

“FOR WHO CAN BEAR TO FEEL HIMSELF FORGOTTEN?”: POETRY IN
THE DRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY OF W. H. AUDEN

by

JESSICA LEIGH WILLIAMS

(Under the direction of Aidan Wasley)

ABSTRACT

The overarching themes readers and critics find in W. H. Auden’s poetry are also found in his dramas and documentary films. By approaching both the dramas and films through this perspective, as well as through the perspective of performance, Auden’s ideas about collaborative work and their connection to his exploration of tensions between the community and the individual become clearer. Auden’s eventual abandonment of the groups with which he worked on these projects thus can be seen as a rejection of a public, political role for poetry.

INDEX WORDS: W.H. Auden, Poetry, Drama, Documentary, Collaboration, British Documentary Film movement, Group Theatre

“FOR WHO CAN BEAR TO FEEL HIMSELF FORGOTTEN?”: POETRY IN
THE DRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY OF W. H. AUDEN

by

JESSICA LEIGH WILLIAMS

B.A., Auburn University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2007

© 2007

Jessica Leigh Williams

All Rights Reserved

“FOR WHO CAN BEAR TO FEEL HIMSELF FORGOTTEN?”: POETRY IN
THE DRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY OF W. H. AUDEN

by

JESSICA LEIGH WILLIAMS

Approved:

Major Professor: Aidan Wasley

Committee: Fran Teague
Emma Hunt

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2007

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper would never have been completed without the criticism, support, and kindness of Dr. Aidan Wasley, Dr. Fran Teague, and Dr. Emma Hunt. Thanks are also in order for Kristen Nielsen of the University of Georgia Libraries and the staff at the Marian K. Heilbrun Music and Media Library at Emory University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
POETRY IN THE DRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY OF W. H. AUDEN .	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39
APPENDIX	
A THE TEXT OF <i>COAL FACE</i>	42
B THE TEXT OF <i>NIGHT MAIL</i>	43

POETRY IN THE DRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY OF W. H. AUDEN

W. H. Auden began writing poems in the late 1920s and continued writing poetry until his death in 1973. Over this nearly fifty year career, Auden experimented with a wide variety of genres, including travel books, drama, film, and opera. Through all of these experiments, Auden never wavered in his original poetic project: the exploration of the tensions between the individual and the community. Even in Auden's earliest poems, one can see him working through a careful balance between two apparently contradictory but nonetheless co-existing ideas. The poetry forces the reader to do the same, to come to terms with these two true and irreconcilable issues, whether the issue is someone desiring both individuality and membership in a community or someone trying to be both a public figure and a private person. In the 1930s, Auden had already gained fame as a poet, but a broadening interest in politics made him reconsider how he could bring his poetry to a wider, more diverse audience; he saw poetry as "a medium which expresses the collective and universal feeling" (Mendelson 259).

The interest in social justice and awareness that can be seen through his interest in socially relevant poetry was not something limited to Auden. Throughout the thirties, artists and writers became more aware of the world around them, and became more concerned with the portrayal of that world. The general trend of English writing and art moved further from the Romantic ideal of the introspective, secluded artist and closer to more socially aware or communal forms of art. The shift in focus from "imaginative forms to literal, documentary forms" became necessary because the imagination could not compare to the actual events in the world (Hynes 131). The literal and documentary forms offered the artist a forum for action, whether through propaganda, didacticism, or simple dissemination of information. The thirties were rife with movements directed at sharing information with the public-the

Mass Observation Movement, the Documentary Film Movement, and the Left Book Club being only a few of these groups or events.¹ During this time, however, as Samuel Hynes notes, “literary realism virtually disappeared, overwhelmed, one might say, by reality itself” (131). The advent of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the rise to prominence of National Socialism in Germany in 1932, and the continuing economic depression throughout Europe gave artists and writers plenty to consider without having to resort to their imaginations. Hynes pins the beginning of this trend on *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror*, published by Victor Gollancz (the founder of the Left Book Club, and a publisher) in 1933 (130-131). The book was an anonymous account of Nazi rule in Germany at the time, and stunned the European community with its accounts of murders, disappearances, and the mistreatment of political opponents, and non-Aryan ethnicities. As Hynes notes, the impact of the work in the literary scene is hard to judge, but as the 1930s progressed, more and more real and terrifying events appeared in the news (131).

Auden noted that “the film has deprived drama of any excuse for being documentary” (Sidnell 168). In drama, Auden had a genre in which he could explore the fantastic elements of poetry and poetic drama while also contributing to a socially relevant project. His interest in drama was based on more than just the social project, though. Auden saw that poetic drama was a genre in need of reform (Fisher 331). In drama, Auden could continue to explore the issues he worked on in his poetry while also publicizing the role of the poet, experimenting with poetry in drama, and participating in a politically progressive group.

Documentary also offered Auden the public forum he wanted, but the inclusion of poetry was more difficult to consider. During Auden’s eight month tenure at the GPO, he worked with filmmakers such as John Grierson and Basil Wright, who worked to influence Auden’s developing opinions of what film, and less directly drama, could achieve successfully. The poetry Auden contributed to the unit resulted in a more subversive, complex role for the poetry as it was layered with the images in the films.

¹See Hynes 279-87, 211-14, and 208-11, respectively.

The first section of this paper explores Auden's dramatic work through *The Ascent of F6*, the second play he wrote in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. The text of this play, as well as the consideration of its performance, illuminates the exploration of tensions between the individual in the community, Auden's greater poetic project, in the context of a moment in history when community was an ideal. The second section of this paper is devoted to an investigation of his work in the British documentary film movement, and his use of poetry as a symbolic and disruptive element in the two major films he made with the unit: *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*. Auden's interest in this art form is an interesting correlative to his work in drama, as he specifically stated that documentary relieved drama from the responsibility of realism, but was able still to explore similar poetic themes in both genres..

The ideas Auden had regarding collaborative art and the role of the artist in the community and in collaboration can be explored by looking closely at the work he did in drama and documentary. As Auden tried to move from poet to public poet, the steps he took along the way and the ways in which his work progressed demonstrate how his ideas about public life and private life changed.

“A Crook Speaking to Crooks...”

Auden's interest in drama began before he actually began writing plays. As a student and as a schoolteacher, he wrote short sketches and charades to be performed in homes or at school. When Auden started writing dramas for a professional theater group, he was able to bring together his interest in drama and desire for socially relevant poetry to renovate the idea of poetry in drama. The most recent examples of poetic drama that audiences were familiar with were those of previous generations, which to Auden were not viable. In a 1934 review of Priscilla Thoulless's *Modern Poetic Drama*, Auden stated that the mistake these previous dramatists made was to “refuse to start from the only place where they can start, from the dramatic forms actually in use” (Auden, “A Review of Modern Poetic Drama” 70). Auden's experiences in Germany during his Oxford years, and later when he lived there for a short time in 1928-29, introduced him to a new kind of artistic expression on the stage,

more vibrant than the poetic drama with which he was familiar. This time in Germany gave him new ideas about what drama and the theater could do. Christopher Innes notes that Auden “had more direct personal knowledge of the German theatrical scene than almost any other British playwright, and the initial source of his enthusiasm [for drama] is clear” (*Cambridge Companion* 84). At this time, realism was less of a concern in characterization, plot, and language. What Auden would have seen on stage in Berlin in the late 1920s was the typical manifestation of German expressionism: fragmented, stylized settings, language, and action, and depersonalized characters and crowds (Styan 53-54). The stage began to be a place where one could explore a personal worldview without having to fall back on realistic depictions. In German expressionism and in the later development of epic theatre in the 1920s, Auden would see how the drive to publicize a very personal worldview could develop into a way to stage the private struggle within and as a metaphor for the group or public struggle.

However, Auden himself always claimed that the appearance of German expressionistic style in his dramas was an accident; he writes that he tried to emulate more the drama of the medieval period-mystery and miracle plays and cycles (Izzo 105-106). He tended to favor allegorical and stylized features over thorough character and plot development, which often resulted in characters that critics deemed “figures for satire, symbolism, or stage life” (Weales). The characters he writes are identifiable stereotypes, characteristic of both medieval cycles and German expressionism-realistic characterization is not the point. The characters are there to fill a set type, not to be realistic portrayals of individuals. Most of the techniques that scholars identify as specifically expressionistic could certainly be applied to the medieval plays Auden respected. The stock characters, the chorus (or crowd in expressionism), the fractured setting and episode structure are all recognizable tropes of both stylistic movements. The medieval role of drama was also intriguing to Auden. As Alan Jacobs notes, the public role of the poet in medieval times would have been appealing (90-91).

The Group Theatre

The Group Theatre² was founded in 1932 by Tyrone Guthrie and Rupert Doone as a center of theatrical experimentation with dance, poetry, song, and of course, drama. The Group was not a place in and of itself, but rather the collection of actors, dancers, and playwrights; it found a home in the Westminster Theatre more often than not, and as a troupe traveled to other cities to produce some of their plays. Auden for a time became the in-house playwright, though plays from other contributors were also produced. Doone was an advocate of the experiments with poetic drama Auden and others (including Eliot and Yeats) were doing at the time. Michael Sidnell notes that Doone “would contest more literary views of poetic drama with the insistence that there was ‘no such thing as an interpretative art: the actor does not interpret the poet’s words, he recreates them’” (46). All of the dramas Auden composed in the 1930s (whether alone or with Isherwood) were written with the Group Theatre in mind. Auden joined the Group almost from its inception in 1932, having been introduced to Rupert Doone through Auden’s old school friend Robert Medley. Auden’s work with the Group Theatre began with *The Dance of Death*, a danse macabre that was eventually staged with T.S. Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes*, and ended after the production of *On the Frontier* in 1938. The Group Theatre would go on to produce plays by Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice before ending their work together in 1939.

Throughout its existence, the Group continually struggled with management and funding problems. Sidnell shows that three phases of control occurred within the Group Theatre through the thirties; first, what he refers to as an actor’s theater, second as a director’s theater, and finally as a playwright’s theater (39). No single person or artist exercised total control over the group, though the focus of the group at the time shows which members were the most valued, or at least the most in control. The changes reflected a restructuring and a shift in the main project of the group. The heyday of the Group (between 1934 and 1937;

²This is the London based Group Theatre as opposed to the American version that also operated at a similar time.

the directors' theater) showed the same influence of the political realm as the rest of the literary/artistic community-the movement towards the left. The influence of leftist politics was clear both in contributors to the group such as Auden or Isherwood and in the audience that patronized the theater. The methods of the theatre itself also became more radical as its members did; the Group became known for "radical methods of presentation but also acquired something of a reputation for sloppiness and lack of principle" (Sidnell 39).

This period in the Group's history showed its greatest successes, particularly in its productions of *Sweeney Agonistes*, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, and *The Ascent of F6*. The Group's main project, however, was not to produce propaganda for the left, or to unite the disparate social classes, or any of the other pet projects the members may have had on their own. Their purpose was to offer an alternative to the standard West End commercial theaters, one that would produce the experimental works that incorporated the various elements of performance arts without always looking towards a bottom line. The communal aspect of the Group, its interest in poets as playwrights, and experiments with varying elements within drama must have appealed to Auden's sense of the public poetry and the unification of the community as well as to the sense of fun he brought to the language and ideas of his dramas.

Auden's notions of drama became more pronounced the longer he worked with and within the Group Theatre, and certainly more focused on the community at large. In the program for the first 1932 production of *The Dance of Death*, Auden produced his ideas for dramatic principles in "I Want the Theatre to Be..."³: "Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy" (Hynes 399). In a lecture in 1938, he compounded this idea of the unified community of the theater when he said that "the search for a dramatic form is very closely bound up with something much wider and more important, which is the search for a society which is both free and unified" (Mason 571). That audience-theater relationship

³See Hynes, Appendix B for complete text.

he desired, however, was troublesome to form. Though the Group continually worked to create a widespread audience from a variety of social classes, the audience willing to pay to keep the Group running was the same audience they were trying to escape-themselves⁴. Though Auden and Isherwood enjoyed modest success with the Group Theatre, the aspects of the Group they benefited from as dramatists were eventually what kept it from being commercially successful enough to keep the theater open.

As the Group Theatre continued to struggle through the thirties, substantial productions of the plays became less and less of an option. The productions were now limited to “occasional’ Sunday performances for members” (Sidnell 166). After the completion of *F6*, Auden and Isherwood realized that they wanted more for the play than just a few Sunday performances. The authors decided to let Ashley Dukes of the Mercury Theatre take over production of the play, as Eliot had done with *Murder in the Cathedral* (175). Dukes found the Group Theatre a contradiction: a dictatorship (under Rupert Doone) where a cooperative theatre was supposed to exist. Dukes produced a successful run of the play that lasted nearly two months at the Mercury, moved to the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, and then back to London at a different theatre, the Little Theatre in the West End (176). The Group Theatre could have given the play perhaps two or three Sundays worth of performances at the Westminster. Though Dukes was involved in the financial aspects of the production, the actual creative components of the production remained for the most part in Group Theatre members’ hands.

A discussion of Auden’s influences in dramatic writing must always include his collaborator, Christopher Isherwood. Working with Isherwood was something Auden had done almost since he began writing poetry. The two men had known each other during their public school years, but only became friends after they went to university. As a young man at Oxford, Auden would send drafts of his poems to Isherwood and often would keep the cuts

⁴Michael Sidnell provides a complete list of patrons of the Group Theatre from 1933-35 in Appendix D. Among those listed are people such as Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Harley Granville-Barker, and Havelock Ellis, a good indicator of the class of people associated with the Group Theatre.

or changes Isherwood made to the drafts. The collaboration as dramatists, however, was quite a bit different from the poet/editor relationship the two originally shared. Between 1929 and 1938, Auden and Isherwood collaborated on no less than six dramas, though not all were produced. Two of the plays they wrote together proved to be relative commercial successes, *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935) and *The Ascent of F6* (1936). Though Isherwood is generally credited with the majority of the plot ideas and the prose sections, Auden was responsible for the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. A, several speeches, and all of the songs-what he and Isherwood called the “woozy” passages⁵ (Mendelson 600). Sidnell notes that Auden’s portions were “more abstract and universal” (195).

The division of labor in *The Ascent of F6* is indicative of the creative tensions that existed between the two writers. Auden and Isherwood had two different approaches to literature in general, not just the plays they tried to write. Their philosophies regarding human nature and characterization in the plays differed. Isherwood once said that “When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him-or down flop the characters on their knees” (Mendelson 259). Mendelson notes that “Agnostic Auden wrote the verse in the plays, ironic Isherwood most of the prose” (259). This tenuous balance shows the need each side has for the other; the two sides juxtaposed provide a reality check, so to speak, that keeps each approach from becoming either too ironic or too melodramatic.

Auden and Isherwood began writing *The Ascent of F6* in March of 1936. Auden traveled to Cintra, Portugal where Isherwood was living at the time. The actual writing of the play seemed to go fairly quickly, taking little more than a month to actually compose. The two separated after assigning themselves various parts of the play that they were to compose once they had decided on the synopsis; they wrote together only on the final scene.

Isherwood never collaborated with Auden and his film group on any documentaries, though the two did collaborate on a travel book titled *Journey to a War*. This book is an

⁵“Isherwood noted in *Christopher and His Kind*: “Woozy, in their private jargon, meant grandiloquent, lacking in substance, obscure for obscurity’s sake. It described the style of the kind of verse-plays they despised” (Mendelson 600).

account of the two writers' attempt to go through China to the front of the war between China and Japan. Although it differs a great deal from the documentary work Auden did in film, the book is quite similar in style to several other writers' books of the same era that were influenced by both the idea of a documentary record of a place and the style of documentary film (montage, etc). This work was the last on which Auden and Isherwood collaborated.

In the beginning of *The Ascent of F6*, the British government is trying to ascertain its hold over the colony of Sudoland. Sudoland is divided into two, one half of which belongs to the British, the other to the nation of Ostnia. Between the two colonies is a mountain chain, the most imposing of which is F6, the haunted mountain. The Sudoland natives believe that whichever country is able to scale the peak and face the demon at the top will be the one to rule over Sudoland as a whole. A British government official tries to convince his brother, Michael, a professional mountain climber, to take on the mission. The official only succeeds by asking their mother to intervene on his behalf. Michael accepts the mission unwillingly.

Michael and his crew (Gunn, Shawcross, Dr. Williams, and Lamp) prepare for their climb at a monastery near the mountain. The crew is approached by a monk with a crystal; within this crystal, each member of the crew sees some aspect of himself that he has tried to repress. Michael is unable to reveal to his crew what he sees: himself as the savior of the British people. As the men make their climb, one by one they succumb to the forces of the mountain: Lamp is killed in an avalanche, Shawcross throws himself off the mountain in a fit of anger, and Gunn dies just before he and Michael reach the summit. Only Williams survives, because he is left behind at one of the lower base camps in case the other two don't return. Michael makes it to the top of the mountain, only to face the demon and her minions in the form of his brother and the other government officials that had persuaded him to make the climb. The demon is finally revealed as his mother, and Michael dies as he sees himself laying his head in her lap.

Textual History and Revisions

The published editions of the play went through several editions, both American and British, not to mention the various changes that would have been made in each production, depending on the director or the production group. The standard version that Mendelson offers in his edition of Auden's complete plays (and the one I mainly refer to in this analysis) is the second edition put out by Faber (Auden's British publisher), which was based on an extensively revised and corrected set of galley proofs from the first Faber edition. Over the next ten years or so, Auden and Isherwood, sometimes together and sometimes not, changed various parts of the play (more often than not the ending) again and again for various productions. Faber published at least two editions, one in September 1936 and the other in March 1937; Random House (Auden's American publisher) published one edition, also in March 1937, which is based more on the first Faber edition than the second. Mendelson also includes revisions made for the Group Theatre's promptbook from the revival of the play at the Old Vic in June of 1939. This version features a few changes that appear to amplify Gunn's jokes and revise the dialogue throughout, add to the abbot's speeches, and delete several short passages of Mr. and Mrs. A and Mrs. Ransom (Mendelson 632-635).

The last two revisions that Auden and Isherwood made were for American productions of the play. The first was done sometime after their arrival in New York in the spring of 1939, partially for the Drove Players in New York and partially for a group production organized by Burgess Meredith that never actually took place (Mendelson 638). The ending goes back to the idea visited in the first edition of an epilogue-like scene after Michael's death on the mountain; the political speeches are replaced with a BBC Radio broadcast featuring the only surviving member of the team, Dr. Williams. The later revision, done in 1945, was for a group of Swarthmore students (where Auden was teaching at the time). This version featured an Americanization of the vocabulary, as Mendelson notes, and yet another ending in which Michael asks for his mother's forgiveness, and the chorus closes the play as in the second edition.

The multiple endings to the play offer a challenge to one who is able to read the play but not see it. Different performances of the play featured different endings, and advice from other writers poured in as they saw different productions (Sidnell 197-98). Yeats implied that the ending scene of the mother should evoke the idea of “the Britannia penny,” linking the idea of the mother with empire—a handy confabulation of the two themes, public and private, though perhaps a little more conservative than the authors would have liked (198). Each change in the ending seems to shift the theme, depending on which character or scene ends the play. In some cases, the ending focuses on Mr. and Mrs. A listening to the BBC broadcast: “He belongs to us now” (II. 5)⁶. By the time the authors finished their last authorized revision, the ending had gone from this overtly political theme to the purely psychological to the more benign politicized radio broadcast and then back again to the first two endings.

The first edition of the play is far more psychological in nature, or rather it focuses more on the psychological aspects of Michael and the other characters. Though the last few spoken sections of this version do imply a more public, political theme, the remainder of the play stays in the realm of the interior. The first act in both editions remains exactly the same, with only one small change to a line of Lord Staggmante’s. The second act, however, differs a great deal in scenes i and v. Scene i, in which the climbing crew is invited to look into the crystal, shows Michael looking into the crystal but professing that “I can see nothing,” much to the dismay of his crew, who all told what they saw (II.i). After they leave, however, Michael asks (in verse) to see into the crystal again, and sees himself as “The small gesticulating figure on the dais / Above the swooning faces of the crowd” (II.i). The reader learns that this is Michael’s private youthful dream; he says of this image, “Was it myself?.../ I thought so once, but that was years ago.” (II.i). In this same scene, the abbot’s speech to Michael after he has seen this vision of himself in the crystal reflects this increased awareness of the psychological in the play. He tells Michael to beware spiritual pride, that to face the Demon

⁶See Auden, *Plays* 625.

(in his mind, temptation) is certain death. The lecture the abbot embarks on reads almost like a tutorial on Auden's and Isherwood's theory of the truly strong and the truly weak man. The abbot warns Michael that "It is not for us to put an end to the Demon and the desire to do so is, to brave and good men like yourself, the Demon's most powerful and insidious temptation" (II.i). The idea of the truly strong and the truly weak man, gleaned by Auden and Isherwood from the works of psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, is that the truly strong man has no need of feats of strength or heroic quests; the truly weak man is the one that feels he must show the world his might through these things (Hynes 126-127).

The second edition retains much of the psychological and private found in the first, but there is less of an emphatic psychological tone throughout. Many of the speeches from the first edition have been edited to sound more in tune with the characters that say them rather than excerpts from psychology textbooks. The abbot's speeches in II.i. are a good example of this. In the first Faber edition, the abbot says to Michael:

You know your powers and your intelligence. You could ask the world to follow you and it would serve you with blind obedience; for most men long to be delivered from the terror of thinking and feeling for themselves. And yours is the nature to which those are always attracted in whom the desire for devotion and self-immolation is strongest. And you would do them much good. But you know, as your great historian Lord Acton has put it, that 'power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely; all great men are bad'. You recognize that. If you climb the mountain and confront the Demon, you think the temptation will be no more; but if you succeed in climbing the mountain you will be a great national hero. The temptation will no longer be there-because you will have succumbed to it. (611-12)

In the second Faber edition, however, the tone of the abbot changes. Rather than speaking of the public good, and the will to public power, the monk speaks of Michael's personal,

private battle with the demon, and goes so far as to tell Michael of his own temptations. The shift here is subtle, but important. It indicates a change of tone throughout the play and the endings that follow the speeches. As noted before, the first Faber edition ends with the public, meaningless praise for Michael by Mr. and Mrs. A and the government officials. The second ends with the chorus and the vision of Michael lying dead on his mother's lap at the top of the mountain; in other words, it begins and ends with Michael, alone on the mountaintop.

In addition to the shortening and refocusing of the abbot's speech, Michael's soliloquies have also been revised. Rather than the metered, poetic form of the first edition, the soliloquies are in prose form. The focus of these prose speeches also has changed. Michael sees more of the crowd's image in this version instead of the vision of himself as a great orator. Like the abbot's speeches, these soliloquies indicate the general tone of the play, whichever version it might be. The more sympathetic and personal vision of the crowd Michael wants to save aligns with the personal, private nature of the abbot's speeches and the ending of the second Faber version. He sees the crowd as weak and sick; he says, "I thought I saw the raddled sick cheeks of the world light up at my approach as at the home-coming of an only son" (II.i). The vision of the first Faber version is one in which Michael sees himself more than the crowd; he sees the praise of the crowd, but not the individuals. He sees his own power, his forceful speeches, but with no idea as to whether these are for good or for ill. Likewise, the ending is a meaningless remembrance of a person that none of the speakers truly knew.

Auden and Isherwood continued to make changes to the ending of *The Ascent of F6* during and after the play's run at the Mercury. Scenes were cut or replaced or rewritten, each one forging a different direction for the performance. One review noted that the fact that those contradictory endings could be interchangeable was a disturbing sign about the play as a whole (Hynes 240). Edward Mendelson provides seven variations on the ending in his collection of the complete plays of Auden. The changes among these versions vary less as

the manuscript evolved from typescript to production to promptbook, though the changes do reflect a change in focus for the plays. The political satire that seemed present in the earlier versions (in which Mr. and Mrs. A listen to the radio program) is less apparent in these later versions.

One idea for these changes could be that the authors wanted to change the play's focus as it changed venues, considering the impact that they wanted to make on the audience. Another could be that they were simply experimenting with how the play could end. The changing endings are indicative of a real issue that critics do not entertain which can be seen both in the comparison of the revisions and in the performances themselves. The change from the empty praise and political speeches in the first edition to the personal, literally private ending shows a movement from political satire to psychological drama. However, even as the endings would show this simple resolution, the entirety of the play still maintains the layering and shifting of themes which would play out in production.

Auden recognized the differences of life and experience that would separate him from those of another class. His ambition was to create an art that crossed those boundaries that he felt separated himself and others of his class from the very people with whom they felt politically aligned. Whether or not he felt that drama could remedy these gaps between classes, he felt an affinity with both the public role of the poet in medieval drama and the socially conscious role of drama in German expressionism⁷ and epic theater and wanted to bring those two ideas together in a new English drama; specifically, English poetic drama.

The poetic dramas that Auden and Isherwood were most familiar with were the poetic dramas that came out of the Victorian era. The language and staging of these plays had grown too overdone for Auden. He wanted drama and the stage to be understandable for all classes and people; in his "I Want the Theatre to Be..." he notes that "drama began as an act of a whole community," and he wants everyone in the audience to feel like they are a

⁷German expressionism is not connected necessarily to social awareness. However, the movements general turn from an introspective ideal to a broader worldview could have attracted Auden to use it in his own project for social awareness as well as its very basic stylistic similarities to medieval drama.

part of that performance (Auden 497). In this way, perhaps, drama and poetry could serve as the reuniting forces that Auden wanted them to be, something that could bridge the gaps between classes that brought about so much of the turmoil in the 1930s. Additionally, Auden wanted to reunite the artist and the community, opposing the Romantic ideal of the isolated artist; Auden wanted the artist to be a voice of and for the community. On the stage, the bridging of class gaps required using a *mélange* of performance styles, including the music hall act, songs, dancing, and other performances not usually seen in the West End shows.

The interest he showed in expressionism and medieval drama forged his direction towards a drama written for a socially-conscious audience, but Auden wanted to connect with an audience different from the typical audience that supported serious (that is, West End) theater. His interest in music hall performances reflects his desire for both a reformed drama and a connection to the working class on their level, so to speak. However, even his discussion of these desires shows a bit of class ignorance; he states “the Music Hall, the Christmas pantomime, and the country house charade are the most living drama today” (Auden 497). While he clearly identifies the viability of a theater that is spontaneous and closely connected to its audience, he forgets that the lower classes would have little connection with or affection for a country house charade.

The creative and personal interests of the two authors contributed to the conflict within the play. The different strengths of the writers is blamed for what appears to be a shaky balance between the prose and the poetry throughout the play; however, this imbalance has more to do with what a critic could see as a thematic issue tied to form than an actual problem in the forms themselves. Several critics note an unstable movement between themes; the authors, they feel, are unable to choose which theme is the true focus or are unable to link the disparate sections of their play together. Hynes states that the complexity of the plot, the multiple layers of meaning and myth, is too much, and results in contradictory elements in the themes (237-240). For others, the characterization is a major problem. The focus does not show the transformation within the main character, states Callan, and leads

to ambiguity in the theme (107). Stephen Spender, reviewing a print edition published in 1959, indicates that the play is good poetry but bad drama: “The writing is often marvelous ... but the characterization and plot are spoiled by self-indulgence in Auden’s pet theories ... One is left with the feeling that either of these writers would, by himself, made something more interesting of these plays” (16-17). The critic Raymond Williams, who in many ways admires *F6*, best unites these arguments when he states “One is ... asked to believe that these are not different themes and different levels, but have an essential unity. The authors work with cross-reference to confirm this; but in the end it is perhaps only clever juggling” (252).

Many critics, including the ones cited above, discuss the conflict between the themes of the public and the private that was common in writing of the thirties. Hynes indicates that these two conflicting elements in *The Ascent of F6* are the concluding elements—one is very public and a commentary on the public in general, and the other is a more private, psychological element (240). While Hynes feels that the coexistence of two conflicting elements is due only to the influence of the times, he does not consider the tension between the two irresolvable issues as an outcome of its own. On the stage, the issue is more complex than just the public or private theme.

The question of form or subgenre is particularly important here. If one is to explore what could be staged in their play, the way in which they present the written material of the drama is quite important. Rather than ending the analysis with the text, however, an exploration of the actual staging in light of this textual concern could provide the answers that a solely textual analysis may not provide. The two subgenres that are perhaps best suited for discussions *The Ascent of F6*, and the Auden-Isherwood plays in general, are parable and allegory.

In much of the criticism on the Auden-Isherwood plays, or on *F6* specifically, the term parable is used as a way of exploring the work⁸. Parable lends itself to an idea of didacticism,

⁸See Brandt, Jacobs, McDiarmid, and Williams.

or overt teaching. In contrast to parable, G. W. Brandt proposes the use of allegory (35). The two are relatively similar in their dramatic forms. Both are the display of an underlying message; the actual display of that message is where the two diverge. The allegory, according to Brandt, presents its message in terms of generalities; it uses “abstractions or generalizations in place of autonomous characters” (35). The parable, on the other hand, is the inverse of this idea. It uses developed characters to deliver generalized lessons to the audience (35). The well-developed, identifiable characters are the audience’s link to the lesson. In both of these forms, we can see how Auden’s influences in German expressionism and medieval drama, and also in psychology, can come to complicate our understanding of these forms; however, they may also serve to elucidate the complexities of seeing both these forms in the same play.

The problem in *The Ascent of F6* is that the play can be seen as both parable and allegory, depending on the perspective of the reader or audience, just as it can be seen as both psychological and political. The play has stock characters that appear to deliver a message, but also has in Michael a well-developed character that delivers a general idea about both maternal conflict and the corrupting potential of power. Sir James, Lord Stagmantle, and their entire group are stock characters; they are simply voices that could be any person of their type: the news magnate who only cares about money, the ambitious government official, the Lady of England that sees herself as a stand-in for all the ladies of England. Michael, however, presents a different kind of character.

Act I, scene iii shows two sides of Michael, the public and the private. In the beginning of the scene, Michael and his crew are pursuing various hobbies after dinner when they are interrupted by James, Lord Stagmantle, and Lady Isabel. Michael’s strained and bitter interaction with his brother, and later in the scene with his mother, show the audience a more complex character than the brave and introspective mountain climber they saw in the first scene of the play. Michael is also a son, a brother, the less-favored child who had to live constantly in his brother’s shadow. Ultimately, he gives in to his mother’s persuasion,

showing the audience the influence her approval still has over him, though he is no longer a child.

The opposing view of Michael we see is the one propagated by the newspapers: the man who “Conquered Triglav, mastered the Scarlet Crag. / Disappeared into Asia Minor, appeared in the Caucasus” (Plays 315). According to the newspapers, he is the man of action that is also a scholar; he is their ultimate Englishman, the stock character in whom the rest of the characters want to believe in and see themselves. He gives a hope of some kind to the suburban couple, Mr. and Mrs. A, who have been languishing in their boredom; they are looking for someone to believe in, and in Michael, they believe they have found him (315-316).

What we have, then, is a complex character that is operating as a center of conflict within a much larger scheme of conflict, or the private conflict influencing and furthering the public conflict. *The Ascent of F6* is able to distribute a message through both sides of the characterization: the stock characters are images of the corrupting capacity of power in the political, public world. Michael is the image of a residual maternal conflict, as well as the struggle with that private conflict in the public world. The two messages are present for interpretation by the audience, but the authors leave the focus of the message in the hands of the production crew and the audience.

Once again, ambiguity in theme and characterization cause problems for interpretation. Though the decision here would seem to be subjective, one must remember what Auden wanted to accomplish with his drama. One must consider whether *The Ascent of F6* was an exercise in uniting a community or bringing poetry to the public. The distinguishing factor one can look for between the two lies in the staging of the play: deciding what a performance could portray, and why. The ambivalence of Ransom himself seemed to be the clearest complaint about the play, which may have stemmed from the idea Isherwood and Auden put forth that Ransom was broadly based on T.E. Lawrence. If the authors wanted to emulate a national hero, then the audience (or at least critics) were sorely disappointed

that his heroism and character came through less than clearly. Again, however, one has to remember Auden's ideas of psychology and the Truly Strong and Truly Weak Man. What a general audience would have seen in this light would probably not have been their ideas of what T.E. Lawrence represented. To the majority of the British at the time, T.E. Lawrence was a national hero, a symbol of bravery and courage under fire. In Auden's mind, and in the drama he writes, Lawrence is a perfect living example of the quest the Truly Weak Man takes in order to become Truly Strong, the idea being that only the Truly Weak Man sees the need to prove himself through quests.

What the performance shows the reader, and the audience for that matter, is not what the play is supposed to be about. The questions a critic must ask when reviewing a performance are the same questions one must ask when reading a play or criticizing the text: what is at stake in the production of the play. This question is one often ignored when drama is read and not seen. Given that this particular text/performance has not been produced on stage (that we know of) since 1945, the confusion and criticism of some later critics is certainly understandable. The ambivalence of the text is clarified on the stage when one considers that Auden and Isherwood are staging a collision of values: they are staging their historical, intellectual moment. The play reproduces the intersection continually happening in the thirties, the intersection of the public with the private, and the private with the public. The struggle between these two themes that critics identify in the play is there because the public and the private do not meld together neatly in life. To try to make those things align in any fictional work would be difficult, but Auden would have seen it as impossible, if not undesirable. He states that "drama is a form [for] the culture which holds temperately to the belief in the free will of man; it is also humble and is aware of all those forces which limit it" (Auden 518). These limitations are the form of drama itself, he goes on to state, evoking and criticizing life through words and a limited area. The tension that results from this struggle on stage is the very thing that drama should critique; for Auden, the drama is questioning what is at stake when the public and the private collide.

The shifting of themes in the play is a result of that collision between the public and private; the critics are operating under the assumption that only one is available for the characters to experience or understand. What happens in *F6* becomes what happens when those public and private spheres are brought to bear upon one another, and the consequences. The movement between themes gives the impression of layering, not actual combination, and the difficulties of the text reflect the reality of trying to combine the public and private. The themes must shift and slide between each side they depict because that is how the private and public coexist. Additionally, just as the private is made public in the context of the play, it is made public on the stage as well. Michael's private struggle becomes his public push towards greatness on *F6*; that two-sided struggle in turn is publicized on the stage.

Considerations of whether the play is a parable or an allegory also contribute to this idea of the publicly staged conflict, whether the idea is to teach a lesson or to unite a community. Again, however, the idea that Auden and Isherwood seem to be interested in breaking apart these binaries on the stage may also be useful in identifying what the play is. If one considers Brandt's definitions of the two subgenres, the allegory being generalized and symbolic while the parable is specific but teaches a generalized lesson, there are elements of both genres at work in the play. The characters of James Ransom and his cohorts are stereotypical political figures, but Michael Ransom is certainly a developed, or at least complex, character, with complex interpersonal relationships with several of the characters (his brother, his mother, Shawcross, and possibly Gunn). One can thus understand the play as one in which a parabolic character (Michael) operates within an allegorical structure: his personal struggle with power occurs in an environment increasingly concerned with the clash of public and private.

The stage, then, becomes the site of a variety of performances, some personal and psychological, and others public or political. Critics rightly identify the conflicting and contradictory elements at work in the play; however, they do not appear to look further than this conflict to find the source of it. Rather they see the play only as a product of its writers, as simply

a text, perhaps because the writers were and are well known for their skills in other areas of literature. The performances of *F6* offer a different view of the play-the possibility of staging and learning from a conflict without a resolution.

The tension of dramatic collaboration, both between the authors and the production group, becomes real and relevant through the view of these collisions on stage. The struggle of Michael within the allegory of public versus private parallels the struggle of the authors with each other and with the Group Theatre, as well as the difficulty all of these artists have with the audience in producing their art. The staged conflict within a conflict points back to Auden's exploration of the struggle for individuality within the community. The need for both sides, both individual and community, and the tension that results from that need is something Auden had been exploring in his poetry, and was now attempting to look at in drama. Drama, as a collaborative art, amplifies Auden's exploration of that tension: even as the audience sees Michael battling on stage, they are also seeing the battle of collaboration among director, actors, playwrights, and designers.

What became most dissatisfying for Auden in his experience with the Group Theatre was that the dramatic efforts he put forth in the Group did nothing to reconnect the artist with the community he wanted to reach. One must remember that the Group Theatre began as (and remained) a place for dramatic experimentation outside the West End; it was never going to be a worker's theater or a socialist/communist theater movement, regardless of the politics of its members. The plays produced by the Group would attract an audience interested in theatrical experimentation-their political views were a sideline to that. Additionally, that audience would probably not be the group Auden hoped to reach. Rather, it was made up of the upper and upper-middle (or educated) classes who could afford to pay subscriptions for an experimental theater. The Ascent of *F6*, both the writing and production efforts, showed Auden that the theater was probably not the path to community he felt it was when he joined the Group in 1932. Though he continued to see drama as the medium

most conducive to didacticism, he still chose to leave the Group Theatre after writing *On the Frontier* in 1938 (Mendelson 258).

”Men long for news...”

During part of his tenure with the Group Theatre, Auden had explored the area of documentary filmmaking. According to Mendelson, Auden wrote to Basil Wright, an old school friend who was working with John Grierson in the General Post Office Film Unit, and asked if there was room for him in the company (281). Up until that point, Auden had already been a part of the Group Theatre and written a few plays including *The Dance of Death* and *The Dog Beneath the Skin*. He had already begun to look for a new method of reuniting the artist with the community; the time he had spent in the Group Theatre had shown him that the reuniting process in the theater would be difficult if not impossible.

Documentary film had several factors that worked in its favor at this time. The cinema was very popular; the novelty of film had not worn off, and the working classes could afford to see a film occasionally. Documentary did not need the assistance of fiction to make it fascinating; the events of the real world were enough. Additionally, social awareness and activism, as stated earlier, were also influential. The documentary group for which Auden worked, however, was less focused on the terrifying events unfolding in Europe and more focused on educating the British public about their country.

The British Documentary Film movement began mostly through the work of John Grierson and the Empire Marketing Board film unit. Alan Lovell states that “as a critic, theorist and producer he influenced the character of the films that were made. As an administrator and public official he helped create a commercial structure that made it possible for the films to be made and shown” (10). Though Grierson certainly was not single-handedly responsible for the popularity of the films made, his name is the one most often mentioned in connection with this particular part of British film history. During Grierson’s time in this group, and his protégés’ time after his retirement, three different government entities oversaw the

filmmakers' work: the Empire Marketing Board, the General Post Office, and the Ministry of Information⁹ .

The Empire Marketing Board was originally created to promote British industry at home and in the Dominions. British industry was suffering on the international market, and the government wanted to create a way of advertising British industry in the various colonies. The British film industry had also suffered during this time, which was during the advent of Hollywood cinema. Through the influence of Sir Stephen Tallents, an EMB official that had been persuaded by a young film enthusiast named John Grierson, the EMB decided to support the production of documentaries, mainly as an easy advertising campaign for British products and services. The film unit produced a few popular films, such as Grierson's *Drifters* (1928); by 1930, the EMB decided to support officially their own filmmaking unit, with Grierson named as supervisor. The first two men he hired were Basil Wright and John Taylor.

The film unit was eventually absorbed by the General Post Office in 1933. As the EMB was dissolved, several government offices picked up the remaining pieces. Tallents, who had lobbied for the film unit at the EMB and who now held an office in the GPO, pushed for the GPO to take over the film unit. After the transfer, Grierson enjoyed even more control over the productions done by the unit than before; he answered only to Tallents. Edward Mendelson notes that Grierson was able to maintain this control without much government interference by creating an "aura of prestige around the documentary film movement," available partly through his own prestige as a popular filmmaker (283). Grierson held strict control over the unit, both in terms of projects chosen and production work. While this control may seem to have been limiting for the people working under him, it actually allowed for a great deal of freedom, distance between the filmmakers themselves and the bureaucracy that supported them. However, censorship and self-censorship still remained an issue.

⁹The work done under the Ministry of Information is generally considered national war-time propaganda and doesn't involve the films discussed here; I have elected to mention this era only in passing.

Sound technology was another added benefit of moving to the GPO. The GPO provided the film unit with a bigger office spaces and gave them an old art studio for their sound equipment. Although the sound equipment they used was “cheap and inferior,” the use of sound opened a new source of experimentation in the film unit (Aitken, *Film and Reform* 127). Sound also helped the film unit get their pictures distributed in more cinemas; at the time, few cinemas wanted to use their British film quotas on soundless films that audiences wouldn’t come see (Aitken, *Film and Reform* 127; Swann 15-16). Grierson was able to hire up-and-coming composers and musicians to work on his films; Benjamin Britten, who collaborated on both *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* with Auden, is one example.

The function of documentary film in Grierson’s mind, however, was educational not aesthetic. He felt that the unit was in place to make socially relevant or didactic films. Though he encouraged experimentation within these parameters, the films were not to be made for a purely aesthetic or commercial purpose. For Grierson, cinema was a tool to be used for the good of society, not one artist’s or a coterie’s aesthetic fulfillment. Once Grierson left the unit in 1937, a marked difference in this policy can be seen in several of the films. This avoidance of the commercial cinema extends into the distribution of the film unit’s works. Grierson tried to get the films shown in places where audiences could watch them for free: stores, trade shows, etc (Mendelson 283). In spite of this assessment, though, one must note that even in the final months of Grierson’s work with the unit, the films began to take on more feature film-like characteristics. Though the films were documentary in subject, the production crews tried to give the films a more narrative construction rather than just a factual account of a particular system. This trend may account for the variety of critical works that note the deceptively real quality of documentaries¹⁰. Graham Greene complained that even the word documentary “carries a false air of impartiality, as much as to say ‘this is what is-not what we think or feel’” (Cunningham 331). The recreation of realistic scenes,

¹⁰See, for example, Rachel Low’s introduction to her *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*.

with conversations and characters like we see in *Night Mail* and to a lesser extent *Coal Face*, was necessary to provide that sense of narrative.

The GPO film unit offered plenty of attractive things the Group Theatre could not: a steady source of income and access to full-time facilities and artists just to name two. Auden also saw a new art form he could work with while also experimenting with his ideas about drama and performance; documentary, Auden said, took all responsibility for realism away from drama. Additionally, documentary as the GPO film unit was using it was a form that had an immediate relationship with the masses that the Group Theatre had failed to establish. As Valentine Cunningham notes, “Documentary art was mass art for and about the masses, making movies that would exploit and ‘reveal’ (Grierson’s words again) ‘the essentially cooperative or mass nature of society’” (329).

Auden’s work at the GPO film unit included several films, the most notable of which are *Coal Face* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936). These two films are two of the few made by the GPO film unit that have retained their lasting power (Aitken, *Film and Reform* 143). Auden also worked on projects for the film unit that were less successful. He wrote pieces for the films *Negroes* (1935), *Beside the Seaside* (1935), *The Way to the Sea* (1936), and *The Londoners* (1937-38), of which only *Negroes* seems to have actually been made. He was able to get experience in almost all aspects of filmmaking; in addition to writing and sound, he also contributed to the shooting and editing processes.

While at the GPO, Auden had the opportunity to work with a wide variety of filmmakers and artists, but the two he worked with on both *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* were Alberto Cavalcanti and Benjamin Britten. Cavalcanti had come to the British film industry from France, having spent time among avant-garde artists and filmmakers there. Britten was a composer that worked on several films for the GPO, and a friend of Auden’s. Alberto Cavalcanti came to work at the GPO Film Unit early in the 1930s. His experiences in the French film avant-garde made his presence in Grierson’s unit unusual perhaps, but his hands-on experience in creating and distributing films would have been quite useful. Though the

films he made maintained Grierson's rubric for the unit's films, after Grierson's retirement and his appointment as senior producer in 1937 both Cavalcanti's and the rest of the unit's films took a marked turn towards aestheticism and away from activism (Swann 80).

Coal Face

Coal Face is an excursion into the life of the collier and the role that coal mining plays in the life of Britain. The film begins with a voiceover as the camera pans over large pieces of moving machinery and equipment. The voiceover gives the viewer a long list of statistics, including how many people are employed by mines and where in Britain the mines are located, with maps as a visual aid. In addition to the voiceover, music and a chanting men's chorus can be heard in the background. The film then moves into the mine itself. The camera follows colliers down the mine shaft as the voiceover tells the audience that the coal face is actually more than a mile from where the men enter the mine.

Inside the mine, the men are shown digging, working machinery, and moving carts. As the narrator discusses the kinds of work the men are doing and the temperature below ground, men are shown removing their shirts. During the workers' break, the music and recitation that started at the beginning also rests. Two men are shown in conversation; their conversation is provided in voiceover, but the voiceover words clearly do not match what the men are saying. The break ends and the men go back to using their machinery. The voiceover gives death and injury statistics, and the miners' day ends. As they come back up the elevator, the music and chanting increase in volume and tempo.

When the miners emerge from the elevator, the women's chorus sings "O lurcher loving collier, black as night," the song that Auden wrote for the film. The song continues as the miners are shown walking together away from the pit and toward a cluster of houses with laundry on lines in front of them. The voiceover tells the audience that the mine and the mining company are the basis of the society seen on screen. The mine owns the houses, runs the stores, and keeps the men employed. Having shown the human element, the film moves on to show how coal is transported and how it is used. The narrator gives statistics for

the amount of coal going to industries like shipping, trains, industry, and export. Images of trains, ships, and mills accompany these statistics as the industrial consumers are mentioned. The film ends with the reminder that “Coal mining is the basic industry of Britain.” The images from the basic parts of the film are shown again in a cycle: the moving machinery, the men leaving the pit, and back to the images of the pit again.

The film was Auden’s first commission for the GPO unit. The song he wrote for the film is the only vocal piece besides the narrator’s that can still be heard. By itself, the poem appears to be a simple love lyric, but coupled with the film scenes and the narration, the complexity of the poem (and of the film) is multiplied¹¹.

The opening image of the poem is darkness: “O lurcher loving collier, black as night,
/ Follow your love across the smokeless hill. / Your lamp is out and all your cages still.” (l. 1-3). Though the collier has left the pit and come out onto the clean “smokeless” hill, the darkness persists. The fourth line provides an image of the collier searching through the darkness; the poem tells him, “Course for her heart and do not miss” (l. 4). The “her” in the poem is Kate, who is admonished by the poem to “fly not so fast, / For Sunday soon is past, / And Monday comes when none may kiss” (l. 5-7). The image of the collier courting for her heart while Kate runs away is resolved by the final line, which seems to bring the two dichotomies together: “Be marble to his soot, and to his black be white.” (l. 8).

The film scenes and narration layered with the singing of this poem serve to amplify the dichotomies that the final line tries to resolve. As the men exit the elevator, the women’s chorus begins; the narrator states, “The shift is finished.” The first three lines of the chorus are sung over images of the men leaving the mining area and walking back to their group of houses. As the men reach the houses, the four lines beginning “Course for her heart” are sung. No people are in the streets; only houses and laundry drying in the front indicate that anyone else might live around this area. Throughout all of this, the narrator tells the audience about the mining company’s control over the lives of the men as well as their livelihoods.

¹¹Please see the Appendix for a complete copy of the poem.

The final line of the poem is paired with bleak images of the landscape surrounding the mine and the men returning to work.

The noticeable absence of women throughout the film troubles the meaning of the poem within its film context and therefore leads to the primary issue. The women's chorus is the only female presence in the film, though the poem is ostensibly about the resolution of work and home (or the public and the domestic). The voiceover complicates this even further, not because the filmmakers avoid showing women in the mining industry (although this was certainly an issue at the time), but because it emphasizes a pattern of dehumanizing the worker throughout the film. The men go home, but not to a place of independent housekeeping. The voiceover diverts the audience's attention back to the mine—the mine owns the houses, the mine owns the store. By implication, the mine also owns the workers.

This idea is shown in other areas of the film, too. The mechanization of human labor becomes apparent in the opening sequences as the montage flits back and forth between machines moving rhythmically and men moving into and through the mines in time with the machines and the music. Their bodies are juxtaposed with the machinery they use; their bodies are yet another tool the mining company uses to obtain its product. Unlike other works exploring the work of colliers, such as George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the audience does not see a vulnerable human body. The men's bodies are hard and muscular, as are their mechanical counterparts. The discussion of the death and injury rates does not come into the narration until after the daily break; at that point, the camera's focus is back on the new machinery used to mine coal.

The film, then, can be seen as a rather subversive exposure of how human beings are exploited by industry instead of a simple educational film about coal. However, this approach invites us to see the filmmakers as completely unbiased outsiders, which is exactly how they liked to style themselves. The attitudes of most middle-class people in the thirties, even those in the political left, towards the working classes were less than enlightened. The working classes might as well have been in another country. Even the words used to discuss

interacting with them, such as “crossing over” (which also held homosexual connotations), indicated the understanding of separateness. The middle classes could cross over, but there was no social mobility for the workers.

The representation of the workers in some of these films, and certainly in *Coal Face*, reflects these opinions, particularly in regards to the idea of The Worker. The idea that one particular person could represent all of the working classes is ludicrous, but nonetheless the search for this symbolic figure continued. Though Marsha Bryant correctly notes that an investigation of these documentaries in terms of the filmmakers’ politics and work removes agency (and disruptive power) from the workers that are actually on screen, one must still approach them from this angle in order to understand Auden’s work in and reaction to the films he helped create (16).

Thus we must again look at the placement of the poem in the film. The disruptive potential of the poem, the music accompanying it, and its contextual meaning within the film provide the first break in the initial wave of information provided by the film. The narration of facts and surging music are layered with the men working mechanically, with the work moving in time with the music. The poem and chorus are layered with the men going home, a disruption of that work.

The presence of this disruption in the film denotes an awareness on behalf of Auden (or some or all of the filmmakers) of the miners’ actual conditions. The production of a film like *Coal Face* provided the GPO film unit with a government-sponsored subject that could still be used to further their own ends without appearing to do so. The visuals of the film could be enough to convince anyone of the miners’ frightening and difficult job, as could the voiceover. Auden’s poem is able to complicate the audience’s understanding of the facts and images with which they are presented.

Night Mail

Night Mail was produced in 1936, and became one of the most popular films the British documentary film movement created. The film was created specifically for the Post Office,

and details the journey of the night mail train from England to Scotland. Scenes of the train traveling through the countryside begin the film. Railway men talking and working on the tracks pause and step back from the rail as the train passes. As the train crosses the countryside, intersections with real people and places are shown: the mail train passes a passenger train, a farm, and more railroad workers. The different mail pickups are shown.

The contraption used to speed the pickup and drop off of the mail is given a special focus. The narrator gives a quick explanation of each part as the local post office employees leave out mail to be picked up and gather the dropped off mail. At one stop, the camera focuses in on the mechanisms that link the train together as they are changed, again with the narrator explaining everything. The train and the postal employees wait for a late train to arrive before they can leave-it arrives just in time. After the train departs this station, the audience sees the postal workers sorting the mail, having discussions about home and work. There is even an uncomfortable silence when the boss comes in.

The new worker and the audience are shown how to set up the mail to be dropped off. The lead worker counts the beats before throwing the package out, in time with the rhythm of the train's mechanism. As the train continues along its course, Auden's poem written for the film begins¹². The narrator chants the verses of the first two stanzas in time with the music and the train as it chugs along. As the third stanza begins ("Dawn freshens, the climb is done") the music changes from the heavy rhythms to a more flowing sound, and the train's mechanisms are less audible. The fourth stanza returns to this heavily rhythmic sound as the narrator goes over the different letters to be delivered. Scenes from the passing countryside, houses, factories, and farms accompany these stanzas. Finally, as the train reaches Glasgow, the music softens again, and the film ends with the railway workers cleaning and polishing the train.

Night Mail differs from *Coal Face* in a number of different ways, but the most obvious of those is the production quality of the two films. While *Coal Face* is clearly supposed to

¹²See Appendix for the full text of the poem.

be factual and informative, *Night Mail* seems in contrast to be more story-like and entertaining. Though the audience still sees the inner workings of a system they use everyday, the presentation of that information is in a totally different style. In place of the omniscient narrator telling the audience what is going on, the filmmakers leave this information in the hands (or mouths) of the workers themselves.

The poetry Auden provides for the film is also quite different. Critical discussion of the film rarely mentions the poetic contribution in the film, other than its pairing with music and image, and the fact that Auden wrote it. The work of the poem within the film, however, is not often mentioned. The majority of the poem is self-explanatory: cities, letters, scenery. The ambivalent imagery of “O lurcher loving collier” is replaced by verses much closer to a factual narrative, though with a more poetic touch of course. The final stanza, however, seems to be less clear, if only because it seems an odd way to end an informative film about the post office.

The final stanza begins with imagery of the train’s final approach into Glasgow: “Thousands are still asleep / Dreaming of terrifying monsters / Or a friendly tea ...,” bringing a measure of fantasy into the otherwise fact-based film (l. 45-47). A list of the cities the train is passing through pulls the poem back into reality, though the people there “continue their dreams” (l. 50). The strong certainty in the last four lines is thrown off by the final line, which states, “For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?” (l. 54). Layered along with the image of the railway workers cleaning the train is the human element with which the poem ends. Up until this point, the film was about the train’s journey across England and Scotland, but the poem separates from the images on screen to direct the audience’s thoughts to the people on the receiving end of this service, back into the community at large.

The movement back towards people, both as groups and individuals, reflects the change in style between *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*. The staging of a coherent narrative throughout the film is clear not only in the central figure of the train itself, but also the people the audience sees along the way. The presence of the voiceover is much less important here, though it

still plays a part in explaining some of the technical images presented to the audience (for example, the pickup/drop off system and the changing of the train's engine at a stop). The image of the workers for the Post Office also changes through this style of film. While the Post Office employees are shown working, the absence of the voiceover keeps control of the scene with the workers themselves. The audience is among the workers, not observing them at an objective distance.

With the advent of the narrative-based documentary, the political element in the films made by the film unit would seem to disappear. Though Grierson's politically leftist social policies were still in effect, the more subversive characteristics seen in *Coal Face* were not as easily interwoven into the films, even in the poetry. The poem begins as a factual recitation that branches out into society, just as the filmmakers wanted their film to do. More subtle political statements, however, such as connecting the audience to the workers rather than setting them apart as objective observers, can be found in the guise of producing a more narrative structure in the film.

The film is a narrative about how a system, the postal service, operates. The imagery and voiceover narration all focus on the system: the efficiency, the automatic movement as each piece is shown doing its job. All the workers are shown doing their jobs mechanically, each doing his part to keep the system running like clockwork. As the audience is placed among the workers, however, they become aware of the individuals involved in the system. The workers shown appear as little more than puppets; even the scripted parts show not individuals but stock characters: the new man, the old-timer, the boss, the wiseguy. The audience in turn becomes a part of the system; absolved of their individuality, they become a part of the machine. They are on the receiving end of the service, not as individuals, but as targets for types of letters: "Letters of thanks, letters from banks, / Letters of joy from the girl and boy" (l. 25-26). There are no individuals in these letters just as there are no individuals in the system.

Night Mail highlights the same issue that *Coal Face* does, though in a stylistically different way. Both films show ideas of how human beings are exploited by industry or by government systems. *Night Mail* takes this idea from *Coal Face* and pushes it further. Not only does the film implicate the very government body supporting the unit, it also implicates the audience and shows how they too are dehumanized by systems. The audience is granted some humanity at the end of the poem, but the images of the film accompanying it are mechanical: the men servicing the train and the tracks are not individuals receiving letters but cogs in the same machinery.

Auden's poetry plays less of a direct political role in *Night Mail*, but it still provides a reflection of the film. The slight change in tone at the end of the poem allows both the reader and the film audience to look back on what they have seen from a more people-oriented perspective, rather than a system-oriented or informative perspective. At this point in Auden's work with the unit, he had already become somewhat disillusioned, so the less overt, but more critical political theme may have something to do with that. By the time *Night Mail* was released, Auden had already written a review of Paul Rotha's book *Documentary Film*, which Edward Mendelson calls "politely devastating" (283). In this review, Auden addresses all the issues he had found within the unit and to a lesser extent in Rotha's book. He notes the complete lack of awareness regarding class inequality, the time constraints, and the self-censorship that went on regardless of the government's non-interference. *Night Mail* gave Auden the chance to subvert not only the system the film featured but also the filmmakers themselves. The humanity that Auden gave the poem in the end shows the film viewer and reader a direct contrast to the images that the filmmakers included with the voiceover commentary¹³. While Auden tried to bring individuality to the community in the film, the filmmakers were content to show and see both the workers and audience as merely small pieces in the big machine. Unlike *Coal Face*, the biases of the filmmakers are revealed, mainly through Auden's poem as it operates within the images and commentary of the film.

¹³When *Night Mail* was released, however, the film proved to be more successful than anyone on the crew had anticipated (Mendelson 283).

Auden left the film unit after uncovering the troubling truths of the documentary film unit: the artists involved were aware of the conservative government support for a supposedly revolutionary (or at least left-wing) art, but they did not see any conflict of interest in that fact. He would later find this same self-interest evident in the Group Theatre, but in the film unit he found it intolerable. He kept his dissatisfaction to himself until he exploded in a fight with Wright in the later part of 1935 or early 1936 (Mendelson 283). He asked for a few months off to work on his own projects, but wrote Grierson a resignation letter during the visit to Isherwood in Cintra, Portugal that began *The Ascent of F6* (284). He had been with the unit less than a year.

The hypocrisy Auden found was not limited to just the GPO film unit. All throughout his work in the theater as well as film he found plenty of people that either had to or chose to make a living by their art, and that art had to be commercial. For Auden, poetry was different. He knew first hand that he could support himself as an artist and still stay true to his ideals. But in the theater and in film, the artist is always part of a collaborative effort, not just an individual one. The collaboration between artists in production had to become a collaboration with the audience as well. The consideration of the audience did not make drama or film less of an art form; it meant that the production of the art would have to be different. Drama and film both were indeed the acts of a community, just as Auden had written about. What Auden learned was that in his ambitions for the theater and for film—the union of the artist and the people, the publicizing and popularizing of poetry—he had discounted the element of the audience more than he thought. One had to attract the community into the theater or cinema first, and in that act the artists in collaboration had to compromise with the audience. Perhaps the greatest barrier that the two groups had to cross was the class barrier that kept them from fully appreciating the audience they ostensibly wanted to bring in.

The Group Theatre had to consider their audience both financially and in terms of their overarching social project. The GPO film unit, though it had government financial support,

also had a social project to consider in their audience. Both groups wanted to reach an audience made up of the working classes. The film group had more realistic opportunities to reach their desired audiences, but still had to adjust their production strategies to this audience. We have only to look at the differences between *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* to see how the production and editing of a documentary into a feature film could persuade more of the public to come see the film.

Conclusions

T.S. Eliot discussed the difficulties of writing poetic drama in two different essays. The two essays and the occasions that Eliot had for writing them, bookending his attempts at writing poetic drama, serve as a parallel to Auden's ideas and work with drama, documentary, and poetry. The essay "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," published in *The Sacred Wood*, is Eliot's early investigation of what it means to put verse into drama. The second, "Poetry and Drama," was given as a lecture at Harvard in 1951. The change that Eliot goes through between his first forays into dramatic writing and the time of the Harvard lecture are evident in the changes he has made to his dramatic philosophy. The first essay is a lesson on the power of the text; Eliot believes that poetic drama should be the simplification of "this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world" (Eliot, *Sacred Wood* 68). In short, drama can not be just a means to an end, but the only means through which this simplification can take form (66). The performer is an unstable base for the publication of this point of view because the performer is self-oriented rather than text-oriented. The answer for Eliot is to look less at the small coterie audience looking for poetry in drama and more at the forms available to the modern dramatist that still employ poetry, namely the music hall performer (70). Auden echoes these sentiments, as I have noted earlier. The music hall, the pantomime-these for Auden are the real, viable forms in which poetic drama can grow.

Eliot's other essay seems to be a bit less optimistic about the possibility of poetic drama. Having attempted several dramas that were somewhat successful commercially, but never up

to the standards that he wanted, Eliot is now able to look back at how poetry fits into drama naturally, rather than how poetry can be forced into drama that people want to see. The idea is that the poetry should be a “dramatic inevitability” (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 135). The verse must be adaptable to its staging; it must be appropriate for the scene and the meaning must come across clearly without burdening the listener with the idea of Poetry. After his actual experiences in the theater, Eliot seems to acknowledge more the audience’s role in the dramatic experience. The poetic theater can not just be about the Author providing the public with Poetry; theater, as Auden put forth in 1935, starts with the community and becomes a part of it. The change of heart, so to speak, we see in Eliot’s two essays is indicative of the change that we can see in Auden’s work over the brief period discussed here. As his practical knowledge of the public increased, Auden’s desire to be a public poet changed as well.

An exploration of Auden’s work in drama and documentary together indicates a running theme in his work in the thirties (and beyond). These works and experiments are a further investigation into Auden’s ideas about the individual in the community and the tensions that result from one’s desire to be both a part of the community and an independent individual which are found throughout his poetry. Understanding these continuing themes, however, also leads to more questions about Auden and his work. One must consider the generic implications; in other words, one must consider how Auden understood the function of drama and documentary. The written work on the Group Theatre and John Grierson provide a basic rubric for understanding how Auden had to compromise his ideas with the overarching ideals of the groups and people with which he worked in collaboration, but they do not offer insight into Auden’s personal views on the subject.

What the reader can surmise about his understanding can be drawn from the specific disruptions discussed in this paper. By approaching these works through the overarching theme of individuality, they become insights into Auden’s understanding of the two genres, as well as collaborative work in general. Auden chose to include these poems and scenes;

they survived the editing process, the work of other individuals on the same project, and appeared at last in the finished (or staged and restaged) product. Auden understood drama to be the act of an entire community¹⁴; the audience, the production crew, and the writers all came together to create an artistic experience. Thus, the artist could be reunited with the community again. Documentary, with its different and more complicated relationship with the audience, was more difficult for Auden to reconcile with his desire for an artist both of and separate from the community. Filmmaking offered a far more public, popular forum for poetry, but the artist was still set apart from the community without being a member of it; though the filmmakers could cross over into the audience by making films about them, they always maintained an objective, observational stance apart from the audience. Auden recognized this distance from the audience as an economic/educational class gap, which he soon realized would never be repaired in the GPO film unit.

From this, one may extrapolate how Auden came to understand the two genres. Drama, with its direct personal contact with the audience, provided the artist a way back into the community and poetry a more public role, but financial and collaborative difficulties would always be a problem. Documentary could potentially be effective in bringing poetry to the masses, but the very objective nature of documentary forms, as well as the unacknowledged biases of the filmmakers (largely due to class differences and the financial support of a definitely biased supporter) would prevent it from uniting artists with the audiences they created with their films.

Collaborative art, then, is the primary tension creator for Auden as he explores his idea of individual and community tensions in genres besides his poetry. The desire to be a member of the community, which can be seen in his hope for a more public poetry and the reuniting of the artist with the community, is always in tension with the desire to be an individual within that community, which can be seen in the private, personal elements Auden tries to bring to each of the works on which he collaborated. Though Auden would go on to do

¹⁴See Auden, *Plays* 497.

other collaborative works, including operas and a few more revisions to his already published plays, he ended his work with the Group Theatre and the documentary film unit by the end of 1938.

The contradiction between one's private beliefs and public works and art became too much for Auden. When he left Britain permanently in 1939, one could say that he chose the private over the public. In Britain he had enjoyed extraordinary fame for a poet; he was called the voice of his generation early in his career, and that responsibility followed him throughout his writing experiences. In leaving Britain, he may have been trying to put into practice a different kind of relationship with his audience; perhaps instead of the orator above them, he was trying to be simply a poet among them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aitken, Ian. *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Auden, W. H. *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928-1938*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988.
- Auden, W. H. *Prose: Volume 1, 1926-38*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Brandt, G. W. "Realism and Parables: from Brecht to Arden." *Contemporary Theatre*. London: Edward Arnold, 1962.
- Bryant, Marsha. *Auden and Documentary in the 1930s*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
- Callan, Edward. "Plays for the Group Theatre 1933-37." *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *W.H. Auden: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Cunningham, Valentine. *British Writers of the Thirties*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.
- The Documentary Film Movement*. Ed. Ian Aitken. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Dukes, Ashely. *Modern Dramatists*. Freeport, NY: Books For Libraries Press, Inc., 1967.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen and Co., 1950.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1975.

- Fisher, James. "'Spiritual Sunburn': Dramatic Journeys from the Auden-Isherwood Plays To A Meeting by the River." *W.H. Auden: A Legacy*. Ed. David G. Izzo. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002.
- Fuller, John. *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970.
- Hynes, Samuel. *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1972.
- Innes, Christopher. "Auden's Plays and Dramatic Writings: Theatre, Film, and Opera." *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*. Ed. Stan Smith. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- . *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Izzo, David G. *W.H. Auden Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004.
- Jacobs, Alan. "Auden and the Dream of Public Poetry." *Literature and the Renewal of the Public Sphere*. Ed. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher and M.D. Walhout. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Lovell, Alan and Jim Hillier. *Studies in Documentary*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1972.
- Mason, David. "Auden Onstage." *Hudson Review* 47 (1995): 569-581.
- McDiarmid, Lucy. *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Mendelson, Edward. "The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration." *Twentieth Century Literature* 22 (1976): 276-285.
- Mendelson, Edward. *Early Auden*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981.
- Muir, Kenneth. "Verse and Prose." *Contemporary Theatre*. London: Edward Arnold, 1962.

- Sidnell, Michael J. *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Spender, Stephen. "The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration." *New Republic* 141.21 (1959): 16-17.
- Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Sussex, Elizabeth. *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975.
- Swann, Paul. *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Weales, Gerald. "Here Come I, the Poet Good." *Sewanee Review* 98 (1990): 308-313.
- Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*. New York: Oxford UP, 1953.
- Worthen, W. B. *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.

APPENDIX A

THE TEXT OF *COAL FACE*

O lurcher loving collier black as night,
Follow your love across the smokeless hill.
Your lamp is out and all your cages still.
Course for her heart and do not miss
And Kate fly not so fast,
For Sunday soon is past,
And Monday comes when none may kiss.
Be marble to his soot and to his black be white.

APPENDIX B

THE TEXT OF *NIGHT MAIL*

This is the night mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner and the irl next door,
Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb-
The gradient's against her but she's on time.

Past cotton grass and moorland boulder,
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,
Snorting noisily as she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses;
Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from the bushes at her blank-faced coaches;
Sheepdogs cannot turn her course
They slumber on with paws across,
In the farm she passes no one wakes
But a jug in a bedroom gently shakes.

Dawn freshens, the climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends
Towards the steam tugs, yelping down the glade of cranes

Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her;
In the dark glens, beside the pale-green sea lochs
Men long for news.

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from the girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or visit relations,
And applications for situations,
And timid lovers' declarations,
And gossip, gossip from all the nations;
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in
Letters with faces scrawled on the margin.
Letters from uncles, cousins and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands,
Notes from overseas to the Hebrides;
Written on paper of every hue
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue
The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

Thousands are still asleep
Dreaming of terrifying monsters
Or a friendly tea beside the band at Cranston's or Crawford's;
Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set Edinburgh,
Asleep in granite Aberdeen.
They continue their dreams
But shall wake soon and long for letters.
And none will hear the postman's knock
Without a quickening of the hear
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?