W.H. AUDEN’S ON THIS ISLAND: NIETZSCHEAN AESTHETICS AND THE NEGATIVE SUBLIME

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Many thanks,

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INTRODUCTION

*On this Island* (1937) is W.H. Auden’s masterfully apathetic commentary upon the decay, corruption, and impending chaos that are already apparent “on this island, now” as Britain withers in the shadow of a Second World War. Auden is flat, dry, and ironic in his delivery of “Mental pictures, so that clearly/ Every tramp’s a landlord really/ In mind-events” (XIV.37). These sublime snapshots form thirty-one separate poems in a devastated kaleidoscope of disconsolate minds and decayed land that forecasts a bleak and deterministic fate for a state on the brink of unprecedented chaos. Each poem is at once self-contained and thematically ingratiate in an abrasive collage of stark, brutally vivid “mind-events,” and Auden solicits his aesthetic like a “tramp, [a] landlord really” in his forcibly versified “mental pictures” of minds, relationships, ideologies, and an entire country collapsing into ruins. Already jarred by the “Great War,” “this island” and its people futilely prepare to brace themselves for yet another monstrous disaster in the making. And Auden’s profound apathy, heightening our involvement and concern for the apparently benumbed state of a poet who could observe such conditions in neutral tones, suggests in an anti-Romantic triumph that no mind can transcend nor rightfully overpower the toxicity of the external world it perceives and projects.

Yet the poetry *is* sublime – no other aesthetic category suffices to encapsulate the sheer power of the verse. The verse slices, stabs, and nauseates; its affects are seductive, arresting, and diabolical. This mode of the sublime tradition differs, in its aesthetics and ideology, from the transcendent sublime theorized by Kant and Burke, conducive to the spiritual awakenings and ecstatic enlightenments of Auden’s religiously resistant or Romantically inclined precursors and contemporaries. Auden refuses to transcend a reality so desperately in need of critique. In “Poet During Wartime” (1939) Auden wrote that the poet’s only method of testifying to such
monumental crises in the history of humankind was to project his world as completely unintelligible – to rationalize or transcend it would be a “Romantic heresy,” a “cheap lie” (*Collected Prose*, 149). And here Auden works very much to the same effect; the results are powerful, disturbing, and perverse.

This is a case-study in what I call the “secondary” sublime tradition as it applies to *On This Island*. Critics have variously referred to this aesthetic and philosophical tradition as the “negative,” “post-Romantic,” or “counter” sublime. The secondary sublime emerges first in the continental philosophy of the era as a theoretical adaptation of the sublime tradition in response to this moment of ideological crisis. It is an aesthetic rooted in moments of ideological and existential crisis, and the artist or artwork of the secondary sublime is definitively decentered.

Auden turns to an artistic solution in facing this global predicament, one formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1873 *The Birth of Tragedy*. In keeping with Nietzsche’s sublime aesthetic and ideology, Auden responds to the chaos of his external environment by *sublimating* it, harnessing and sculpting the terrible realities his world presents into representations that testify to the tragedy of the human predicament as he knows it. In breaking down the structure of Auden’s sublime performance, I turn to Northrop Frye and suggest that Auden occupies an archetypal stance at the “point of epiphany,” where the cyclical world of nature and the apocalyptic world come into alignment. Auden stands between two worlds, and two Wars, with a piercing gaze beyond the shores of this island with a penetrating vision for the apocalypse that Auden envisions on the near horizon, rising like a tidal wave soon to engulf the globe. Having outlined key concepts and modes of analysis, I turn directly to the verse and apply this theoretical lens to select, key poems. The poems that I have chosen reflect the overarching function, affect, and aesthetic paradox that constitute Auden’s sublime achievement.
BACKGROUND: CRITICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS

In 1932, W.H. Auden (1907 - 1973) set out to write his first, full-length volume of verse. It was unlike anything that Auden had written before:

At last, during 1932, he set out to write a larger and more coherently patterned volume. He knew it would not be easy. A unified long poem requires an extended commitment to the poem’s subject, a commitment very different from that needed for a lyric. At one extreme of critical theory, in the territory explored by the Arnoldian touchstone and other affective ideas of what poetry ought to be, a long poem is regarded as a contradiction in terms. Similarly, all modernist long poems – The Waste Land, The Bridge, The Cantos, and so on – shift abruptly from one short fragment to another, from one style to another, in an imagistic procession. . . . He was ready to try for something different: works that recommended a large social unity by embodying a large poetic unity. (Mendelson 147-148)

Over the next four years, Auden wrote a volume meant to address a single topic, pointed towards a singular teleological goal – to awaken his readers to the ugly truths of Britain’s state during the late interwar years. The book was released in the U.K. in 1936 as Look, Stranger!, and the U.S. edition was released under the poet’s preferred title, On This Island, shortly thereafter in 1937.

From 1932 to 1936, Auden wrote On This Island against the backdrop of international turmoil and interwar conflicts, corruption and Depression abroad and on the home front. Auden was nauseated by the state of humanity at present, and realized that Britain would likely engage in the next War that Auden envisaged as the end to a doomed decade. The twenty-five year old poet was living in England, and “Auden’s politics, when he first formulated them, were those of a very intelligent young man in the 1930’s – young enough to believe revolution inevitable, intelligent enough to be skeptical of its benefits” (Mendelson 137). By the 1930’s, Auden harbored grim
prospects for the fate of the world at large. Widely traveled, he had witnessed omens of impending War at close proximity shortly before returning to his native England to write *On This Island* – in Iceland and Berlin, Auden “was shocked by the bloody shambles he encountered. . . . he bumped into Herman Goering’s brother’s entourage of Nazis visiting Iceland; and while he was there the news about the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War came through” (Sharpe 25). Auden believed that the escalating conflicts of his decade would end in catastrophic violence and apocalyptic upheaval:

> The choices being made throughout Europe were leading to catastrophe; education had done no good. Auden’s interest in history, however troubled its outcome, began as a wish for certitude. He knew enough about recent political history to sense that the doctrines of liberalism were not enough . . . . He could not doubt the urgency of the times. As his private moment of visionary unity receded, the public agonies of European war grew even more threatening. Nothing weakened his conviction that fascism was an absolute evil, but he could no longer imagine that those who directed the struggle against it were, by necessity, good. The civil war that began as a battle between Fascist invaders and a democratically elected Republic soon changed to a struggle between the agents of Hitler and the agents of Stalin. (Mendelson 153)

Meanwhile, Britain itself was a political disaster, in shambles from the First World War and the worst Depression in industrial history. British liberals like Auden believed that the current condition of their native country was completely irreconcilable: “The atmosphere created was one of cynicism and despair for those who believed that the world they lived in would never change” (Symons 7). It became apparent that a return to prewar “normalcy” was all but impossible:
The success of German fascism shocked Britain’s liberal conscience. . .With Hitler’s ascension to power in 1933 and the tide of Fascism rising in almost every European country, it was these people who found themselves part of a movement both political and artistic. . . .The election of the National Government, which lasted until the war, [was] a watershed in British politics. . . .there was no Parliamentary solution to the problem of Britain. (Symons 9)

Julian Symons summates the implications of these interwar developments for English poetry during the interwar period: “It was plain, then, that the rebirth of Britain must come through chaos and catastrophe. This idea, with sometimes the chaos and catastrophe stressed, sometimes the rebirth, was the basis of the art of the Thirties” (Symons 8).

In *On This Island*, the stresses fall upon chaos and catastrophe. Monroe K. Spears adequately diagnoses the worldview behind Auden’s seminal book of poetry, agitated by the undertow of truths that seep through each line of verse with unsettling gravity: “*On This Island* is a profoundly pessimistic volume. . . .It is the image of Britain in crisis that unifies the volume” (Spears 204). Auden writes in a gravely deterministic manner with a voice of oracular foreboding in assessing the present state of his country and generation and its implications for the future. Auden diagnoses his country’s ills, but offers no remedy. With each poem, we receive a deadly prognosis. He holds a mirror to nature and magnifies her blemishes, while projecting his envisioned apocalypse onto the world of the present in assessing the implications of his historical crisis with a dim forecast for its future. And Auden’s social critique is in no way isolated to Britain. Instead, his depiction of Britain and “this island now” functions as a microcosmic reflection of a macrocosmic crisis, with the toxicity of global conflict infiltrating every corner of the globe.
Yet Auden’s staunch pessimism developed alongside an increasingly profound artistic philosophy and an evolving sense of the poet’s place in relation to the public and the world that provided his subject matter. His artistic philosophy became part of his sense of responsibility as a citizen. Auden had a keen sense for his historical moment and turned to an artistic solution in confronting a context that was otherwise hopeless to resolve. As Auden wrote in a prose piece on Wilfred Owen, commenting on the duty of the poet after World War I, “If the poet, qua poet, has any other social function than to give pleasure, it is, in the words of the greatest poet produced by the last war, ‘to warn’ so that, in one sense, the serious poetry of any given moment is consciously at odds with the majority” (Auden, 153). He felt compelled to communicate his voice, vision, and “warnings” through a thematically unified volume with universally damning implications for what would become a massive readership.

In earlier years, Auden had attempted to account for what he saw as a form of psychological malaise shared among mankind and attempted to diagnose, even psychoanalyze, the collective consciousness of a humanity exhibiting its newfound inability to coexist. By 1932, he had become exasperated and shifted his focus from psychology to society in attempting to diagnose the source of his generation’s inability to coexist. Auden shifted the blame from hypothesized, shared mental complexes, to society itself: “What is the use of trying to remove complexes from individuals when the society into which they will go demands that they should have them?” (Collected Prose: I, 202). And through he saw plenty wrong with the societies he continued to critique, he maintained his belief that escalating conflicts were irremediable and would end in cataclysmic chaos: “There was no turning back from the disaster; best to accept it . . . The war that peace occasionally interrupts is a civil war between the broken fragments of a whole. Its forces are the mutually opposed, and the edginess of Auden’s early poems is partly the result of this internal contradiction”
Auden envisioned an “apocalyptic upheaval” as a cataclysmic and inevitable end to the conflicts, aggravations, tensions, and deeply disturbing developments of the 1930’s: “After the isolating darkness of his psychological questioning, Auden, at twenty-five, writes as one who has emerged into daylight, even if he is somewhat blinded by it” (Mendelson 147).

It is important, for Auden criticism and especially for the purposes of this study, to differentiate the early, English Auden from the later, “American” Auden, whose newly religious worldviews completely changed his poetry and artistic philosophy after 1940. Cleanth Brooks emphasizes this often overlooked division in a 1954 article for the Sewanee Review:

On the surface [Auden’s] work shows all sorts of apparent contradictions. Auden is clearly the poet of civilization: witty, erudite, and obviously concerned with the problem of building the just city. Yet there are few modern poets whose work is more tightly tied to the natural scene, preeminently to the rugged landscape of northern England -- the landscape of fell and scarp and potholed becks that is revealed in his earlier poetry. . . Auden is the modern par excellence: the poet who makes use of the tensions and sometimes baffling juxtapositions of a radically modern poetic. . . Finally, though Auden began as the left-wing poet, castigating an England of silted harbours and abandoned coal workings, of a proletariat on the dole and a capitalist class perverted and sick with its own inner contradictions, by the ‘forties he had, somewhat to the consternation of most of his admirers, become a Christian poet, writing a verse which, however unconventionally religious, was obviously firmly grounded in theological orthodoxy. (Brooks 300)

Directly before the outbreak of World War II, Auden emigrated to the United States in the late summer of 1939. Shortly thereafter, in January of 1940, Auden was devastated by the death of his mother and, in the same month, by his American lover Chester Kallman’s infidelity. Both
traumatic events, which occurred just after Auden had settled in New York City, prompted the poet’s hasty conversion to Anglo-Protestantism.

And thus we have the “American Auden” overrepresented and homogenized in much modern Auden scholarship. John Fuller is representatively biased in *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (1998), one of many authoritative pieces of Auden scholarship that nonetheless fails to take seriously this fascinating phase in Auden’s poetic career:

> It is characteristic of much of Auden’s work in the 1930’s not to have really made up his mind between spiritual tragedy and an invigorating call to order (this of course represents a conflict in his thinking which could only be resolved later by the adoption of Christian belief) . . . the text is patently attempting to reconcile this equivocation and tidy things up, but the result is flat and unexciting. (Fuller, 141)

This is overwhelmingly characteristic of the Auden scholarship that was generated after the poet’s death in 1973, inspiring an efflux of criticism that forms three decades of what many contemporary scholars now regard as nearly-canonical works in Auden’s critical heritage. Their merits are as great as their coverage, yet they have led contemporary Auden scholarship down meandering and repetitious paths. All too often, these two phases of the poet’s long and ideologically amorphous career are conflated, when in fact the early and later Auden are altogether entirely different poets. Needless to say, Auden’s later work has its merits, and its spiritual depth and self-contemplative profundity are not to be undermined – nor are the lasting difficulties, the scathing sincerity, and the aesthetic and cognitive profundity of his early verse.

This is a study of the sublime as the supreme aesthetic and intellectual merit of Auden’s *On This Island*. The worldviews and critical heritage that I engage with in this study belong solely to the early, English Auden of the 1930’s – they are the dialectical opposite of those held by the later,
American Auden. The Auden of the 1930s’ was a radical skeptic, and was not open to traditional modes of religious consolation in dealing with the tragedies of his age. This is a volume that belongs to a poet with a vision, a fierce sense of duty as an artist compelled to comment upon the realities of a monumental crisis in human history, and *On This Island* is a lasting testament to the early Auden and to the sense of crisis that accompanied the tensions of the interwar years. Shattering like mirrored glass, Auden’s everyday reality refracts on the poet in disturbing ways, and the volume reflects a kaleidoscopic whirl of a world in pieces.
CHAPTER I: THE EVOLUTION OF THE SUBLIME TRADITION

It is quintessentially difficult provide a generalized definition of “the sublime” that fits the many literary and philosophical theories of the mode. Philip Shaw provides a useful generalized definition of the sublime in the “primary” or “positive” sublime, the theocentric mode of transcendence from whence Nietzsche and Auden depart:

Since the concept was first presented in *Peri Hypsous* or *On the Sublime*, an aesthetic treatise commonly attributed to Longinus, a philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician . . . the sublime has stood, variously, for the effect of grandeur in speech and poetry; *for a sense of the divine*; for the contrast between the limitations of human perception and the *overwhelming majesty of nature*; as proof of *the triumph of reason over nature* and imagination and, most recently, as a signifier of that which exceeds the grasp of reason. [emphasis mine] (Shaw 7)

The primary sublime tradition had necessarily centered upon belief in God, from its genesis in Longinus through the end of the eighteenth-century. Burke’s *An Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1757) exhibits an Aristotelian influence, and analyzes the sublime as the intervening hand of a terror-and-awe inspiring God who reminds us of our finitude by bringing us into confrontation with an inherently “sublime object.” In the Burkean sublime, our self-preservation is threatened and our ambition kindled, and we are reminded to “set for ourselves a final purpose” in progressing towards a more perfect state of existence throughout our lives as part of his Grand Design. Likewise, in his *Critique of Pure Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant foregrounds his theory of the sublime with the premise that “in order to set ourselves a final purpose in conformity with the moral law…it is also necessary that we assume…that there is a God” (Critique p.340).
Yet in the philosophy and literature of the late-nineteenth century, the dissolution of belief in God is palpable. Thomas Weiskel foreshadows the burgeoning heterogeneity that emerges in the sublime tradition in the late nineteenth century:

The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human -- God or the gods, the daemon or nature -- is matter for great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure. . . . Without some notion of the beyond, some credible discourse of the superhuman, the sublime founders; or it becomes a “problem.” (Weiskel 15)

As traditional European epistemology began to show weakness in the face of scientific advancement, an entire generation was cast into existential vertigo. A newly decentered worldview and the destabilization of a once-omnipotent ideology had vast consequences for the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and the ideological failure of metaphysics manifested itself in the literary and humanistic expression of the era. Terry Eagleton turns directly to this period as a representative example of literature and ideology as codependent variables in an amorphous theoretical tradition:

If the reader is still unconvinced, the narrative of what happened to literature in the later nineteenth century might prove a little more persuasive. If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: ‘the failure of religion’. By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and minds of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. (Eagleton 2244)
And so, too, was the ideology of the primary sublime. Like any literary tradition, the primary sublime relied upon a context and an ideology -- theocentric, in this case -- and “all successful ideologies [work] much less by explicit concepts or formulated doctrines than by image, symbol, habit, ritual, and mythology” (Eagleton 2255). Thus the stakes for the sublime in the skeptical tradition are radically altered, as are the aesthetics and ideological foundations of this representative mode.

In a world and worldview in which “God is dead,” does the sublime cease to exist? Absolutely not: it is under these conditions that the secondary sublime is born. Like any literary tradition, the strength of the sublime relies upon its ability to adapt to the inevitable ebb and flow of ideological shifts and aberrations of taste that its future inevitably entails. Humanistic traditions and archetypes are as plastic as they are durable. Eagleton attributes the reorientation of late nineteenth-century aesthetics to the dissolution of religious belief, which foregrounds the conception of the secondary sublime:

Literature was in several ways a suitable candidate for this ideological enterprise [to react to the ‘failure of religion’]. As a liberal, ‘humanizing’ pursuit, it could provide a potent antidote. . . .dealing in universal human values rather than historical trivia, [literature] could serve to place in cosmic perspective. . . .the contemplation of eternal truths and beauties.  

(Eagleton, 2245)

From this ideological crisis of the late 1800s, the secondary sublime is born. First conceived in the continental philosophy of the late nineteenth-century, it flourishes in the poetics of the early twentieth-century and enables sublimity to outlive the Western tradition of belief in God.
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the most influential and visionary pioneers of the secondary sublime, and a torchbearer in the adaptation of the sublime tradition to a radically decentered worldview. He eschewed religious nostalgia in the wake of “God’s death,” and responded to his own moment of ideological crisis by developing a philosophical project for the “revaluation of values” in the wake of the metaphysical. In an attempt to prevent devastating existential vertigo before its onset, Nietzsche promoted sublime artistry as a method of responding to the otherwise senseless and uncontrollable tragedy and absurdity of human existence -- these had always been facets of human life, but with the decentering of religion, they were no longer justified. Nietzsche argued that artistic creation was the healthiest possible response to moments of crisis such as his own, when man’s view of himself and the world is decentered and the human predicament becomes the only “truth” to which we can genuinely lay claim: “Nietzsche himself possessed that health which responds to the severest penalization and to nameless suffering with defiant creativity” (Kauffman, 30). The sublime artist exhibits a “pessimism of strength” in exhibiting an intuitive sense for the deeper meanings of his crisis and suffering – he has a piercing insight into the innermost core of existence, and he exerts power over the chaos of his world by sublimating it into aesthetic representations that testify to the eternal truths of the tragic predicament. His spectators develop a stoic palate in learning to appreciate tragedy, and universally identify with the facet of the human predicament which the sublime artist captures in representative forms -- they are unified in their suffering, and in learning to appreciate tragedy they develop an appreciation for life itself.

The Nietzschean sublime acts as an intermediary vessel through which reality and representation – truth and artistry – are balanced and synthesized in a depiction of human existence
that brought spectators face-to-face with the newly exposed, difficult, and painful truths that modernization had unveiled:

Nietzsche’s embodied sublime thus seeks to disrupt the formation of quasi-transcendentals, those God substitutes that, whether conceived as reachable or unreachable, provide the self with a supersensible point of orientation. . . . For Nietzsche, it is not the beyond, but the world itself that inspires awe and terror, generating modes of ekstasis powerful enough to break the unity of the all-knowing ‘I’. (Shaw 157)

And for Nietzsche, this was a call to order for the sublime artist, tasked to confront the historical crisis of his era with an aesthetic solution that confronted these truths, in their formless and incomprehensible quintessence, through modes of representation that at once concretized reality without sacrificing its integrity. Weiskel affirms Nietzsche’s central role in the conception of the secondary sublime. It was Nietzsche who altered the stakes for the sublime tradition, establishing its firm foundation in the ironic and absurd. These became necessary prerequisites for the sublime tradition in the secondary mode:

It would be hard to overestimate [the sublime’s] presence in the nineteenth century. In one direction the sublime opens out through Kant into the vast and gloomy corridors of German idealism. . . . But we have long since been too ironic for the capacious gestures of the Romantic sublime. When Nietzsche proposed “the heights of the soul from which even tragedy ceases to look tragic, he took hypsous about as far as it can go. To please us, the sublime must now be abridged, reduced. . . grotesque, somehow hedged with irony. (Weiskel 6)

Nietzsche’s first book, The Birth of Tragedy (1873) is a philosophical reassessment of the role of art and the value of knowledge, with deep contemplation as to their respective integrities and
impacts on the role of cultural psychology. Nietzsche extends his entire aesthetic philosophy and theory of the sublime in response to the moment of crisis in which he wrote, and to the revelation of truths with scientific inquiry and the decentering of metaphysics. Nietzsche’s multifaceted preoccupations in The Birth of Tragedy are of tripartite relevance to this study. First, there is his treatment of art as a psychological coping mechanism. Second, there is the role of the Nietzschean sublime as an intermediary vessel for the “artistic taming of the horrible”: the Nietzschean sublime acts as the intermediary vessel that allows art to reflect a balanced synthesis of abstract, conceptual realities “tamed” through concrete, representative forms. And, third and finally, in The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche proposes a revision to the cultural aesthetic of the beautiful, the rational, and the intelligible, and he revises the role of the sublime to suit moments of ideological and existential crisis such as his own, and with it comes an aesthetic and ideology of the frightening, the uncertain, the abyss. The sublime artist looks past the beautiful, and Nietzsche restores serious contemplation to the art of the tragic sublime, eschewing his precursors’ concern with the beautiful and demanding from art something far more profound, “which will not be judged according to eternal beauty any more than according to notions of the sublime” (Nietzsche, 19). The sublime artwork has a depth and profundity indicative of an artistic insight “beyond the aesthetic sphere...reaching over into the territory of pity, fear, and the morally sublime” (Nietzsche, 19).

It is imperative that we distinguish Nietzsche’s definition of “truth” from that of his precursors, since the truths that the Nietzschean artist sublimates are quite different than the “truth” of the sublime object in the primary mode. Nietzsche’s sublime object is the truth that the sublime artist intuits and confronts: the difficult truths of human existence in an ambivalent, Godless cosmos. Nietzsche’s conceives of a cosmos governed by chaos: “[The universe] has no drive to self-preservation or any other drives; nor does it observe any laws” (Nietzsche 109). When we
realize that such “laws” are nonexistent, we realize that our existence is subject to complete and utter chaos:

Let us beware even of believing that the universe is a machine; it is certainly not constructed to one end, and the word ‘machine’ pays it far too high an honour. The total character of the world, by contrast, is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called. Judged from the vantage point of our reason, the unsuccessful attempts are by far the rule; the exceptions are not the secret aim, and the whole musical mechanism repeats eternally its tune, which must never be called a melody.

. . .But how could we reproach or praise the universe! Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness or unreason or their opposites; it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man!

(Nietzsche 109)

Nietzsche attacks the religious narratives which Kant and Burke ascribe in their theories of the sublime, attempts to rationalize a quintessentially incomprehensible experience by referring the sublime feeling of primordial frenzy – a disorderly element that refuted their belief in a transcendent, divinely inspired reality – back to God, and these thinkers tethered the sublime in “causes” that they could explain by traditional means. Thus in the Nietzschean schema, the only attainable “truths” that the artist can honestly claim to represent are the truths of human existence as such: the sublime artist has an intuitive gift that attunes his insight to the primordial, eternal, innermost truths at the essence of nature and of human existence.

For Nietzsche, the sublime artwork or performance brings its artist and spectators closer to the truth than any other mode of investigation or expression. The Nietzschean sublime is a mode
of performance and communication, casting into representative forms the truths of human existence – the suffering, tragedy, irrationality, and absurdity that we do understand – and portraying them in representative form. Sublime tragedy never claims to rationalize the universe or follow laws, and the artist equipped with the sublime capability at once exhibits insight into the “terrible truths of existence” and a “pessimism of strength” in confronting those aspects of life directly and exerting creative power over the truths of life in a lawless world. Time does not sway the poignance of the sublime artwork: it communicates a universally identifiable element of the imperiled human predicament on a primordial, eternal scale. Nietzsche grants access to this truth only to the artists, who can not only grasp, but withstand, and moreover articulate, the innermost truth of existence into universally recognizable forms and patterns:

The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world, like some fantastical impossibility contrived in a poet’s head; poetry aims to be the very opposite, the unvarnished expression of truth, and for this very reason it must cast off the deceitful finery of the so-called reality of cultured man. (Nietzsche 106)

Sublimation is the poetic figuration of abstract concepts into signifying forms and images to speak to abstract, primordial realities that could otherwise never be concretized:

What then, is truth? . . . As creatures of reason, human beings now make their actions subject to the rule of abstractions; they no longer tolerate being swept away by sudden impressions first, turning them into cooler, less colourful concepts in order to harness the vehicle of theirs lives and actions to them. Everything which distinguishes human beings from animals depends on this ability to sublimate sensuous metaphors into a schema, in other words, to dissolve an image into a concept. (Nietzsche, 878)
Sublime poetry deals with “the contrast between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the entire world of phenomena,” and sublimation “is itself a metaphorical expression of that original relationship between thing-in-itself and phenomenon” (Nietzsche 106). For Nietzsche, *art* is the construct through which the sublime is channeled as an intermediary vessel that synthesizes representation with reality.

Formulaically speaking, the Nietzschean sublime occurs at the apex of an antithetical struggle between two art-realms, the “Apolline” and the “Dionysiac”:

[Nietzsche] describes the origin of tragedy in ancient Greece as the outcome of a struggle between two forces, principles, or drives. Nietzsche names each of these principles after an ancient Greek deity (Apollo, Dionysus) who can be thought of as imaginatively representing the drive in question in an especially intense and pure way. “Apollo” embodies the drive toward distinction, discreteness, and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits. . . . The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of boundaries, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess. (Geuss, xv)

Apollo was the Greek “god of all shaping energies,” and the Apolline is Nietzsche’s term for the “art-world” of sculpture, illumination, individuation, and representation, “that measured limitation” (Nietzsche, 75). The Apolline is necessary as a counterbalance to the antithetical art-God Dionysus, and the faculty of the Dionysiac, with which all boundaries are destroyed in the abyss as “the spell of individuation is broken, and the path to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost core of things, is laid open” (Nietzsche, 76).

The Dionysiac represents the nauseating truths of our existence, and it presents powerful, existential truths so devastating that it alienates the individual who obtains Dionysiac insight, the
“man of intuition” who senses the formless frenzy stirring beneath the surface-world of his absurd existence in an uncanny universe:

The Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts a lethargic element in which all personal experience from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience. But as soon as daily reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced with a sense of revulsion. . . .In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. . . .it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action.

(Nietzsche 7)

*Just* when man finds himself in existential vertigo, *just* when he is forced to confront these “terrible truths” of existence, and recoils to regard himself and his universe as a swirling, limitless, chaotic mass of deindividuated dust -- here, the sublime presents itself in his salvation. The Nietzschean sublime emerges not as the beautiful, not as the terrifying, but as the “artistic taming of the terrible”:

Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means. (Nietzsche 7)
For Nietzsche, sublimation is possible only through a fragile and balanced harmony of the antithetical, through the synthesis of the Apolline and the Dionysiac. We cannot ignore the Dionysiac truths of our existence, as this access to primordial truth on the fringes of consciousness constitutes the new “beyond” that Nietzsche has redefined as the transgressive reach of sublime performance – Dionysiac insight supplants the “God” that was once at the center of sublimity and the poet’s access to the “beyond.” Yet the Dionysiac, like truth itself, defies direct representation – it is quintessentially abstract and formless. And for this reason, if the artist is to represent Dionysiac insights, he must rely upon figurative aesthetics and the Apolline faculty for sculpture, illumination, and form, to render the shapeless, abysmal “sublime object” of Dionysiac truth into artistic form. Hence the necessity for the Apolline, the representative faculty through whence reality’s painful truths are sublimated into artistic representation, and in the poetics of the Nietzschean sublime, a string of Apolline signifiers stand in for a universal, Dionysiac Signified: “For the genuine poet metaphor is no rhetorical figure, but an image which takes the place of something else, something he can really see before him as a substitute for a concept” (Nietzsche 42). The poet translates insight into artistry through tropes, figures, symbols, metaphors, synecdoche, metonymy, and all the other substitutive powers of language which render abstract or ineffable concepts into being through versification. “With sublime gestures,” the artist “shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate that releasing and redemptive vision and then, lost in the contemplation of that vision, to sit calmly in his rocking boat in the midst of the sea” (Nietzsche 30).

These are the merits of the sublime artist, and here we see his role in sculpting a lawless universe and an existential abyss into something meaningful and representative of the hardships that define the human condition. Unlike the artist preoccupied with the “beautiful,” who constructs
a “veil of illusion” to please his viewers, the sublime artist confronts a potentially devastating sublime object with the courage of a warrior and the conduct of a stoicist:

Is there a pessimism of strength? An intellectual preference from the hard, gruesome, malevolent, and problematic aspects of existence. . . Is there a tempting bravery in the sharpest eye which demands the terrifying as its foe, as a worthy foe against which it can test its strength and from which it intends to learn the meaning of fear? (Nietzsche 3)

The sublime artist is the “instinctive poet” who, like Auden, “goes beyond beauty,” exhibiting his keen “recognition of the terrors and absurdities of existence, of the disturbed order and the unreasonable nature of events, indeed the most enormous suffering throughout the whole of nature”; he “seeks to emulate his model [Dionysus] in the upheaval of the sublime” (Nietzsche, 130). And the sublime artwork results from the delicate synthesis and maintenance of that sublime upheaval in a representation of the tragic core of human existence. Harold Bloom shares Auden’s reverence for Nietzsche’s aesthetic and philosophical didactics:

The Nietzschean Sublime depends upon our surrendering easier pleasures in order to experience more difficult pleasures. Strong poetry is difficult, and its memorability is the consequence of a difficult pleasure, and a difficult enough pleasure is a kind of pain. . . What the poet means is hurtful, Nietzsche tells us, nor can we tell the hurt from the meaning. What are the pragmatic consequences for criticism of Nietzsche's poetics of pain? To ask that is to ask also what I am convinced is the determining question of the canonical: what makes one poem more memorable than another? The Nietzschean answer must be that the memorable poem, the poem that has more meaning, or starts more meaning going, is the poem that gives (or commemorates) more pain. . . the strong poem repeats and
commemorates a primordial pain. [The] strong poem constitutes pain, brings pain into being, and so creates meaning. The pain is the meaning. (Bloom “Essayists and Prophets”) This, we will see, is as true of Auden as it is of sublimity in Nietzsche. Raymond Geuss concludes his introduction to Nietzsche’s book with a neat formula: “Tragedy requires the cooperation of Dionysus with Apollo, of music and words” (Geuss x). I draw this one step further -- no further than Nietzsche, between the bookends of his aphoristic constellation, but simplifying the classicist terminology and multifaceted nature of the paradigm to fit Auden’s work: “the cooperation of Dionysus and Apollo,” the harmony between the sublime object and the poet’s representative mode, of sublime content sculpted through form.

EPIGRAPH: AUDEN’S STATEMENT OF ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Thus the Nietzschean sublime is perfectly in keeping with how Auden understood both his era, and his function as a consciously ironic, critical poet using poetic traditions in transformed, ironic ways. This is clear from Auden’s “Epigraph,” which I read as an opening declaration of his artistic philosophy for this volume:

Since the external disorder, and the extravagant lies,

The baroque frontiers, the surrealist police;

What can truth treasure, or the heart bless,

But a narrow strictness? (Auden 1)

Auden sublimates the overwhelming, Dionysiac truths of the chaos that has engulfed his everyday reality and concretizes it through verse, imposing the Apolline faculty for sculpture and form upon the formless and thus achieving the Nietzschean goal in casting this modern tragedy into light for all of its absurdity -- and illuminating it thus, so that no mind, nor reader, can ignore the scathing social commentary that Auden has to deliver. Just as the tragic fuses the Apolline and Dionysiac
in sublimation through art, Auden achieves his sublime through verse that posits form and tone in
perverse interrelation to disturb and affront the reader with a curt vision of truth, for all of its
terrors.

And thus Auden achieves the Nietzschean goal. He reserves no illusion, no pleasantry or
optimism in his mimesis a world in ruins and the even more frightening dilapidation of the minds
that inhabit it. The thirty-one poem volume posits tone and content in perverse interrelation,
soliciting an encyclopedic variety of poetic form in overextending an invitation to the reader to
indulge in a dislocating aesthetic paradox, as Auden solicits the sensory pleasure of versification
whilst dealing with such dark issues. Auden is the mouthpiece for a multitude of jaded voices,
“tramps” who solicit the senses in guileful temptations to one “mind event” after another; versified
labyrinths disentangle the reader’s ability to abstain or withdraw from the frightening “mind
events” in which he finds himself at the crux of every poem, only to read on and nod off, as it
were, to the cadential rhythms of meter, rhythm and rhyme at the expense of our inhibitions. Time
and again, we are duped into the devastated visages of men and a nation mired in the throes of
impending devastation, prepared to enter a war with a cacophony of utterances whose choral cries
of betrayal, mourning, deceit, and benumbed acceptance, ring out in discordant notes of
foreboding: this is the dissonant chorus of “this island, now,” and stunned, we can only fathom the
horrendous forecast of a future for a multitude of voices that already wail, gasp, and chide in
rhythms of corruption and despair. And this is, to return to Nietzsche once more, the function of
verse as a vehicle for sublimation: “the art of grand rhythm, the grand style of phrasing, as the
expression of the first rise and fall of the sublime” (Nietzsche 4).
CHAPTER II: THE INTERWAR POET AT THE POINT OF EPIPHANY

Auden’s predicament as a poet is profoundly interesting — and terrifying, from the perspective of his alienated social critique — because the crowning crisis of his decade has yet to arrive. As an artist of the secondary sublime, Auden is tasked with confronting the “external disorder and extravagant lies” of the reality he comprehends at present, whilst confronting a sublime object -- the incomprehensible reality of the Second World War -- that threatens to eclipse his future. We saw, with Nietzsche, the merit of the sublime artist, and the ideology of the secondary sublime insofar as it pertains to the poet’s task. Yet there is one final element missing from Nietzsche’s seminal account foregrounding the stakes and significance of the secondary sublime: what is the nature of the sublime performance? In other words, how does the sublime artist himself “look at life through the prism of art”? From what vantage point can he obtain this galvanizing perspective?

I suggest that in this volume, Auden maintains a sense of division between the war-torn present and an apocalyptic future by adopting an archetypal stance that Northrop Frye later defined as the “point of epiphany:”

One important detail in poetic symbolism remains to be considered. This is the symbolic presentation of the point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment, and which we propose to call the point of epiphany. Its most common settings are the mountain-top, the island, the tower, the lighthouse, and the ladder or staircase. (Frye 304)

The point of epiphany is an archetype where the cyclical world of nature and the apocalyptic world come into alignment, and at a key setting such as the island, “the sense of being between two worlds simultaneously is present” (Frye 304). Frye makes it clear that this archetype has existed
for centuries in the Western literary tradition, one that Auden made his own: “Folk tales and mythologies are full of stories of an original connection between heaven or the sun and earth. . . . such stories are often analogues of the Biblical stories of the Fall” (Frye 273). Though Auden was not the first modern poet to adapt this archetype to his own context, he was certainly the most prominent artist of the interwar period to use it as powerfully as his precursors had in the 1920’s:

In the later poetry of Yeats and Eliot [the point of epiphany] becomes a central unifying image. Such titles as “The Tower” and “The Winding Stair” indicate its importance for Yeats, and the lunar symbolism and the apocalyptic imagery of “The Tower” and “Sailing to Byzantium” are both thoroughly consistent. In Eliot it is the flame reached in the fire sermon of “The Waste Land” in contrast to the natural cycle which is symbolized by water, and it is also the “multifoliate rose” of The Hollow Men. Ash Wednesday brings us back again to the purgatorial winding stair, and Little Gidding to the burning rose, where there is a descending movement of fire symbolized by the Pentecostal tongues of flame and an ascending one symbolized by Hercules’ pyre and “shirt of flame.” (Frye 300)

Auden’s role as a poet is to bear witness to his moment through epiphanic verse. With transcendence to Frye’s liminal threshold between two worlds, the poet achieves the Nietzschean goal: “And the full view/ Indeed may enter” (Auden V). This unique perspectival stance facilitates Auden’s sublime performance, as he drifts to the periphery of an absurd and chaotic universe as an alienated commentator with a piercing and prognostic social vision. Auden’s sublime performance occurs at a point where past, present, and future collide in nostalgia and mourning for the ruptured center of a once harmonious world. Auden refuses to transcend a reality so desperately in need of critique. Instead, he hovers on its periphery as an alienated commentator.
He looks about and sees the ruins of a past crisis, and with disconcerting acuity he senses the encroaching antagonism of a monstrosity on the near horizon.

The point of epiphany is uniquely suited to the purposes of the interwar poet. Auden occupies the crux between two worlds, and two Wars, and he is acutely aware of this. The cyclical order of nature in Frye’s archetypal schema neatly aligns with Auden’s depiction of “this island, now”: shaped by the First World War and the chaos in the political sphere, the natural world appears fallen, disordered, and barren. Nature, in this volume, takes the visage of a desecrated pastoral landscape whose motions stagger into retrograde as the apocalyptic sphere’s swift orbit threatens to eclipse this world of the present. In *On This Island*, the “external disorder and extravagant lies” are externalized in projections of a dysfunctional English landscape. Auden’s motifs of environmental decay signify an angry and impotent earth. We “[hear] of harvests roiling in the valleys,” while “fish float in unruffled lakes” as “the earth turns over and our side feels the cold” (Auden VII - IX). This is a world which breeds nothing but death, and Auden bolsters this dark message by reaping all signs of life from a desert earth to reflect the state of human affairs at present while foreshadowing its fatalistic future.

Simultaneously, Auden presents a second, apocalyptic world in alignment with his own. This is the world of the future, the world of the Second World War, strewn with omens of destruction as nature resigns to her cosmic antagonist: “One thing that is now certain about revolution, whoever makes it, is that it will be violent. . . .His political poems in the summer of 1932 use a heady rhetoric of apocalyptic upheavals” (Mendelson 125). Auden develops his own apocalyptic iconography, combining Biblical portents with images of modern warfare to envisage the forthcoming catastrophe on every fathomable level of experience, harkening the end of an apocalyptic age: the world of “destruction of the social, political, and cosmic order as we know it”
(Jeffrey 52). This volume is strewn with omens of destruction, among them the “calamities and cataclysms” in nature and the cosmos, with “beasts rising from the sea and land”: “But when the waters make retreat. . . when stranded monsters gasping lie./ And sounds of riveting terrify/ Their whorled unsubtle ears” (Auden 60-65). Violent attacks, scarlet soldiers, naval ships, sea-beasts, receding seas, and the arid cracks of a reticent earth -- these signifying images connote the apocalyptic undertow of On This Island as Auden breaches the perspectival limits of this world and peers into the next.

Crucially, Frye draws an analogy between the point of epiphany and the apex of the Nietzschean sublime, which occurs at the intersectional axis of the Apolline and Dionysiac. In Nietzschean aesthetics, the point of epiphany -- the point of the secondary sublime -- finds its “dramatic form” in the “point of the birth of tragedy”:

At the far end of the archetypal masque, we reach the point indicated by Nietzsche as the point of the birth of tragedy, where. . .Dionysos is brought into line with Apollo. We may call this fourth cardinal point of drama the epiphany, the dramatic apocalypse. . . .This point is the dramatic form of the point of epiphany, most familiar as the point at which the Book of Job. . .finally ends. Here the two monsters behemoth and leviathan replace the more frequent demonic animals. (Frye 292)

And thus we have a direct connection between Auden’s archetypal stance for his sublime performance, and the Nietzschean aesthetics for the secondary sublime that emerges in Auden’s epiphanic verse. At the point of the birth of tragedy -- the point of Auden’s secondary sublime -- “the revel of satyrs impinges on the appearance of a commanding god, and Dionysos is brought into line with Apollo” (Frye 292). Frye draws an analogy between the apocalyptic world at the point of epiphany and the Dionysiac “underworld of secrets and oracles” at the point of the birth
of tragedy. These are the deeper, Signified meanings of the work, which seep through its surface appearances in the case of the secondary sublime (Frye 291). Likewise, Frye draws another analogue between the cyclical order of nature and the Apolline world of signifying images, words, and forms in the surface appearance of an artwork -- the Nietzschean equivalent of Frye’s cyclical world of nature -- where action unfolds until the hero’s search for truth is interrupted by a rupture and corresponding crisis, similar to that in which Auden finds himself in *On This Island*.

The point of epiphany is, in Nietzschean terms, “artistic middle world” where Dionysus and Apollo intersect, the axis of alignment where through an “artistic taming of the horrible” and a stoic construction of the human predicament, the artist and the spectator alike behold the sublime “in order to be able to live” (Nietzsche 22). The Dionysiac, or synonymously the apocalyptic underworld of secrets and oracles, is brought to the surface through the Apolline and the substitutive powers of language, and that “middle world of art” at once “shows its roots. . . . in short that whole philosophy of [Dionysus]” and shows us the pessimism of strength necessary for the sublime artist for whom “all of this was constantly and repeatedly overcome” (Nietzsche 23).

At the point of the birth of tragedy, Dionysus and Apollo align, and “Here, in the highest symbolism of art, we see before us the whole Apolline world of beauty and the ground on which it rests, that terrible wisdom of [the Dionysiac], and we grasp, intuitively, the reciprocal necessity of these two things” (Nietzsche 29).

Moreover, critics such as Richard Stingle have observed that for Frye, the point of epiphany is the point of the reader’s sublime: “in order to help readers perceive behind all verbal structures those myths and metaphors that may be found in their pure state as ‘two aspects of one identity’” (Stingle 33). Like the Nietzschean sublime, Frye’s point of epiphany forces the poet to straddle the intersection of two antithetical forces or dimensions of existence. The result is a revelation of
the meaning at the innermost core of the work, and of the meaning that lies beyond the work: “In responding to this pure model with heightened consciousness, readers may experience an epiphany going beyond the imaginative to . . . the experience of the sublime” (Stingle 96). Weiskel, too, notes that “the sublime is apocalyptic in the strict sense that it reveals final things, and the defeat of the sensible imagination accomplishes subjectively the end of the natural order,” bringing the about the apocalyptic equinox in nature’s eclipse (Weiskel 42).

Auden uses this alchemical symbol from literary history and applies it to his own stance, between two worlds in the most suggestive and chaotic manner fathomable -- in doing so, he at once lens clarity to the incomprehensible, and at the same time defies our scramble for balance and suspends his reader in sublime vertigo, refusing to let us graft intelligibility unto a world that does not, and cannot, make sense:

These archetypal positions throw a great deal of light on the characterization of modern allegorical, psychic, and expressionist art, in which a sense of confusion and fear accompanies the sense of loneliness . . . the constant undermining of the distinction between illusion and reality, as mental projections become physical bodies and vice versa, splits the action up into a kaleidoscopic chaos of reflecting mirrors. (Frye 292)

Critics have long noted the sense of ontological division that lends itself to the double-worlds of his early English verse, remarking explicitly that “two worlds” seem palpably present in his poems of the 1930’s. Yet none have attempted to find an archetypal monad that sufficiently synthesizes those worlds into a coherent and meaningful unity, as do the poems themselves. In *Man’s Place: An Essay on W.H. Auden* (1973), Richard Johnson introduces Auden’s sense of man’s duality as analogous to that of the world he inhabits. In understanding this fundamental concept of Auden’s early work, “we refer to a basic paradox that exists in reality and is at the core of man’s existence”:
Man is a double creature, aware of existing in two radically different spheres governed by radically different laws. . . . The world is also double, consisting of a natural world of iterative occurrences describable by natural laws, and a world of history, the world of unique persons interacting, in which no event is repeatable, and in which man can exist as shaper, creator, and agent. (Johnson 2)

Johnson writes in reference to Auden’s work of the mid-1930’s, and his book is preoccupied with Auden’s sense for man’s existential predicament as defined by his ontological division between two disparate spheres of existence:

This yoking of present and future itself makes a point: the moral crisis of our age grows in part from the expectation that the same order men assumed in the past can or should exist in the present. . . . in a coincidence of events, [we encounter] the end of a historical era and the beginning of the Second World War. Its method is to approach the crisis defined by its occasion from a number of different perspectives. The result is to assert the multiplicity of the crisis and the necessity of a pluralistic view of it. . . . The crisis of the moment is primarily a crisis in man’s knowledge of himself and the world, and the immediate problems – the dissolution of order in Europe and the rise of Fascism – stem from accepting simple solutions to complicated problems. (Johnson 7)

Mendelson also acknowledges Auden’s occupation of a threshold between two radically disparate ontological spheres. He notes in *Early Auden* that by 1932, Auden had developed a solution to the problem of “borders” with which he had been preoccupied in his early work. He grew fascinated with the implications of a boarder as a “limen,” the Latin term for “threshold” at the root of the “sublime” or *sublimis*. Mendelson recounts that by the mid-1930s, Auden surmounted the issue of “barriers” by re-envisioning these divisions as *thresholds*. Thus “Auden at the border” and “Auden
braving the frontier” are consistent perspectival motifs throughout the poet’s early work. Yet as in Frye, “there are parallels in Auden’s double sense of style – illegal yet traditional – to his double sense of history” (Mendelson 43). And thus we receive the formula for sublimation which becomes especially poignant on the island, which is itself a privileged perspectival stance at the threshold between the natural and apocalyptic worlds. Auden now saw a “frontier” that, for the poet, “has been transfigured,” while “what has not altered is our disease within” (Mendelson 149).

Thus the point of epiphany seems to unify critical discourse denoting Auden’s keen sense for man’s double-nature, and dualistic existence, as a term which concretizes Auden’s sense for his historical moment and the poet’s place therein. Auden’s ability to capture both worlds at once, and this sensation of duality in the unity of the poems themselves, is what I take to be the result of double refraction, with Auden at the axis between his perceived natural world of the present, and his inability to see this world separately from his imagined apocalyptic world of the future: for one cannot be understood without the other.

Aside from the continuities I have noted thus far, there is the final and most obvious linkage between the classic settings for the point of epiphany and Auden’s island, the unified terrain for this volume. Auden was a topologically minded critic and poet fascinated with the island archetype and its attendant connotations. Auden wrote prose pieces, poems, and criticism about islands and explores its ironic inversion at length in The Enchafed Flood (1949), demonstrating that the island’s largely positive connotations in literature through Romanticism became radically negative in the post-Romantic and modern imagination. A lawless inlet once presented the return to a prelapsarian state, presenting innocence as we enjoyed it in an age of grace where there was no conflict between moral choice and natural desire. Now, the lawlessness of the island foregrounds anarchy, its isolation corresponds to loneliness and estrangement, and its geographic confines
place the island at the threshold between the continent and the Atlantic. The metonymic association of island with continent has problematic social and political implications in Auden’s context. Britain is on the border of a European continent in flames, and stands imperiled at the shores of “this mole perched between Europe/And the exile-crowded sea” (Auden I). Auden is sure, in his 1936 *On This Island*, to distinguish carefully between the old legend of “Britain as an oceanic Eden” and “this island now”:

This image, in turn, has two possibilities. Either it is the real earthly paradise, in which case it is a place of temporary refreshment for the exhausted hero, a foretaste of rewards to come or the final goal and reward itself, where the beloved and blessed society are waiting to receive him into their select company; or it . . . is seen to be really the desert of barren rock, or a place of horror. . . . the islands turn out to be places of danger which make them kill each other or commit suicide, i.e. they turn their aggressive feelings away from the absent object against themselves. Thus the islands become the means by which [they] are taught through suffering from hate that hate is hateful. (Auden 51)

“LOOK, STRANGER, AT THIS ISLAND NOW”

This brings us to the poem from which both the U.S. and U.K. editions of this volume draw their titles: “Look, stranger, at this island now” (Auden V). This is a quintessential poem of epiphanic vision, and exhibits Auden’s impressive mastery of these antithetical forces or dimensions of vision in surmounting the barrier between two worlds and bearing witness to his moment of revelation through epiphanic verse. We must look at this island now, and like Auden we must confront this historical crisis without wincing or turning a blind eye to the pressing concerns of this moment in a germinating global crisis that will forever affect the history of mankind. Unlike any other poem in the volume, this poem is direct address to the reader; one hesitates to call it a
conversation, for it is one-sided. This is an auditory and imaginative assault on the our ignorance and innocence, with which the reader is charged as an addressee. We have no choice but to follow the speaker’s command, for how else can we “look” “at this island now” and proceed with the poem?

Look, stranger, at this island now
The leaping light for your delight discovers,
Stand stable here
And silent be,
That through the channels of the ear,
May wander like a river
The swaying sound of the sea. (Auden 1-7)

Our estrangement from this speaker is pronounced at the poem’s outset, though it is never justified. This quintessentially lonely volume, whose galvanizing perspective is a merit of extreme alienation, strands us at the “ending pause” of life as we know it. Suspended between two dimensions of existence, we sense that we are at the end of this life and on the verge of beginning the next, and the gravitational pull of the apocalyptic world is palpable as this postwar sphere grows closer in its interminable orbit. We have involuntarily joined him at the point of epiphany, and we participate as helpless and hopeless bystanders in this sublime performance, caught in a chokehold and force-fed the ominous implications that are tightly bound to every utterance.

Not only does the voice of the speaker violate the “ear”; so, too, do the truths he utters. Like an infectious substance, his speech seeps “through the channels of the ear” and into the threshold of our immediate consciousness. Even the inherently harmless “swaying sound of the sea” becomes noxious and overwhelming as it pulsates with the steady iamb of the speaker’s
devious homily. The fearful implications of this poem gain momentum with the ebb and flow of the sea, thrusting with each tidal motion into our immediate awareness of an increasingly ominous scene. The sound of the tide’s ebb and flow is inundated with foreboding, reminding us like a ticking clock of time’s swift passage, from this moment of calm to the full-fledged chaos ahead. Even the syntactic units and metric pulsations of lines in free-verse begin to echo with the reverberations of a military promenade.

We find shortly into the poem’s second stanza that we cannot, as we are commanded initially, “Stand stable here/And silent be,” as we are thrust head over heels into vertigo, tossed in different directions by the sounds and sights of the shoreside scene deliberately scattering into kaleidoscopic disorder:

Here at the small field’s ending pause
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam, and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide,
And the shingle scrambles after the sucking surf, and the gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side. (Auden 8-14)

This stanza is strewn with metric and syntactic surprises. Enjambment and alliteration enrich its devious tropes and stumbling rhythms, and in this second stanza we feel as if we are tumbling out of control. Assonance and consonance couple in a sustained recourse that seem to animate the units of each line, as if the poem were in conversation with itself, and likewise the “cyclical order of nature” seems to enter a sort of schizophrenic-recourse with its natural rhythms and boundaries. This tangle of enjambed lines depict the cyclical rhythms of nature colliding with her own
boundaries. The auditory and imaginative associations to which this meticulously disorganized stanza gives rise cause us to gaze into the Dionysiac abyss that is Nietzsche’s sublime object, shapeless and formless yet indubitably present. We “stride over,” as it were, like the enjambbed lines that leave us tumbling, head over heels, attempting to retain our balance. Auden sublimates the sounds of the “cyclical order of nature” -- “the pluck/And knock of the tide. . .the suck-/ing surf” while the “gull lodges/A moment on its shrill side” -- and fuses them with the diction of battle: the sea on the offense, the Dover cliffs’ “chalk wall” embracing itself to counter the blow of a long-familiar tidal crash, depicted as an epic encounter between the mountainside and the tide which “falls to the foam” as it crashes into its bordering entity yet makes no impact, except upon itself (Auden 9-14). This is apparently the product of Auden’s judicious syntactic implementation, his clever and disorienting tropes, and his uncanny diction throughout this stanza, which collectively sap these lines of their resemblance to human speech. Our alienation is further established, and our sense of disorientation intensifies. The nauseating turbulence of the stanza reaches stunning stasis with a seagull’s tilt on spread wings, showing its underbelly, which silences the “suck-/ing surf” and its ravenous consumption of shingles which scramble as they are reproduced into tidal flotsam.

Both ends of this second stanza, like the geographic boundaries of this island, are bordered by an “ending pause” (Auden 8). The gull “lodges” on its side, and like the reader appears thrust into a whirl of natural cycles and spun onto its “sheer side,” with implications of translucency as if it tilts on an axis, like this world at the point of epiphany, to show us its oracular underbelly. Here at the shore or the “small field’s ending pause,” we gaze far beyond the shores and into the infinite horizon, far beyond this moment of stasis and into the future. Like the gull in its half-successful attempt to lodge, we reach a limit-experience in suspension between the natural and the
apocalyptic. In this purgatorial threshold of the poem and Auden’s topography of global crisis, we see in this image of nature the apocalyptic sphere of existence as the natural and cyclical worlds come into alignment in a moment of calm before the storm, growing closer in their equinoctial orbit. The ethereality of this speaker’s voice and his oracular tone lend a disconcerting gravity to his light utterances, which are entirely deceiving in the guise of harmless invitations, and we experience a simulation of the apocalyptic moment in this “ending pause” before these spheres collide.

The poem’s third stanza is its final and most powerful unit. Beyond the shores of this island, Britain spreads her antagonistic tendrils into global conflict as ships depart from her channels and slip onto the horizon:

Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands;
And the full view
Indeed may enter. (Auden 15-18)

Naval vessels depart from the entry and exit ways of militarizing industrial channels, and they proceed on “urgent voluntary errands” ambivalent as to their profound impact on the implications of this scene. They momentarily trespass our consciousness before receding on the horizon, gravitating towards the apocalyptic world of the unknown. The “stranger,” who has disappeared completely in pointing us towards the scene in which we are now completely immersed, nearly whispers these final lines as he puts the finishing touches on his powerful portrait. If “the full view” has not “enter[ed]” already, it has to now. Britain is going to war. Another, World War -- and this portrait has obliterated any sentiment to the contrary, in three short stanzas. Yet even this is not enough. Auden continues to develop the image beyond this profound couplet, and sears the
full impact of the poem into our memory: “And move in memory as now these clouds do,/ That pass the harbour mirror/And all the summer through the water saunter” (Auden, 18-21).

Auden’s manipulative rhetoric is at its prime, here, as is his wit and scintillatingly brilliant cynicism. These are truths that Auden won’t let us forget. The speaker sears an impression upon our imagination that will likely haunt us until we, too, meet our final pause. Like the infectious notes that began, in the poem’s first stanza, the “full view” “indeed may enter” whenever it pleases, and “wander” effortlessly, at the speaker’s whim, through the “harbor mirror” to render every horizon, every threshold and geographic boundary in this volume set on this island, as the apex, the point of epiphany in ironic inversion, as the “top of the wheel of fortune from which the tragic hero falls” (Frye 239). This dictatorial exercise in perspectival manipulation will forever saturate the natural scenes of this island, in our eyes, with connotations of apocalypse. And this is precisely because nothing about Auden’s “cyclical order of nature,” nor the island that he inhabits, is natural or normal. Even a glimpse at a seemingly harmless natural setting, such as the cliffs and shore of Dover Beach, offer nothing but terrifying revelations which “mirror” the state and fate of mankind.

“PAYSAGE MORALISE”

“Paysage Moralise” (1936) is one of the most integrated and symbolic depiction of the point of epiphany in which equal measure of both the apocalyptic and the natural worlds informing the poem is palpably present. This sestina is reflects a hopeless realization that “our sorrow” is unparalleled by past crises in human history, which ended in resolution rather than apocalypse:

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys

Seeing at the end of street the barren mountains,

Round corners coming suddenly on water,

Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands.
We honor the founders of these starving cities

Whose honour is the image of our sorrow,

Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow (Auden 1-7)

Auden reflects upon the “founders of these starving cities” and “their sorrow” compared to “our sorrow,” and refuses to draw any inspired analogy between his own moment and past moments of crisis in human history which lent themselves to the betterment of mankind or resolution. He leverages the repetitious agility of the sestina form to provide us with an apocalyptically inverted reflection of his generation’s predicament. The “founders of these starving cities” found redemption in gracious harmony with the cyclical order of nature. Their suffering was absolved when they reached these “islands” and built “cities” alongside the “mountains”; they were welcomed by “water” in the “valleys” and “the green trees blossomed on the mountains” (Auden 7-12). The island beckoned the founders of cities with a natural abundance, an earthly paradise, where man made a future from his present destitution and founded cities in advancing the progress of humankind. But they were “innocent” (Auden 18). Their recovery and redemption suggested that it was possible that ours was a theocentric universe governed by an omnibenevolent deity, one with vested interest and an active hand in facilitating the survival of our species: “The gods,’ they promised, ‘visit us from islands. . . .Sitting at their white sides, forget your sorrow,/The shadow cast across your lives by mountains’” (Auden 24-30). They saw God in the white Dover cliffsides, and sensed his presence in the “mountains” at the edges of “this island now” – they were filled with gratitude for the divine, gazing upon the same the “chalk wall” which, decaying, “falls” to the “knock” of the tide when Auden stands on the same shores in “Look, stranger, at this island now” (Auden V).
Yet Auden’s natural world finds its inverse reflection in his meditation upon an idyllic pastoral age. Aided by the sestina and its repetitive cycles, he is adamant in his affirmation that the natural reflection of human affairs in his moment harkens to an unprecedented apocalypse unknown to past generations. In the past, “green trees blossomed in the valleys,” but now one sees “at the end of streets the barren mountains”; the founders found respite in the welcoming shores of the “island,” whereas now Auden knows “them shipwrecked that were launched for islands”; the “green” valleys that greeted the founders of these cities are now “rotting” after the final harvest; coexistence was effortless when “love was innocent far away from cities,” yet by the 1930’s, these “cities” are “starving” (Auden 5-36).

And thus the conclusions to the interwar generation’s “suffering” can only find its reverse reflection in “their sorrow” (Auden 6-7). The story of their revival “cannot see its likeness in our sorrow” because it ended in resolution rather than apocalypse, and Auden’s firm implication in this poem’s centre is that his generation most certainly will: “But dawn came back and they were still in cities;/ No marvellous creature rose up from the water/ The gold and silver were still in the mountains” [emphasis mine] (Auden 19-21). In alluding to Biblical portents of apocalypse, Auden foregrounds further differentiation between the past and present crisis. He suggests that just as the natural world appeared differently to the “founders of these cities” on the same island at the point of epiphany, so too did their cosmos: they could not see Apocalyptic omens to which Auden alludes in signaling the alignment of the apocalyptic sphere and the natural world in his moment at the point of epiphany (Auden 6-7). As in Revelations, “our sorrow” here meets a final judgment beckoned in by the Apocalyptic imagery that Auden here employs: “I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea” (Revelations 13:1). Auden’s implication for his own moment of “sorrow” in the history of “this island” is that “dawn” will not come back -- this is a
darkness which will give light to a whole new type of “dawn,” when we will see some “marvellous creature rise up from the water” (Auden 19-20). As the poem progresses Auden employs heavier-handed imagery from the Book of Revelations, with the Leviathan or sea-beast most immediately recognizable from Hobbes’ depiction of Man in his “natural condition” of constant warfare. His vision of man at present is quite fitting with its true reflection, which is not in “their sorrow,” but in Hobbes’ image of the sea-beast rising from the water, in the chaos of man in a state of constant unabated warfare, as pictured in the frontispiece for Hobbes’ Leviaethan (1651). Yet no sovereign rules the head of this apocalyptic harbinger, who instead rises from the sea as a creature formed and opposed by man in a constant state of battle with his neighbor; politics have only served to facilitate and exacerbate this war; “And thus also the controversy, and the condition of War remaineth, contrary to the Law of Nature” (Hobbes XV.31). And just as Auden “know[s] them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,” so too does the Biblical Apocalypse leave man, destitute, in search of land: “Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found” (Revelations 16:20).

None of these omens accompanied “their sorrow.” And as Auden concludes in the final envoy of this sestina, this “is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Ah, water/Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys/And we [would] rebuild our cities, not dream of islands” if there were any hope for action which could save us from our destitute fate at the apocalyptic equinox of a man-made monstrosity (Auden 37-39). Auden’s “send-off” recycles the six end-words employed throughout the poem -- “sorrow,” “water,” “cities,” “islands,” “mountains,” and “valleys” -- all of which are crucial settings for the point of epiphany. This “starving city,” unlike that which Auden’s precursors founded, will not be cleaned by the “gush, flush” of water that could possibly “melt” “our sorrow”: “The ancient founders and explorers, the thinkers of the Enlightenment and the
dreamers of the Romantic age, all hoped to escape or to diminish human sorrow, but Auden’s hope is different, knowing that sorrow is everywhere and will never lessen. . . . No reason or logic offers any promise that this might happen” (Mendelson 156). Again, Mendelson confirms the apocalyptic visions I have identified here as chimerical manifestations of Auden’s pessimistic imagination of forthcoming apocalypse. By the mid-1930’s, the endings to Auden’s poems had taken on an apocalyptic and oracular gravity: “where there is still no resolution but, rather, a sudden exit for an unspecified Elsewhere. Now Auden is no longer subverting from within,” for he sees this world as sufficiently subverted from without: “His departure is no more effective in any practical sense than his fantasies of destruction,” and these become “formal means of bringing a book to an end when the disordered world of the book itself permits no resolution that would be plausible in reality” (Mendelson 116). Auden cannot speak for the forthcoming war in the future tense; he knows that it will manifest itself through violence and revolution, chaos and catastrophe. Yet confronting this sublime object with the available resources of the Western canon, he portrays this envisaged fate through apocalyptic iconography in imagining a final judgment of a damned epoch in the history of humankind. His aim is to suggest that “our sorrow” is unprecedented and will not historically align with past moments of manmade crisis: this is a poet suspended at the end of existence on this earth as he knows it.
CHAPTER III: THE UNIVERSAL NIGHTMARE OF “O WHAT IS THAT SOUND”

“O what is that sound” (Poem VI) is one of the most widely canonized poems from On This Island. This ballad is known for its nightmarish effect, chronicling a terrifying series of events through a recursive series of questions and answers between two lovers who watch a troupe of scarlet-clad soldiers charge towards their home. Chris Baldick summates the affective power of a poem designed to conjure fears that were potent in the collective consciousness of Auden’s era:

“O What Is That Sound” is a ballad by W. H. Auden. . . It has proved to be one of the more popular of Auden’s poems of the 1930s, evoking for many readers the private terrors felt in that age of political persecutions. . . Much later, in a lecture of 1971, Auden himself gave an account of how he had come to compose this poem with the deliberate aim of producing a nightmarish effect. (Bal
dick 2005)

In a 1971 Freud Memorial Lecture entitled “Phantasy and Reality in Poetry,” Auden revealed that the poem was inspired by a nightmare:

It occurred to me then, but not before, that I, and, I fancy, nearly everybody, have had a nightmare in which one is pursued by some malignant power, and since this was a general experience, not private to myself, a poem might be based on it. . .[It] seemed to me that soldiers could function for all readers as a symbol. For dramatic purposes, I wanted a second person in the poem besides the dreamer so, for those disciples who ran away, I substituted a single figure, whom the dreamer loves and trusts, i.e. the reader can choose whatever image suits him or her -- but who in the end deserts the dreamer leaving him to face the terror alone. (Collected Prose IV 716)

This piece is the product of creative poetic output based on psychoanalytic dream interpretation. Auden knew that replacing the image of the steamroller with the universally recognizable and
inherently threatening symbol of soldiers could, at the time of this poem’s composition in 1932, stir the culturally conditioned anxieties that were deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of his era. This empowers the poet to decipher the source of anxiety at the root of his own nightmare, and to generalize these deductions of culturally-conditioned anxiety to stir the fears of an entire population. Auden reversed the dream-work, deciphered the source of the anxiety it endeavored to conceal, and recreated the scenario in a poem that remains chilling, and would have been, in Auden’s day, the world’s worst nightmare.

Before proceeding with the poem – for it commands full attention, as perhaps the most engaging and horrifying triggers of the reader’s sublime – it is worth noting the multifaceted significance of the folk ballad as it relates to this study. Here I return to Nietzsche for a fresh perspective on this traditional form of sublime communication. The folk ballad is the narrative species of the folk song, which Nietzsche isolates as a prime example of his reformulated sublime. Nietzsche hailed the folk song for its synthesis of primordial Dionysiac music channeled through the sculpture and formal discipline of Apolline, lyric verse:

But what is folk song, compared with wholly Apolline epic? Nothing other than the perpetuum vestigium of a union of the Apolline and the Dionysiac; the fact that it is so widely distributed amongst all people and grew ever more intense in an unbroken succession of births bears witness to the strength of that artistic double drive in nature, a drive which leaves traces of itself in a popular song in much the same way as the orgiastic movements of a people are eternalized in its music. Indeed it ought to be possible to demonstrate historically that every period which was rich in the production of folk songs was agitated by Dionysiac currents, since these are always regarded to be the precondition of folk song and the hidden ground from which it springs. (Nietzsche 6)
Nietzsche champions this artistic mode for two reasons, first and foremost because it encapsulates his formulaic and ideological sublime. The folk song is the balanced synthesis of his formula for the sublime, and isolates the folk song as an example of the “hidden ground” of crisis and agitating insights from which the Nietzschean sublime springs as an artistic response to the tragic absurdities of the human predicament. The union of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in the folk song and its “permanent trace” in the popular music of the ages, “born and reborn” into various forms and epochs, and every time it represents precisely the artistic response to moments of crisis “agitated by Dionysiac currents” which are regarded to be the “precondition” not only of the folk song, but of the Nietzschean sublime. This is where we reach the “point of the birth of tragedy,” the Nietzschean analogue to Frye’s point of epiphany, where Dionysus comes into alignment with Apollo: where the abyss of choral voices in a primordial outcry are sculpted through lyric and verse. And here we have the same occasion for folk song that Nietzsche privileged for sublime artistry: an agitated cultural climate.

Nietzsche also hails the sublimity of the folk song because like Auden’s interwar volume, his philosophy, and the sublime artwork in the Nietzschean mode, it emanates from moments of crisis: the most profound moments of human creativity and artistic efflux. Nietzsche notes that these genres flourish in historical moments agitated by Dionysiac undercurrents of disruptive truths and revelations, and that the folk song reflecting the discordant state of the world re-organized into repetitive rhythmic portrayals of the world they are composed to confront: “But above all else we regard the folk song as a musical mirror of the world, as original melody which then seeks for itself a parallel dream appearance, and expresses this in poetry” (Nietzsche 8). If the folk song, then, is a mirror of the world at present, we can confirm with this poem that Auden’s is truly as perverse as he projects it to be through such an abrasive interrelation of form and content.
as we encounter in this poem. As Weiskel noted, Nietzsche untethered the sublime and propelled it promptly into a realm even higher than tragedy, so detached from its disposition that it becomes ironic and absurd – here, we get a blend of all three. The union of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in the folk song and its “permanent trace” in the popular music of the ages, “born and reborn” into various forms and epochs, and every time it represents precisely the artistic response to moments of crisis “agitated by Dionysiac currents” which are regarded to be the “precondition” not only of the folk song, but of the Nietzschean sublime.

“O what is that sound” is the only poem in the volume in which two voices are present, depicting the interiorized experience of a nervous dialogue between a married couple who correspond with rhyme and reassurance as soldiers appear on the horizon, visible from the inside of their home. This ballad is intentionally perverse, and the form and melody of the folk ballad are entirely inappropriate in relation to the content of this poem, which is horrifying as the poem unfolds – yet Auden never breaks with the stringent demands of the ballad stanza:

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley, drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
Only the soldiers coming. (Auden 1-4)

The internal mechanisms of each stanza are stunningly systematic, each leveraging the posterior effect of complementary interrelation to the next. The quatrains are thoroughly and utterly sculpted. The first speaker, presumably the wife, begins inquisitively on a note that seems well fitted to a ballad stanza, opening with a stock phrase (“O”), an abrupt opening with an onomatopoeic unstressed vowel that initiates the outlay of an utterly formulaic ballad stanza borne into being with recursive stock phrases and refrains in a question-and-answer format. This is
especially disturbing because the content of the poem, as it unfolds, is horrifying – the tone and delivery of the content escalates rapidly in nervous suspense, yet Auden never breaks with the stringent demands of the ballad stanza.

This is a prime instance of Auden’s textural methodology to disrupt and disturb, positing form and content in perverse interrelation and superimposing traditional verse forms upon a devastated reality that renders them disenchanted, diminutive, bitter, and diabolical. We are invited to relax and nod along, as it were, with the inviting melody of the ballad and its recognizable rhythms, wandering into familiar poetic territory, only to find ourselves in the abysmal territory of Auden’s mercilessly dark content. It is difficult to imagine a poetic form more reliable than this, and yet this is by far the most suspenseful and jarring piece in the entire volume. Incremental repetition turns an innocent and familiar poetic form into a tragic nightmare as each progressive refrain informs the blind reader, trapped in the perspectival finitude of each voice in the duet, of the horrors that unfold in this short, compressed song. The congenial rhythms of the traditional ballad give the recursive question-and-answer exchange in each quatrain a diabolical cadence, entirely disparate with the events and terrifying observations that our focalizers chronicle. The events chronicled rapidly take a turn for the worst, yet Auden is rigid in enforcing the syntactic and semantic laws that he has established for this experience of crisis. Like the seemingly friendly invitation from a stranger to “Look” at what seems to be a pleasant shore-side scene of the famous Dover Beach, this is deceptive and misleading in its formal guise of pleasantry and idyllic pastoral innocence.
The first speaker, presumably the wife\(^1\), begins inquisitively on a note that seems well fitted to a ballad stanza, opening with a stock phrase – early in the ballad, her “O” seems like a seemingly sprightly initiation with an onomatopoeic unstressed vowel that initiates the outlay of an utterly formulaic schema, metrically reinforced by the iterative effect of “drumming, drumming” (Auden 2). Later, we realize that it has always been, or soon becomes, an outcry of sheer terror. The second interlocutor, the husband, assumes an assuaging, protective role that lends his voice a sense of safety and reliability, a deceptive guise that the ballad tradition itself solicits: its easy cadence, steady metric recourse between two speakers in set stock-formulae (arguably as set stock-characters), mirrored in the alterations between trimeter and tetrameter, and reinforced further by the (again, deceptive) harmony in the rhymes between the first speaker’s punctual inquiry, and the second speaker’s final refrain. Yet the ballad is by far the most suspenseful poem in the volume, and with its tones of urgency, immediacy, and heartbreaking pathos escalate through as their recourse continues and the soldiers grow closer in their encroach:

O what is that light I see flashing so clear
Over the distance, brightly, brightly?
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,
As they step lightly. (Auden 5-8)

\(^1\) I find that the genders of these two speakers are entirely indeterminate from the poem itself – and I hope to extend a reading that would not be compromised if we were to imagine these roles reversed, or to change the speakers’ genders entirely. Nonetheless, in my view, this is a poem about betrayal and persecution by the native soldiers of one’s own country: two vows are broken, and herein the tragedy lies. I have assigned the given genders as a matter of convenience and clarity for reference purposes, and I imagine this as a married husband and wife given the traditionalistic of the form, scene, and setting.
The “Only” that initiates the response in the second speaker’s first quatrain is subtracted as the implications of the vision become more and more ominous. His second tercet begins with a consonant that breaks the smooth assonant recourse of the quatrain and signals an air of uncertainty, while the refrain grows more complex both in its allegorical implications and in its immediate, literal implications for the speakers as they watch the soldiers come closer and closer until the sun glints off their weapons. The sun, the Apolline faculty for illumination, here instantiates the allegorical potency of the refrain: at first, it was “only” routine, “only” the soldiers making their roundabouts. Now, it is “Only the sun” which in and of itself has shone on this isolated village with each waking day, yet today it illuminates a new subject and refracts off the armory of scarlet-clad -- and presumably native -- soldiers in a metonymic displacement of the “light” “flashing so clear” (the warning signal for the encroaching War, already allegorized in “the soldiers coming”) which shifts the blinding glaze of the sun on steel unto the speakers and “channels through the ear” into their consciousness as “Indeed the full view may enter” (Auden V). And it refracts off of their weapons and onto the speakers, who are their intended object of pursuit, “as they step lightly” signifying the second speaker’s realization as he speaks that there is a semblance of native antagonism to the soldiers.

As Auden makes clear in his depiction of the civilians, soldiers, and members of this island, no one is to be trusted. Nothing should ever be dismissed as “only” routine, even soldiers clad in the speakers’ native scarlet. Yet all too often, these signs of conflict and of the time more generally are dismissed as “only” routine, as Auden implies through the well-meaning reassurances of a speaker who has grown so accustomed to the “external disorder and extravagant lies/ The baroque frontiers, the surrealist police” that inform the texture of his everyday life. And this results in the second speaker’s fatal flaw: he is unthreatened, initially, by the advance of armed
soldiers approaching his home, until it is too late to flee. With the refrain of the ballad bringing a troupe of soldiers closer and closer in proximity to an anxious couple’s focalizing gaze, he uses this universally-recognizable allegorical vehicle to bring readers face-to-face with its inevitable tenor: “The soldiers coming” represent the swift encroach of the forthcoming War. And in imagining its onslaught from a highly personal, private, and pathological perspective, Auden conveys the immediate danger that these military advances will pose to everyone on this island, combatant, non-combatant, civilian, women, and children. The poem’s third quatrain begins with the question that we, ourselves, ask of this situation:

O what are they doing with all that gear,
What are they doing this morning, this morning?
Only the usual maneuvers, dear
Or perhaps a warning. (Auden, VI.19)

What are these British, scarlet clad soldiers doing with all this gear, fully armed and charging a peaceful domestic countryside? Who are they after? What are they prepared to fight for, and why are they targeting this unassuming couple? Movement and chaos intensify as codependent variables in a vision of an individual experience of being pursued by a malignant force, and the primal fear and suspense, on the reader’s part, evoked by the focalizing perspective of the imperiled individual who is now trapped and helpless to defend himself. The interlocutors are displaced, as personae and rhetoricians, yet Auden maintains the deterministic rhythm and rhyme of the ballad as if to tighten his grasp upon the situation that has begun to strangle the male speaker who is frozen, stunned. The husband’s tone shifts from nervous assurance -- addressed to a lover, saturated with a sense of self-help and wishful optimism -- of feigned bravery in the face of ultimate rapture, feigned for a loved one as much as one’s self, until chaos hurdles so close that
the speaker can feign no longer. The situation, which the second speaker has attempted to de-
escalate thus far – to the reader, somewhat convincingly, until now, and certainly to the first
speaker – is confirmed with the alteration of the second interlocutors’ third refrain: “Or perhaps a
warning” (Auden 12).

Here the ballad reaches its turning point, and reader and speaker alike realize that this is not
“only” routine and that the events which have been playfully dismissed, through speech and song,
as harmless, are indeed ominous and represent an immediate threat to the speakers of this poem.
Once again, we are robbed of our capacity for objective observation, and the speakers’ voices and
combined vision dominates the imaginative picture we construct in the reading experience. These
two voices are extracted from the external circumstances that electrocute this compressed folk-
ballad with increasing power and intensity, until they forcibly break into their home and their song.
Glimpses of scenery as the soldiers fly towards our focalizers suggest that this scene takes place
inside a domestic residence on the rural countryside. Yet we remain trapped in the finitude of a
couple who become the prey of a military attack.

Auden shakes the foundation of a comfortable, domestic life, narrating this unfortunate
series of events through the open dialogue of a couple who scramble to realize the gravity of their
situation. The poem opens and ends with the soldiers’ charge towards their home, but we can tell
from the scenery that the soldiers bypass, in the speakers’ narration of encroach, that this is what
seems like an idyllic way of life on a pastoral landscape. As in “Paysage Moralise,” we hear of a
“valley” below (Auden 2), and a one-sided show of affection issues from the voice who assures
the questioner that this is just a normal “morning.” This and the couple’s mutual scramble for
alternative explanations as to why the soldiers appear to be invading their home betray a pastoral
inclination to resist acknowledging or accepting change, especially the shift from innocence and
simplicity to the brutal experience and rapid complication that the forthcoming “forces” pose to their marriage, and to their lives, in a short nine stanzas.

This is yet another “poem of vision” at Frye’s point of epiphany. The cyclical world of nature is the world of life as this couple knows it, the world of rural simplicity and a pastoral landscape by the “valley,” “farmyard,” “gateways,” and “road” that brings these soldiers into view as the sun shines down on their weapons. The cyclicality of each ballad quatrain reinforces the cyclicality of nature -- *alone*, the natural world is governed by the principle of order, which typically governs the cyclical world of nature, a rhythm not unlike that of the song that repeats the pattern of recursive dialogue between these voices. Yet at the point of epiphany the cyclical order of nature and the apocalyptic worlds are brought into *alignment*, and thus we receive a combination of pastoral and military, nature and apocalypse, melodious order and false reliability as the pastoral nonchalance and resistance to the idea of change becomes the final speaker’s fatal flaw. And the apocalyptic world connotes change, in Frye’s schema. The order of the natural is thus implied not only through the form and landscape of this song, but also through the second speaker’s assumption that this is “only” routine: “only the scarlet soldiers, dear,” “only the sun on their weapons, dear” (Auden 1-8). Yet at the point of epiphany, the apocalyptic world and the natural world come into alignment, and thus the cyclical order of what this reassuring speaker believes is “only” routine will indeed change -- as will his portion of the ballad, with subtraction of his “Only” and the ominous shift in tone that comes with his third refrain: “Or perhaps a warning.” This revelation intensifies with our vision of the soldiers as they come closer into view, and their gait, gear, and veer off the road and towards the house represents the apocalyptic world growing closer in its orbit as the soldiers begin to eclipse the couple’s view of the natural world growing closer in proximity as the song progresses. Recall, too, that apocalypse means “revelation” and apocalyptic literature
reveals, and the revelation in this “poem of vision” at the point of epiphany is ultimately the same theme of foreboding that unifies the “revelations” in every poem of this volume. “The soldiers coming” is an allegory for the forthcoming catastrophe that he represents through this universally recognizable symbol in a time when military conflicts signified an anxiety in the British conscience of the island’s infiltration by the violence and fascism that raged on the continent. And Auden’s “revelation,” here, in the symbolic presentation of the natural and apocalyptic worlds coming into alignment, is that the cataclysmic end to the escalating tensions, clashes, and antagonism of the 1930’s will end in the unleashing of some destructive “forces” that will ultimately impact the lives of noncombatant civilians like the speakers of this poem:

O why have they left the road down there,
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?
Perhaps a change in their orders, dear,
Why are you kneeling? (Auden 14-18)

The sun shines on suspenseful revelations of the changes to routine in a village peopled by this couple, who scramble in their desperate search for alternative targets for whom the soldiers might be “running,” hopeful that this “change in orders” will not result in a “change” that the image forebodes: this is a rural and isolated village peopled by pastoral stock-types, “the parson” with “white hair,” “the farmer so cunning,” and “the doctor” whose “care” they do not seek when they “pass the farmyard” and begin “running” (Auden 17-27). The village that we imaginatively construct as the setting for the horrifying sight that hurdles into full-view is not, as the island was, industrialized or polluted; it sounds as conducive to an “ivory-tower outlook,” to an Apolline veil of illusion in hiding from truth and epiphany, as one could get. It is as comfortable and removed a civilian life as one could imagine, which is what makes this scene so nightmarish. War has no
discretion, nor does Britain, when the aggression that was bursting at the seams of the last poem is unleashed and individuated into the armed forces’ furious teleological pursuit:

O haven’t they stopped for the doctor’s care,
Haven’t they ruined their horses, their horses?
Why, they are none of them wounded, dear,
None of these forces. (Auden 20-24)

The deindividuation of the soldiers into “forces” is crucial regarding Auden’s vision of the forthcoming “apocalypse.” Early in the poem, they serve conveniently as universally recognizable signifiers of the malignant force that was at the source of a culturally shared anxiety at that time. Now that his message is clear and the reader is involved, sympathetic, and alert to the rising suspense of the poem, Auden deindividuates the soldiers in a powerfully suggestive hint that this is not meant to be a portrayal of an isolated incident, a persecution of rebels, or a freak occurrence -- these soldiers an symbolize impersonal and malevolent “force”: “O its broken the lock and splintered the door” [emphasis mine] (Auden, VI). And incredibly, “none of these forces” seem to have hesitated in their pursuits, as we might assume they would, given the violence that took millions of lives and minds with World War I; as the dead hover with no “thoughtless heaven” to which they could rise in keeping with the promise that they lost their lives in the name of Britain and of God, a new generation of soldiers “unwounded” by the severely shell-shocked collective psyche of this island charge onward, now towards one of their own.

We brace ourselves for the worst, and Auden blindsides us with another tragedy – one even more unbelievable than the aggression of the “scarlet soldiers,” for we know well by now, six poems into the volume, that they are by profession not to be trusted, at least, in the context of this vehement antiwar volume. The questioning speaker, whom I identify as female, turns away from
the window through which she peers and ushers a wrenching outcry at a betrayal that is astounding, even in the context of the chaos unfolding:

O where are you going? Stay with me here!
Were the vows you swore me deceiving, deceiving?
No, I promised to love you, dear,
But I must be leaving. (Auden, 25-28)

Because of the contextual information and the double-blow that Auden has delivered, first with the dark content of the soldiers’ pursuit, and now with the rupture of the lovers’ dialogue in a moment of heartless betrayal and shameless cowardice. And thus, the “assuaging” husband – who feared not, who comforted, who seemed naïve, even – leaves without hesitation: indeed, we wonder if he would have said a word, had his wife not cried out in a question, followed by an exclamation of heartbreak and exasperation. Of course, the manners remain, the superficiality of “Love, that interest itself in thoughtless Heaven,” resounds on an infuriatingly hypocritical note with his farewell, “dear/ But I must be leaving” (Auden 28).

This is loaded inference in the context of this volume and this poem -- if we recall the precursory discussion of the death of God and the death of love as the decay of the values that once united a now antagonistic and rabid humanity, introduced in the first stanza of the “Prologue,” and the affirmation of the volume’s Godlessness in poems like these (and contexts like Auden’s). This is the height of the ironic sublime -- yet it is tragic, humiliating, and gut-wrenching for the narrator, who means well and is devastated when, in the following stanza, her husband eschews prayer and flees the scene to save his own life, breaking his vows, and deserting her in the face of her own demise. This is the extreme limit of pathos in this poem, when the good-natured and frightened speaker turns, once more, to his loved one, who fails to meet his answer with her usual inquisitive
response. Her fear is momentarily overshadowed by her heartbreak, and for the first time, her voice sounds dehumanized enough to weave the final lines of this poem back into the devastated texture of this volume, ripped forcibly from the momentarily vibrant rhythms of the folk song and cast down once more into the harsh abyss of this island now. She continues her song, as if on cue, and fulfills her final purpose in uttering the forced lines of this final stanza: the speaker is left, as Auden intended in crafting this poem from his own nightmare, to face the malignant force alone.

This betrayal has implications that resonate far beyond this poem itself, just as this poem and its meaning are in no way isolated to this imagined incident; rather, these instances carry broader, cultural and psychological implications. At this time, Auden was highly concerned with the signs of the current state of humanity and the disorder of the present as it will manifest itself in the “personal betrayals” that he knew would “inevitably attend” an event such as the apocalyptically violent revolution he envisioned. Love in this volume has been exposed, like God, as nonexistent and appears entirely facetious in Auden’s context, hence the opening line of his “Prologue”: “O love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven” (Auden I). Love, for mankind, and its betrayal in poems such as “O what is that sound” has broader implications, and its failure in interpersonal relationships is a microcosmic depiction of the general benevolence between man and his neighbor that has here been corrupted by the events leading up to this interwar volume and Auden’s profoundly disturbed conception that his epoch shared a collective psychological malaise for which there was no conceivable remedy. This is evident in man’s newfound inability, after World War I and in the conflicts that persisted and escalated throughout the 1930’s, for coexistence. “Love” and “vows” of loyalty between human beings or entire societies were as implausible in this context as the idea of God’s intervention, his fabled existence and “rational plan” that are palpably absent from the process of historical decay as Auden sees it: this would
have prevented this from happening. It would have never allowed for the senselessness of the scene now before us.

And thus love, religion, faith and the “vows” that man once made in his relationships and his professions of faith are here depicted in an advanced stage of decay. Like the conventional forms of the ballad and the sestina, they exist among the rotten matter of the modern world as fossils, tired flotsam of times past and values breached that are meaningless and “thoughtless” as “Heaven,” forming a “ring” that is only binding, unifying, eternal, and definite in that their decay is representative of the internal turmoil and collapse of the state confined to a locus of violence and insanity by the circumference of the island. The island and its geographic confines form the only unity, the only “ring” in this volume that actually binds the people of this island to the larger ring of the wretched and deplorable state that they inhabit. What was once a symbol of love and unity, of eternity and God’s foreseeing that all life comes full-circle, becomes a deterministic structure that suffocates the inhabitants of this island as they grow isolated from each other and as violence sprouts like weeds withering on the arid earth of this pastoral landscape marred by military strife.

Finally, we find ourselves alone with the penultimate voice that whimpers this poem’s final stanza, trapped in the mind of a woman whom Auden thrusts through the gates of hell. Her experience is fatal and heartbreaking, but we are – like the speaker, in this final quatrain – almost too shocked to comprehend the sheer insanity of what has occurred in the short span of this ballad. Yet we have no choice but to hurtle through chaos with her as the poem nears its climactic end, panting in our fruitless efforts to comprehend the incomprehensible, to rationalize what even she has neither time nor reason to understand at the moment of her own rapture. Rhythmic pulsations take the semblance of fear beating away the feigned bravery and nonchalance that have left this
speaker, justifiably frightened from the poem’s outset, now alone to face this malignant force, heartbroken and on the brink of destruction. The will to live is bursting at the seams of a frightened mind whose temples do seem to pulsate with horror, and it is as if the ballad finishes itself while she mentally resigns and accepts the unfathomable fate that will befall her after this final break in the most disturbing folk ballad imaginable. She stands helpless, caged like an animal in the trap of her own home, unable to fend for herself:

O it’s broken the lock and splintered the door
O it’s the gate where they’re turning, turning;
Their feet are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning. (Auden 32-36)

These are her final words. The voice that once rung with escalating shrieks and inquisitive anxieties is warped of its humanity. The final “singer,” her tone is barren as the desert landscape of this island itself, emptied of emotion in an ascetic resignation of all hope and relinquishing the will to live. She has borne the brunt of betrayal, and now she is the victim of an egregious attack by soldiers of in her native, scarlet garb. Her decency – anxious, but discursively so, never thinking (despite the fact that she was more keenly attuned to the situation from the poem’s outset) of the mere possibility to escape a home that has now been invaded, and she has lost everything that she owns, herself included. Meanwhile, we may well assume that the traitorous coward of the two will escape safely and without reprobation, and that the soldiers have their way in a heinous crime towards one civilian – the sheer display of aggression, unbridled and bursting at the seams, suggests they are indiscriminate in their choice or number of victims, and here we see a crime against women, and feel as if we experience the crime as children, by armed forces of the same national allegiance. Though Auden spares us the details of the final assault, we can surmise that
the soldiers are unlikely to be gentle in unleashing their aggression. Indeed, given the poem’s termination and the song’s break from its regular rhythms into dead silence with this final line, it seems probable that Auden’s implications with the ballad’s termination are fatal.

Auden’s cruelty of disposition, though brutal here, is suited to the artist of the Nietzschean sublime, who takes the “gruesome, malevolent aspects of existence” as his foe and exposes them in holding a mirror to a humanity that should, he seems to imply, be ashamed of itself. The reading experience feels almost punitive. Auden’s ultimate goal, in this poem, is to addresses any and every reader who wishfully believes that they can live in isolation from, and oblivion to, the truth of their historical crisis and the moment they inhabit. No matter who you are, Auden suggests, this will be your war. You may be innocent, as this woman presumably was, but Auden is looking at a widespread social and psychological disease and he spares his audience none of the casualties that he expects to be spared when moments like these occur. Auden delivers a debilitating stab to his audience, yet his message is affective. No matter who you are, where you are, where you live or whose side you are on, this is your apocalypse, in whatever form it may take: here, the human sphere of Auden’s tragic vision strikes a devastating chord, disturbing in a radically different manner than the beached Leviathan, the fall of an empire, the receding sea. Whether you are married; widowed by the Great War; a “scarlet soldier,” or the enemy, those “brothers for whom the sirens roar”; the Romantic heretic who looks away from this island, now, and “dreams of islands,” finding it easier to meditate on “their sorrow” – this is going to affect you, whoever and wherever you are, and no matter how you isolate yourself, no matter how stable your situation may be, when the “political orator lands at the pier” or the soldiers “break the lock and splinter the door,” you, too, will succumb to the primordial chaos of an earth whose nucleus has been abrogated
by humanity’s inability to coexist, and like an infectious spore the corruption of her superior species pulsates frantically, targeting all, in a radius of violence that will soon smother the globe.

In the 1971 Freud Memorial Lecture, “Phantasy and Reality in Poetry” Auden read the poem in its entirety aloud to his audience at the Philadelphia Association for Psychoanalysis. After finishing the penultimate stanza cited above, he resumed his speech as follows:

If you ask me to describe the process of poetic composition I would say this -- The subject matter of a poem is comprised of a crowd of historical occasions and feelings and thought recollected from the past. The poet presupposes that this crowd is real, i.e. a real disorder, but should not be, and attempts to transform it into a community by embodying it in a verbal society. . . .The nature of the final poetic order is the outcome of a dialectical struggle between the recollected occasions of feeling and thought and the verbal system. As a society the verbal system is actively coercive upon the occasions it is attempting to embody; what it cannot embody truthfully, it excludes. As a potential community, the occasions are passively resistant to all claims of the system to embody them, which they do not recognize as just: they decline all just persuasion. (Bucknell 194)

Auden defines the “verbal society of a poem” as governed by laws: “the laws of syntax are analogous to the laws of physics,” while “metrical and rhyme schemes are more like the laws of biology” (Bucknell 194). The laws that form the rhythm, syntax, and meter of these poems are governed by the laws of transmitting energy in the relationships between material objects (words) and the laws of a study in the living beings of a particular, isolated sample (people and their relations, behavior, and evolutionary status in Auden’s time and place). Auden is similar to a scientist in that he is imposing the laws of poetics upon the adverse feelings and occasions of a poem with the clinical distance of a scientist; he once told Stephen Spender that this was the poet’s
duty, to remain “clinically detached, like a surgeon,” and here he encapsulates total detachment precisely through the divorce of metrical and rhyme schemes from the subjective, personal “occasions and feelings” of this poem.

And this poem, in particular, demonstrates, these laws of form in this volume work in opposition to the poetic content, the “feelings and occasions” of a poem that “passively resist” the coercive formal structures in which they are forced to exist but to which they “decline unjust persuasion”: horrifying events and betrayals like these “decline” unjust “persuasion” or harmonious agreement with the formal laws which still govern their formal presentation, but which do not subtract from the potency or charged pathology of the feelings and occasions that provide the basic subject matter from the collective experiences of a society for scenarios like the one Auden presents in this poem. The subject matter of these poems, as I have attempted to demonstrate, are the realities of existence in Britain in the late 1930’s. For Auden, those realities are indicative of an apocalyptic end to the current escalating conflicts worldwide, the envisaged “apocalypse” of which Mendelson speaks in his critical and biographical study of the Early Auden. And here we receive Auden’s own confirmation of what I have attempted to illustrate, first in my analysis of the Nietzschean sublime, and its connection to another intersectional axis between antithetical spheres, and in this chapter, to the antithesis – deliberately abrasive, unnatural, instinctually opposed – that Auden creates as the fabric that weaves his interwar poetics in a brutal topography of minds, lives, relationships, and ultimately, a world that has begun to turn on itself.
CONCLUSION

What can we gain, what is to be salvaged from these moments when our conception of ourselves, our existence, our meaning and the world we inhabit, are decentered? The answer, as we see in Auden’s poetic practice and Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory, is the art of the secondary sublime:

Constantly, we have to give birth to our thoughts out of pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate and catastrophe. Life -- that means for us constantly transforming all that we are into light and flame -- also everything that wounds us; we simply can do no other. . . .Only great pain . . .compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put aside all trust, everything good natured, everything that would interpose a veil, that is mild, that is medium -- things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such pain makes us “better”: but I know that it makes us more profound. (Nietzsche 36)

Auden read widely in Nietzsche, and would later borrow the philosopher’s great apothegm from *The Birth of Tragedy* for his own Epigraph to his 1948 critical manifesto, *The Dyer’s Hand*: “We have Art in order that we may not perish from truth” (Auden 1). The secondary sublime emanates from moments when primordial truths of human existence in a lawless universe force us to relinquish what we thought we knew about ourselves and our place in the world, and to return to that which we do know: the human predicament, and human existence as such.

As I hope to have shown, much can be gained in our understanding of these often-canonized poems in literary, archetypal, aesthetic, and historical context. By investigating the affective power and the function of the sublime in *On This Island*, I hope to have rekindled reverence for this volume, now out of print in the United States and widely overlooked in contemporary Auden
criticism, which instead takes as its preoccupation the historical trivia and the exhaustive debate as to whether Auden’s poetry is “modern” or “postmodern,” “American” or “English”; the list could go on. These are important questions, but they distract us from the verse itself, and I hope to have restored serious contemplation to Auden’s best poetry at what I perceive to be the height of his poetic prowess.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


