The Sea and the Mirror

Auden started 'The Sea and the Mirror', his self-confessed *ars poetica*, in August 1942 after finishing 'For the Time Being'. By 9 January 1943 he told Elizabeth Mayer that it was 'going quite nicely so far', and he had finished the first two parts by early March. He found Part III difficult (see below) and could not see how to proceed until October. The work was finished by February 1944 and published together with the oratorio in *For the Time Being* in the same year. It was republished in the 1945 *Collected Poetry* (p. 349) and in the 1968 *Collected Longer Poems* (p. 199). Publication of individual sections is noted below. The text referred to is that in the *Collected Poems* (1991), p. 401.

As is the case with all the long poems of the 1940s, there is an autobiographical thrust to the work, endorsed here perhaps by the ending of a poem he admired by Rilke, 'Der Geist Ariel': 'Nun schreckt mich dieser Mann, | der wieder Herzog wird. Wie er sich sanft | den Draht ins Haupt zieht und sich zu den andern | Figuren hängt . . .' ('Now he terrifies me, | this man who's duke again. The ways he draws | the wire into his head, and hangs himself | beside the other puppets . . .', Leishman's translation). In Auden this self is clearly the poet's self, and the puppets are both the characters he borrows from Shakespeare and various reactions to the power of art. In a 1943 notebook in which he drafted much of the work (Buffalo) these characters are also listed as parts of the body, faculties and activities, while in a contemporary letter to Isherwood they are categorized in normative terms relative to anxiety or to modes of conduct. On occasion, as we shall see, they may also suggest relationships personal to Auden. However, since the work is a semi-dramatized discussion of the relationship between life and art in the context of spiritual possibility, one obvious starting point is Prospero's Epilogue:

> Now I want
> Spirits to enforce, Art to enchant;
> And my ending is despair,
> Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,

> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

Prospero's words are, of course, a kind of pun, an actor's appeal for applause, but for Auden their suggestion that the artist as a maker of illusions is in need of supernatural grace when his belief in these illusions has been shattered, is a powerful one. It is one which is heavily reinforced by the allegorical interpretations of *The Tempest* which circulated in the nineteenth century, that Prospero is the artist, Ariel his imagination, and Caliban his animal nature. Although these interpretations seem to have lost their critical following in the twentieth century (certainly since the work of Wilson Knight) they are present in D. G. James's *Scepticism and Poetry* (1937), a book which, in its attempt to show Shakespeare tending towards a Christian symbolism, may have stimulated Auden at this date. Lecturing on *The Tempest* in the 1940s, Auden would mention treatments by Dryden, Renan, Browning and Wilson Knight. He pointed out to Alan Ansen that in fact Dryden was the first to see Prospero as the Artist ('But *Shakespeare*'s Magick could not copy'd be, | Within that circle none durst walk but he'). If we accept a crude identification of Prospero with Shakespeare, then it is possible to see the familiar Kierkegaardian categories lurking in Auden's interpretation of Prospero's course of action: his enchantment belongs to the aesthetic, his forgiveness to the ethical, and his abdication to the religious sphere, and the whole action of the poem (taking place immediately after the end of Shakespeare's play) symbolises a similar process of self-awareness, in a vocational context, going on in Auden's own consciousness. To this extent, 'The Sea and the Mirror' is not only a commentary on Shakespeare's play but a completion of it. As Auden remarked to Ansen on 30 April 1947; 'Shakespeare really left it in a mess.'

The work falls into three main parts: (I) Prospero gives Ariel his freedom: i.e. Auden feels that his spiritual quest takes him beyond a reliance on art. (II) The other characters soliloquise in celebration of their regeneration, though they are negated by the unrepentant Antonio: i.e. man's pride is beyond the reach of either the aesthetic or ethical appeal. (III) Caliban addresses the audience about his own role, and that of Ariel: i.e. he discusses what is expected from art in its treatment of reality, and of the rival worlds of the flesh and the spirit.

The dedication is to James Stern, the short-story writer, and his wife Tania, née Kurella. Auden had met the Sterns in Paris in 1937, and in 1941 had collaborted with James in a radio adaptation of a story by D. H.

Lawrence, 'The Rocking-Horse Winner'. The quotation from Emily Brontë is the final stanza of her poem 'Plead for Me', in which she makes a powerful case for the authority of her imagination.

The 'Preface' of the Stage Manager to the Critics (p. 403) suggests that art, by presenting its audience with the surprising fulfilment of their secret wishes (stanza 1), reveals the human motive behind it. With reality it is a different matter (stanza 2). Rational explanations do not ultimately help, and art, because it is human, can only evoke emotions from its presentation of the human predicament; it cannot arouse the will or account for our sense of being victims of life (stanza 3). In the end, the religious sense has no need for art ('the smiling | Secret he cannot quote'), for it is the Unknown which has supreme importance. The last half-dozen lines blend Shakespearean quotations (*The Tempest*, IV.i.142; *Hamlet*, V.ii.372; *King Lear*, V.ii.11) with the garden quest of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', I.

'Prospero to Ariel' (p. 404) begins by establishing the basic terms on which the Unknown must be approached: the creative imagination is responsible for the denial of a reality that has to be faced ('I am glad I have freed you . . . | For under your influence death is inconceivable'), and is ultimately a poor exchange for life itself (mere shadows compared with the city of common warmth). Art is basically a compensation for life, 'the power to enchant that comes from disillusion' (cf. 'New Year Letter', Part I), and it has great power to reveal and explain life's disorder.

Prospero's first song is based on this idea (p. 406). Art's function as truth is so powerful, he says, that we cannot bear too much of it. The sexual ambience within which this truth may be glimpsed is interesting here. Auden revealed himself to Ansen as a 'oncer', frightened of any deeper relationship than a one-night stand, hurt by Chester Kallman's defection. The holiness of his love for Kallman prompts complicated metaphors of Rome facing the barbarians and Andromeda chained for the dragon. The obliqueness of Prospero's songs may be due to their originating in part in 'l'affaire C', as 'Prospero to Ariel' in general certainly did. As Auden admitted to Isherwood: 'It's OK to say that Ariel is Chester, but Chester is also Caliban, "das lebendigste"' (the phrase is from Hölderlin, and means 'what is most alive'). This seems to imply that Auden conceives the duality of the imagined life and the lived life to be unbridgeable, even in art.

Prospero turns to the other characters of the play (p. 407), admitting his own responsibility for Antonio's treason. Here, I think, is a suggestion of the failure of liberal humanism to avert Hitler. This is not the particular responsibility of the artist though in the second part of the work Antonio, in his arrogant self-sufficiency, stands outside Prospero's power, and, while he denies it, will continue to call it forth. Prospero's 'impervious disgrace' is, however, not the defiant tempted Ego of Antonio, but the recalcitrant Id of Caliban, whose 'absolute devotion' Prospero has himself desired. All the other characters have 'been soundly hunted | By their own devils into their human selves' and are returned to the sea of existential living from which they lately swaggered. Thinking of Miranda and Ferdinand leads him into his second song (p. 408) about the erotic ideals of youth, middle age and old age. Its imagery circles suggestively around the Falstaff / Hal situation, where for Auden the erotic is as significant as the political. It casts the shadow of Falstaff's rejection over the remainder of Prospero's speech: as an old man, he will find it hard to embark on his spiritual quest without being able to speak about it. The Kierkegaardian leap ('seventy thousand fathoms') demands suffering 'without saying something ironic or funny | On suffering' (cf. 'The Quest', no. XII). Prospero's final song (p. 410) shows him, even as 'trembling he takes | The silent passage | Into discomfort', still wishing for Ariel's song, as though at the moment of rejection art had attained a fresh poignancy and power.

Part II, 'The Supporting Cast, Sotto Voce' (p. 410) is something of a virtuoso performance as, 'dotted about the deck', the changed characters deliver, each in an appropriate verse-form, an account of how the magic has changed them and how they mean to pursue their destinies. Auden may have been saving up his technical idea for some time. Reviewing Philip Henderson's edition of Skelton in the *Criterion* (January, 1932), he wrote: 'I am glad that Mr Henderson has called attention to the use of different kinds of verse for different characters in *Magnificence*. As far as I know Skelton is the only English poet who has done this' (Auden then makes a point about the similarity of Shakespeare's blank-verse climaxes).

Antonio sets the scene, referring in his first stanza to the 'calm seas, auspicious gales' promised by Prospero in *The Tempest*, V.i.316, ironically equating Prospero's magic with Circe's (whereas it is Sycorax, Caliban's mother, who is closer to Homer's sorceress) and later, in stanza 6, with the saccharine property of popular song ('What a Little Moonlight Can Do', from the obscure film *Roadhouse Nights*, but popularised by Billie Holiday). His refrain ironically dominates the whole section in its expression of his unregenerate will. Antonio represents man's freedom to create the disorder which exists for art to put in order. *The Tempest* is about the purgation of evil, but Antonio's virtual silence in Act V could indicate that he has not, as the personal agent of the evil, repented. In his stanza about Hitler in

'September 1, 1939' Auden seemed uneasy with the facile assumption that evil is begotten only of evil. But here it is certainly the natural outcome of temptation. Prospero is responsible for his brother, because he put the temptation to usurp in his way: in other words, it is the irresponsibility of art in the real world which guarantees art's continuing importance as a means of healing the errors which its isolation has created. As long as Antonio exists, Prospero will not be able to give up his role. Auden sees Antonio as a man made demonic by art, a failure because he cannot forgive forgiveness. As Antonio says, 'while I stand outside | Your circle, the will to charm is still there' (cf. 'New Year Letter', lines 64–75). Prospero's 'all' is 'partial' because it is not a 'true gestalt', and Antonio feels justified in his sarcastic view of it as a Circean charm which can easily be resisted by the unaccommodating will. The last line of the *terza rima* was originally in the draft 'As a little child into the joy of heaven'; in the text it becomes an allusion to one of Auden's favourite Baudelaire lines, 'Le vert paradis des amours enfantines' (from 'Mœsta et Errabunda'). He also quoted the Baudelaire line in the Preface to his edition of Tennyson and in the poem 'Ode' ('The vacation at last is approaching').

Ferdinand's sonnet in alexandrines (p. 412) takes a hint from the involved syntax of his language in *The Tempest* (e.g. at III.i) to create a tone of innocent obscurity which pleasantly borders on pastiche (Auden told Isherwood that Ferdinand 'describes fucking in completely abstract words'). The sense in lines 3–6, however, of his discovery in Miranda's *Thou* of the fullness of his own *I* probably derives from his reading of Martin Buber. And in its final tercet the sonnet's awareness of 'another tenderness', a Light which enables the lovers to possess the 'Right Required Time' of the Kairos, shows it to be seriously Christian. The other phrase in the final line ('The Real Right Place') is similarly Jamesian. One James story, 'The Real Right Thing' (1899), is conflated with another, 'The Great Good Place' (1900). Auden praised the latter as a religious parable and contrasted it with James's unspeakable view of America in *The American Scene*: the 'Great Good Place' is 'nearer everything' (*Town and Country*, June 1946).

Stephano's ballade (p. 412) involves his search for identity. The belly ('bride' and 'daughter' in the opening lines, ambiguously 'Child' or 'Mother' in the envoi) is an early representation of the feminised body in Auden (cf. 'No, Plato, No' and the later 'Lullaby'). See also the remarks about Falstaff in *The Dyer's Hand*, pp. 195–6. Auden associated Stephano with Falstaff in his comments made to Isherwood: both take that flight from

anxiety into the unconsciousness of which only the body can be the instrument. Stephano's belly, heavy with drink, exchanges cravings with his mind, not only in the sense that it wishes to get rid of the alcohol as fast as Stephano wishes to consume it ('Between the bottle and the "loo"', the quotation marks for this newish word appearing to be an editorial intrusion), but because it is the belly which has learnt to need the alcohol through the mind's desire to escape from its 'disappointments' and 'ghosts'. The search for identity is assisted by drink, because it dispels melancholy. ('The high play better than the blue') and imparts the illusion of a unity of mind and body, even though 'The will of one by being two | At every moment is denied').

Gonzalo (p. 413) is representative of the interpretative reason 'in whose booming eloquence | Honesty became untrue'. His 'prediction' (of the ideal Commonwealth) did come true in a sense, but he is guilty of making the song of the Absurd sound 'ridiculous and wrong' because of his compulsive and pedantic rationalisation (the reference is to his vision of the political threat in *The Tempest*, represented by Ariel's song at II.i.295). As Auden explained to Isherwood, he is the man who makes goodness easy by blinding himself to evil.

Adrian and Francisco's camp couplet (p. 415) expresses their realisation that their superficial life must come to an end; their appalled resignation is largely a theatrical gesture (as Antonio's comment acknowledges), a reaction of the corrupt court. According to Ansen, Auden heard the phrase 'madly ungay' at a lunch party in the South of France applied to conditions in Spain at the time of the civil war. Auden used it himself, for example in 1942 on discovering that his Swarthmore class consisted of twenty-six girls and one boy. However, the only earlier use in print that I have found is in Cyril Connolly's 'Where Engels Fears to Tread' (in *Press Gang*, ed. Leonard Russell, 1937), reprinted in *The Condemned Playground* (1945): 'Harold said Balliol was perfect for case-histories like mine, but I realized I should find it madly ungay.' An earlier longer version of this section appears in *As I Walked Out One Evening* (1995), and contains material (similar to parts of 'Under Which Lyre') critical of contemporary education.

Alonso's speech (p. 415) is written in lines of nine syllables with a seven-syllable line at the end of each stanza, and is a letter intended to be opened by Ferdinand after his death. It was first published in *Partisan Review* in October 1943. Its central image is of the 'Way of Justice' as 'a tightrope | Where no prince is safe for one instant'. On one side is the sea, on the other the desert, each lying in wait to tempt the prince from his path, or to purge

him of his error if he does stray. In ideal terms, the sea represents the life of the senses, the realised; the desert represents the life of the spirit, the potential. One is reached by the *via activa*, the other by the *via contempliva*. Each should ideally balance the other. As temptations here, they offer 'vagueness' and 'triviality' (compare the 'primitive potential power' and 'actualized triviality' in Auden's elaboration in *The Enchafèd Flood*, 1951, p. 28). As always in Auden, the nightmare has elements of the surrealistic (with a flapping horror perhaps out of M. R. James's ' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" '). Ecbatana in stanza 5 was the capital city of the Medes, the earliest inhabitants of Persia. The statue in the final stanza is borrowed from *The Winter's Tale*.

The Master and Boatswain (p. 418) sing of the prostitutes of Stephano's song in *The Tempest*, II.ii.47. They take a hard, practical, even Freudian, view of the consolations of sex. They see it fatalistically as a kind of chain reaction stemming ultimately from a hopeless search for a lost maternal love ('nightingales' is slang for prostitutes; cf. Eliot's 'Sweeney among the Nightingales': 'The nightingales are singing near | The Convent of the Sacred Heart').

Sebastian's sestina (p. 419) shows him glad to have been found out before he was able actually to murder Alonso ('my proof | Of mercy that I wake without a crown'). His guilt has only been a dream, his error in a sense exposed by the sword which he took up against his brother; now he has woken from his dream, and ceased to be a negative personality even though his nature has been revealed in its full weakness. The sestina form here accidentally gives the appearance of being much looser than usual: the order of the key words, in relation to those of the preceding stanza, is either 364125 (stanzas 2, 4 and 5) or 246531 (stanzas 3 and 6) instead of the entirely conventional 615243. The reason for this is simply that the originally drafted order was changed during composition: stanzas 2 and 3 were reversed, and so were stanzas 5 and 6.

Trinculo (p. 420), as a jester, is a type of the artist, whose loneliness is symbolised by his tallness. As Stephano retreats from anxiety into unconsciousness, so Trinculo retreats from anxiety into wit, and his humour is seen as a nervous reaction to his alienation from life: 'A terror shakes my tree, | A flock of words fly out, | Whereat a laughter shakes | The busy and devout.'

Miranda's villanelle (p. 421) expresses her certainty of love in fairy-tale terms, as Ferdinand had done in terms of striving for a vision of the Logos. The 'Black Man' may be an allusion to the King of Tunis to whom

Ferdinand's sister Claribel has just been married, but the elder tree links him more firmly with Othello, who in his last speech in the Folio text compares himself with Judas: the somersault turns any threat of betrayal into a clownish game. The Witch melts away like the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (filmed 1939). In the drafts, the 'Ancient' was successively 'the patriarch' and 'Grandfather'. Of course, the three characters may more simply be Miranda's dream conceptions of Caliban, Sycorax and Gonzalo. The 'high green hill' is suggestive of Calvary ('There is a green hill far away'). Ferdinand is Miranda's 'as mirrors are lonely' in the sense that since a mirror doesn't fulfil its function unless someone is looking into it, and yet cannot itself see its own reflection, it is inevitably lonely, whereas lovers who belong to each other are mutually reflected in each others' adoring eyes. The mutuality of 'mine' was a late thought in the draft: Auden originally wrote 'true'. The conceit is a familiar one in Elizabethan poetry, and its use as a refrain enforces what the other images also propose, that her love is largely an aesthetic pleasure ('O brave new world') and is expressive of a magical harmony ('children in a circle dancing'). For 'He kissed me awake', Auden borrowed 'Ich küsste Sie wach' from Siegfried's aria in *Götterdämmerung*, III.i.

Antonio's last words in Part II were altered from 'the Royal O, | Dances all day alone' to 'Creation's O | Dances for Death alone' in galley proof, a thematic deepening of some importance, linking the ring of Agape with a negative solipsism, and with the Dance of Death.

Part III, 'Caliban to the Audience' (p. 422), is much the longest section, and it was also one of Auden's favourite pieces of work. He chose to reprint it, for example, in his Penguin selection of 1958, where it takes up twenty-three pages of the selection (pp. 103–25). It is an insistent, amusing and exhausting prose disquisition on the role of art, written in the style of Henry James. Auden is concerned to examine art's particular place in society (as he must be concerned to defend the aesthetic character of the individual creative consciousness), but the admonitory and ventriloqual voice of Caliban, forever confiding, cajoling, comforting and castigating, forces a recognition of the unbridgeable gulf between what people wish to be like and what they really are. According to Auden's explanations at the time, Caliban is a representation of nature who has the power of individuation but no power of expression, while Ariel is a representation of the spirit, who has the power of expression, but no power of individuation. Caliban is therefore Ariel's 'oracle', possessed by him just as Socrates was possessed by Diotima (the analogy suggests that Auden considered his spiritual conclu-

sions here to be of the same order of significance as those of Plato in the *Symposium*). His speech concludes that for the artist or for any human agent these opposed contraries of life are almost impossible to reconcile; only the Supreme Artist is able to create 'the perfected Work which is not ours', of which art itself is only a 'feebly figurative sign'.

The argument, as in earlier prose pieces such as the 'Address for a Prize-Day' in *The Orators* or the Sermon in *The Chase*, is imaginatively detached from the normal functions of the kind of rhetorical prose it resembles; the Caliban persona ensures that what is said derives from the point of view (however imaginatively varied) of man's fallen sensual nature, his 'impervious disgrace', which still imagines that its attempted transformation by the imaginative order of art is something whose failure is a suitable subject for a sermon. Behind Caliban's unearthly style are the intuitions of Ariel; behind both, of course, is Auden himself, attempting in this way to define the longing of Ariel for perfect embodiment. This is to be most movingly expressed in the 'Postscript', brief as it is; for the moment, and at great length, the unassimilable and natural is allowed a voice and a role in front of the theatre curtain (for this Caliban can be neither left on the island nor taken on board ship for the new life). The limbo in which Caliban exists is in Auden's mind specifically a sexual limbo. He was conceived as 'the Prick', as letters to Isherwood and to Theodore Spencer tell us. Phallic utterance demanded an original and ornate style as far removed from nature as possible. 'From May to October', Auden wrote to Spencer, 'I was completely stuck with Chap. III. I knew what I wanted to say, I had the images, but every treatment went wrong, until I suddenly got the James idea: it seemed blindingly "right".' The Buffalo drafts indeed show a good many false starts, among them (a) a speech by Ariel himself, 'Kiss me, Caliban, curse no more', much of which ends up in the final paragraph of 'Caliban to the Audience', including the significant final line which becomes the latter's last seven words; (b) a version in verse of a speech by Caliban, 'Ladies and gentlemen, please keep your seats'; and (c) an entirely different prose draft about Setebos, Caliban's God, a devil who has bewitched the real world ('the task is to break the spell of Setebos'). This draft introduces the imaginary landscapes, and experiments with versifying them. The Henry James idea took Auden usefully right away from his own style, and he came to feel that in a strange way it was therefore more authentic. Auden did not say so, but what better ironical prose voice might there be than that of a supreme stylist also rumoured to have been emasculated in an accident? Of course, Auden did also believe that James's

Prefaces were 'the best stuff I know about the nature of the creative act' (letter to Ursula Niebuhr, 19 June 1946). Even at the level of a literary joke, this is a very good one, and it sustains the theme admirably.

Caliban's speech falls into three main parts. First of all he assumes the audience's role in enquiring of Shakespeare why he should have introduced Caliban into *The Tempest* at all. 'Our native Muse' is presented as a hostess faced by an unwelcome guest. Although she doesn't, for instance, have any suburban worries about 'what the strait-laced Unities might possibly think', she does draw the line at Caliban, and so do the audience, because to them Art is a wholly other world of which they feel privileged to have glimpses, and in which opposites are reconciled and time is in control (p. 426: 'what delights us about her world is just that it neither is nor possibly could become one in which we could breathe or behave'). Caliban in such a world appears as a distorted parody of what he is in real life, 'a savage and deformed slave', i.e. the penis, instead of the 'nude august elated archer of our heaven', i.e. Eros (p. 429). In the mirror of art, Caliban appears 'incorrigibly right-handed' (i.e. untransformed by reflection. Left-handedness is a symbol of absorption in the lover's eyes in 'Fleeing the short-haired mad executives' and other earlier poems). The address to Shakespeare ends lightly with a parallel possibility (p. 430): 'Is it possible that, not content with inveigling Caliban into Ariel's kingdom, you have also let loose Ariel into Caliban's? We note with alarm that when the other members of the final tableau were dismissed, He was not returned to His arboreal confinement as He should have been.' This joke about the Crucifixion (if such it is) is crucial: it prepares us for the survival of the aesthetic in the religious sphere (and no doubt also for a Christian Auden continuing to write poetry). Prospero may drown his book, but Ariel is not returned to his pine-tree.

The second part of his speech is addressed, on Shakespeare's behalf, to young poets for whom Ariel, the creative imagination, is at first a faithful servant (p. 432: 'the eyes, the ears, the nose, the putting two and two together are, of course, all His, and yours only the primitive wish to know'). In time, the partnership goes sour, but Ariel refuses to be set free (p. 433):

> Striding up to Him in fury, you glare into his unblinking eyes and stop dead, transfixed with horror at seeing reflected there, not what you had always expected to see, a conqueror smiling at a conqueror, both promising mountains and marvels, but a gibbering fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar.

The artist, in other words, may too easily ignore his Caliban nature. Auden is alluding perhaps to Wilde's paradoxical aphorism about Victorian literature: 'The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. | The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass' (Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). To have chastised the flesh, or to have given it complete freedom, might have been ways of reaching the truth, but these would have distracted the artist *qua* artist, who must steer his way between Realism and Romanticism. For 'the reverent rage of the highest-powered romance' (p. 434) compare 'The reverent fury of couples . . .' (New Year Letter', lines 1649n). When the poet's 'charms . . . have cracked' and his 'spirits have ceased to obey', then he is left alone with 'the dark thing' he 'could never abide to be with' (pp. 434–5).

The third part of Caliban's speech is *in propria persona* as he addresses the audience on the subject of himself and Ariel (p. 435). The first two parts of the speech have shown that he can upset both the work of art and the artist by his eventually unignorable presence: now it is the audience's turn to be brought face to face with the choices they must make in real life. In childhood there is no distinction between the miracles of life and play (the coal-scuttle Hector suggests another Shakespearean character, Don Armado as Hector in *Love's Labour's Lost*) but in adult life the duality of Caliban and Ariel is enforced.

Caliban then (p. 436) describes life as a journey in which the actual moments of travel are few; even when the right step is taken, this only brings the traveller so 'far outside this land of habit' that he immediately becomes vulnerable to the twin heresies of desiring either a retreat into the actual (via Caliban) or an escape into the possible (via Ariel).

The first of these courses was described by Auden to Isherwood as 'The flight from God into Nature as immediacy. It gives him an opportunity to indulge in a version of his own Eden (cf. *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 6) in a surrealistic dream landscape which represents the childhood nostalgia of those who 'have never felt really well in this climate of distinct ideas' (p. 438). The slightly deranged tone of ecstatic homecoming (like the end of the Sermon in *The Chase*) is out of Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*. Caliban responds to those making this nostalgic plea by conducting them instead to what is really 'the ultimately liberal condition', an arid solipsistic universe, 'where Liberty stands with her hands behind her back, not caring, not minding *anything*'. The result is the despair of having nothing to choose because you are the only subject in the world. Curiously enough, this landscape is distinctly Icelandic.

The second course (described by Auden as 'The flight from God into Spirit as possibility') is taken by those who wish to escape from the chaos of life to 'that Heaven of the Really General Case', a Platonic universe of transcendental reality, to which they imagine Ariel is able to lead them. Instead, they arrive in a world without causal necessity, without objectivity, in which events may have any interpretation because all sense of *haecceitas*, or Thisness, has been lost ('A sugarloaf sea' on p. 439 is a rough sea with pointed waves; on p. 441, a 'fish-tail burner' is a kind of gas lamp; for 'bisson eye' compare 'bisson rheum' (blinding tears) in *Hamlet*, II.ii.502; 'bevel course' means at an obtuse angle). This is the Quest's Negative Way, and, like the first course, leads to an annihilating despair, 'the love nothing, the fear all' (cf. Lady Macbeth's 'All is the fear, and nothing is the love').

Caliban presents these alternative routes ('the facile glad-handed highway or the virtuous averted track') as the horns of a dilemma which faces the artist, too, for he cannot successfully portray both the truth and man's condition of estrangement from it; and worse, where he is successful in doing this, 'the more he must strengthen your delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge, your interest in your imprisonment a release' (p. 442). This is what Auden described as 'The flight from God into self-reflection'.

Thus art can in a sense be self-defeating, for an awareness of life's inadequacies can itself become an interesting game. And in life itself the irreconcilable categories, Ariel and Caliban, act out in *ad hoc* fashion (the metaphor, apparently borrowed according to Ansen from Trotsky writing about Kerensky, being of 'the greatest grandest opera rendered by a very provincial touring company indeed', p. 443) fallen man's version of the perfect life, Becoming not Being. At the moment of realisation that this is such a shoddy performance, we are aware (Auden asserts) of 'that Wholly Other Life': 'it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours' (p. 444).

The reader has a slight sense of the *deus ex machina* at this point. Auden has subtly and brilliantly exposed the contradictions that govern both art and life, but he has not (despite Caliban's confident and persuasive rationality) been able to show how they may be resolved, except by this gesture towards deity. However, in the 'Postscript' (p. 445) the totality of the individual is lyrically and mysteriously expressed by Ariel's love for Caliban, and reinforced by the Prompter's echo '. . . I'. It is perhaps cast as an aria as a tribute to Kallman, who could well recognise the opera's urge to

transcend the passions it exploits, just as Auden could ruefully acknowledge that poetry could still be made out of sexual unhappiness (the body's lameness casts its shadow, the ideal that it can never be). The aria puts man firmly at the centre again, his body and spirit precariously but tenderly united.