



# Rivista di poesia comparata

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Gregory Dowling:

AIDAN WASLEY, **The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene**, Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, pp. 280, \$35.

Adrian Wasley’s book makes a claim for the British-born poet W.H. Auden as perhaps the single most influential American poet of the twentieth century. As he says in his preface, the phrase that gives the title to his book, «The Age of Auden», «was already a cliché before Auden left England». It originally defined the poetic climate of the 1930s, where Auden dominated the literary scene; Wasley contends that this dominion continued—and perhaps even more powerfully—on the other side of the Atlantic, after Auden took up residence there.

This move, which took place in 1939, has always been seen as a crucial one, neatly dividing Auden’s career into two halves: English Auden (later to be used as the title of a book collecting his early works) and American Auden. For some of his early admirers the move was seen almost as a betrayal (its date did not help). Even some who did not criticise it on personal or on political grounds saw his American poetry as a sad falling off; the visionary poet whose works had inspired a generation became, for some readers, a prosy rambling bore. Randall Jarrell, the influential American critic, dismissed his later works with the contemptuous word «comfy» (taken from a poem by Auden himself). For these disappointed disciples, the premature ageing of Auden’s craggy countenance—like a wedding-cake left out in the rain, as it was once memorably described—provided outward physical evidence of an artistic and spiritual decrepitude, as the inspirational revolutionary deliberately transformed himself into a slipper-wearing, crossword-solving, church-going belle-lettrist.

There is no doubt that the move to America was more than just a geographical one. The first poem he wrote in America, his elegy for W.B. Yeats, has always been seen as a literary turning-point. The poem was not simply an act of homage to a great poetic predecessor but also provided Auden with an opportunity to reflect on his own art and on the role of the poet in public life. The most famous line from this poem is quoted several times in Wasley’s book: «Poetry makes nothing happen.» This has often been seen as Auden’s official renunciation of all political aims in his poetry and, more broadly, as a renunciation of his role as a public figure.

However, as this book reveals, he remained very firmly in the public eye in America and became, if anything, even more influential. In terms of his public standing, the real change was that his appeal broadened. Whereas in England in the 1930s he and his poetry were very clearly identified with one political side, in America Auden seemed to attract followers and admirers of all literary and political persuasions. As Wasley puts it, Auden’s role in the careers, lives and poetry of a great number of poets «helps to muddy those tidy critical narratives of experiment versus form, radicalism versus traditionalism, political versus quiescent, cosmopolitan ventriloquism versus authentic American song.»

The paradox is that this happened in a country where the poetic battle-lines are generally seen as far more rigidly drawn than in Europe; the expression «poetry wars» is a common one in the American literary world, where Beats and Squares, the Raw and the Cooked, Redskins and Palefaces have been fighting it out for decades. It is probably the case that Auden carried greater clout, on the whole, among the more traditionalist schools but Wasley makes persuasive claims for Auden’s impact, for example, on a prominent member of the Beat Generation like Allen Ginsberg. The essential point was that Auden’s influence was in no sense a coercive one; one could say that the main message of Wasley’s book is that Auden succeeded in taking the anxiety out of influence—a paradoxical feat for one who contributed the expression «Age of Anxiety» to the language.

For Auden the attraction of America lay in its great openness. As Wasley puts it, «[u]nlike European politics, hobbled by class, history, and a legacy of authoritarianism, and whose catastrophic failure was being played out with blood and bombs, what Auden saw as the American tradition of ‘Only the Many make the One’ matches his model of how poetry could work constructively in the world.» His elegy for Yeats, after the apparent bleakness of the line «Poetry makes nothing happen», ends by affirming that poetry is in fact a «way of happening». It would seem that for Auden it was more likely to become a «way of happening» in America than anywhere else, precisely because America was a more democratic country. The American poet was liberated «from history, from fixed notions of identity, from nationality itself.» Indeed, according to Wasley, for Auden America was precisely «the *absence* of nationality.» In a 1963 lecture on «Influences,» Auden stated: «America is the anti-country; that was why I had to join it.»

It was this liberation from fixed notions of identity that gave Auden’s American poetry its amplitude and breadth, making it a useful model for a whole generation of American poets. It was not just that the poetry itself could offer a way forward for other

## Iniziative

**8 dicembre 2019**  
**Semicerchio a "Più libri più liberi"**

**6 dicembre 2019**  
**Laura Pugno alla Scuola di Semicerchio**

**5 dicembre 2019**  
**Convegno Compalit a Siena**

**4 dicembre 2019**  
**Addio a Giuseppe Bevilacqua**

**29 novembre 2019**  
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**8 novembre 2019**  
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**25 settembre 2019**  
**Ultimi giorni iscrizioni al Corso di scrittura creativa**

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**19 giugno 2019**  
**Addio ad Armando Gnisci**

**31 maggio 2019**  
**I'M SO TIRED OF FLORENCE: READING MINA LOY**

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**8 dicembre 2018**  
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**6 dicembre 2018**  
**Semicerchio issue on MIGRATION AND IDENTITY. Call for papers**

**16 novembre 2018**  
**"Folla delle vene" di Iacuzzi a Semicerchio**



poets; Auden testified—in both practical and theoretical terms—to the stimulating and liberating effects that poetic influences could have in general. In his long didactic poem, *New Year’s Letter*, and in many of his essays and reviews published in his early years in America, Auden proposed a new form of relationship with poetic predecessors, arguing, as Wasley puts it, that «a poet’s originality stems from his ability to synthesize a voice—his own true voice—from the different voices of the past.» At a moment when the Modernist movement seemed to have made relationships between tradition and individual talent a constant source of anxiety, Auden opened the field, emphasising the wide array of choices that lay before the poet; a poet’s originality resided precisely in his distinctive choice of voices.

One of the choices—and not specifically a literary one—that a writer could make (or could at least choose to make public or not) was his sexual orientation. Wasley suggests that Auden provocatively made an association between his own «queerness» and the eccentricity of his adopted country. In this sense it is significant that the two writers who seemed most helpful to Auden in constructing his American poetic identity were Walt Whitman and Henry James. This new reading of an important strand of American culture was to have a liberating effect for a number of younger American poets, who «saw his sexual frankness as encouragement to their own efforts to articulate their own American difference, sexual and otherwise.» The central chapters of Wasley’s book focus on three such writers: James Merrill, John Ashbery and Adrienne Rich.

It is, of course, essential to the overall point that Wasley is making that these writers are so diverse. The relationships they had with Auden were all very different, ranging from that of obedient (and brilliant) pupil in the case of Merrill to that of reluctant and later rebellious protégée in the case of Rich. The case of Ashbery is an intriguing one, since Wasley is to a certain extent going against the critical consensus on the poet, most of his admirers (Harold Bloom *in primis*) seeing him as far more strongly influenced by Wallace Stevens. Wasley’s discussions of all three poets provide fascinating new ways of reading their works. He is particularly illuminating on Merrill’s poetry, emphasising the stimulating effect of Auden’s formal professionalism. For the poet who was the son of the co-founder of the Merrill-Lynch Investment Bank, Auden showed how poetry could have its dignity as «real *work*: labor with a utility in the world.» Wasley declares wittily that Merrill’s major work, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, «is a highly corporate enterprise» and the poet himself

is a poetic executive [...]. He assembles his workforce of influences, represents and gives them a voice and a mouth, employs their various skills for his own imaginative profit, and directs their collective work out into the world to provide a real service for his poetic consumers: to help them «survive.» [...] For Merrill, poetry is a very serious business.

The final chapter takes its title from another line in Auden’s elegy for Yeats: «He Became His Admirers.» It offers a fascinating survey of the numerous «elegies, eulogies, and remembrances» that were published after Auden’s death, by such diverse poets as James Schuyler, John Hollander, Richard Howard, Karl Shapiro, William Meredith, Irving Feldman, Richard Wilbur and Theodore Weiss. The chapter concludes by opening out beyond native-born Americans to consider the cases of two non-American-born poets (both to become Nobel laureates): Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky, both of whom were profoundly influenced by Auden’s poetry even before coming to America. Indeed, Brodsky declared that the «sole purpose» of his ambition to become an English-language poet «was to find myself in closer proximity to the man I considered the greatest mind of the twentieth century: Wystan Hugh Auden.» The strength of Wasley’s argument in this book can be seen from the fact that Brodsky’s declaration does not seem unduly exaggerated by the point one reaches it.

Obviously Wasley has by no means exhausted the subject. Other poets from the generation he discusses could (and, in the case of Anthony Hecht, only glancingly referred to here, *should*) have been included. But more important is the fact that Auden’s influence has shown no sign of waning, and the study of his influence could be extended to consider later generations of poets, on both sides of the Atlantic. In Great Britain obvious examples would be John Fuller (author of a key study of the poet) and James Fenton, and, from a later generation, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, who both undertook a tour of Iceland as an act of homage to Auden and MacNeice. In America there are also countless examples from a younger generation, some of them taught by acquaintances of Auden. For example, David Mason’s doctoral dissertation on the poet’s longer works was supervised by Anthony Hecht. Rachel Wetzsteon, whose book-length study of Auden’s influences is cited by Wasley in an end-note, was taught by John Hollander; Wetzsteon also wrote a superb tribute to Auden as a fellow New-Yorker, imagining an encounter between herself and the poet: «stroller collides with old man in sneakers / and Saint Mark’s Place falls silent for a second.» Witty poetic tributes have also been written by such poets as Paul Muldoon, A.M. Juster, Dick Davis and Carol Ann Duffy, many of them using forms either created by or closely associated with Auden; the «Father of Forms»—to use Merrill’s admiring name for the poet—is by now at the very least a great-grandfather. The Age of Auden shows no sign of coming to a close.

Gregory Dowling

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**Laboratorio pubblico di Alessandro Raveggi a Firenze Libro Aperto**

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**Mina Loy-Una rivoluzionaria nella Firenze dei futuristi - Villa Arrivabene**

**22 settembre 2018**  
**Le Poete al Caffé Letterario**

**6 settembre 2018**  
**In scadenza le iscrizioni ai corsi di scrittura creativa 2018-19**

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**9 giugno 2018**  
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