long way to prove/ No land, no water, and no love." Love is the missing element; the lack of it is the gap which severs man from his animal ancestors, makes him anxiety-ridden and sick.

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6Ibid., "Poem XXXV", p. 46.

7Ibid., "Poem IX", p. 18.
In XXVII of Poems, the necessity for man to remember his evolution from the lower forms of life is noted. Memory must restore to man the "steps and the shore, / The face and the meeting place;" and must renew in him the animal's unquestioning and always proper obedience to the laws of nature, ("And sheep obey/ In a sheep's way;"). It is the function of love to "remember the question and answer, / For love recovers/ What has been dark and rich and warm all over." Whether or not man can accomplish this is doubtful in this poem ("Can love remember?") which ends on a note of questioning; but in Auden's thinking at this time it was apparently not impossible.

In poem XVI of the 1934 volume, the persona sits gazing at a "colony of duck" in a public park and admires them as they bask and preen themselves or simply sleep in the sun. They are indifferent to him and to the "anxiety at night, shooting and barricade in street" which is the cause of his unquietness. For them "sun's luxury is/ enough." Here a basic difference in Auden's animal and human worlds is discernible: the lack of serenity and peace in man as contrasted with the perfect serenity and completeness of the animal world. The creatures accept life, nature, what they have been given, unquestioningly without asking for more. Man, however, is suspended between

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8Ibid., "Poem XXVII," p. 49.

two worlds, his purely animal heritage from his evolutionary past and the rational and spiritual world. Because of this he must suffer the "necessary error" of choice and be constantly alone. But he can choose to follow the dictates of love, not a simple love which is merely "the admiring excitement of union", but that love which brings "death of grain, our death,/ Death of the old gang." It is a hard course of action, but it is the only way.

In this early volume of poetry Auden's animal imagery shows a hopeful wish for the millennium. Its attainment is possible although the choices necessary to gain it are not easy. The "duck's indifference" is compared to "that friend's hysteria." The animal world in this poem is, if not explicitly "better", at least implicitly better and more peaceful than the human state.

In Letters from Iceland (1937), a travel book which Auden wrote with Louis MacNiece, a similar concept is expressed. The "Letter to R. H. S. Crossman, Esq.", contains a reference to "The ponies...who never will grow up to question/ The justice of their permanent discipline." The persona, however, does question man's discipline though he makes no judgment ("Justice or not, it is a world") and postulates that each man shares a common human-ness,

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10 Ibid., p. 32

"however far we've wandered/ Into our provinces of persecution/ where our regrets accuse, we keep returning/ Back to the common faith...Back to the hands, the feet, the faces."\(^{12}\) But man, unlike the unquestioning ponies, has "dissented" from his nature. Historically oriented he sees nothing but the law and order "and forgets" the rusting apple core we're clutching still\(^{13}\)--the symbol of man's common mortality and humanity. Here occurs another of Auden's frames of comparison--Man must see himself historically; the creatures of the animal world are totally without history, tradition, superimposed "law and order". While the poet in Letters from Iceland has not yet come to view the dichotomy between beasts and the man as one of "good" and "evil," the idea of the animal world as "innocent," at least of knowledge of its past, has begun to appear.

In his "light verse". Letters to Lord Byron, Auden adds another quality to his beasts: "The unself-consciousness/ That children share with animals and peasants".\(^{14}\) The creatures lack self-regard, the typical attribute of adult man. This unself-consciousness which is evident in infants and children eventually "sinks in the 'sturm und drang' of adolescence;" The result of its disappearance is the self-loving, self-conscious anxious man. Whether Auden intended the "peasants" as an exception to those who exist in the

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 93.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., "Letter to Lord Byron, Part IV", p. 208.
human dilemma is debatable. Since Auden very often uses a stereotyped image in order to make a contrast, it seems more likely that his peasants are, as in the popular conception, child-like, simple images without the intelligence or sophistication to have developed self-consciousness. They are not the twentieth century man with whose plight Auden deals; but in a sense, out of the mainstream of human activity, as are children.

On This Island, published in 1937, is a transitional volume. In it Auden makes more frequent use of animal imagery and attempts to diagnose man's plight as resulting from the lack of "love that makes impatient/ the tortoise and the roe, and lays the blonde beside the dark."15 Animals in their finished perfection obey unquestioningly the dictates of this law of love. By comparison man, unfinished and imperfect, feels "How insufficient is/ the endearment and the look", the perverted or superficial kind of love which man tries to use as a substitute. Man is by his nature condemned to "Lose [his] loves,/ on each beast and bird that moves/ Turn an envious look."16 He is envious of the "white perfection" of the swan, of the fish's serenity in "unruffled lakes" and of the great lion who walks in his "innocent" grove. Each possesses unwilled


16 Ibid., "Poem XXVII," p. 60.
and unconscious perfection, while man, because of the absence of love "must weep and sing/ Duties conscious wrong,/ The devil in the clock."

There is hope for man, however. In poem XXVII the gift of "voluntary love" bestowed by man is that quality which allows him to surpass the creatures whose perfection was the unearned and unasked for gift of "Impulsive Nature." Man's achievement of love is not a gift, but the result of risk, of his daring to choose to love and to offer that love voluntarily. It is an answer to his dilemma, but it will not make him "like the animals."

Here Auden first makes the distinction clear and irrevocable. Man cannot gain the perfection of the creatures. His situation is unique and the resolution of his dilemma must be also uniquely human.

Poem III of On This Island also contrasts the finished perfection of the creatures with the human condition. Man ironically pities the animals for their limitations which are unfortunately set in their "finished features" and cannot be changed. If only "reason's gift" could be somehow given to them, "the lion's intolerant look" and "the quarry's dying glare" would gain articulate expression in the quest for personal glory. Reason would add "The liberal appetite and power,/ The rightness of a god." Surprisingly, however, reason seems not to have done this for humanity. It has so modified love in the human condition that it is "suited

\[\text{Ibid., "Poem III", p. 17.}\]
to/ the intricate ways of guilt" and made it man's "mature ambition. To think no thought but ours,/ To hunger, work illegally." Again Auden stresses the inability of man to gain the moral serenity of the beasts. As the beasts do not possess reason, so man cannot divest himself of it. The cleavage is permanent, and man's situation is singularly his own.

"Casino" in On This Island pictures an Audenesque wasteland. Here man is lifeless but for his hands which are "To the wheel attracted,... moved as deer trek desperately towards a creek." In this instance, man resembles the desperate deer. But the deer behave as they do because they cannot do otherwise. For man there is a choice. He has come "to this last feast of isolation self-invited" and prefers perpetual security ("The labyrinth is safe but endless") to the unsafe but "wholly living" world outside which could be gained by a commitment to love. The animals are part of a world that is verdant and alive ("the bird/ Deep on the greens and moistures of summer,/ Sings toward their work") but it is a separate world.

Journey to a War, authored by Auden and Christopher Isherwood, was published in 1939. It contains a sonnet sequence in which Auden again compares the completeness of the animals to man who must choose and is responsible for the

consequences of his actions. In Sonnet I the animals are created and showered with gifts: "Each/Ran off with his at once into his life:/Bee took the politics that make a hive,/Fish swam as fish, peach settled into peach,/And were successful at the first endeavour;" They were satisfied and at peace with their "precocious knowledge" and "knew their station and were good forever." Then enter man, a "childish creature" who had the power of imitation and could "fake with ease a leopard or a dove". But his imitative powers were only sham and could never connect him with the world of the beasts. Man is by his nature condemned to be "shaken" by the "lightest wind," to search for truth and be always wrong, and to envy his friends and "choose his love."

In Sonnet II, a distinctly Christian theme is adopted. Man, having been close to nature, was shut off from it: "They could not understand/ The dogs now who, before, had always aided;/ The stream was dumb with whom they'd always planned." Cast out from the perfect world, man was free, but he "wept and quarrelled: freedom was so wild." Looking back to Eden with envy, he found that "the way back by angels was defended." Man's freedom has made him unable to communicate with nature and the creatures. There will be no re-unification of the two worlds.

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In a verse "Commentary" in *Journey to a War*, Auden makes a direct statement on the permanence of man's imperfection. "Man are not innocent as beasts and never can be, / Man can improve himself but never will be perfect." Written at approximately the time of Auden's conversion to Christianity, this forms with "Musée de Beaux Arts" a framework for Auden's conception of the world of the animals as opposed to that of man.

Of the two, "Musée de Beaux Arts" with its oft-ignored lines pertaining to the creatures is probably more definitive in comparing the innocence of the animals to the guilt of man. The dogs who "go on with their doggy life," and "the torturer's horse/ who scratches his innocent behind on a tree" seem at first glance to be such banal and ordinary manifestations of the indifference of the animals to the suffering of man as to be unworthy of mention. A closer reading of the poem, however, shows in these lines the comparison of natural innocence with the perpetual guilt of man and a Christian nostalgia for the loss of Paradise. Man has been cast from Eden (Sonnet II, *Journey to a War*) but his expulsion has brought upon him not merely confusion and frustration, but the knowledge of his sinfulness and the dilemma of choice.

21 Ibid., "Commentary," p. 298.

22 Auden, "Musée de Beaux Arts," *Another Time*, op. cit.
The dogs' life in "Museé" is doggy because dogs have no choice but to live in this way. Auden even uses the singular "life" instead of "lives" in order to indicate the sameness of the pattern of life among each species. No variance from this pattern is possible, and none is sought. The innocence of the horse is by analogy the innocence of all the animal world. He is indifferent to the "dreadful martyrdom" which occurs so near in the human world. The dogs and the sun ("the sun shown as it had to") are also oblivious to human misery, but the horse particularly indicts mankind. Auden makes him deliberately "the torturer's horse." Surely no clearer example of the guilt of mankind can be found than in one who tortures his fellow human beings, and no characteristic is quite so typical of man and so absent from the creatures.

In a poem published much later in The Shield of Achilles (1955), a similar contrast between guilty humanity and the innocence of the beasts occurs. "After shaking paws with his dog/ (Whose bark would tell the world that he is always kind)/ The hangman sets off briskly over the heath."23 The torturer and the hangman are the prototypes of guilty humanity after the Fall.

After Auden's conversion to Christianity the theme of man's guilt becomes increasingly prevalent. In Poem XXIV

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man must look on in hopeless envy at "the striped and vigorous tiger" who "can move/ With style through the borough of murder:" and the ape who "Is really at home in the parish/ Of grimacing and licking," all the while knowing that he has failed to learn anything from the natural world because of his own self-love and guilt. The guilt is very real for "even our armies/ Have to express our need of forgiveness."

Though Auden can still say in Poem III ("The Creatures") of Another Time that the animals "are our past and future" and that "Their appearances amid our dreams of machinery have brought a vision of nude and fabulous epochs" which man may yet regain ("But what their pride has retained, we may by charity more generously recover."),

the pervasive theme of the animal imagery of Another Time is the invidious comparison of guilty humanity with innocent creature-ness. This emphasis continues in Nones, published in 1951, The Shield of Achilles (1955), and Homage to Olio (1960), though with some gradual changes in tone.

"Their Lonely Betters" in Nones again stresses the differences between the world of man and that of the beasts. Not one of the birds to which the persona is listening

\[24\text{Auden, "Poem XXIV," Another Time, op. cit., p. 39.}\]

"was capable of lying,/ There was not one which knew that
it was dying/ Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme/
Assumed responsibility for time."26 Language, then, he
postulates, is rightly left to the birds' "lonely betters"
who are faced with choice and cursed with consciousness
of time and death. The birds in their careless perfection
need assume responsibility for nothing; man, on the other
hand, has "promises to keep" and must accept the consequences
of what he does.

In "The Love Feast" the innocence of the animals
becomes an obvious theme: "Adrian's pleasure-loving
dachshund/ In a sinner's lap he's curled;/ Drunken absent-
minded fingers/ Pat a sinless world."27 Here Auden
pictures a perverted gathering of neurotics, liars, and
homosexuals. The dachshund presents a sharp contrast to
these practicers of "love according to the gospel/ Of the
radio-phonograph." The dog is "pleasure-loving" as are
the people at the feast but with a difference. He is
part of the "sinless world" which in their perfection
love what they must love. Man, on the other hand, must
choose to love not merely pleasure, but his fellow man.
This the revelers in "The Love Feast" have obviously not
done and are, therefore, "sinners." The speaker in the

26W. H. Auden, "Their Lonely Betters," Nones,

poem is a typical example of abdicated responsibility and the weakness of man. He asks to be made "chaste" but is not sincere in his request, for he adds the invalidating phrase "but not yet" to his prayer for self-improvement. He wishes to enjoy his sins for as long as possible without the permanent loss of salvation.

In "The Fall of Rome" the contrast is made once again between the birds who are "unendowed with wealth or pity" yet are beautiful in their completeness, and man who is sick and incomplete. In this poem man lives in the "flu-infected cities" of decaying Rome unable to glean help from the animal world which is "altogether elsewhere" and as totally indifferent as it is totally beautiful: "vast/ herds of reindeer move across/ Miles and miles of golden moss,/ Silently and very fast."

In "The Managers" Auden views with something like nostalgia the state to which the "rulers" of society have come. Instead of heroic figures whom a painter would not hesitate to paint "rising triumphant from a lake/on a dolphin naked,/ Protected by an umbrella of cherubs" those who today decide how we live and die are "such quiet/ Men, working too hard in rooms that are too big,/ Reducing to figures/ What is the matter, what is to be done."

They are juxtaposed with the world of nature: "woods

28Ibid., "The Fall of Rome," p. 32.
unaltered by our wars and our vows" and the uncaring animals ("the songs of birds who will never vote"). The natural world is indifferent and unchanging while man has altered himself for the worse.

In The Shield of Achilles the tone of Auden's animal imagery is somewhat lighter. In "Winds" "one bubble-brained creature" philosophizes "I am loved, therefore I am"30 but the world fails to heed this logic so the lion does not "lie down with the kid." The logic of love has not impressed itself upon humankind, nor apparently has it impressed itself upon the animals which here appears to be removed from the perfect world by the separateness of the species.

In two more poems from The Shield of Achilles the ability of man to imitate though not equal the animals is again a theme. In "Mountains" man is "an uncatlike creature who has gone wrong"31 and his attempt to be like the animals cause him to admit that it is impossible: "Five minutes on even the nicest mountain/ Is awfully long." In "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning" the poet comments on the condition of man: "For given man by birth, by education/ Imago Dei who forgot his station/ The self-made creature who himself unmakes,/ The only creature

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30 Auden, "Winds," The Shield of Achilles, op. cit., p. 11.
ever made who fakes."

The tone of these two poems and, indeed, of much of the poetry in *The Shield of Achilles* tends toward an acceptance of the condition of man. Unlike his very early poetry which dramatizes the close evolutionary link between man and the animals, later Auden verse (*On This Island, Another Time*) admits the permanent separation between the two worlds and views the creatures with a Christian nostalgia: the animals are part of a better world which man can never attain.

What must man do in this situation? He must seek his own salvation through love and through faith (Christianity, though Auden is not didactic about it).

By the time the poet published *Homage to Clio* in 1960, he was able to view man’s situation with a calm acceptance, even to view it as perhaps preferable to that of the animals. In the title poem of this volume, the persona awakens "to hear a cock pronouncing himself himself/

Though all his sons had been castrated and eaten." But rather than envying the calm acceptance of the animals, as the persona in Poem XVI of the 1934 *Poems* does in an almost identical situation, he is "glad [he] could be unhappy." He rejoices in man’s right "to visit/ the grave of a friend, to make an ugly scene,/ To count the loves one has grown out of" even though these things are

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32 Ibid., "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning," p. 44.

"not nice." The alternative to them "to chirp like a tearless bird, / as though no one dies in particular/ And gossip were never true" is "unthinkable." If man could act in this way then "forgiveness would be no use, / One-eye-for-one would be just and the innocent/ Would not have to suffer." It is man's unique privilege (not curse) to use his powers of reason, to be able to confront Clio, the muse of history, and to come to grips with his condition in a uniquely conscious and human way.

Still mortal, still guilty, man in "The Sabbath" returns on the Seventh Day of Creation after a short absence during which the creatures have decided "that fellow had never really smelled/ Like a creature who would survive./ No grace, address or faculty like those/ Born on the first five."34 Life without him is "beautiful, happy," but it is also "perfectly pointless." A gunshot heralds man's return to the horror of the beasts. But the poet speaks out strongly for humanity. After all, "For whom did they think they had been created?" It was for man that Eden had been made. The felix culpa which caused the expulsion from the garden is a fact. Man stands midway between two polar extremes: the unconscious, beautiful and in themselves purposeless existence of the animals and the spiritually perfect world of the gods. He is both worse and better than he should

be, "more bloody minded than they [the creatures] remembered/ More godlike than they thought." So man is not, will not be perfect, but there is in him that which is godlike and the poet seems to say in Homage to Clio with considerable more hope and acceptance than he had said in On This Island "It's a world. It's a way." 35

From 1934 to 1960 W. H. Auden's ideological position had evolved from that of left-wing Marxist sympathizer, (1928-1937) during which the problems of mankind were diagnosed as societal and the millennium to be gained by the modification of society, through a period of humanism which stressed the lack of love as the chief ill of the individual and hence the chief evil of society. By 1941 he had become a converted Christian. The ills of human condition sprang from a lack of Christian faith. 36 As he changed, his metaphorical comparisons between the animal and human worlds also change. The possibility of regaining the perfection of the animal world voiced in the poems of the early 1930's gradually gives way to a realization of the irreconcilable cleavage between the two worlds, eventually portrayed with a Christian nostalgia for the lost Eden. "Musée de Beaux Arts" shows this change in the picturing of the animals as innocent and humankind

35 Auden, "Epilogue," On This Island, op. cit., p. 68.

The Christian position is later, in *The Shield of Achilles* and *Homage to Clio*, expressed with more acceptance and finally a quiet kind of rejoicing in the uniqueness of the human condition. Each of these stages of Auden's ideological commitment figure importantly in his poetry. Those poems used in this paper have been chosen to demonstrate the nature of this ideological change, as mirrored in his use of beast imagery. The feeling of the author of this paper is that this device, the comparison of the animal world to that of the human world, is one of importance in Auden's works and one which should be understood for a thorough understanding of his poetry. It is hoped that this paper has added to this understanding.
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