



## Remembering Auden

by Francis Sweeney, SJ

When Wystan Hugh Auden quitted New York last year to live in Oxford he left an apartment that was cluttered with the baggage and suttlers of a long literary career. One of the perils of bachelor living, without wifely ultimatums, is the steady accumulation of debris that silts in and erases familiar landmarks. Yet the ruck is sometimes not as disorderly as it seems.

There is a kind of domesticated wildness about his poetry, a brook running underground, a gale caught to turn mills. Every experience was grist, yet his art often drove him (to abandon the metaphor) to a second milling.

Once when he came to Boston for a reading, I said, "you'll read 'Under Which Lyre' won't you?"

"No, I won't," he said. "Sometimes you realize that a poem is a fraud." I protested that the poem rang true for his readers; but he would not read it.

For his first visit we lodged him at the bleak old Beaconsfield Hotel in Brookline; on his second visit at the glossy new Sheraton Boston. Thereafter he stayed with his friends, Louis and Emmy Kronenberger, in Brookline. He was nervous about travel, and preferred the railroad to planes.

When we were waiting in an anteroom while a crowd gathered in the gymnasium, I said, "The Boston audience either arrives early and reads a book, or comes in with a rush at the beginning of a lecture. Shall we begin at about three minutes after the hour?"

"Certainly not," he said. "We'll begin at the announced time." And just at eight o'clock he picked up his books and walked out to the podium.

He stood hunched over the lectern, a tall man in a rumpled dun suit and grey carpet slippers. He read without dramatic emphasis, his voice husky now but clear, letting the poems unroll their music like bolts of tweed and broadcloth. He did not "speak" his poems as Frost did, lifting his forefinger like a schoolmaster, nor rock his shoulders with the meter as Eliot did.

After one reading he said, "I hope there's no reception."

"Yes, there is," I said. We had had receptions on his four previous visits, and I had mentioned it in the correspondence.

"Well, a short one," he said. But he stayed on for an hour, answering questions courteously, his mind elsewhere.

When the mood was on him he seemed to enjoy the adulation and the questions of undergraduate poets. A girl asked him to sign a page in an anthology. He sat down and revised several of his poems, and handed the book back.

Once the wine ran out too soon, and I approached him where he stood in a group, an empty wineglass in his hand. "We've sent out for wine," I said. "It was improvident of me not to have gotten more."

"It was cheap," he said amiably.

One dinner before a reading is bright in my memory. One of the guests was Father Martin D'Arcy, who had been a young don when Wystan had come up to Christ Church. Auden was at his most brilliant and merriest. Around the table we revelled in the rich flow of reminiscence, at the evocation of the boats on the Isis, the running of the Christ Church beagles, the Oxford churchbells ringing their changes on Sunday mornings.

One personage Auden recalled bore the raffish title of "the second wickedest man in Oxford."

"Don't mention his name," Auden said, laughing at his own trace of superstition. "The last time I heard his name mentioned I lost my railroad ticket."

He was generosity itself. (Remembering his going bail for Dorothy Day when she was jailed for refusing to participate in an air raid drill?) He came to Boston College for a minimum fee, even though lecture fees were an important part of his income, because his readings here began in his early years on the lecture circuit.

"Will you return to America?" I asked him last year. "Oh yes," he said. "I'll have to come back."

The reading was planned for February 19, 1974. Perhaps because of fear that this might be his last appearance in Boston, there has never been so much excitement at the prospect of his return. I worried that the hall might not hold the crowd of youngsters from all the universities in Boston who would come to listen and to say goodbye.

He was an original, humorous, patient, completely candid and radically humble man troubled by genius and by an emblematic intelligence. The apparent disorder of the apartment in St. Mark's Place was an emblem too: he knew where everything was. Along the coastlines and harbors of letters, in the present hour's constant labor, and in the life beyond time, Auden knew where things were.