

Paysage moralisé

I could draw its map by heart,
showing its contours,
strata and vegetation
name every height,
small burn and lonely shieling ...¹

The village of Rookhope lies in upper Weardale, County Durham, in northern England. It takes its name from the valley in which it is located. Rookhope Burn is a tributary of the River Wear, which it joins three miles (5km) away at Eastgate. *Hope* is an old (northern) English word for a hidden side valley and likely refers to an abundance of rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*) there². Writing in 1962, the architectural critic, Ian Nairn, offered a lyrical account of the topography of the village:

Screwed into a tributary of the Wear above Stanhope, and 1,100 ft. [335m] up even though it is in the valley. One of those rare, wild places where you feel that the inhabitants might speak a language of their own. An old mining village, still active, crowded around a dog-leg bend in the road. Everything natural stone except the village pub, stuccoed black and white and the perfect foil to the cottages. This gives the kind of signature which Weardale villages lack – a place instead of a collection of picturesque houses³.

By English standards, the valley is a remote spot, anciently a collection of farmsteads that formed part of the lawless border zone between England and Scotland; a ballad, *Rookhope Ryde*, recounts how, in 1569, Weardale men repelled cattle raiders from Scotland. The valley was transformed in 18th and 19th centuries, however, by the expansion of lead mining. The village owes its origins to the need to house the workers of Bolts Law, Grove Rake and Brandon Walls mines. The valley lay at the

heart of a booming industry but, by the beginning of the 20th century, mines were already closing and the population contracting, creating an early post-industrial landscape, albeit in a 'rural' setting⁴.

Rookhope is an unprepossessing place. The scenery is one of treeless fells. Its landscape is neither bucolic nor conventionally romantic, its buildings lack grandeur. It occupies a marginal location in the geography of England. Yet, the valley, and its environs, loom large in the poetry of Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), a central figure in Anglophone culture in 20th century and who wrote some of the most famous lines in English verse. Auden's cultural weight is attested by the adjective 'Audenesque' to indicate a particular poetical style and a distinctive set of (post)modern moral and cultural and aesthetic concerns – Seumas Heaney, titled his poem in memory of Joseph Brodsky, 'Audenesque'. The present paper explores what, at first sight, seems an unlikely connection. Auden was not native to Weardale and lived a nomadic international life. Born in Birmingham, he had an upper-class background and attended private boarding schools before studying at Oxford University, from which he graduated with a Third Class degree. He travelled widely and lived variously in Berlin, Helensburgh, New York, Ischia, Kirchstetten, and Oxford, where his old college, Christ Church, gave him a cottage in its grounds in his last years. But throughout his travels, Auden carried with him a profound and unresolved homesickness and a deep attachment to the landscape of the northern Pennines and, especially Rookhope as, 'the most wonderfully desolate of all the dales'⁵.

Auden has generated a vast and learned body of criticism, concomitant with the depth, range and impact of his creative output which, in addition to poetry, included prose, journalism, screenplays, libretti, and plays. The aim of the paper is not to add to the corpus of literary criticism on Auden but, rather, to trace the presence of Rookhope in Auden's poetry, to assess the shifting literary use he made of it and how it might help us to think about questions of place attachment and belonging. The opening quotation, from the poem 'Amor Loci', reveals the intensity of the poet's imaginative

engagement with Rookhope, with its deployment of northern English toponyms (*burns* – tributaries of major rivers; *shielings* – roughly constructed huts to house shepherds at high ground in summer months). According to Mendelson, Auden referred to ‘Amor Loci’, as ‘the Rookhope poem’⁶, even though the place is unmentioned. Rookhope was the capital of his poetic homeland in the northern Pennines⁷.

Auden’s work embodied shifting intellectual interests and literary concerns and he revisited his symbolic landscape at different phases of his life to express these. A major intellectual transition occurred as he recanted his poetic *modus operandi* of the interwar period, when he had presented as a man of the Left. (Famously, he disavowed two of his greatest pre-war ‘propagandist’ poems, ‘Spain’ and ‘September 1, 1939’, although they remain central to his canon.) He departed England in 1939, on the eve of war, to live in the United States. He was accused of abandoning his country in its moment of peril but, for Auden, the decision was driven by the artistic need to escape his enlistment into a political cause that was hampering his development as poet. The poem which signalled the transition was ‘New Year Letter’, which revealed his reengagement with the Anglican Christianity of his youth in the form of a Kierkegaard-inspired leap of faith. For McCall Smith the poem contains ‘a complex skein of ideas about humanity and history, about art, civilization and violence’ but it has Rookhope at its heart. Much of Auden’s poetry reflects ‘a struggle with the whole idea of engagement’, a tension between the civic urge to engage and an artistic impulse to disengage and remain politically dispassionate⁸. Rookhope is the site of this struggle.

Auden’s reversion to Christianity was informed by a belief that liberal humanism and scientific enlightenment had been powerless to stop the rise of totalitarian violence. If poetry cannot change the world, he suggests, it can help us live in it. His later poetry typically had a celebratory tone, commemorated domesticity and everyday pleasures, valued communal life and local habitats. In the

face of the isolating and alienating tendencies of modernity, Auden's work is marked by a concern with the restoration of a sense of identification with nature, the past, and the unified self. Auden offers a vision of agape and proposes a life focused on clemency and love: 'Our life and death are with our neighbour./And love illuminates again/The city and the lion's den'⁹. Forgiveness, humility and friendship are the means to redemption and a virtuous life: 'You shall love your crooked neighbour/With your crooked heart'¹⁰. The appeal of Christianity, in part, lay in the way that it offered the possibility of community. His return to Christianity was a means to be at home the world, to reconcile the global and the local, 'The teaching of Jesus is the first application of the scientific approach to human behaviour – reassuring from the particular to the universal'.¹¹

Topophilia

'Devotion to place and pietas, a reverence for the enduring earth, for the past, for the dead dominate Hardy's sensibility'¹².

Auden is a poet with an explicit interest in what he termed, on several occasions, *topophilia*. His poetry and prose express an attention to physical geography, and he invests places with sacred meanings. He 'maps the mythic and the psychological onto landscape'¹³. His landscape of ideas features mystical experience, vivid apprehensions of nature, longing for a lost Eden and New Jerusalem. Auden engages with 'good places' which he invests with ethical, emotional and intellectual significance: 'Paysage Moralisé', is the title of a poem from the 1930s. If modernity divests places of their identity, the poet reinvests them with meaning in ways that resist culturally homogenising tendencies. There are echoes here of the work of human geographers, notably Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of topophilia as an affective bond between people and a place or setting¹⁴. For Relph, 'insideness' is the key to the strength of affective bonds¹⁵. The significance of place rests on the intensions it evokes. Insideness provides a basis for engagement in the world but, according to Relph, is a quality that is lost in an era of 'placelessness'. Cosmopolitan critics, including prominent

geographers, view local attachments as inherently exclusionary and regressive but also likely to be continually effaced by deepening global integration. The very notion of space as topographically ordered is challenged by topological accounts in which places are devoid of cultural coherence and in which fidelity to particular places is presented as archaic and ethically suspect¹⁶.

Some sociologists, psychologists and geographers, however, point to the persistence of place attachments as a means of being at home in a placeless world¹⁷. Savage *et al* propose the sociological concept of 'elective belonging' to describe how, even in an era of increased individualism, solipsism and heightened mobility, people still yearn to set down roots, select places as sites for the performance of their identities and attach their biographies to places with which they invest meaning¹⁸. For poets, novelists and artists of various kinds, similarly, engagement with the virtues of place is a leitmotif. Poets such as Basil Bunting¹⁹ and Patrick Kavanagh²⁰ offer a view of place that rests on their insideness. Both engage deeply with their home worlds of Northumbria and Monaghan respectively, to envision and endorse the particularity of their milieu as the means for engagement with the world at large. Their poetry rests on a parochialism which values local attachments as a means for engaging with the world²¹. Auden presents a different case. To adapt the concept of Savage *et al*, his is an elective belonging. Lacking the roots (or insideness) of Bunting or Kavanagh, Rookhope becomes a site for the performance of his poetic identity and a place to which he attaches his literary biography.

Auden developed his interpretation of topophilia through his reading of other poets. His earliest literary influence was Thomas Hardy who Auden saw as able to convincingly evoke a distinctive locale in which the lives of his character were set; he valued Hardy's 'hawk's vision', which allowed him to survey an imaginative territory in exceptional detail²². Hardy appealed to Auden because he presented a provincial world unaffected, at the time he was writing, by the influence of London, but

upon which modernity was encroaching. Hardy's 'Wessex' presents a moral framework in which virtues of topophilia are developed. Auden was attracted to poets such as Hardy, Edward Thomas and John Betjeman because of their depth of engagement with their chosen places. He developed his own distinctive concept of topophilia which, 'differs from the farmer's love of his home soil and the litterateur's fussy regional patriotism in that it is not possessive or limited to any one locality; the practised topophil can operate in a district he has never visited before'²³.

There is great precision in Auden's description of landscape and the emplacement of his verse²⁴. Auden eschewed a focus on grandeur as a criterion for the selection of places to which to commit, 'though history manifested by objects is essential, the quantity of the history and the quality of the object are irrelevant; a branch railroad is as valuable as a Roman Wall, a neo-Tudor teashop as interesting as a Gothic cathedral'²⁵. Poets should not be swayed by beautiful place names: 'if he loves a person or a thing he loves their actual name and would not change it'²⁶. Place names are sometimes capitalised in the poems to emphasise their particularity. Auden's commitments are to ordinary places and it is the intensity of the engagement, however brief, that matters.

Auden offers an example of a 'topopoetics'²⁷ that anticipates the poetry of the post-modern age. Poets such as Elizabeth Bishop are engaged with place from a position of estrangement: 'I've never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it with him'²⁸. Although engaged with the detail of the various places in the United States, Canada and Brazil, in which she lived, Bishop's engagement was always provisional, an unfulfilled quest to find a home, a kind of unbelonging. According to Cresswell, 'Bishop's topopoetics is one of strangeness at home and home-seeking when away. It is a search for knowledge of place – the distanced search of a rootless, homeless anthropologist. Or geographer perhaps'²⁹. Similarly, Jo Shapcott, contrasting her poetry with that of Seamus Heaney,

has told of growing up in a new town where there was 'no one way of speaking at all and no connection between language and landscape but what I came to discover was something I now feel is very contemporary - and that is a kind of aesthetic that demands travel, it demands, in a sense, rootlessness and even exile'³⁰.

Despite anticipating these themes, Auden offers a paradoxical counterpoint to them. Although living without roots and disconnected from place and family, Auden's commitment to an ordinary poetical homeland distinguishes him from poets such as Bishop and Shapcott who, by their own account, are homeless wanderers. By contrast Auden avers the critical importance 'local understanding' and the role of art in its formation.

Lit up America and on
A cottage in Long Island shone
Where Buxtehude as we played
One of his passacaglias made
Our minds a civitas of sound
Where nothing but assent was found,
For art had set in order sense
And feeling and intelligence
And from its ideal order grew
Our local understanding too³¹

Auden's formation as a poet occurred in the context of the mid-century clash of fascism and communism and the failures of liberal democracy. By the end of the 1930s he had disengaged from these ideological struggles and extricated himself from England. His injunction that, 'Poetry makes nothing happen'³², signalled his rejection of his previous allegiance to Marxism, for the more modest ambition of creating his own civitas or 'parish of immediacy'³³, a culture that is local rather than universal. As Jacobs suggests,

... his apparently rootless way of life forced Auden to confront a difficult fact: if he were to experience the blessings of the communal, local culture at all, he would have to find a means to cultivate such experience that would seem quite alien to more traditional local cultures³⁴.

The paradox is that although his feelings for Rookhope were intense and real, Auden's community was formed in his mind and his work rather than in the material or social world.

Important places, for Auden, form a sacred world within in which he glimpses the transcendent. The early 20th century artist, Paul Nash, much of whose work was a meditation on the ineffable in the English landscape, wrote, 'There are places, just as there are people and objects and works of art whose relationship of parts creates a mystery, an enchantment, which cannot be analysed'³⁵. A theme of Auden's work concerns the way his good places embody qualities of the numinous. The Protestant theologian, Rudolf Otto, saw the numinous as the foundational experience of religious belief, a '*mysterium tremendum*', concerning a fearful and fascinating mystery, experienced with blank wonder, stupor³⁶. It incorporates a sense of terror, demonic dread, awe, absolute unapproachability, and the 'wrath' of God and emphasises one's own nothingness in contrast to its power. Simultaneously, the numinous is marked by energy, urgency, will, and vitality as well as potent charm, attractiveness, despite fear, and terror. Auden conveyed the nature of his sacred places in language remarkably akin to that of Otto. Accordingly, the sacred could not be anticipated

only 'encountered' and is marked by 'an overwhelming but undefinable importance' and 'may range in tone from joyous wonder to panic dread'³⁷.

It was in Rookhope that Auden encountered the numinous and it was an experience he carried with him wherever he went.

Rookhope in Auden

'My great good place is the part of the Pennines bounded on the S by Swaledale, on the N by the Roman wall and on the W by the Eden Valley' (Auden in a letter to Geoffrey Grigson³⁸).

The occasion of Auden's first visit to Rookhope is uncertain, although he claims he went there first aged 12³⁹. Auden's imaginative engagement with his 'great good place', however, began before he ever visited it: '... years before I ever went there, the North of England was the Never-Never Land of my dreams. Nor did those feelings disappear when I finally did; to this day Crewe Junction marks the wildly exciting frontier where the alien South ends and the North, my world, begins'⁴⁰. Specifically, Auden claimed, 'I was going to be a mining engineer or a geologist. Between the ages of six and twelve, I spent many hours of my time constructing a highly elaborate private world of my own based on, first of all, a landscape, the limestone moors of the Pennines; and second, an industry—lead mining'⁴¹. Auden's imaginative region, however, is unpeopled, 'Although I equipped my mines with the most elaborate machinery, I never imagined any miners. Indeed, when I visited real mining areas, I preferred abandoned mines to working ones'⁴².

Auden invested 'the North' with aesthetic and intellectual virtues that had a magnetic attraction: 'North must seem the "good" direction, the way of heroic adventures, South the way to ignoble ease

and decadence'⁴³. Auden professed to favour colder climes rather than warmer ones. His northern sensibility was not restricted to the North of England; he visited Iceland in 1936 with Louis MacNeice to satisfy his passion for Norse sagas, ice and austere landscapes. The North offered an emotional register. 'The North' serves a metonym or code for a set of aesthetic and intellectual orientations⁴⁴.

For Auden, 'Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,/That was, and still is, my ideal scenery'⁴⁵. Auden's Rookhope is a landscape of modern ruins; a panorama of loss. The ruination of the remote lead mining industry of the northern Pennines was already visible by the early 20th century, a presentiment of a 'left-behind', post-industrial world that attracts so much political and cultural commentary today. Indeed, while the ruins of mining have been carefully tidied away in the former Durham coalfield to the east, in Upper Weardale, within the lead mining landscape around Rookhope, fragments of the past remain scattered through the landscape: abandoned hushes and adits, discarded quarries and disused railways and crumbling farmsteads and shielings. But his place was invested with moral qualities: 'And later when I hunted the Good Place,/Abandoned lead-mines let themselves be caught'⁴⁶. Auden's biographer, Richard Davenport-Hines, reports that when living on Fire Island, off the coast of Long Island, New York, Auden pinned to the wall of his house, an Ordnance Survey map of Alston Moor – which, roughly, corresponded to the territory of what he termed his 'Great Good Place'⁴⁷.

Rookhope and its environs recur throughout the poetry. His verse play, 'Paid on Both Sides', references places in the vicinity of Rookhope, and was likely written at the Lord Crewe Arms hotel in nearby Blanchland. 'The Watershed', written in 1928, which concerns the nature of personal and political choices ('Who stands, the crux left of the watershed'), describes a scene of

...dismantled washing-floors,

Snatches of tramline running to a wood,

An industry already comatose,

Yet sparsely living⁴⁸.

The setting for the poem, conventionally, is Cashwell pumping engine at Cross Fell in the northern Pennines, which marks the watershed between the rivers Eden, South Tyne and Tees, although Fuller speculates whether the original setting was Rookhope⁴⁹. It is one of the remotest sites for lead mining in England and was the location of a redundant winding engine when Auden knew it. The poem can be read as a statement about the integrity of the landscape and the alienation of the observer: 'Go home, now, stranger proud of your young stock,/ Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed;/ This land, cut off, will not communicate'. It can also be read as a poem about what Seamus Heaney refers to as 'the penalty of consciousness'⁵⁰, that limits local attachment on the part of the knowing poet. A watershed lies within the poet, so the poem affects belonging and detachment, rootedness and transience. Throughout the early poems, the abandoned mines of Weardale symbolised isolation, loss, guilt, the stifling of language and love.

In 1954, *American Vogue* commissioned Auden to write a travel guide to England. The extraordinary result was a five-day itinerary in which Auden, inevitably, beseeched his readers to ignore London and Windsor and head to the Pennines, 'that chain of limestone hills which runs due North up the centre of England from Derbyshire to Northumberland'⁵¹. The fifth day involved a trip from Dufton in Westmoreland to Blanchland, on the border between County Durham and Northumberland, via Rookhope. Although it had been years since he had visited the region, he describes the journey accurately and poignantly:

...the land has something of the shape of a wave rising northeast and breaking southwest.

On reaching the crest from the breaking side the eye is confronted by an enormous

whaleback moors. Today they produce little but sheep and grouse, but from Roman times down to the end of the nineteenth century, this was the richest lead-mining field in the country. Relics of its vanished wealth, derelict shafts, abandoned washing floors, decayed water wheels, solitary chimneys sticking up in the midst of nowhere abound ...”⁵²

Landscape for Auden provides both a point of reference for his poetic enterprise and a rich source of metaphors for human nature. Limestone, the bedrock of the northern Pennines, offers the most fecund store of inspiration. It often represents inconstancy in human affairs because of its porosity and because it is characterised by subterranean fissures and voids. The limestone character of the northern Pennines was central to its attraction for Auden.

If it form the one landscape that we the inconstant ones

Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly

Because it dissolves in water⁵³.

‘In Praise of Limestone’ was written by Auden during his time at Ischia, the volcanic island off the coast of Naples, where he summered from 1948 and which attracted a colony of artists, centred on Caffé Internationale in Forio, which he saw as his natural milieu: ‘I am presently moved/by sun-drenched Parthenopea, my thanks are for you,/Ischia, to whom a fair wind has/brought me rejoicing with dear friends’⁵⁴. This relocation was in contradiction to the poet’s avowed ‘northernness’, but his engagement with Italy brought him into contact with the limestone geology of the Mediterranean which suggested imaginative connections with the English Pennines⁵⁵. Limestone stands here as a metaphor for the human body and mind. Limestone landscapes are marked by, ‘A secret system of caves and conduits’, resonant of the arterial life of the body and subconscious life of the mind, a kind of Freudian natural environment. Limestone reappears in the later ‘Amor Loci’ – ‘the Rookhope

Poem' – this time as a symbol of constancy and as an analogy between love of place and the possibility of divine love.

The zone which Auden described as his 'Great Good Place', was a landscape marked also by spectacular igneous intrusions. Faults are a recurring theme as found, notably, in 'New Year Letter'. Here, Auden mines his own childhood memories of visits to Rookhope.

Whenever I begin to think
About the human creature we
Must nurse to sense and decency,
An English area comes to mind,
I see the nature of my kind
As a locality I love,
The limestone moors that stretch from BROUGH
To HEXHAM and the ROMAN WALL,
There is my symbol of us all.
There, where the EDEN leisures through
Its sandstone valley, is my view
Of green and civil life that dwells
Below a cliff of savage fells
From which the original address
Man faulted into consciousness⁵⁶

Elsewhere, geological intrusions are metaphors for the creative process.

Along the line of lapse the fire

Of life's impersonal desire

Burst through his sedentary rock

And, as at DUFTON and at KNOCK,

Thrust up between his mind and heat

Enormous cones of myth and art⁵⁷

'New Year Letter' is a vast and complex poem, in which Auden casts loose from his previous political and intellectual moorings and searches for new directions, exploring theological and psychoanalytical themes. The poem questions the legacy of the Enlightenment and its scientific, political and literary hubris. It is written for Elizabeth Mayor whose salon on Long Island Auden had recently attended. The gathering of like minds – writer, artists and musicians – had offered Auden a glimpse of elective belonging, 'a *civitas* of sound', 'the *polis* of our friends', which he saw as the means of creating fellowship and the only hope in the face of the collapse of the 20th century's metanarratives and the persistence of violence and injustice. The relationship between this localism and named places on a map is both imaginative and precise. The return to Rookhope occurs in this context.

Always my boy of wish returns

To those peat-stained deserted burns

That feed the WEAR and TYNE and TEES,

And, turning states to strata, sees

How basalt long oppressed broke out

In wild revolt at CAULDRON SNOUT..."⁵⁸

This passage above returns us to the fells and, specifically, a location in upper Teesdale. Cauldron Snout is a dramatic waterfall created where the River Tees meets the igneous intrusion of the Whin Sill which breaks through the overlaying limestone strata. Later passages of the poem recount Auden's numinous experience of his childhood in Rookhope. Writing in 1971, Auden described how, at age 33 in New York, he put his childhood sacred landscape to poetic purpose claiming, 'my description of my experiences is, historically a fiction: what I wrote was an interpretation of them'⁵⁹. In the poem the recollection of dropping stones down a flooded mineshaft is akin to a loss of innocence and a first intimation of mortality. The entrances to mines (adits) offer a glimpse into the unknowable depths of our being. In his copious and notorious notes to the poem, Auden lets us know that *Urmutterfurcht* refers to a primal fear of the mother and derives from Wagner's *Siegfried*, while the passage in German is a quotation from Goethe's *Faust*: the rhyming of *Bild* and guilt is inspired.

The derelict lead-smelting mill,

Flued to its chimney up the hill,

That smokes no answer any more

But points, a landmark on BOLT'S LAW,

The finger of all questions. There

In ROOKHOPE I was first aware

Of Self and Not-Self, Death and Dread:

Adits were entrances which led Down to the Outlawed, to the Others,

The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers;

Alone in the hot day I knelt

Upon the edge of shafts and felt

The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives

Us into knowledge of our lives,

The far interior of our fate

To civilize and to create,

Das Weibliche that bids us come

To find what we're escaping from,

There I dropped pebbles, listened, heard

The reservoir of darkness stirred;

"O deine Mutter kehrt dir nicht

Wieder. Selbst bin ich, dein' Pflicht

Und Liebe. Brache sie nun mein Bild"

And I was conscious of my guilt⁶⁰.

Bolt's Law are the fells above Rookhope village and 'the landmark' refers to the still extant chimneys at Sikehead which once served to disperse toxic gasses transported via flues from the lead smelter in the valley below, but which now stand redundant in bare moorland⁶¹. The image of the stranded chimneys is one that Auden carried with him all over the world (see Figure 1).

'Great Good Place'

‘A poet’s hope is to be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized elsewhere’⁶²

For Edward Said, ‘imaginative geographies’ enact geopolitics: the Orient and Orientalism are categories which serve political purposes, above all⁶³. Ridanpää proposes the concept of the ‘imaginative region’ as a ‘resource with which social, political and cultural processes are mobilized and maintained’ and highlights the way literature can direct the performance of spatial belonging⁶⁴. There are many examples of how the fictive representation of a region is used to underpin political regionalism⁶⁵ but Auden’s Rookhope resists such enlistment. The North Pennines now forms a UK-government designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is a UNESCO-designated Geopark. The North Pennines AONB claims its region is, ‘a peaceful, unspoilt landscape with a rich history and vibrant natural beauty’⁶⁶. But Auden shows that this landscape is anything but unspoilt⁶⁷. Even the designation ‘natural beauty’ is highly contentious in this case. Rather, it is a landscape of scars, ruination and depopulation. It was these features that furnished recurring themes in Auden’s poetry including the tensions between the rural and industrial, natural and mechanical, vanishing and persistent, past and modernity, albeit the people that made the landscape are absent from the poems. There is an irony that, arguably, the greatest work of art to emerge from this region is utterly at odds with contemporary practices of ‘place marketing’.

Geological metaphors drawn from his ‘Great Good Place’ explore the affect of belonging and estrangement and the movements of time and history. The northern Pennines offer an existential exposure that tests assumptions about civilisation. Auden carried his deep knowledge of Rookhope on his international peregrinations. While there can be little doubt about the depth of his artistic dedication, Auden’s lifelong engagement with Rookhope involved no commitments to any real community there. The novelist – and former Durham miner – Sid Chaplin recounts meeting Auden in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1972. Auden was taken on an excursion to Chollerford in the North Tyne Valley after he ‘expressed a wish (or had it wished upon him) to see something of the Roman Wall

country again, also the fringe of the lead-mining area.' Auden was an unapologetic snob. His was a search for belonging and attachment from a position of class privilege. He appeared uninterested in his hosts until he discovered Chaplin's background:

A spark of life only when I got the drinks in at The George (his a dry Martini on the rocks), when he discovered that I'd been a miner Bishop Auckland way. Momentarily his eyes lit up. He talked of Rookhope, still lead mining when he knew it. When did he first go? At 12. His father a doctor interested in geology, his brother in Geological Survey. His two most treasured books, he told me, the *Geological Survey of Weardale* (1923) and Westgarth Foster's *Sections of the Strata from Newcastle upon Tyne to Alston*. Said I was the first person he'd met who had read the latter. My note: 'Obviously little or no feeling for folk - I doubt if he'd ever made friends with a Weardale or Alston lead miner'⁶⁸.

Auden's disdain highlights how he is a poet *in*, rather than *of*, Rookhope. Much of his poetry is committed to building, acknowledging and being thankful for a society of friends. Poems record the life of his epistemic community, but it is one which comprises an artistic elite and its privileged patrons. Politically, in contemporary parlance, the world can be divided into 'the educated, mobile people who see the world from "Anywhere" and who value autonomy and fluidity, versus the more rooted, generally less well-educated people who see the world from "Somewhere" and prioritise group attachments and security'⁶⁹. Might then we see Auden as a poet of the Anywhere people, constantly on the move, escaping the bonds of attachment, affecting connection where a place proves attractive for various reasons? That would be too simple. Imaginative fidelity to Rookhope makes Auden different to Elizabeth Bishop and Jo Shapcott. His 'Great Good Place' offers a kind of unmoored parochialism which reflects some of the tensions that 'Anywhere' people are disinclined to reflect upon. Auden's poetry might offer literary succour to a cosmopolitanism that has echoes in contemporary topological accounts of space offered by some geographers that deprecate local attachments⁷⁰. But, as Simone Weil observes, the need for roots is a universal human condition and

uprootedness brings social, environmental, and emotional costs⁷¹. The intensified search for belonging is a corollary of the increased mobilities of (post) modernity⁷². Auden was a confirmed cosmopolite, but he craved the rootedness that Weil valorises, and his literary output recurrently addresses both its absence and his own efforts to create it among his friends, albeit from apposition of social and cultural privilege. In doing so, he returns constantly to the unpeopled, desolation of his imaginative homeland, his 'Great Good Place', a real territory where he can name every height, small burn and lonely sheiling.

Here I have attempted a conspectus of Auden's imaginative geography as the product of a rootless, cosmopolitan extolling domestic virtues against the backcloth of an ordinary poetic homeland in the Northern Pennines with Rookhope as its capital. Auden's poetry addresses eternal questions about the conditions under which communities thrive or decline, what dividends they bestow upon their members, the costs and benefits of choosing to cultivate local knowledge and local attachments and how communities coexist at different scales: 'The largest publicum's a res,/And the least res a publicum'⁷³. The boundaries of Auden's imaginative region, however, are formed for personal and aesthetic rather than political reasons. Auden's topo-poetics reflects his search for affective bonds in a life marked otherwise by placelessness. It is a quest for a sense of place in the absence of insideness – in this respect it affects more widespread concerns of how to belong in an age of globalisation and hyper-mobility. Although the wind-blasted fells and industrial archaeology round about held profound attraction for Auden, it was the numinous experience of his youth in Rookhope that allowed him to attach his poetic and personal biography to the place and ascribe its meaning. This amounted to a kind of elective belonging, albeit stripped of any sociological connotation or political commitment. In the end, though, even the cosmopolitan poet needed his roots.

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- ²⁴ Auden's critics sometimes fail to meet his standards of geographical exactness. For instance, Hufstader misplaces Cauldron Snout – a waterfall mentioned in 'New Year Letter' – in Yorkshire, when it lies on the border of Westmoreland and County Durham at the time Auden wrote about it, see J. Hufstader. "Auden's sacred world", *Essays in Criticism*, 59 (3): 234-254 (2009). (County boundaries have since changed.) Hecht has Auden 'born and brought up among the Pennines, a limestone region in central England'. With this statement Hecht draws attention away from the precisely elective nature of Auden's attachment to Rookhope, which is the key theme of the current paper. See A Hecht. *The Hidden Law. The Poetry of W. H. Auden*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1993) p304.
- ²⁵ 'Introduction to *Slick but Not Streamlined*, by John Betjeman', *CW* II: 333)
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