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Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

REVIEW

Ladislav Vít. 2022. *The Landscapes of W. H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes*. New York: Routledge.

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.22.10.9

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W. H. Auden famously both celebrated and criticized his renowned Irish predecessor in the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" from 1940. His lines, "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living," are very much relevant to his own critical legacy and reputation. A great deal has been written concerning, for example, Auden's politics, his sexuality, his interest in psychology, his religious beliefs, his move to the United States and his practically unmatched virtuosity in verse. One might therefore assume that the critical approaches had already been exhausted. Ladislav Vít has managed, however, to find not only a new perspective on the poet's work, but has also wisely limited himself chronologically in order to narrow the focus on this ever-evolving artist. *The Landscapes of W. H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes* is part of the book series *Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture* published by Routledge. Launched in 2017, the series consists of 27 books thus far, this being among the latest to be published.

Ladislav Vít is a graduate of the doctoral program at Charles University in Prague. He currently works at the University of Pardubice in Czechia where he teaches British literature with a special focus on the Interwar period and the work of W. H. Auden in particular. He is also the editor of the academic journal *American and British Studies Annual* published at his home institution.

Vít, in the monograph, argues convincingly for the centrality of Auden's interest in geology (having planned to be a mining engineer as a boy) for his poetic vision. "Above all, Auden himself weaved into his writing a geography of the unique and sacred places which occupied his imagination, providing him with an important source of reference and allowing him to elicit his strong topophilic sentiments" (2). He counters the pervasive view that Auden somehow lacked a visual sense and argues for the contrary perspective, arguing that his "prose and poetry are replete with insights into human spatial experience, the artistic representation of place, and references to landscapes, ranging from generic types to particular places" (4). One of the key concepts in the monograph, is the concept of a 'good place' (Auden's expression for a personal idea of Eden), which, at least in this

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature, 10 (2022), pp. 90-92

period of Auden's life and work, between 1927 and 1939, consisted of the North Pennines, Iceland and England generally. Vít also makes repeated use of the useful concept of 'landguage', coined by the Danish scholar Sten Pultz Moslund, to describe Auden's specific relationship to particular places. "To use Auden's words from his definition of the critical act cited above, his own writings are 'inhabited by a guy' who is imaginatively rooted in a set of specific landscapes and has a clear notion of his 'good places'" (11). As is frequent in the case of Auden, his approach to landscape and home evolves, backtracks and even contradicts itself over the course of his life.

The first chapter entitled "The Map of Auden's Mythical Geography Affinities" makes mention of two of his literary models, particularly when it comes to focusing on a particular landscape, these being John Betjeman and Thomas Hardy. There is also an extensive discussion of the importance of Iceland for Auden, which he visited in 1936 and which resulted in his, coauthored with Louis MacNeice, unclassifiable travel book *Letters From Iceland*. The chapter also draws attention to the importance of islands in general as an inspirational source for the poet.

Chapter two, "My 'Great Good Place' in the Pennines" focuses on yet another landscape, this time the range of mountains or uplands in Northern England which inspired and captivated Auden, leading to the composition of, among other things, poems such as 'The Watershed' from 1927 which Vít discusses in some detail and uses as a case study.

I had some minor objections to certain parts of chapter 3, "My Tutrix': England in Auden's Poetry", which attempts a more general overview of the significance of Auden's homeland in his artistic development. The argument grows slightly muddled in terms of chronology at certain points when the biography moves from Auden's time spent in Berlin to his voyage to New York and back to Berlin once again. He also employs the phrase 'rentier' twice to explain the same thing. These are only minor details of course. The chapter contains, however, an extremely interesting discussion of Auden's long poem "Letter to Byron" from 1937 and its criticism of William Wordsworth and even a discussion of his less than complimentary views of the Scouting Movement and its approach to landscape.

The fourth chapter, "My Dream Exile on an Island with a Halo", contains a discussion of the widely differing views on the afore-mentioned *Letters from Iceland*, which has been, unjustly disparaged, according to the author. In contrast to critics who have a tendency to skip over this mere 'travel' book along with other 'experimental' works of his in prose in favour of the poetry, Vít demonstrates how it was a natural progression in his established interest in landscape and the mythology and 'landguage' of Iceland. "As shown in this and the previous chapters, a crucial aspect of Auden's poetic landguage is also his determination to de-romanticise spatial experience, bleach insularity and question some of the basic attributes of islandness" (129).

The final chapter entitled, "Roots, Routes and Landscape" is the conclusion and forcibly argues for how Auden uses specific particulars to often draw attention to general, universal issues or as Vít eloquently puts it: "... the staple of Auden's spatial imagination is the treatment of individual places as local manifestations of large macroscopic, supra-regional and timeless aspects of human existence" (137).

Vít's book is well-written, thoroughly researched and his enthusiasm for the subject is very much apparent. The monograph also accomplishes what all literary criticism should ideally do, that is fermenting a desire to either read or reread the texts discussed in the

text, in this case specifically some of the lesser known poems and texts by W. H. Auden. The monograph will primarily be of interest to fellow scholars, but more advanced students of literature will also benefit from the insights and analysis. This focus on the sense of place, on 'good places' and 'landguage', is of course very much relevant to the present-day when locales in Ukraine and elsewhere are being irreparably demolished and people are being displaced against their will.

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