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**Topophilia and Escapism:  
W.H. Auden's Interwar Poetics of Place (1927-1938)**

**Topofilie a útekářství:  
poetika místa v meziválečném díle (1927-1938) W.H. Audena**

**Teze**

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## Theme

This dissertation is about W.H. Auden's (1907–1973) fine responsiveness to the physical environment and examines his engagement with topographical detail, landscapes and local cultures in prose criticism and poetry between the wars (1927–1938).

In 1956, Auden became Professor of Poetry at Oxford. In the inaugural lecture he held discourse on two aspects that he considered crucial for the assessment of any poet's work: "[...] the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: 'Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?' The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: 'What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or *the good place*?'"<sup>1</sup> The character of twentieth-century assessments into Auden's own work largely parallels his emphasis on the moral and technical aspects of the critical act. Formal virtuosity and the 'Audenesque' idiom turned his early work into a subject of critical attention as much in the 1930s as in later decades. However, scholars have always been particularly interested in assessing the poet's interwar engagement with political discourses and abstract systems of thought. Only recently have literary critics begun to abandon standard inquiries into the poet's politics reinforcing or diluting the social commitment of his poetry. They heed previously ignored connections between the poet's life and work. For instance, the role of Auden's affinity with the Anglo-Catholic fold has been assessed in poetry written even during his proclaimed 1930s disavowal of the communion and faith (Kirsch, 2005). Rainer Emig (2000) has read Auden in terms of his transition from a socially committed towards a postmodern poet. Richard R. Bozorth (2001) and Piotr K. Gwiazda (2007) have focused on the long-avoided role of homosexuality as a source of anxiety, but also as a creative impulse for Auden's work.

The range of critical perspectives is expanding. However, a little scrutiny has heretofore been accorded to the last part of Auden's definition of the critical act: the poet's notion of the good place and, more generally, to his responsiveness to the physical world. Auden's biography and writing show his profound engagement with the material environment and art that responds to it. With John Constable as a maternal ancestor, Auden wrote several ekphrastic poems and commentaries responding to the imagination of numerous other landscape painters (e.g. Brueghel, Bellini, Rosa, Poussin). Auden's father Dr George Augustus Auden held a first-class Cambridge degree in the natural sciences, published in *Nature* and possessed a library on geology. Dr Auden's fascination with the material environment nurtured his son's sensitivity to the texture of the earth to such an

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<sup>1</sup> Wystan Hugh Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging," *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, Vol. IV: *Prose, 1956–1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) 490, emphasis added.

extent that when he came to Oxford in 1925, it was to prepare for a career as a mining engineer. Auden became a writer but his texts bear a residue of an acute sense of particular places and environmental types developed in childhood. He translated travel literature, wrote travel reportage as well as commentaries on the emulation of places in art. Moreover, Auden wrote encomia of local, topographical and nature Georgian poets, who became his first literary models. He praised their ability to render particular locations as unique, even sacred. Most importantly, Auden's 'poetic universe' is replete with references to concrete landscapes and environmental types. He wove into texts a geography of unique numinous places for which he had strong topophilic sentiments.

Critics have acknowledged the importance of this aspect of Auden's sensibility. David R. Weimer (1966) and Craig Hamilton (2005) have assessed the poet's engagement with urban space. Patrick Deane (2004) focuses on Auden's image of England and Paola Marchetti (2004) concentrates on the iconographic dimensions of Auden's interwar landscapes.

This dissertation approaches Auden's attitude towards the texture and contours of the physical world as an integral attribute of his work and brings it to prominence as a category for its interpretation. While Marchetti analyzes the generic landscapes as a signature feature of Auden's interwar poetry, the present study examines the poet's frequent colloquy with a selection of concrete locations that had a special emotional and intellectual significance for him. It examines Auden's engagement with the limestone landscape of Alston Moor in the Northern Pennines, Iceland and England. All three remained lodestones of his thought and topophilic sentiments even when residing in the USA, Ischia and Austria. Auden incessantly travelled the world. Yet, there is a contrasting intellectual and emotional rootedness in his life, whose literary expression is worth exploring.

This dissertation provides a detailed textual analysis of Auden's interwar poetry against his critical prose. It inquires into the character of the imaginative dynamic rendering the inscription of the three places into texts. It approaches such issues in light of knowledge offered by recent critics of landscape and its representation, and, primarily, by exponents of humanistic geography concentrating on the study of human spatial experience and its textualization in different discourses including literature. This perspective and methodology proved applicable and conducive to determining the nature of Auden's poetics of place as well as the impact on its character of the poet's search for a personal idiom and style inside one of the most socially intense and artistically innovative moments of recent history. One step in this journey was to seek the influence on Auden's sense of place of his relationship to the local and topographical Georgian poets he admired. Another

aspect was the imprint on the verse treatment of the places of Auden's affinity with the High Modernists reappraising established modes of space representation and variously responding to the Romantic and Classicist aesthetics. Lastly, the analyses constitute an insight into the impact on Auden's literary topography of his kinship with the concerns of interwar intelligentsia about the social function of art and the relation of artists to the public. Hence, while attending to Auden's general politics where necessary, the focus on his engagement with the world of places and their appropriation in prose and poetry makes this primarily a study of *politics of place, description and representation*. This focus on Auden's poetics of place and the forces that determined its character contributes to the knowledge available in existing studies of Auden's literary topography and enlarges our comprehension of his imagination in contexts beyond the political.

### **Methodology, Structure and Main Conclusions**

Chapter One provides the theoretical underpinning for subsequent literary analyses. It introduces the methodology of humanistic geography and places it with twentieth-century philosophy and theoretical schools sharing a recrudescing critical interest in the category of 'place'. Primarily, it attends to a group of concepts and propositions crucial for further chapters.

Humanist geographers (Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, D.W. Meinig, Anne Buttimer, etc.) approach space as a prime context of human existence and so place a major emphasis on the idea of *a sense of place*. Departing from the epistemology of traditional descriptive geography, they concentrate on the physical environment to the degree that allows them to determine patterns of human spatial awareness and experience as well as their textualization. Yi-Fu Tuan is the founder of the branch. His thought, which draws nourishment from the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and M. Merleau-Ponty, constitutes the main part of methodology used in the present dissertation. For Tuan, place is not an *a priori* container *per se* but a cultural category and product of spatial experience. He conceives of it as a multifaceted construct conflating location, physiognomic properties and meanings inscribed to an essentially neutral space by the human being. He takes place-making beyond material shaping of the environment and approaches places primarily as ideal (i.e. of ideas) constructs. They emerge from human stratification of space into segments by imputing to them different values that reflect existential situations, needs, intentions and desires of the experiencing subject. In this process ideal borders arise that differentiate hierarchically organized zones (e.g. sacred/profane, home/periphery, non-carpentered/humanized landscape).

An important part of Yi-Fu Tuan's and Edward Relph's analysis of such a signifying process is attention to factors influencing the quality and intensity of a sense of place. The existential relation of the human subject to locations is a crucial determinant preconditioning forms of spatial apprehension. It ranges from the direct and long-term encounter with a lifespace by an "existential insider" (Relph, 1976) and local resident (e.g. home) to a parochial experience of sojourn tourists (e.g. nature) and apprehension of large places (e.g. the nation state) fusing a direct with vicarious knowledge derived from public discourses. The extreme is an "existential outsider" (Relph, 1976) experiencing places in personal *terrae incognitae* outside the quotidian lifespace (e.g. holiday destination) merely on the basis of mediated knowledge or imagination.

Such factors are vital for the formation of topophilic sentiments and mythical geographies consisting of places invested with superlative and idealized values. Yi-Fu Tuan (1998) and Paul Shepard (1991) relate their emergence to man's congenital indisposition to accept the shortcomings and vagaries of the actual environment and existence. For Tuan and Shepard, humans make incessant attempts to escape their *status quo* in search for a place and life satiating their basic physiological, psychological and spiritual needs of safety, stability, belongingness, identification, etc. Besides physical structures and departures (e.g. houses, migration), individual and collective mythical geographies are approached as notional 'carapaces' emerging from responses to actuality. Home and homelands are the prime constituents of such ideal constructions. The former attracts topophilic sentiments because perceived as a life-sustaining existential core, an intimately known superior and sacred cocoon, forming a benchmark for assessing the outside periphery. The manner of experiencing the nation state shows a partial shift from a direct and perceptual experience to indirect apprehension. In such cases, Tuan believes, personal encounters coalesce with public discourses. They exploit chosen geographical features and landmarks for nurturing the pride, topophilia and identification of local inhabitants with the *terra patria* edified as a superior unit bestowed with a unique identity. The fuzzy and vicarious knowledge of remote locations in personal *terrae incognitae* makes their sense equally prone to idealizations. Places that are merely imagined or visited briefly (e.g. a cottage and nature) represent major constituents of mythical geographies. Such areas attract topophilic infatuation and serve as superior destinations for temporary, permanent, physical and imaginative escapes.

This type of a response to actuality encouraged Tuan (1998) to reverse the usual derogatory connotations of 'escapism'. He approaches it as an essential aspect of the idea of 'culture' (1998). For him, the ability to conjure images of places and times superior to

the actual is the most congenial behavioural pattern and survival strategy proper to man because 'seeing' what is not there defines a goal for whose achievement to strive. From such a perspective, migration, travelling, architectural structures, as well as mythical geographies and topophilic sentiments for particular locations or environmental types, become different expressions of escapism and endeavour to cope with the shortcomings of actuality. Because integral to W.H. Auden's work and thought, Chapter One concludes with an interpretation of the 'nature/culture' dialectic. It takes it as an illustrative example of a frequent form of stratification of space into hierarchically arranged segments teeming with meanings and capable of exchanging their signification. Nature is approached as a major constituent of mythical geographies and source of topophilic sentiments maintained by existential outsiders temporarily escaping from the quotidian lifespace.

This knowledge is then first applied to the analysis of Auden's prose. Chapter Two focuses on his understanding of the term topophilia and relates it to a proclaimed awe for particular English poets. It draws attention to Auden's view of topophilia as essential for conducting 'a verbal rite of praise' in poetry paying homage to the *genius loci* and sacred 'proper-name' quality of particular places. Auden used the term exclusively in connection with two poets. He treasured Thomas Hardy and John Betjeman and claimed that topophilia allowed them to channel a sharp eye for detail and exquisite verbal skills towards the delineation in art of minute details expressive of the unique, even numinous, local qualities.

The weight of the chapter, however, is on Auden's sense of Alston Moor, Iceland and England embedded in prose. The analysis shows that Auden presents himself as an Englishman and topophilic writer uninhibitedly emblazoning the essential architecture of his mythical geography. All three places are constructed as locations bestowed with a distinctive landscape and culture, as unmatched *loci amoeni*. Auden's approach to Alston Moor and Iceland displays his readiness to write them in a manner that reflects the human sense of remote locations as described by Yi-Fu Tuan. Both places were outside Auden's lifespace – in the mythical space prone to idealizations. As an existential outsider he constructs them under the force of mediated knowledge and childhood imagination nurtured by Dr Auden, his fascination with mining and Norse myth. Auden also displays obvious indebtedness to the type of sensibility that he found so endearing about Hardy and Betjeman: the sense of Iceland and Alston Moor derives from his ability to focus on local features and minute details. Auden praises them as sacred places, embodiments of his idea of Eden, and as destinations of his imaginative and physical escapism. England, on the other hand, was Auden's homeland susceptible to equally tinted perceptions by existential

insiders. He writes it in an ethnocentric manner as a hierarchically privileged and unique entity. As in the case of Iceland, Auden emphasizes its insularity and lets the shores form a border marking England's ensiled identity. In the treatment of both islands Auden promotes preference for local diversity along with aversion to placelessness and homogenization. He writes their landscapes and cultures as unmatched and contrasts them with Europe fashioned as a depersonalized inferior Otherness. Besides, Iceland's remoteness provides Auden with reasons for constructing it as a sanctuary of pre-modernity and idyllic location of his future exile. England's insularity provides a feeling of national pride and belonging to his *terra patria*.

Tuan and other humanist geographers thus provide a set of useful concepts and theorizing but their approach has certain disadvantages. In viewing literature as a reliable source of subjective encounters with space, they underestimate the pressure that genre specificities and period aesthetics exert on writers' poetics and imagination. This dissertation compensates such deficiency with a complementary discussion preceding the textual analysis of Auden's poetry. Chapter Three draws upon research in the idea of 'landscape' and its representation in the visual arts and topographical poetry. It uses works of recent literary critics, critics of culture and anthropologists of landscape such as David Lowenthal, John W. Foster, Raymond Williams, Jerome McGann, Dennis Cosgrove, Lothar Fietz, J. Hillis Miller, Eric Hirsch, Roland Barthes, W.J.T. Mitchell and Aaron Santesso. Starting with Dr Samuel Johnson's definition of locodescriptive poetry, the chapter analyzes features inherent to the idea of landscape and examines selected poems for their capacity to engage with topographical details as singular entities. It proposes that topographical poetry is characterized by poets' tendency to use landscape and the inherent properties of its experience for gaining height and distance from the location in prospect, and for different means of evasion of local detail and its distinctiveness.

The dissertation then offers a close textual analysis of Auden's engagement with the components of his mythical geography in interwar poetry. Chapter Four attends to Auden's sense of Alston Moor in his earliest poems (1927–1930). It starts with a detailed analysis of "Who stands, the crux left of the watershed" (1927), which remains the first poem in the Auden canon marked with what has become recognized as the trenchant 'Audenesque' idiom. This topographical and prospect poem, anchored in a clearly defined spatial-temporal nexus, is read against others from the period referring to generic and concrete spatial imagery. An insight is sought into the manner of Auden's modern appropriation of the topographical genre and into the basic elements of his early poetics of place in context of broader ethical concerns.

Chapter Five surveys the image of England in poems published either in *Look Stranger!* (1936) or separately between 1930 and 1938. This is the only moment when Auden wrote poetry and stayed in his homeland for an extensive period of time. He wrote about the 1930s as a period of transformation from a private ‘rentier’ existence to a public figure and the analysis charts its consequences on Auden’s literary topography. It focuses on the extent to which Auden’s new awareness of the parlous interwar situation adjusted his poetics and sense of England displayed in prose. Attention is paid primarily to traces of his proclaimed national identity, pride and emphasis on England’s insular position functioning as a border that protects a superior enisled cultural and physiognomic identity.

Chapter Six examines *Letters from Iceland* (1937) – a travel book in verse and prose based on Auden’s visit of the island in the summer of 1936 immediately after gaining experience in interwar film documentary (early 1936, the Film Units of the General Post Office). Prior to his trip, Auden praised the new genre for its capacity to display a vast amount of visual detail and, simultaneously, criticized abstract artists for failing to be ‘journalists’ reporting on the actual world. The chapter opens with a discussion of the 1930s documentary and travel literature in general, which is followed by a close analysis of Auden’s verse letters in juxtaposition with the prose parts and *Letter to Lord Byron*. This comparative approach assists in gauging the extent to which Auden exploited the travel-book medium, and its personalized epistolary form comprising letters to his friends, for corroborating his topophilic sense of Iceland as a topographically and culturally unique, even sacred place.

My analyses show that when scrutinized, Auden’s verse and prose treatment of Alston Moor, Iceland and England reveals disparities: a contrastive ‘mapping’ and bifurcated poetics. The imaginative dynamic that renders their inscription in poetry differs from Auden’s own prose and Yi-Fu Tuan’s assessment of the patterns of experiencing distant places and homelands. Concealment characterizes the poetry, where the sense of place embedded in prose is negated, deconstructed and systematically effaced. Auden the poet neither enunciates the uniqueness of the three places nor does he eulogize his holy lands. He does not only silence proclaimed national identification, topophilic sentiments, rhetoric and awe for local poets. He also tightly disguises the contours of his mythical geography and fondness for topographical diversity. Despite his grudge against processes causing placelessness and geographical depersonalization, an integral attribute of Auden’s interwar poetry is a set of strategies displacing local identities and obfuscating the singularity and importance of topographical detail.



Firstly, Auden turns details derived from his sacred and unique landscapes into images of mere environmental types representing locally unspecific dichotomies (e.g. ‘nature/culture’), which connects the sacrosanct and unique centres to locations in the profane periphery and to generic landscapes embedded in other poems. Secondly, Auden’s speakers invariably assume elevated vantage points from which to view Alston Moor, England and its other regions. In his Icelandic poems, Auden started to use more contemporary devices such as the close-up and pan techniques derived from his experience with the Film Units. In all such cases, however, the height and distance allow Auden to abstract from local detail, transcend it and, in the case of England and Iceland, invert the traditional perception of the island *topos*. The poems in a sustained way diagnose commonalities and interconnection. Both islands are constructed as historically and culturally inseparable from Europe, its heritage and interwar condition. This strategy involves a consistent erasure of the protective border – an essential attribute of the idea of place, which turns unique places into undistinguishable parts of the surrounding inferior space. Thirdly, in the 1930s Auden started to use the first-person speakers and base poems on personal encounters with his sacred and unique places. Yet, he unfailingly universalizes the fleeting experience and transforms it into general comments uttered in a deracinated cosmopolitan voice unmarked with a timbre of topophilia, national identity or patriotic care. Fourthly, the poems display Auden’s perennial penchant for diagnosing analogies between man and landscape in a manner inverting pathetic fallacy. The poet usually starts with a detailed delineation of a local detail but only to be able to centre on human figures in the foreground and their experience of the surrounding space, which turns his landscapes into means for grappling with man’s being in the world.

Chapter Seven places Auden’s depersonalized and syncretic verse poetics to broader aesthetic contexts. Its features are approached as facets of the poet’s entrenchment in some of the basic and traditional tenets of topographical poetry and the Classicist aesthetic revived in Anglo-American Modernism. In 1937, Auden commended Alexander Pope’s ability to merge the “microscopic image of tea-making” with “the macroscopic image of a flood,” and he praised Augustan writers in general for placing man above descriptions of the physical world.<sup>2</sup> This is an echo of his 1930s views on the differences characterizing the work of poets and novelists. Auden claimed that the former universalizes an experience of particular objects while the latter should proceed in an opposite way.<sup>3</sup> The chapter relates such views to Thomas Hardy’s work. Auden the critic writes places in a manner

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<sup>2</sup> Wystan Hugh Auden, “Pope,” *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, Vol. I: *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, 1926–1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 152-03.

<sup>3</sup> Auden, “Writing,” *Complete Works I* 20.

reflecting his interpretation of Hardy as an author able to convey *genius loci*. Auden the poet, however, shows a more obvious indebtedness to a different aspect of Hardy's work. Auden noticed Hardy's "hawk's vision" and tendency to observe a particular detail from massive elevations allowing him to engage with "the most general interests in terms of a loved and intimately known locality."<sup>4</sup> Auden the poet performs this very shibboleth. He lets speakers gain height in landscapes to which he claimed to be topophilically devoted and exploits minute details in the prospects below such vantage points for pondering on 'general interests' while disregarding local variations. He treats them as synecdochic manifestations of supra-regional and -temporal issues. At a more general level, Auden's enmeshment of places in a borderless analogy with others is associated with Dr Samuel Johnson's claim that a poet should "neglect the minuter discriminations," focus on "abstracted and invariable" problems and "rise to general and transcendental truths."<sup>5</sup> This strategy is so fundamental an aspect of Auden's verse poetics that not even the challenge of writing a travel book corrected it and, as Chapter Seven indicates, it projected itself onto his later poetry.

Besides the synthetic aspects of poetics, the analysis shows that Auden the poet also tightly conceals his topophilic sentiments and perceptions of particular places as sacred. Alston Moor is not constructed as a superior asylum but as a gasping dilapidated landscape of suffering and crisis from which human figures desire to escape. The same desecration of a numinous sanctuary concerns Iceland. Auden collapses its status of a pre-modern and therapeutic retreat from the civilized world by deflating the wishful thinking of existential outsiders who escape to its insular landscape imagined in romanticized terms. Simultaneously, he exposes the self-deluding anthropomorphic myths of a caring and protective homeland fashioned by Icelanders. Instead of dwelling upon the Icelandic landscape, Auden the travel-book writer turns his verse letters into meta-poetical and self-conscious ruminations on previous travel accounts and, in general, on the subjectivity of perception and representation of places in different art forms. The project elevated his eagerness to debunk mythical geographies, including his own, and enunciate views on the generic capacity of poetry and others genres to engage with local topographical detail.

The suppression of topophilic sentiments in poetry is interpreted as a repercussion of Auden's ingestion of T.S. Eliot's emphasis on the depersonalization of the poetic voice. The 'desecrating' and demythologizing attribute of Auden's poetics issues from his affinity

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<sup>4</sup> Wystan Hugh Auden, "A Literary Transference," *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, Vol. II: *Prose, 1939–1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 46-47; "Thomas Hardy: An Aspect of His Poetry," BBC, 16 Sept. 1949, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, Vol. III: *Prose 1949-1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) 679.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 28-29.

with the concerns of the 1930s generation about the social function of art and artists' public role. Instead of promoting his myths, Auden constructs speakers as exemplars of socially responsible *citizens* through which to disclose others' romanticized perceptions and mythical geographies. They assume elevated vantage points in hills and nature outside their lifespace but, rather than escaping, they do so to gain a synoptic view of its actual present state. Auden makes them focus on human figures in the prospects who fashion mythical geographies and indulge in imaginative and physical escapism to an idealized past, nature, solitude, remote islands, etc. He deems such responses to actuality as mere self-delusions and symptoms of irresponsible withdrawals from commitment to the imperfect humanized lifespace and the present. Auden exposes the futility of such cultural carapaces and, in the process, silences his own. This issues from his pre-1939 view of poetry as a moralizing discourse that should not enchant and cater for escapism but provide disenchantment and illumination. A poet's role in this scheme was not to promote myths of superior places or times. On the contrary, a poet should provide secular parables allowing sufficient freedom for interpretation reflecting readers' diverse actual existential situations. Instead of indoctrinating concrete ideologies, the parables should assist in choice-making leading to the construction of a satisfactory lifespace 'here' and 'now'.

Auden's bifurcated poetics issues from his unfailing insistence on formal differences between prose and poetry. The analysis of his politics of representation reveals that each entailed a different type of an imaginative dynamic rendering the inscription of the physical world into text. The consistency of Auden's principles reflects the extent of his submission to generic specificities and very broad aesthetic contexts. At a more general level, this dissertation also taps into an important aspect of the twentieth-century Anglophone poetry: the poets' willingness and capacity to engage with what is locally unique, distinctive and particular about cultures, landscapes and places in the contemporary globalized world. This is a field offering plentiful opportunities for further critical explorations.

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