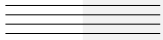
A POETRY READING



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Translated by Barbara Harshav

The evening I heard Auden read his latest poems mixed up in me several layers of my life. By the time that evening ended, I didn't know which pages rustled and which doors opened along the corridors of things that were here and were past. Recently, I read a newspaper article about oil drilling that said the experts were not allowed to go on drilling for fear of mixing up one stratum with another. But that evening in New York, when Auden read his poems, was like that drilling, mixing up the past with the present. And maybe that's one of the functions of true poetry, to open, to drill, to mix up, and to close again, to arrange, to calm. At five o'clock, I was sitting in my room and looking at Central Park through the fire escape they've got on every building in New York. It was a brisk winter day and only by chance it wasn't snowing. My room was well heated and I tried to imagine what Auden looked like from the pictures I'd seen. But I couldn't remember. I tried to remember him from his poems, and what immediately came into my mind was him wearing a Basque beret, a pipe stuck in his

mouth. All that sadness in the lines of his face, and only his eyes had a glimmer of irony and goodness. I heard the elevator door close and knew that Lotte had arrived. An hour earlier, she had delivered her quiet, white patients, lined up like flowerbeds, to the nurses of the second shift. Her patients she had delivered and her memories she took with her. On the subway, on her way to me, she didn't take up much space, just as in her whole life she didn't take up much space. Life was pressing her more and more, making her smaller and more fragile and quieter and a little scared. Now the elevator door closed and it went back down. It can be assumed that Lotte rang the bell and that I got up to open the door for her and that she took off her coat and sat down across from me. She must have said, *Come on let's go to Rudy, he's waiting for us.* If I'm not mistaken, we stood afterward and looked at the fire escape I hadn't yet gotten used to seeing. It's quite possible I said something about the two of us, that in our lives there isn't a second flight of stairs for escape in an emergency. I assumed all that, because it was a brisk winter day outside and because my room was warm. But I was sure only of that other big room in the old Arab house in the Ethiopian neighborhood in Jerusalem, in those early days of World War II. The only window in it was high and vaulted and embedded in the wall. In the room, there were copper vessels and Oriental rugs and a narghila. We waited near the door for what might come through next and the remnants of an after-midnight conversation still hung in the room like cigarette smoke. On the wall were pictures by Picasso along with medieval pictures, a case of "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb." Strange and full of hiding places was the little garden, enclosed in two walls, and so were the two of us, strange and full of hiding places. On the sofa open books of poetry or newspapers from distant lands always lay. Our seriousness was like flowers. The seriousness of grownups is papers and accounts and gray walls. The seriousness of youngsters is like flowers. With questioning fingers we tried to hold the world and we touched it and felt it, like fabrics in a shop, until the world began to be ours too and to take on the taste of our fingers and the smell of our hands. Since then, our traces have been wiped out. I put on a coat too and we got into the elevator. I asked, *Cold outside, Lotte?* even though I knew it was cold. She said, *Come on, let's hurry, Rudy's waiting for us.* Rudy is Lotte's boyfriend and we

wanted to take the subway to his place. I thought, how dependent is Lotte's love on that underground transportation. If it broke down one day, and didn't start up again for a few days, Lotte wouldn't be able to see Rudy and he'd take another lover. I asked her, *Does he really want to come with us to hear Auden? He's an engineer, so why should he listen to poetry?* She smiled and said, *We'll take him.* When the elevator reached the ground floor, the same strange current you feel when the elevator stops passed through the two of us. But now it was too late to share the feelings between us, and still get to Rudy's. The things we had in common dwindled. Once, in that Jerusalem of the days of El-Alamein, we were next to one another like two dominos. Identical and abutting, in a grand game whose dimensions we couldn't imagine. But we knew that the other side of each one of us was different, and that side was tied to other, distant things. Since then, a lot of dominos have been shuffled and put into new patterns, until we too found ourselves far away from one another. In those Jerusalem days of El-Alamein, we were like the children in Auden's poems. The courage was sad and a piano was heard in the background of the evening news and poems were read on the last night before returning to the army camp at the end of a leave. But we were part of that big camp of pacifists who learned to hold a rifle. And we learned to use it well, although sometimes with a little shame, like a boy whose voice is changing and is timid about talking. On one of those leaves came our friend, an English officer whose hair had turned prematurely gray. We sat in Lotte's room and listened to his stories about the International Brigade in Spain where he had fought. Then he took us to the auditorium at the YMCA, which was empty, and he played the organ for us. Just for the two of us he played in that big auditorium. His army overcoat was thrown over the seats of one of the rows.

Because subway rides in New York are long, so was our conversation. Although I'm really not sure if the whole conversation was spoken aloud. It may be that quite a few of the words remained in Lotte and in me, and only some of them were said to each other. Like the train we rode to Rudy's, which sometimes traveled underground and sometimes came out and rose onto pillars between the lighted buildings. At one of the stops in Queens we got out. The gigantic human figures in the ads let us pass safely and we left the

station. In my childhood, I learned a proverb that the mills of God grind slowly. But the stations of New York, on the other hand, grind fast. Rudy was already waiting for us. His apartment was the last word in modern. Its furniture was low and comfortable. I threw my coat on the back of a chair and threw myself onto one of the sofas. Rudy sat next to me and told me what he did. He's an artificial intelligence engineer at one of the big American companies. He himself was to invent various things in that area. The blueprints were wonderful with hundreds of lines and sketches and numbers and letters. They have the same charm as the short lines of a new poem on a page. A hidden phonograph played a cembalo sonata by Corelli. There was no contradiction between Corelli and Rudy's blueprints. Months later, when I was in Rome, I felt the same anachronistic harmony between the ruins of the Capitol and the colorful trolleys. Like the thick carpets at our feet, that music was a carpet for my heart, which also walks a lot and hurts a lot and needs the soothing of a carpet. Beyond the window, gigantic billboards lit up and went out. Far away from them, a bright fog stood over lower Manhattan. Rudy spoke of his work on artificial intelligence. I asked him if he liked modern poetry. He smiled the way people smile when they're asked if they like modern poetry. Nevertheless, he agreed to come with us. Then he said, *One day it will be possible to write poems with an electronic brain. How? They'll take all the words and put them together in all possible combinations. That way, among the billions of printed pages, there will be all the poems that were ever written and that are still to be written. But they'll need poets to take those pages of poetry out of the pile.* I was relieved because I saw that it was cheaper and simpler to write poetry with the brains of poets. Lotte drew the reddish curtain and said, *Let's eat.* At that moment I loved Rudy and I saw that his life was full of poetry and so were his pages and so were his brains and so was his furniture. After Corelli, he put on a record of a Beethoven quartet. Rudy had two telephones and three radios and one television. Once during the war, I left Lotte to return to the western desert after time on leave. When I said goodbye, a violin was playing on the radio in her room. When she walked me to the door, she didn't turn off the radio. When I went out into the alleys of the Ethiopian neighborhood, I heard that playing continue from the other houses and from all the houses

until I came to the Egged bus stop. I calmed down. I thought that for a whole year I wouldn't see Lotte, but I knew that in all the houses that same music was playing and that Lotte closed the door behind me and that she was sitting on the sofa and hearing the same music. That was the thread winding through everything. And that's how it would always be. That's the solace of my life. Ever since then, that playing hasn't stopped in Lotte's house. She never turned off that radio. She went on believing in human beings and in a world we once touched. It's hard for me to believe that her weak body can hold such strength and such faith. As we ate, we were cheerful. I said we had to hurry up. By the time we got to Auden it would be late. Auden certainly had eaten a light supper, because he had to talk a lot. All the sources of light in Rudy's apartment were hidden in the wall. In Lotte's room in the Ethiopian neighborhood, there was a copper lamp. We bought it in the Armenian Quarter in the Old City. Afterward, Lotte had to leave her room and move into a big basement room. But we were happy in that corner of the hall that Lotte lay claim to. As on a map; we thought all the green was a valley and all the brown was really a mountain and all the borders were right. But ever since we left one another, we've seen that maps weren't precise and in all the long days we've lived, each of us alone, we've discovered the mistakes day after day.

We stood up to go. Pushing a button, Rudy sent all the electrical currents from the lightbulbs back into the generators. We couldn't return like that. We always remained imprisoned in the lightbulbs. Sometimes weaker like an eternal light, and sometimes bright as for parties. But we can't go back. Rudy's modern car is low and comfortable like his room. In one place, we had to stop and go back and look for another road, because the street was under repair. The road had been dug up and maybe there was a possibility of planting seedlings here in New York. The ground was open and steam from the heating plant rose from it as from hellfire. A few workers were going in and coming out of the ground. I myself have often been under repair, but the world doesn't take that into consideration, traffic continued and everything went on as usual and yet I had to be repaired and recover. The springs of the car were like ocean waves. Suddenly joy sprang upon me that I didn't have to stand up and read my poems. Auden

must have arrived in the building and was now sitting in a comfortable easy chair. Maybe his wife, Erika, Thomas Mann's daughter, would be seated next to him. Or maybe she was used to his appearances by now and wasn't even in the city.

We got to the 92nd Street Y, the Jewish Y, on the east side of Manhattan. Like the Christian YMCA in Jerusalem. Swimming pool, concert halls, libraries, gym, and other amenities to bring people close to culture and closer to each other. The lobby was already full of people. In a nearby room there was dancing. From time to time, two people hugging passed by the open door. Now and then the same couple returned and I was glad to see some of them come back. In another place, young men and women were sitting in easy chairs and watching television: a famous clown suddenly stopped his tricks to shave in public with a Schick razor.

I immediately recognized the audience that had come to hear Auden. Some of them, who later sat in the first rows, members of the affluent and intellectual society, were dressed in formal evening attire and talked softly. But most of the audience were young men and women from Greenwich Village, the artists' quarter, university students, fans of artists and artistes. A plethora of colors in checked shirts and shirts sprawling over trousers and strange beards on the men; and weird pigtails and buns and all forms of pants and loud shirts on the women. One girl had a gigantic earring hanging on only one ear, to show that she wasn't one of those rubes who strive for balance and symmetry. Rudy saw that whole colorful sea, panicked and wanted to flee. We held onto him, Lotte and I, and entered the auditorium. The usher was a pleasant girl with light hair, timid, and also embarrassed and not very efficient. Too bad Auden can't see her during his reading. She'll probably stand in the back to show latecomers to their seats. The auditorium is beautiful and all paneled in dark wood. Around the ceiling is a border with various names written in gigantic letters: Socrates, David, Goethe, Isaiah, Beethoven, Kant, and so on. Like magic invocations to culture. Or as the names of visitors are written in a Sukkah. The Jews of America are proud of being cultured people, broad-minded. For years, the YMHA has presented poetry readings by the best poets . . . Auden, Eliot, Stevens, and Spender.

The light went down in the auditorium and went up on the stage. A man wearing a three-piece suit with a shining checked

vest pranced in. Hard to tell if he was a waiter or a diplomat or a clown. He was a poet named Brinnin, who organized programs. In an upper-class accent, with affected stammering and coughing, he demonstrated his contempt for the audience and for Auden, even though he said, *Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen* and *Distinguished and Splendid Poet*. He came down from the stage like a dancing horse who had finished his act in the circus. Auden himself then entered and stood at the podium facing the auditorium. I whispered to Lotte, *How old he's grown*. She replied, *But you never saw him*. I said, *But I did read his poems*. His hair was colorless and his face was ruddy. He was a tall man in a simple dark suit. He spoke quickly and quietly and didn't look at the audience as he read, and it seemed to me that he read reluctantly. It took several hours until the words penetrated me. The thoughts rose like smoke from a pipe. Children lie in the grass on their backs and see shapes in the clouds. So I too began to see in his mounting thoughts different shapes of poetry. Auden wants to calm us with his poems. As he did with his poems of the 1930s. Good poetry should calm. Like a lullaby, to bring sleep, console, repeat lines of serenity over and over, make quiet closures. To be a warm house, a shelter, a refuge, a defended position, a sheepfold, a mother's apron, a father's hands.

Auden opened with bucolic poems. Poems of forests and winds, of mountains, lakes, cascades, islands. All poets praise nature and are excited about it. He, a twentieth-century poet, isn't like that. The forests, once a place of legendary creatures and wild animals, no longer exist. The forest is divided into hunting areas, hostels, tourists, and even "doves create / In rustic English over all they do / To rear their modern family of two." The poem "Winds" begins:

Deep, deep below our violences,
Quite still, like our First Dad, his watch
And many little mains,
But the boneless winds that blow
Round law-court and temple . . .
Winds make weather; weather
Is what nasty people are
Nasty about . . .

Later on, he read: "Romance? Not in this weather!" And similar things:

Am I
To see in the Lake District, then,
Another bourgeois invention like the piano?

Listening to his poems made me sad. The lines themselves were beautiful, the ideas original. But I asked myself, *What had Auden made out of himself?* And I didn't laugh, because often the people in the auditorium would burst out in short, nervous laughter.

A lot of words and thoughts were funny, like the beginning of the poem "Mountains":

I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains . . .
. . . While a normal eye perceives them as a wall
Between worse and better, like a child, scolded in France,
Who wishes he were crying on the Italian side of the Alps:
Caesar does not rejoice when high ground
Makes a darker map,
Nor does Madam.

The audience laughed, but I didn't. I thought of laughing and crying as two sides of the same coin. Now, for example, I knew that laughing comes out of people's mouths and crying goes into their hearts, like a watershed dividing rainwater. When they cry, laughing goes into them. Auden went on reading, as the electricity goes on flowing from the generators. His face suddenly became lined and weary. If the generators that make electricity show signs of fatigue, the engineer comes and replaces them. I looked at Rudy and saw he was bored. I pretended not to notice. Auden came to "Lakes," and read:

A lake allows an average father, walking slowly,
To circumvent it in an afternoon,
And any healthy mother to halloo the children
Back to her bedtime from their games across:

He added that cunning foreign ministers should always meet beside a lake. The path they walk around it will be like a yoke on their shoulders and will harness them to the liquid center, like two old donkeys. He also called the lake "the drinking water of the

city." Then Auden reminded us that love of nature frequently "Goes with a wish for savage dogs and man-traps." I thought that Hitler was also a great lover of mountains and lakes and fierce German shepherds. The poet's hatred of tyrants also came out in another poem, "Islands":

His continental damage done,
  Laid on an island shelf,
Napoleon has five years more
  To talk about himself.

I heard a rustling behind me. A latecomer. The blond usher led him to his seat and went back to the dark so Auden couldn't see her. He went on reading his poems as if he were reading them from the tomb, after his death. I said to myself, *He must not be reading his real poems, those he conceals inside himself.* When he saw the curious audience and the colorful youths and the bored intellectuals, he hid the real poems and read those mocking poems to entertain them. If he had seen Lotte and me and the blond usher and the room in Jerusalem and the days of Spain and the days of El-Alamein – he would certainly have recited his real poems, the ones we loved.

What did he say about the plains? "Oh God, please, please, don't ever make me live there." And "It's horrible to think what peaks come down to," and he imagined that windmill on the plain, "when an emperor saw / His right wing crumple."

In another poem, American warships visit a European port.

The sailors come ashore
Out of their hollow ships,
Mild-looking middle-class boys
Who read the comic strips;
One baseball game is more
To them than fifty Troys.

Not the sailors of Odysseus, bold-faced and adventure-loving. Nonetheless, Auden loves them, these draftees not meant for battles and conquests.

My thoughts wandered away from Auden and the auditorium. They passed by the fair-haired girl standing behind a pillar, and went into the quiet, empty corridor. The way my father would go

out of the synagogue on Yom Kippur to pace the yard and to rest from his fasting. So did my thoughts. When they returned to the auditorium, the audience was laughing because a poem mocking the hunting season had been read. A shot fell in the silent forest. A slain feathered creature will be brought proudly into a kitchen.

Down in the startled valley
  Two lovers break apart: . . .
Reminded of the hour
  And that his chair is hard,
A deathless verse half done,
  One interrupted bard
Postpones his dying with a dish
Of several suffocated fish.

That's how humans are. And poets, too. Auden took a break and went out. Conversations started. Rudy asked, *Where's the poetry?* I said, *Wait.* I recalled those poems of his filled with wonderful human warmth. When Auden returned to the podium, he began with two short elegies.

The first was to a two-year-old cat who had died:

At peace under this mandarin, sleep, Lucina,
Blue-eyed Queen of white cats:

And the second was an epitaph for the Unknown Soldier:

To save your world, you asked this man to die:
Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?

When I heard those, I said to Rudy, *There's our Auden.* And to Lotte I said, *Look, we'll be like that, too.* It starts with lovers of peace and books and beautiful pictures, who suddenly pick up a rifle and put on army belts – and it ends where Auden stands today. And still, how wonderful his poems were in the sadness they hid behind the mockery. He still was the master of his art. Once I saw a child pulling a little wooden car by a string. The toy got cut off. The child didn't feel it and went on dragging the string and didn't know that, on the end of it, there was nothing. Auden's like that child. But I suspect that he does feel that his world got cut off and yet he still keeps pulling the string. Out of his caution and his intelligence and his sadness, he doesn't turn around to see, let

alone try to reattach the rolling toy. In my eyes, his poems were so sad, even though the audience laughed a lot. Auden told of a professional hangman who, when he left his cozy house in the suburbs, would pat his dog, didn't yet know "who will be provided" that day. But that didn't interest him. He'd gently close the door of his wife's bedroom.

Auden went on like that in his rhymed conversations. I heard them the way you hear a sound of water and I was calmed. Here are people who know their vocation and why they were created:

You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,

you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon

making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading . . .

How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look.

Auden wrote a lot of poems. But he doesn't yet seem to know what his vocation is. His eyes are sad and small. The years have passed and it will be too late before we know what we really become.

You need not hear what orders he is giving
to know if someone has authority,

you only have to watch his mouth:
when a besieging general sees

a city wall breached by his troops,
when a bacteriologist

realizes in a flash what was wrong
with his hypothesis, . . .

I looked at Lotte's mouth. Can I see there what she wants, what she yearns for? I saw only that her lips were slightly open, in the thrall of excitement, like an amazed little girl. Only her lips re-

membered something. Every part of the body has its own capacity to remember. Sometimes the feet remember a walk the eyes forget, sometimes the hands remember a touch the hair forgets. When will the miracle happen and the whole body remember? Before the hour of death is it still possible to arrive at such a remembering? I saw her lips remembering and I remembered again her room in the Ethiopian neighborhood. The dry summer plants she'd gather and put in a big beaker. The thorns and nettles, the carob branch, the prickly oak leaves, the branch of bellflower seeds that opened like a dry mouth, the branches of yellowed olive. All those she arranged together and stood them in a corner. From the sofa, we'd see them. Why had she gathered them? Why did I remember them now?

I also thought that, while the bard stands and reads his poems, golden girls are jumping into a swimming pool on the floor below us. The water is spraying, the laughter is spraying. And under the pool, in the depths of the earth, the subway is passing. Everything exists and in everything there is poetry. Only the bard, who has to praise the universe, stands here, the words burning his lips. The fair-haired usher also went home. When she got to her room, she took off her coat, because the room was warm. Before she got into bed, she ate a slice of bread, or maybe she drank a glass of cold milk, as American girls do. Then she turned off the light next to her bed, I couldn't see her anymore.

Then I went out of the auditorium. Lotte didn't ask why. She was sure I'd come back, since this time I wasn't coming back to her anyway. The people in my row let me pass. Since the usher had already gone home, nobody prevented me from leaving. I went out to the corridor. The sound of a Ping-Pong ball came from one of the rooms. They seemed to be two pretty good players, since the rhythm wasn't broken. I saw the announcements about events taking place on dates when I'd no longer be in New York. I thought about all the things that would go on after my death. I leaned on the windowsill and looked out, like a person who wants to see himself in the window. I imagined dark Central Park with its trees and beyond it the long rows of the buildings of New York. Is it possible to go back? Impossible to go back. There will always be performances. Every bulletin board is testimony to that, and I knew that to be grown-up means to forget childhood. I knew I'd

have to bake the bread of longing every night when I'm illuminated by the red light at the maw of the oven. I knew that to be grown-up is to relinquish most of the places and most of the lighted windows all around the world. I knew that a poem comes if all the words that come out of the mouth turn into blood, like the plague of blood on the Nile. I returned to the auditorium, I heard a subway shake the floor beneath me. No one had noticed my absence. Only Lotte put a remembering hand on my hand that never forgot.

Auden went on reading. The acrobats of Auden's poems returned sadly to his heart. After they had passed by and fluttered with great skill on the stage above us, among the names of Socrates and Beethoven and Isaiah and the other great men, they returned to his heart. I shall copy here one last poem, that performed some reconciliation with the world:

Among the leaves the small birds sing;
The crow of the cock commands awaking:
In solitude, for company.

Bright shines the sun on creatures mortal;
Men of their neighbors become sensible:
In solitude, for company.

The crow of the cock commands awaking;
Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding:
In solitude, for company.

Men of their neighbors become sensible;
God bless the Realm, God bless the People:
In solitude, for company.

Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding;
The dripping mill-wheel is again turning;
In solitude, for company.

God bless the Realm, God bless the People;
God bless this green world temporal:
In solitude, for company.

The dripping mill-wheel is again turning;
Among the leaves the small birds sing:
In solitude, for company.

That poem consoled me. I went outside and it was already late. We sat in the bar of a splendid hotel. Some scattered couples were sitting there, it was quiet. The velvet upholstery and drapes absorbed all sound. We didn't talk about Auden. I was contemplating Rudy's blueprints and he was thinking about the poems and Lotte was thinking about her past. Lotte's like those papers spies use to communicate with one another; what's written on them is seen only when you dip them in a special solution. That evening, when Auden read his poems, was like that solution for her. Things that were blurred in her heart looked written on her. Next to us, somebody was playing blues on a piano. A man and a woman were playing four-handed piano. In fact, she wasn't playing but was leaning across from him and her fingers were fiddling with a small purse and she was looking at the man who was playing. And, in fact, he wasn't playing either, but the keys were playing and moving his fingers and his fingers were moving his feelings. In the nearby hall, nimble, quiet waiters were preparing the tables for breakfast the next day. I didn't know how to prepare my next day because I was tired. Rudy took me to my apartment in his car and took Lotte with him into the fog that started rising after midnight over the East River.