

Fall 2011

Review of Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden.*

Anne O'Byrne
Stony Brook University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol9/iss2/6)

Recommended Citation

O'Byrne, Anne (2011). Review of "Review of Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden.*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol9/iss2/6>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol9/iss2/6>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 301 pp. (+ xii) ISBN 9780804745110.

Reviewed by Anne O'Byrne, Stony Brook University

Philosophers and critics of modernity have long been aware that Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden, both formidable figures of twentieth-century intellectual life, were friends for many years. Yet, until fairly recently, a database search for Auden+Arendt would have produced nothing beyond Arendt's memorial piece for Auden, published in 1975. In 2002, David Halliburton published a chapter, "Friendship and Responsibility: Arendt to Auden" in *Literary Paternity, Literary Friendship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 255-277), which, despite its title, has a lot to say about Arendt but almost as much about Augustine, Aristotle or Cicero as about Auden. Why has this intellectual friendship received so little attention? Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb's 2003 book, *Regions of Sorrow*, in its strength and its difficulties, suggests an answer.

Arendt and Auden got to know one another in New York in 1958. Each had taken a convoluted path to this place of exile and/or sanctuary. Arendt left her native Germany in 1936 and lived in France, where she was interned after the German invasion, and escaped to America in 1941. Auden had been in Spain in 1937 and China in 1938. He lived in the US during the war years. Later, in May 1945, he went to Germany in the employ of the US military to interview German civilians about their feelings concerning the Allied bombing campaigns that had destroyed their cities. Yet neither wrote directly about their experiences of the war. When they met, they were both in their fifties. Although they were close, Arendt characterized herself and Auden as having been very good but not intimate friends. Yet Auden returned to New York late in life after a sojourn in Oxford, telling Arendt that he had come back only because of her and that he loved her very much, etc.

The point of contact from which their friendship grew was a phone call that Auden made after reading *The Human Condition*, to thank Arendt for having written a book which, as he later wrote, gave him "the impression of having been especially written for me" (7). Indeed, the essays he was writing at the time (later collected in *The Dyer's Hand*) echo themes familiar to Arendt readers: promising and forgiveness in "The Prince's Dog," for example. Auden also quotes Arendt in the later essay collection, *A Certain World*. She returns the favor, quoting Auden in an epigraph to her essay on Brecht. Yet none of this is enough to warrant a book-length study. Gottlieb looks elsewhere. One surmises that she made a series of decisions, the first plausible, the others increasingly puzzling: first, to concentrate on a small number of works—three by Arendt, three by Auden—and pursue her argument by means of detailed readings of these works; second, to choose works written almost exclusively before the two writers met; third, in the case of Auden, to select works that are stylistically among his most demanding, notably *The Age of Anxiety* (written according to rules of meter and alliteration based on Anglo-Saxon epics) and "Canzone" (written to a complex form invented by Dante and used by him only once). The third Auden piece is the rich and lovely "In Praise of Limestone."

The first decision is a good one, allowing a clear focus upon the force-field between Auden's and Arendt's thought and the lines along which its energy runs. By concentrating upon just three works by each author, Gottlieb requires her readers to follow her into difficult material. Her thesis is that these two writers emerge from their parallel experiences of Europe during and after war with a shared concern for the fate of language in dark times. In the case of Arendt, this concern emerges in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (first published in 1951) in the realization that language became meaningless in the no-place of the extermination camps, and that for any of us to speak meaningfully we must have an identifiable place from which to speak (20). For Auden, it gives rise to *The Age of Anxiety* (written between 1944 and 1946), an exploration of displacement that finally rejects any striving for utopias but which does entertain a certain "anxious hope" that Gottlieb interprets as messianic. This in turn resonates with the messianic element of Arendt's concept of natality in *The Human Condition*. Natality is the existential condition of having been born, and for Arendt it is the signal that we natal beings are capable of action, that is, of doing something new and thus intervening creatively in the affairs of the world.

The themes of *The Human Condition* are similarly relevant to Auden's "Canzone," which seeks the renewal of language in the repetition of a very old poetic form. Yet Gottlieb also identifies another line of energy, this time running from Auden's allusions to will in that poem to Arendt's later considerations of the activity of willing in *The Life of the Mind*. Both authors entertain the thought of a non-sovereign will, although I am unconvinced by Gottlieb's claim that Auden's idea of fellowship, arrived at through the experience of helplessness, is equivalent to Arendt's concept of plurality. For Arendt, the essential connection is between natality and plurality—we *all* arrive into the world quite new, sharing the characteristic of uniqueness, and so when I act I cannot anticipate how the others around me will respond or how or whether they will act in turn. Action is a public occurrence, performed before others. Auden's contribution, in contrast, is founded on the deeply private experience of being unable to will the beloved to return one's love. For Arendt, the distinction between public and private life is crucial for protecting political life as a realm where we can be fully human, where we can show *who* rather than *what* we are.

This gap in the argument is not impossible to fill. There is much work to be done dismantling or at least complicating Arendt's distinction between public and private. Indeed, Gottlieb suggests some avenues here (184-187) but without pursuing them far enough to justify thoroughly the connection between Arendt and Auden regarding the responses available to us when faced with the unpredictability of public action, on the one hand, or experiencing the helplessness of unrequited love, on the other. The former opens up the possibility of promising as a means to overcome the unpredictability of action, and of forgiveness as an answer to the finality of any given act, while the latter invites praise for the vulnerability of existence. Gottlieb summarizes the relation of the terms: "the act of praising joins promising and forgiveness as the third internal potentiality of action" (25).

If the author's first decision—to concentrate on a few texts—is necessary, the second—to concentrate mainly on texts written before the two authors met—is counter-intuitive. Shouldn't we expect a book about a literary friendship to have an account—perhaps more than one—of a shared creative moment out of which each party produces distinctive work, in which the influence of the other can then be traced? Perhaps, but, despite the author's initial gestures toward friendship as a theme (5-15), this book isn't about that. Rather, the fact of friendship and

the material drawn from letters and from their later writings serve as indications of where the deeper resonances are to be found. Indeed, the meeting of Arendt and Auden seems less important to Gottlieb than their having shared a world historical moment and independently come up with a single diagnosis of their present crisis. The loss of meaning in language (and related responses), the redemption of action through forgiveness and promising for Arendt, the redemption of language through its archaic forms—and praise—for Auden: all are based on a shared idiosyncratic messianic sensibility.

The third decision—to focus on some of Auden's most demanding pieces—struck me as more problematic when I embarked on the second chapter, on *The Age of Anxiety*. It was helpful to have in mind the thesis that both Arendt and Auden were concerned with the evacuation of language. I followed the poem's four characters as they met in a New York bar, journeyed through phantasmal landscapes and eventually returned, late in the evening, to someone's apartment where the hope and anxiety of their age (the poem is set in wartime but written post-war) and of their lives gain expression in the final speech of one character, Rosetta.

We must try to get on
 Though mobs run amok and markets fall,
 Though lights burn late at police stations,
 Though passports expire and ports are watched,
 Though thousands tumble. (131-132)

Gottlieb's insight is finally a valuable one. Those phantasmagoric landscapes are shown up as the dystopias which, rather than symbolizing hope for a rotten world, symbolize what aids and abets the rot. The ones who present us with worked-out utopias are the ones who will commandeer our language and force us toward those promised worlds, even if many of us have to perish along the way. The revival of an archaic form makes of the entire poem a gesture of retrieval and projection, a confession of faith in language that reaches both into the past and toward the future.

"We must try to get on . . ." is the line that indeed captures the best hope of that time during and just after the war and—why not?—of our time too. Gottlieb is right to pair it later with Arendt's claim that the act of forgiving makes it possible for "life to go on" (184), though I would also extend the thought in another direction. The addition of the last words of Beckett's *The Unnamable* is irresistible: ". . . you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." Auden's line has all the Sisyphean intensity of Beckett's, but here it is expressed in the domesticity of a Manhattan flat, while the other characters are riding the subway home or asleep in the other room. However, instead of taming the despair, the setting and the use of the first person plural make it political *and* personal. We must try to get on with one another; we each must try to get on with living; we all must struggle to get on from here. What Arendt offers in her analysis of forgiveness is a strategy for going on, together. When we can forgive we can attenuate the effects of action which, strictly speaking, can never be undone. Without any requirement to forget, we can renew our friendships and hold open our political spaces as the spaces where we can try to go on together.

This capacity for renewal is part of what Gottlieb describes in the third chapter, "Arendt's Messianism." It is a weak messianism that locates the messianic moment at the beginning of

each of us, that is, in the human condition of natality. Some of the more interesting questions, however, are not broached. For instance, if the important feature of natality is the fact that we are each capable of doing something new and surprising, how can we account for Arendt's apparent commitment, in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, to a thought of subject positions and enlarged mentality that assumes that we can each in some sense occupy the position of another? What the chapter does very effectively is set in place the contrast between natality and sovereignty, the self understood as exposed and becoming, rather than assertive and complete, *arche* understood as *beginning* rather than *rule*. The conception of a self under way, in motion and perennially incomplete, is what opens the possibility, not to say necessity, for praise.

In Chapter Four we revisit the problem of that third decision regarding the choice of Auden's works, when Gottlieb turns to the "emphatically peculiar" "Canzone." Here a different explanation of his choice of poetic form suggests itself, different from the earlier account of the need to redeem language, and from the explanation suggested by Gottlieb's pun: "As Auden's "Canzone" repeats Dante's poem, it analyzes the zone of possibility, this can-zone" (165). As she explains, this is a poem written in response to the deepest emotional disappointment of Auden's life. In 1941, his lover, Chester Kallman, told him that he had been unfaithful and ended their sexual relationship. Auden, a poet already committed to adventures in technical rigor, one well-versed in the history of his craft and also a keen reader of W.B. Yeats, would surely have thought of Yeats's comment:

. . . but all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt. Once when I was in delirium from pneumonia I dictated a letter to George Moore telling him to eat [?] salt because it was a symbol of eternity; the delirium passed, I had no memory of that letter, but I must have meant what I now mean. If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. . . . Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing. (Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 522)

This thought evokes both Arendt's understanding of what it is for us to be historical beings and a broader understanding of the city as the common space where experience can be shared and preserved, thanks to the work of retrieving and repeating traditional forms of language. Thus the *I* and *you* that emerge in the poem's fourth and fifth stanzas are moments in the great intimacy of sharing a plural world, and their emergence may pose a real challenge to the distinction between the public realm and the four walls of privacy that continues to trouble Arendt's work. Gottlieb, however, takes a different path to plurality, reading this poem as a treatment of will and setting it alongside Arendt's writings on willing in *The Life of the Mind*. The contingency that afflicts our ever having come to be at all (my mother might never have met my father; our evolutionary forebears might never have made it out of the primeval swamp) turns out to be lodged deep in us as the lesson we keep failing to learn, or, in Auden's words, the truth that "We cannot choose what we are free to love" (166). The advantage of Gottlieb's choice is that it delivers us to her culminating claim that what Arendt and Auden finally offer us, together, is an exhortation to praise.

Why praise? The impulse comes from the closing lines of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats":

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. (62-65).

It is not a matter of praising God in order to justify His creation. Nor is it a requirement to praise this world because it is the best of all possible worlds. Rather, we are called upon to bless what there is for being (188), to be grateful for our contingency, for the fact that we fall short of sovereign power and find ourselves instead subject to uncertainty and unpredictability, that is, to the human condition of plurality. Gottlieb, with Arendt, clearly wants the affirmation of praise to have its play here and now and to leave to one side the godliness and sense of heaven that form a persistent theme for Auden. In the end she cannot begrudge him his transcendent inclinations. Who can, when he leaves us with lines like these?

Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape, (196)

The book weighs in at three-hundred pages, the last one-hundred pages of which are devoted to notes, bibliography and index. While the index has its lapses—important references to W.B. Yeats on pages 188-189 are missed, as is mention of Kant on page 187, for instance—the notes are fascinating and indispensable. See, for example, the page-long note on responses by Arendt and other Jewish students who studied with Heidegger in the 1920s to early Christian thinking, a note which ends with this stunning sentence: "The attraction of certain German-Jews of the Weimar era to the history and thought of early Christianity can thus be understood as something other than an interest in the Christian religion, for the world of German-Jewry was indeed coming to a swift, unexpected, and violent end" (256).