Une Saison en enfer for many years—he donated a copy to the Bibliothèque nationale in 1938. A copy he gave to Jules Mouquet was purchased by the British Library in 1982 (C.i.29.m.13.). This copy has two interlaced Ls stamped in the upper blank margin of the front wrapper and below the last line of text; on the first page it has the inscription ‘A Monsieur Jules Mouquet, l’éditeur des Vers de collège d’Arthur Rimbaud’ (Mouquet’s edition was published in 1933). It is in a fine binding by Rose Adler, signed and dated 1948. Reproduced in Martin Breslauer, Fine Bindings Catalogue 104, part II, (1981), col. pl. xiii.

17 Bulletin, i, 1er fasc. (1908), p. [3].
20 Zweig was deeply hurt by Verhaeren’s expression of bitter anti-German feelings in works such as La Belgique sanglante and Les Ailes rouges de la guerre, written after the German invasion of Belgium.
22 Zweig, Erinnerungen an Emile Verhaeren (Vienna, 1917). All references are to the French edition Souvenirs sur Emile Verhaeren (Brussels, 1931).
23 Zweig, ibid., p. 76.
26 Zweig, Souvenirs sur Emile Verhaeren, p. 137.
30 Zweig, ibid., p. 41: ‘he never had a single line printed by his own efforts, he was utterly regardless of the fleeting examples of his gigantic power’.
31 Pierson-Piérdard, op. cit., p. 346.

W. H. AUDEN’S POEMS OF 1928

Joanna Leevers

In April 1987 the Modern British Section of the British Library acquired a rare and important copy of W. H. Auden’s Poems of 1928. This was Auden’s first published work, privately printed by his fellow poet and undergraduate Stephen Spender during the Oxford summer vacation. It is a surprisingly small volume measuring only 12 × 9.5 cm., bound in limp orange covers; the title-page reads: W. H. AUDEN [long rule] POEMS [short rule] S.H.S.: 1928. Its pagination is pp. [i–iv, 1–2] 3–37 [38–40], and a printed erratum slip is
loosely inserted between pp. 6 and 7. The British Library copy, press-mark C.190.aa.24., has manuscript alterations by Auden himself. Though it is stated on page two that 'About 45 copies' were produced, Spender later admitted that thirty was a more realistic figure. The book has since become, in the words of Christopher Isherwood, 'a bibliophile's prize'.

Owing to its scarcity, this edition of Auden's earliest poems has received little attention from critics, yet it is a seminal work by one of the twentieth century's most influential and prolific poets. It contains work written before Auden went to Berlin and wrote most of the material for the edition of Poems published by Faber & Faber in 1930. Some of the poems were never republished, but nevertheless played an important part in Auden's poetic development.

Fig. 1. Verso of title page

Until now, the British Library has held only facsimiles of the 1928 Poems, reproduced from copies belonging to Mr John Johnson (no. 12), Durham University Library (no. 24), and the University of Cincinnati Library (no. 17). The copy recently acquired is no. 9 (fig. 1), and was originally presented by Auden to the novelist Edward Upward. Only close friends and relatives were given copies of the book, and this copy had until now remained unrecorded. It is signed by both Auden and Upward, and its provenance stands as a testimony of the enduring friendship between the two writers. They were first introduced by Christopher Isherwood in a Soho restaurant in 1927. Following this meeting, Auden wrote to Upward several times enclosing poems for him to comment on, and in return Upward sent Auden a copy of his short story The Railway Accident. The importance of the literary discussions and correspondence between Auden, Upward and Isherwood is alluded to in Auden's letter to Upward which accompanied this copy of the Poems. He acknowledges half-jokingly 'I shall never know how much in these poems is filched from you via Christopher'. In years to come Upward was to exert a more direct political influence on Auden.

Spender began printing Poems, together with his own Nine Experiments, at his parents' house at 10 Frognal, in Hampstead. The British Library only has the 1964 facsimile of Nine Experiments, which has a foreword by Spender explaining that he 'later retrieved and destroyed as many copies of Nine Experiments as possible. Thus it is probably rarer than the Auden Poems, though not nearly as remarkable, for the latter contains some work that even today counts among his most interesting, and unlike my pamphlet, it is nothing to be ashamed of.' At first Auden's Poems was hand-printed with a primitive 'Adana printing set price £7 for chemists' labels'; however, when Spender's patience and the machine broke down, he took it to be completed and bound at the Holywell Press in Oxford. The original copy was supplied in both handwritten and typewritten form by A. S. T. Fisher, and Auden himself. Auden continued to send Spender copy whilst he was setting up the poems. The compositor's mistakes and uneven printing that resulted from this rather haphazard method of publication add a certain character to the finished product. As in other copies, the inking on pp. 3 and 18 is particularly uneven, and the numbers of pages 18 and 20 are miss-set so that they appear in the gutter instead of the fore-edge of the page. The printing noticeably improves from p. 23 onwards; this was the point at which the Holywell Press took over.
Just as Auden continued to send Spender poems once printing had begun, he continued the process of addition and deletion after all the copies were printed. In the facsimile copies to which I have had access these alterations are inserted by Spender; the British Library's copy, however, has only a few minor alterations in Spender's hand, the remainder being by Auden. This copy may well be unique in this respect.

The book is therefore not simply the product of an important publishing project, but an example of an aspect of the creative process which Auden was often at pains to emphasise. He was a perfectionist and a firm believer in Valéry's dictum: 'A poem is never finished, only abandoned', to which he adds 'Yes, but it must not be abandoned too soon'. He was never satisfied, and his poems went through endless stages of revision. Such linguistic 'tinkering' (as he termed it) is particularly significant at this early stage of his career, for he was about to emerge as a leading voice for the writers of the 1930s; Stephen Spender has declared retrospectively 'The 1930s began in 1928'. These poems and their alterations see Auden formulating a poetic form and language with which to launch himself and his contemporaries into the historic decade. Today, many literary critics influenced by the linguistic theory established by Ferdinand de Saussure, and by structuralism, might be interested in Auden's various choices of words, or 'signifiers'. Where he has substituted certain words, the text can be viewed as a focal point where signifiers intersect and the whole linguistic process of signification is set in motion.

The way in which Auden structured his poems was in radical contrast to his predecessors. The insertions in the British Library's copy bear witness to the enthusiasm with which he juggled his lines. Isherwood claims that his own opinions played a large part in this:

If I didn't like a poem, he threw it away and wrote another. If I liked a line, he would keep it and work it into a new poem. In this way whole poems were constructed which were simply anthologies of my favourite lines, entirely regardless of grammar or sense . . .

Perhaps crediting Auden with rather more artistic integrity, Stephen Spender corroborates:

. . . he was not shocked at the idea of tacking lines from a rejected poem onto a new one—as though a poem were not a single experience but a mosaic held together by the consistency of an atmosphere, a rhythm or an idea common to all its parts.

Thus 'the earlier poems are often made up of scraps of still earlier ones', and these lines are again recycled in later works. Poem II, 'On the frontier at dawn getting down', appears in its entirety only in this book, but its opening line was re-used four years later in *The Orators*. Only nine of the original twenty poems are reprinted in the 1930 Faber & Faber edition. Some have been revised, and the final four poems are reworked into the charade 'Paid on both sides'. In the 1932 edition a further five were cut. Only the remaining four were included in Auden's *Collected Poems* (London, 1976), where they are entitled: 'The Watershed', 'The Love-letter', 'The Secret Agent' and 'As well as can be expected' (later retitled 'Taller Today'). The editor Edward Mendelson writes in his preface 'This edition includes all the poems that W. H. Auden wished to preserve, in a text that represents his final revision'. But, as Auden was aware, and the British Library's purchase of *Poems* confirms:

There are no secret literary sins. By cutting or revising a bad poem in later editions, one may show repentance, but the first is still there; one can never forget or conceal from others that one has committed it.

The second poem in the British Library's copy is heavily annotated; significantly it was excluded from later collections. In the original printing, lines 39-44 read:

In ticking silence, I
Gripping an oily rail
Talking feverishly to one
Professional listener,
I know, old boy, I know
And reached his hand for mine

Gripping an oily rail,
Talked feverishly to one
Professional listener
I know, I know, I know
And reached his hand for mine.
Now in a brown study
At the water-logged quarry.

Fig. 2. Manuscript alterations to Poem II

With the alterations in manuscript (fig. 2), it reads:

In tickling silence I,
Gripping an oily rail,
Talked feverishly to one
Professional listener
Who puckered mouth and brow
In ecstasy of pain,
I know, I know, I know
And reached his hand for mine

Both the influences on Auden and his future direction are discernible in these poems. He was writing at a time when poetry was viewed as a viable link between the personal and the increasingly confusing public and political world. Poetry was becoming recognized as a particular type of discourse, which could perhaps organise what T. S. Eliot had called the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. The pioneer of New Criticism, I. A. Richards, believed that poetry 'is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos'.

The influence of the images and structure of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, can be seen throughout Auden’s *Poems*. Spender wrote recently that ‘... the early poems of Auden all seem to come out of *The Waste Land*, a poem that acted like a rope bridge over an abyss of public and private despair’. Eliot’s vision of a waste land was one which was slowly penetrating the world of Oxford students. Auden commented on his days at Oxford: ‘We were far too insular and preoccupied with ourselves to know or care what was going on across the Channel... Before 1930 I never opened a newspaper.’ This was a generation who saw strike breaking during the General Strike as a ‘tremendous middle-class lark’, and inhabited private fantasy worlds, like Isherwood and Upward’s invented land of Mortmere.

But Auden’s poems are an attempt to redress the balance, to understand or at least acknowledge the rift between the private and public spheres. In their preface to the 1926 volume of *Oxford Poetry*, Auden and Charles Plumb proposed that ‘If it is a natural preference to inhabit a room with casements opening upon Fairyland, one at least of them should open upon the Waste Land’. In the wake of Eliot, Auden’s 1928 poems are full of deserts and valleys—a ‘lean country’ (Poem II). In Poem VI he laments:

This land, cut off, will not communicate.

The opening lines to *The Waste Land* resound throughout Auden’s Poem I where:

In Spring we saw
The bulb pillow
Raising the skull,
Thrusting a crocus through clenched teeth.

A sense of personal isolation and fragmentation can be felt from these poems. They were written shortly after Auden and Day Lewis wrote the 1927 preface to *Oxford Poetry*, which became a manifesto for the writers of the thirties. Auden wrote of a world where ‘no universalized system—political, religious or metaphysical—has been bequeathed to us’. His 1928 poems are an attempt to realign T. S. Eliot’s now famous ‘dissociated sensibility’ through the act of writing. Echoing I. A. Richards, the 1927 preface declared ‘All genuine poetry is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of public chaos’.

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Auden and his contemporaries could not yet claim to be actively political, though, as Stephen Spender recognized: 'The Oxbridge poets extended essentially aesthetic values into politics in defence of freedom. They wrote political poetry but they never judged their work by standards derived from politics.'

Purely by virtue of being a group, or 'gang', Spender remembers Auden, Isherwood, Day Lewis and Rex Warner as 'rather like a shadow cabinet, the successors to the literary heritage of tomorrow'. They were governed 'by J. C. Squire and a group of Georgian poets . . . The honorable opposition was Bloomsbury.'

The modern poet felt that the language and structure of the Georgian poets could not express his new concerns. The poetic language of the previous generation seemed redundant and needed to be broken and reinvented. The fragmentary, dense lines of poetry which emerge from Poems reveal Auden's search for an appropriate poetic. Poem III in the book sees the poet poised between past and future eras and attempts to forge a link between the two, yet as the 1927 preface indicated, the demise of any unified vision means that no solution can be offered.

No trenchant passing this
Of future from the past,
... But still the mind would tease
In local irritation
And difficult images
Demand an explanation
Across this finite space
Buttressed expensively
The pointed hand would place
Error in you, in me.

Here, Auden's images are invested with a personal and an historical significance. The frontiers which define 'Auden country' are not just Auden's, but represent the aspirations of a whole generation of writers. Several lines and passages convey a sense of standing on the brink. The opening line to Poem V reads 'On the frontier at dawn . . .', and Poem VI, (the original version of 'The Watershed') begins 'Who stands, the crux left of the watershed . . .'.

The relatively little-known poems in this book prove Auden to be an acute diagnostician of prevalent feelings and also show him formulating a language and an imagery with which to express those feelings. The early poems, like his manifesto, provided his contemporaries with metaphors of exploring beyond their immediate world. They were to spend the 1930s venturing beyond the immediate in terms of writing, travel, politics, sexuality and social class. Written on the verge of a new decade and a new literary movement, Auden's Poems of 1928 in a sense record this transition, tracing how:

The womb began its crucial expulsion (Poem IV)
They anticipate the birth and growth of a generation:
Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids wrinkled, first dazzle known,
World-wonder hardened as bigness, years, brought, knowledge, you, . . . (Poem I)

8 However, Auden issued words of warning to over-enthusiastic literary students, citing an occasion when 'one critic made quite a to-do
about a difference between two versions of a line, in which he detected an ideological significance, when in fact, the difference was due to a typo in one of them. Bloomfield, op. cit. n. 6 above, pp. viii–ix.

9 Christopher Isherwood, ‘Some Notes on Auden’s Early Poetry’.


13 I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (London, 1926), p. 823. It is significant that in his 1953 edition of Science and Poetry, Richards used lines from three of Auden’s poems as epigraphs.

14 Stephen Spender, ‘Where No-one Was Well’.


17 Ibid., p. 31.

18 Stephen Spender, ‘Where No-one Was Well’.

19 Stephen Spender, ‘W H Auden and his Poetry’.

20 Samuel Hynes, op. cit., p. 53.