Arts & Humanities

Executor Privilege

Edward Mendelson on W. H. Auden.

By
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If Edward Mendelson hadn't known W. H. Auden so well, he might have gotten to know him better.

As a teenager, Mendelson sought — and got — an audience with the great English poet in his New York apartment. As a graduate student, Mendelson chose Auden for his dissertation topic. By the time he was 26 and an assistant professor at Yale, Mendelson had become such an authority on Auden's work that the poet invited him to be his literary executor. "I've met a young man who knows more about me than I do," Auden confided to a friend.

But in Auden's presence, Mendelson always found himself at a loss for words. "I was too nervous," he says. "I regarded him as The Great Man. And Auden clearly most enjoyed talking to people who knew things about science or some obscure historical period. It was hard for me to have a conversation with him because he was what I knew about."

Mendelson, who is the Lionel Trilling Professor in the Humanities at Columbia, speaks from his home office in Morningside Heights. He finally has time to discuss the life of a literary executor, having just returned the galley proofs of Auden's *Prose, Volume III*, to Princeton University Press.

It's an Auden-saturated existence, he says. Yet he doesn't consider himself an Auden disciple. Indeed, he doesn't think it's possible to be such a thing. Auden believed too deeply in the primacy of the individual. "The uniqueness of individuality against all the forces in government and culture that want to treat human beings as categories: That was his big subject for 30 years," Mendelson says.

“Nothing could betray him more than discipleship.”

So Mendelson has studied Auden exhaustively, but not, as it turns out, exclusively. The Auden wall of his office is impressive — poetry, biographies, critical studies, and correspondence from desktop to ceiling — but so are the walls devoted to his other enthusiasms. There’s a long row of computer manuals and reference books; Mendelson moonlights as a tech geek and has been contributing to PC Magazine since 1988. Elsewhere in the apartment there are shelves and shelves of Virginia Woolf, who wrote three of the novels Mendelson examined in his most recent critical work, *The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say About the Stages of Life*. Mendelson is also a leading authority on Thomas Pynchon and a collector of Baedeker guidebooks.

It’s the sort of magpie eclecticism that Auden — if he’d gotten to know Mendelson a little better — probably would’ve admired. But the poet clearly knew he was dealing with an independent sensibility.

“When I put together a collection of essays for him, he asked, ‘Why didn’t you include my essay on *Romeo and Juliet?*’” Mendelson recalls. “And I didn’t really know how to respond, because it wasn’t a very good essay — at least, I knew that it was not as good as others. So I just shook my head, no. And he *beamed*.”

It’s been a busy year for Mendelson — Auden was born in 1907, and the centennial celebrations have been more or less continuous. Mendelson says he’s been on the road nearly every week giving readings, lectures, and talks.

“A motto that I have no embarrassment adopting from Auden I found in one of his letters: ‘Anything for a quiet life.’ I keep looking forward to 99 quiet years until the next centenary.”

But apart from the sheer number of public appearances, he says, 2007 hasn’t demanded anything extraordinary of him. It saw the publication of two new Auden poetry collections — a selected and a collected. But those had been finished and in the hopper for years. Mendelson was relieved that the centenary finally prompted the publishers to bring them out.

And he was pleased that he could take part in all the Auden festivities without having to plan them or put them on.

“I think Auden’s real fans are not very good at organizing things. They prefer to stay home and read,” Mendelson says. “In the poem ‘Under Which Lyre,’ Auden contrasts the children of Hermes with the children of Apollo. The children of Apollo are always organizing other people, and the children of Hermes just want to be left alone. And Auden had a little bit of Apollo in him — a little bit. But he didn’t like it.”

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