

Berlin and the Two Versions of W. H. Auden's "Paid on Both Sides"

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UNTIL *Paid on Both Sides* was accepted by T. S. Eliot for publication in the *Criterion* in 1929, W. H. Auden had published only scattered poems in undergraduate journals and a privately printed volume, *Poems*, in 1928. Some of the poems in that volume were versions of those which would later appear in *Paid on Both Sides*. When Auden's 1930 volume, *Poems*, was published by Faber, Auden placed *Paid on Both Sides* as the opening work. In his *Collected Poems* Auden dates the charade "January - December 1928." John Fuller, in *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden*, mistakenly claims that it was written in Berlin, ignoring the first draft which Auden had completed before he went to Germany in late August 1928 (13).

No matter where he thinks it was written, Fuller recognizes that *Paid on Both Sides* depends on both English and German sources, including the English mummers' play and the Christmas pantomime as well as dreams in the manner of German Expressionism (13; cf. Mitchell 169). Auden had written a first draft of the charade by the end of July 1928; he completed the final version by December, after three months in Berlin, and he submitted it to T. S. Eliot at the *Criterion*, where it was published, after a year's delay, in 1930. The first, or English, version shows how Auden was working just before going to Germany; the final, or Berlin, version shows how he modified that work during his critical first few months in Berlin.

One wonders why, when his father offered him a trip abroad, Auden decided to go to Berlin. Auden claimed that he went to Berlin because everyone else was going to Paris. Although Auden knew no German, he wanted to learn the language. Auden also

may have been attracted to Germany because of his having missed the Great War. In *Lions and Shadows*, Christopher Isherwood explains that his generation felt guilty about missing the war (see also Hynes 17-23). Because they were too young to fight, they had missed the opportunity to be heroic. They felt they had been cheated out of an important part of their lives. They also felt dislocated because, although the war changed the conditions of life in society, they were taught at school the values of the society which had existed before the war, as if that society would go on unchanged forever. Schools often do not recognize the changes which take place in the rest of society, and to Auden at Oxford, the world remained as it had been in 1913. The world had been changed by the war but the schools had not yet found out (Replogle 31). Auden, sensitive to the poetic currents of his time — he advised his tutor Nevil Coghill to read T. S. Eliot (Carpenter 57; Hynes 27) — was also sensitive to those changes, although he might not be able to break through to them because of the barriers of the school world.

Auden went to Berlin because of war and its effects. He went not only to assuage his guilt over missing the first world war but also out of curiosity about where the world was going. Samuel Hynes, in *The Auden Generation*, points out that people in the late '20s and '30s felt that war would come again soon, that its advent was inevitable. War would come from Germany, and to be in the midst of the currents of one's time, one should go where that current flows strongest.

Although Auden was part of that school world, he was also separated from it. The clash between school world and outside world filled him with a curiosity to see the effects of the war. Dwelling with the former enemy would intensify the feeling of being away from home. "Perhaps . . . I had an unconscious bias in favour of Germany because, when I was a little boy in prep-school during the First World War, if I took an extra slice of bread and margarine, some master was sure to say — 'I see, Auden, you want the Huns to win' — thus establishing in my mind an association between Germany and forbidden pleasures . . ." ("Going Into Europe" 53).

Forbidden pleasures also meant the boy bars in Berlin. Auden had undergone psychiatric analysis at Spa in Belgium during the summer of 1928 in order to come to some decision about his sexual orientation. There was a reputed engagement to a nurse (Carpenter 83-84) which he broke off: his psychoanalysis did not initiate any change in sexual orientation but made him more sure of his choice. When Isherwood left the university, he went to "the Berlin Wistan had promised him. To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys" (*Christopher and His Kind* 2). Both poets wanted to cruise the boy bars in Berlin in an atmosphere of accessibility which was impossible in strait-laced London.

Auden responded to the currents of feeling and excitement in Berlin. We do not know if Auden met Bertolt Brecht on this visit but he was certainly aware of the playwright and was open to the same influences and ideas which affected Brecht as he was open to the influence of Brecht himself. On his first night in Berlin, Auden went to a performance of Brecht's and Kurt Weil's *The Threepenny Opera*. He must have had some difficulty in following the action on stage since he had little command of German at the time, but certainly the costumes, the music, and the differences from Gay's model would have struck him. While in Germany Auden probably read Brecht's collection *The Manual of Piety (Die Hauspostille)*. This volume represents Brecht's ideas of the twenties and is marked, according to Eric Bentley, largely by the principal mode of the comic in our time: "serious parody" (xi-xii). Auden wrote a good deal of parody during his career, but its serious note may be something he learned in Berlin. Brecht represented ideas implicit in Germany to which Auden responded. These ideas allowed Auden to learn what he could do in his early poetry and become more himself.¹

In his analysis of the differences between Auden's 1928 volume of *Poems* and his 1930 *Poems*, Frederick Buell argues that the differences are "the extensive and wholehearted use of parody and caricature" in the later volume. This, Buell goes on to say, found literary analogues in the cabaret and theatre of Berlin (84-85). While Buell points out this difference only in the poems, there is some indication of similar changes occurring during the revisions of *Paid on Both Sides*, which parallel changes between

the two volumes of poems. The English version has the seeds of parody and caricature within it, but they have not yet been cultivated.

In the English version of *Paid on Both Sides*, fewer characters are dressed in more elaborate costumes than in the Berlin version. John Nower and Anne Shaw are in formal evening clothes; Aaron Shaw wears plus-fours; Seth, sporting a straw Panama with an elastic under the chin, wears tight, too small clothes and carries a revolver; the Announcer, in the uniform of a cinema doorman, carries a megaphone; the Chorus are dressed in rigger uniforms while the Lintzgarth party, the Nowers, wear handkerchiefs round their left arms. A hectic and rather mysterious battle is interrupted by the announcement of the engagement of John Nower to Anne Shaw, after which an actor cartwheels across the stage. After a tender and serious love scene, Anne tries to convince John to leave the country with its residue of the past, but he insists on staying. After the lovers leave the playing area, the Chorus asks the traditional *ubi sunt* question, this time in terms of school heroes: this parodies the traditional question since school generations succeed each other so quickly.

What is most striking in the English version is, first, the costumes; second, the actors who never leave the stage when they step out of the action but sit on the side in full view of the audience until their disappearance in the last scene;² third, the cartwheel which greets the announcement of the engagement of John and Anne; fourth, the riddling mention of the schoolboy heroes of an earlier time to suggest the similarity, which Isherwood pointed out to Auden, between ancient Nordic societies and the atmosphere of a boy's boarding school ("Some Notes" 11).

On its way to its more whole-hearted use of parody and caricature, the final or Berlin version tones down the extravagances of costume, the only distinctions between the two feuding parties being "different coloured arm-bands." The Chorus, now limited to no more than three persons, "wear [clothing] similar [to each other's] and distinctive [from the other characters]." No longer do the actors sit on the stage in full view of the audience as in the English version but they make their exits conventionally. Although the world of the charade and its feud still seem dis-

located — there is no secure location in time and space — there is no direct caricature until John's followers sit in a bar and talk about school sports. There John's servant Zeppel produces the Christmas turkey for examination. The description of the battle, done in conventional terms, is suddenly interrupted by Stephen's getting up from the floor and reciting drunkenly, "A forward forward can never be a backward backward." The spy is taken out and shot; he is followed by a drunken Stephen, calling after him, "Don't go, darling." The basic seriousness of this scene is interrupted by its parodic elements.

The entrance of Father Christmas during the dream sequence of the Berlin version introduces a wild new world, the world of the school skit, of the in-joke, of the cultural assumptions of a closely-knit body. Edward Mendelson suggests this dream has as its purpose psychological healing, the "mutation of his [John Nower's] cure" (52). Not only had Auden been interested in psychology for many years — using its vocabulary to impress and dominate his schoolfellows — but he had recently met John Layard in Berlin and been converted to the doctrines of Homer Lane. Nower's dream, like that of Bloom in the "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses*, takes the form of a trial, simultaneously chilling and comic. Nower's trial considers the tyranny of the dead who make their descendants feel as if they have failed if they do not continue their wars; their heavy hand represses more genuine impulses toward love and reconciliation. Nower throws off this burden of the past by reconciling with the Spy, but only in his dream. After Nower in his dream shoots the Spy, the doctor, using the devices of broad comedy and magic, restores him; John and the restored Spy plant a tree in order to re-establish love and erotic impulse. John can now live, as his name Nower suggests, in the present, in the here and now, because he has become psychologically whole. However, his internal cure has not cured the external world, and John is killed and the feud renewed.

This action reflects the world as Auden grew to know it in Berlin (Mendelson 49-53). Mendelson claims that "the change in [Auden's] life which occurred in Berlin had nothing to do with Berliners. Its catalyst was an Englishman named John Layard who was living in Berlin at the time" (55). Replogle

also suggests that Germany's influence on Auden was mainly psychological (7-12). Auden learned from Layard that to be happy and virtuous one should act on his own deepest impulses. To deny one's impulses is to rebel against one's own inner law and give way to disease.³ Only by living in harmony with one's inner being can one be cured (58).⁴

In the dream sequence, Layardian harmony has not been established: the world is still childish. Not only is Joan, John's mother, carrying a gigantic feeding bottle, as if the prisoner whom she guards were an infant, but the members of the jury now wear school caps. When the Spy groans, his cries are produced by jazz instruments at the back of the stage. The doctor and his assistant recall the characters in the epilogue of Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid* but in a way reminiscent of school plays which depend for their jokes on the mishearing or misinterpretation of words as well as the deception of the authority figure:

[Enter Doctor and his Boy]

B. Tickle your arse with a feather, sir.

D. What's that?

B. Particularly nasty weather, sir.

D. Yes, it is.

The Doctor, with his equipment of circular saws, bicycle pumps, etc., uses pliers to "extract an enormous tooth" from the body of the Spy, who, in the dream sequence, is restored to life. The planting of the tree by John and the Spy establishes a Layardian harmony which is broken when Seth, Anne's brother, kills John for revenge, against his own instincts but at his mother's urging.

The plot of the Berlin version, at least from the announcement of the engagement to the play's conclusion, with the exception of the cartwheel, repeats the English version. However, the same script is changed by its different context as well as the costumes and the method of exiting from the action. Auden's experience with the German theatre and cabaret may well have suggested the use of jazz instruments for the groans of the Spy; it also may have freed him to introduce some of the schoolboy elements which break in on the heavy threat of the action.

Plotting is more complex in the Berlin version. The English version is a complete action which suggests the inevitability of

war as a condition of life. The Berlin version portrays John's life from his birth, brought on prematurely by his father's death in the feud, to his own death which revives the flagging feud. Along the way John and Anne became engaged in a failed attempt at a Romeo-and-Juliet marriage to bring two warring houses together. While the Berlin version suggests a possibility that the feud might end, its central characters remain psychologically trapped and unable to escape, even when an opportunity to escape arises. When Dick, John's friend, chooses to leave the world of the play for a ranch in the Colonies, he invites John to join him. John, having been brought into the world at the death of his father, finds it impossible "To throw away the key and walk away." The killing of the Spy, Anne's brother, reminiscent of the killing of Tybalt, Juliet's kinsman, by Romeo, seems fated for no other reason than that it occurs twice. The atmosphere of the charade, made more somber in the later version by the more conventional costumes, is lightened by the surrealistic dream sequence, the capturing of the Spy, his resurrection, and his and John's planting a tree together as a sign of the peace John finds. John's reconciliation within his dream makes his death necessary in order for the feud to continue.

What is largely different about the Berlin version is the more complex plotting which sounds a larger resonance, the industrial setting as opposed to the vaguely aristocratic, agricultural setting of the English version, and the dream sequence. The English version, with its undefined setting, seems to take place in the country. This setting may echo Auden's familiarity with the public-school atmosphere of his growing up. While there are many references to automobiles and towns, the play suggests the passage of the seasons, the star-crossed lovers of a pastoral tradition somehow transported into a time of passenger cars, field glasses, and rifles.

Living in Berlin changed Auden's landscape. The Berlin version, using much of the same imagery, is centred more on the mature Auden landscape of machinery and mines. At the opening of this version, Walter has just returned from the Mill, where a breakdown needed attention. John intends to send a wire to Dick if John thinks of joining him on his journey to a new life.

Through such small changes, the vaguely agricultural setting of the earlier version is changed into the industrial setting of the later one.

The Berlin version's dream sequence provides an opportunity for high jinks and for references to the doings of the public school, but what it reveals is also dark and threatening. Straight vaudeville turns, such as that of the Doctor and his Boy, prepare the way for the Spy's imprisonment. The accusing speech of the Man-Woman details the young man's failure to develop, and the consequent guilt, which he carries in the waking world even after the symbolic planting of the tree in his dream of forgiveness, eventually leads to John's death.

Buell makes the distinction that the 1928 *Poems* was derived mainly from the literary sources such as Eliot, Hardy, and Lawrence, and that the 1930 *Poems* uses a great variety of material from popular culture (85). The role of popular culture in *Paid on Both Sides*, written between the publication of those two volumes, is complex from the very beginning. In the English version, the costumes, the feud, and the schoolboy jokes are part of the popular culture with which Auden, having spent his time in public schools before he went to Berlin, was best acquainted. Many references to folk culture, as opposed to popular culture, such as the mummers' plays and other English popular customs, are specified by Breon Mitchell. The Berlin version uses the same schoolboy world. The schoolboy skit in which the Doctor pulls huge and unexpected parts from his patient either from under a table or from behind a sheet is too well known to describe here. What has been added in the Berlin version are not popular elements but those elements derived from the cabaret and the drama. The dream trial, the role of Father Christmas as judge, the mixing of moods from the serious love between John and Anne and the somber possibility of leaving this world that Dick offers John to the low humour of the Doctor and his assistant — all bespeak a large reference but not to popular culture.

Auden may have extended the range of the play in the Berlin version simply because he had more time to work on it, but his use of severer costumes, the urban landscape, and the techniques

of the trial may have come from his relocation in Germany. His conversations with John Layard may well have encouraged Auden to emphasize the failings of the psychologically weak. The sense of unending struggle and war may have come from such forces in English society as labour unrest and the threat of worldwide depression, but they were reinforced by his stay in Germany.

Auden's Berlin version of the charade departs from the realistic drama because of these new social and psychological conditions. The play requires an old-fashioned curtained-off recess in the Shakespearian tradition for revelations of corpses and other figures. Characters on one side are distinguished from those on the other side only by armbands. These armbands may stress the responsibility of both sides of the feud, since neither side can be blamed for a feud whose beginnings stretch back to well before the opening of the play. The armbands may also set off political and racial identities; the Nazis wore armbands to set them off from the general public, and they would soon require the Jews to wear yellow armbands to identify themselves. Fuller suggests an allusion to the German-Jewish distinction in the names of the characters: the Nowers are Kurt, Walter, Zeppel, and the Shaws, Aaron, Seth, etc. (14). Only the three members of the Chorus are dressed distinctively, to separate them from the action.

Like the atmosphere of Berlin even more than that of England between the wars, the atmosphere of *Paid on Both Sides* is filled with feud and continual war. There is no indication of the beginnings of this war between the Nowers and the Shaws; its beginnings have been lost in the mists of history much like the beginnings of the feud waged between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. All we know is that the death of John's father opens the action and brings on John's untimely birth. We also know that John's ultimate death at the hands of Seth Shaw recalls the Nowers to avenge his death on the Shaws. While there are schoolboy pranks in the midst of this action, the world of the play is not to be taken light-heartedly. It is a world of continual conflict.

Even if the younger generation tries to end the conflict through love, through the proposed marriage of John Nower and Anne

Shaw, the older generation will find some reason to continue it. *Paid on Both Sides* suggests that the conflict is rooted in the Oedipal struggle —

But he is defeated; let the son
Sell the farm lest the mountains fall;
His mother and her mother won.

— and that it will continue even as that struggle continues from one generation to the next. Even if rooted in the Oedipal struggle, the conflict precedes birth. The birth of John Nower, who like MacDuff was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d” because of the assassination of his father, is described largely in terms of war. When the doctor is asked how things are going with the birth, he replies in military terms: “We’ve had a hard fight, but it’s going to be all right” (22).

Buell suggests that only with the 1930 publication of *Poems* did Auden become an explicitly political poet, and indeed despite its references to war, it is difficult to find explicit political elements in either version of *Paid on Both Sides*. However, political elements are there. The world of the schoolboy — with a succession of generations so quick that the deeds of a few years before become events set in the dim past, with its own mythology, its secret societies, its shifting allegiances which will realign again and again, its sharp divisions between pupils and others — reflects the post-World-War I world described by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. *Paid on Both Sides* may not be explicitly political, as much of Auden’s later verse is, but its conception and execution are political in the larger sense of the word: Auden reacts on a deep level to war, to spies and betrayals, to a sense of being psychologically doomed to continue a feud, to “us” vs. “them,” to the triumph of the older generation (of “his mother and her mother”), to a sense of love lost; the only way out of this modern world is to flee to the colonies as Dick does in the Berlin version. The foregoing suggests a writer deeply sensitive to political concerns. However, when Auden had earlier driven a truck for the Trades Union Congress in the General Strike of 1926, he did not understand being ordered out of his house by a cousin who supported the government side: in Berlin people took their politics seriously. Auden had moved

into the larger world of continental Germany in the midst of its wrenching struggle to recover from World War I while on its inevitable road toward World War II.

In the Berlin version Auden was also moved by the theatrical devices flourishing in Germany, as revealed in the cabarets and the theatre practices of such playwrights as Bertolt Brecht. These devices can be seen most clearly in the trial scene of the charade, in which Father Christmas steps out of character to instruct the members of the audience to go home and tell their friends about the play but not give away the secret of the very scene taking place before them. The prisoner is guarded by a warder with a gigantic feeding bottle and the members of the jury, led by Father Christmas, wear school caps. The cries of the prisoner are produced by jazz instruments at the back of the stage, visible as the musicians are in a cabaret or in *The Threepenny Opera*. The prisoner, shot to death, is restored to life by the Doctor who uses a circular saw and a bicycle pump to pull a tooth. The Man-Woman, introduced as the Angel of Peace, recites the failures of John Nower and includes a series of riddles and in-jokes whose references are unclear but whose tenor is threatening (27-30).

All these dream-like disconnections result from a dramatic style prevalent in Germany at the time and exemplified by the practices of Bertolt Brecht. The A effect (or alienation effect or *Verfremdungseffekt*) as developed by Brecht is introduced through language as well. In the description of the ambushing of Red Shaw, Auden uses the half-lines and heavy alliteration of Anglo-Saxon verse. This verse form is not empathetic; that is, it does not allow the members of the audience to identify with the action (25). In the same way Auden's use of double-consonantal rhyme distances the reader so that he becomes more interested in the rhyme and less in the action; he becomes more intellectually and less emotionally involved (26-27, 28, 31).

The central A effect that Auden uses throughout his career is this distance he creates between the reader and the action and his emphasis, to reduce any empathy, on the general human condition rather than on the specific individual one. Contrast Auden's Chorus with Eliot's in *Murder in the Cathedral* which

describes the same world that Auden's does — see the three knights in the second act justify the murder — but whose focus is on the very real problem of the martyrdom of Thomas A. Beckett. In Eliot's, as in Greek, tragedy, the Chorus did not know what the future would bring; only the audience knew enough of the story to appreciate dramatic irony. In *Paid on Both Sides*, the Chorus achieves a distinctive ironic perspective different from its traditional one. Now the Chorus knows what only the audience used to know. This identifies the audience with the Chorus and distances it from the action because the audience, like the Chorus, "observes the doom it cannot change" (Mendelson 62). While the Chorus has traditionally sung about the human condition, there are no interludes of action here that can cause the audience to feel Aristotelian fear for itself or pity for the characters. Aaron Shaw voices his hopes for peace at the announcement of the engagement of John and Anne, but George, Kurt, and Bernard continue to speak about war: when Bernard asks, "But what about this peace?" Seth answers, "That remains to be seen. Just wait" (32). The engagement does not convince the audience of any passion between Anne and John; instead of speaking of passion they speak high-mindedly of peace. The reader is more interested in the reasons for the continuation of the war — for obviously it will continue — than in the fate of the two reputed lovers. The vision of peace articulated by the Chief Guest at the wedding is shattered by Seth's agreeing to kill John in what is surely one of the mildest protests against, and speediest acquiescences to, murder in literature.

Auden's *Paid on Both Sides* thus springs from an English tradition, that of the public school Christmas play with its adolescent tricks and mummies' plays, mixed with the spirit of Berlin as expressed in its cabarets and theatres. Auden uses techniques which he may have been working out for himself, but a number of them resemble in effect those of his Berlin experience. Auden's use of music, of schoolboy skits, of dream sequences, of the Christmas charade, of self-irony, of the more urban landscape, all of these are the result of his residence in Berlin.

Paid on Both Sides in its two versions shows a change in Auden from the young poet setting out to the young poet a few months

later who has been exposed, even on a superficial level, to the experience of Berlin. Auden would learn these techniques when he had stayed longer in Berlin and when he had devoted himself to the poems which were published in 1930 by Faber and would go on to develop them throughout his poetical career.

NOTES

- 1 Brecht's influence is more important than those superficial similarities to which critics have responded when they draw parallels between the drama of Auden and of Brecht. Brecht did not influence Auden's drama directly (see Breon Mitchell) but each came up with similar ideas from different sources. Any influence, Auden claimed, was from Brecht the lyric poet, not Brecht the dramatist. In *A Commonplace Book*, Auden includes "Berthold [*sic*] Brecht (the lyric poet)" among those "elder modern poets and critics from whom I have learned most" (372).
- 2 This resembles Brecht's alienation devices but may have been forced on Auden by the limitations of the playing area in which he envisioned the play being presented.
- 3 See "Miss Gee" for an example of cancer which is caused by sexual repression.
- 4 Layard had suffered a nervous breakdown and was treated by the American psychologist Homer Lane. After Lane's death in 1925, Layard went first to Vienna, then to Berlin, where he was introduced to Auden. Lane believed that human nature was innately good: to act on one's deepest impulses is to be happy and virtuous. Trying to place these impulses under conscious control is the only sin. Thus the "liar's quinsy" of "Sir, No Man's Enemy" can be cured by telling the truth, by being at peace with one's inner desires.

Layard's cure is in itself an illustration of parody and caricature, fantasy, comedy, and exaggeration. In the spring of 1929, Layard announced that he was going to kill himself. Auden felt that, if this was indeed his deepest impulse, he should be free to act on it. Layard one day put a revolver in his mouth, aimed up his nose, and fired. He missed; the shot was not fatal. He took a taxi to Auden's flat, handed him the revolver, and asked Auden to finish him off. Auden apparently did not find the request consonant with his own deepest impulses; he sent for another taxi and took Layard to the hospital. Within a few weeks Layard had recovered from his wound as well as from his mental depression (Carpenter 99-101; Mendelson 55-56).

This series of incidents could have taken place in one of Auden's poems or, later, in his plays. As one to whom these incidents were happening, Auden must have felt their seriousness. Had he been writing about these incidents, Auden would have treated them less seriously and from a greater distance.

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