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Cover Page Footnote

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"The Isle is Full of Noises": Art as a Moral Force in Auden's *The Sea
and the Mirror*

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Abstract

W.H. Auden's collection of poems *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest* presents the reader with dramatic monologues spoken by the characters of *The Tempest* in a myriad of poetic forms, such as Miranda's villanelle and Caliban's meandering prose poem. Though many critics use Caliban's poem to argue that Auden believes poetry is an impotent aesthetic activity, this paper offers a reading of *The Sea and the Mirror* as a development of the moral understanding of poetry that ends in its affirmation. Reading the collection as a rejection of poetry on behalf of life flattens out the complexity of this nuanced work. In this development, the paper proposes three modes by which to understand the poems based on Kierkegaard's realms of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the transcendent. In each of these three modes, the character speaking the monologue ascribes a certain moral status to poetry. Prospero, for example, sees poetry as exclusively aesthetic, ambivalent to or perhaps threatening to morality. In this paradigm, Caliban's prose poem—the climax of the collection—does not deny the legitimacy of poetry, but rather affirms its transcendence and thus its relation to life. By reading the collection thus, the reader can appreciate the moral understanding presented by each character and progress from radical doubt to authentic reintegration of art in its relation to life.

Keywords: 20th century, Auden, poetry, poetics, aesthetics, philosophy

In her work *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, literary critic Lucy McDiarmid writes, "If you take *The Sea and the Mirror* seriously, you know that all its characters are stuck in the poem, and that the poem's only *raison d'être* is to undermine the spiritual significance of all art" (McDiarmid 117-118). W. H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, a series of dramatic monologues spoken by the characters of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, examines art's ability to relate to life. If it can relate to life, the poem questions further its ability to relate to a good life. Through the voices of the characters, Auden examines if and how art changes people in their choices and their understanding of art. However, Auden does not, as McDiarmid claims, unilaterally dismiss art's ability to transcend, but rather experiments with different moral statuses of art. "Moral" here means the orientation towards right action. Some characters, such as Prospero himself, accuse art of preventing right action in its auditors, whereas others, such as Caliban, defend its ability to inspire us towards the good life despite our separation from the proverbial stage. The theatrical voices do not imprison the art, but rather release it to different modes of understanding. The work features as many poetic forms as it does poems which, for Auden, shows poetry as both a technical and a moral artifact. By using dramatic monologues, Auden enables himself to enter into different personae, each assuming and enacting a perspective of the value of art. Not only are the different voices important, but the movement of these voices reveals a development from an anxiety about the self-directedness of art to an authentic acceptance of art's goodness. In *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden uses and organizes morally charged forms to illustrate the movement towards an understanding of the positive moral power of art.

In *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden writes in highly conventional forms, such as the villanelle and the sestina, as well as the least conventional, such as free verse and prose poetry. By "conventional" here, I mean the rules for organization of verse and rhyme. Though free verse and prose poetry have traditions of their own, their rules for organization are far looser. Conventional forms implicitly assume the moral value of a work as a force of tradition and societal virtue. When writing in conventional form, Auden writes not about poetry itself, but about action and thought directed towards others. Even Antonio's monologue frames his hatred in such a way that the reader appreciates the social importance of forgiveness. The unconventional forms, however, show a character's preoccupation with poetry itself. This meta-poetical position questions the very activity of art as moral rather than contemplating the typical actions and feelings of life, suggesting a doubt about its ability to contemplate those typical actions. Once Auden introduces non-traditional forms, art is put into a crisis, and the question of its ability to speak to the essential questions about life arises.

Richard Davenport Hines, along with many other critics, links the poems to Kierkegaard, writing that they are "experiments in dramatic poetry which were [in part] based on Kierkegaard's three categories of human experience," (219) the ethical, aesthetic, and transcendent. Auden concerns himself throughout the work with the way these three modes of life connect to art. The ethical, to Kierkegaard and received by Auden, concerns itself with society; the highest good in the ethical realm is peace and charity. The aesthetic mode of life, however, seeks beauty and energy, figured by Kierkegaard as a lover and by Auden as Ariel. Finally, the transcendent is the realm of life that seeks direct contact with God. In my analysis of the poem, the transcendent as used by Auden means both contact with God and understanding of essential truths about human life. Auden, having received these categories, wonders through his

poems how art can interact with these modes of life. If art has no access to God or any transcendent truth, it can have no morality, only ambivalent and beautiful power. Can art, then, trap us in an impotent aesthetic realm? Can art access the transcendent if the artistic agent himself is a fallible human? By his various uses of form, Auden examines important ideas responding to these questions.

Moral status arises from the relation of the self to the other. When taken in isolation, the aesthetic speaker sees the other as an object, the ethical responds to the other that is in essence the same (human), and the transcendent responds to the other that is in essence other (divine). Auden's experiments in form correspond with these relationships. The speakers who see art as primarily aesthetic—the Stage Manager, Prospero, and Ariel—use, on the whole, subverted form, which indicates the artistic notion of freedom and control. Subverted form, as I have called it, refers to Auden's use of regular but unconventional form, a form that is aware of traditional modes and deliberately subverts them. The personae who constitute the entire second chapter of the work see art as primarily ethical, for they use traditional forms. Traditional forms evoke a historical and societal culture. When writing in traditional forms in this collection of poems, Auden uses poetry to speak about the moral actions of social life—betrayal, marriage, and charity, to name a few. Caliban, though, who most confidently advocates for art's ability to access the transcendent, speaks in highly unconventional forms. Traditional forms are not inert for Auden. Stan Smith writes that, “[Auden] seemed to rejoice in paradox.... His use of language made him an experimenter all his life, but he hated obscurity posing as profundity, and he loved tradition and sought ways of realigning modern poetry with its inheritance” (128). *The Sea and the Mirror* does not dismiss traditional forms, but rather understands them as beautiful and morally good. Tradition enables virtue and art to be lived; however, tradition alone cannot

answer the philosophical questioning of the transcendent significance of art. Auden's work explores the role of unconventionality in the path to understanding morality in art, a corollary to the role of conventionality. In the poems, Auden's usage of form corresponds to the kinds of questions he asks. When writing in conventional form, Auden tends to ask how poetic activity can explore the complications of life. Poetry in this perspective becomes a mode of knowing more about life. When writing in unconventional form, however, Auden tends to ask why anyone writes poetry at all. In some sense, this perspective narrows the object of artistic activity to become a self-directed reflection on artistic activity, meaning that it ignores the other myriad aspects of life. In another sense, this perspective expands the reader's understanding of the moral aspect of art, and thus becomes a mode of knowing more about art. Auden uses both in the same work, thus relating them in the organization of the collection as well as using their particular strengths to further understand their relation.

In the first and third chapters of the poem Auden writes in unconventional forms to prompt fundamental questions about art's relationship to life, especially about the moral good of art. The Stage Manager, Prospero, the characters in the first chapter, and Caliban, and Ariel, the characters in the third chapter, have forms which Auden invented for each of their particular poems. Mendelson writes that Auden's use of irregular meters:

...were used in his work to evoke voluntary, unpredictable acts, newly found accommodations between, on one hand, the world of nature and the instinctive body and, on the other, the world of history and the individual face.... (xiv)

With each of these poems, Auden uses form as a "voluntary, unpredictable act," showing the artistic and philosophical ability the speakers possess. While Chapter II's various poems are identified as spoken *sotto voce*, or in a soft voice, the other sections' monologues explicitly break

out, interacting with extra-theatrical and extra-poetic entities. The Preface, for example, is delivered, as Auden indicates, by “The Stage Manager to the Critics”; Chapter I spoken by “Prospero to Ariel”; in Chapter III, “Caliban [expostulates] to the Audience” finally, in the Postscript, we overhear “Ariel to Caliban [with an] Echo by the Prompter.” Auden uses the power of their unconventional forms to dissociate his audience from accepted, inherited ideas about art and life and to open them to a world of awful exploration of art’s potential impotence or danger. However, the unconventional speakers do not agree about art, nor do they all endorse the very art they produce.

In Chapter I, Auden adopts the voices of the Stage Manager and Prospero to ponder art as a morally ambivalent aesthetic force. By using regular but unconventional form, Auden informs the sense of authorial will in each of these aesthetic speakers. For them, art is concerned with beauty alone, and beauty is independent of tradition or the moral good. As an aesthetic voice, the Stage Manager wonders at the power of art, uses the illusion of art, and yet undercuts the ability of art. In the Preface, the Stage Manager, addresses the critics in accentual trimeter, a form that both acknowledges the accentual tradition of Anglo-Saxon verse and alters the number of accents and does not use alliteration. Additionally, the first three stanzas all have ten lines, whereas the final stanza alters this pattern by adding an eleventh line. At once, the Stage Manager participates in the deception of art while pondering art’s power to deceive, as when he says, “But how does one think up a habit? / Our wonder, our terror remains” (Auden 136). In his professional role as a stage manager, he uses the power of art to trick the audience. For example, he says, “For the nonchalant couple go / Waltzing across the tightrope / As if there were no death” (Auden 136). The couple walking on the tightrope represent, as does the whole circus, the artistic project, but their activity ignores the reality of death. In this quotation, the Stage Manager

expresses his doubt that art can represent the truth because art is inherently hubristic, or at least self-deluding, about death. As an aesthetic agent, the Stage Manager participates in a convention of art, here represented as the circus and formed in regular accentual trimeter, while simultaneously undermining art, shown in his unconventional form and despairing content. Though the Stage Manager has aesthetic values, he cannot ultimately endorse art as moral because he doubts its ability to transcend. He specifically cites the inability of metaphor to "satisfy when we meet, Between Shall-I and I-Will" (Auden 137), a poetic way of claiming that poetry cannot incite moral impetus. Thus, he resolves to be silent, and his closing lines, referencing *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in a final rejection of art, saying, "All the rest is silence / On the other side of the wall; And the silence ripeness, / And the ripeness all" (Auden 137). Auden begins his *ars poetica*, concerned always with the moral and aesthetic abilities of art, with a speaker who denies that art does authentic moral good and states that art can only please aesthetically. The Stage Manager's form, though regulated and pleasing to the ear, undercuts traditional forms and even its own regularity, showing the Stage Manager's doubt that art can do any good beyond aesthetic pleasantness and even suggesting that art is deceptive.

Prospero, the primary aesthetic agent of Shakespeare's play, straddles the division between conventional and unconventional form even more radically than the Stage Manager. Prospero alternates between varying, long stanzas of free verse and highly regulated strophes, and each alternation progressively has fewer and fewer lines. Even the regulated lines change and lessen upon each utterance. In the first stanzas, Prospero speaks forty-one, then thirty-two lines of free verse, followed by three nine-line stanzas of ballad iambic verse. After two more lengthy stanzas of free verse, Prospero speaks three stanzas of ballad iambic verse, but now with eight lines instead of nine. Finally, after two more stanzas of free verse, Prospero speaks two

stanzas of accentual dimeter, each with eleven lines, that evoke the conventional alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse without fully accepting it. As Prospero's monologue goes on, the verse paragraphs and stanzas get progressively shorter. The continual paring down of words and syllables instantiates Prospero's self-confessed notion that, "Where I go, words carry no weight" (Auden 138). In this multi-form poem, Prospero is bidding Ariel goodbye, thus literally and figuratively losing his magical power; though Prospero says that he will miss his aesthetic force (Auden 143), he also asks, "Are you malicious by nature? I don't know" (Auden 140). In the face of his disempowerment, Prospero, like the Stage Manager, grapples with art's effective power contrasted with its moral power, and, like the Stage Manager, ultimately resolves to be silent. The alternation of his form between free and regulated, and then even between accentual-syllabic and syllabic, each progressing towards fewer and fewer lines and syllables, shows his sense of confusion and finally despair at the ineffectiveness of art.

Prospero believes, like the Stage Manager, that art can wrongfully suggest immortality, as when he says to Ariel, "I am glad I have freed you, / So at last I can really believe I shall die" (Auden 137). Though Prospero suggests that perhaps art may have a morally good dimension that he does not understand, he insists that art corrupts him. In his last free verse paragraph, Prospero posits and ponders: "[I]f I speak, I shall sink without a sound / Into unmeaning abysses. Can I learn to suffer / Without saying something ironic or funny / On suffering?" (Auden 142-143). In these lines, Prospero denies that speech can make sound or mean anything, thus fundamentally undermining language. Ariel's liberation coincides with Prospero's vow to take "The silent passage / Into discomfort" (143). The last two strophes, entrancing in their accentual regularity and loose alliteration, both participate in and undermine conventional verse; this paradoxical artistic decision resolves to be silent, for it, like Prospero, cannot accept the morality

of art, only its hollow beauty. Art, as Prospero says, is an "*Unfeeling god*" (Auden 143), powerful but morally neutral to the detriment of artists and their audience. Both the Stage Manager and Prospero begin their monologues as aesthetic creators, and both resolve by the end to be silent in order to avoid the moral harm of art. Prospero even equates "the way of truth" with "a way of silence" (Auden 143). The Stage Manager and Prospero yearn for the transcendent and the ethical, but they deny art's ability to speak to anything but the aesthetic. However, Auden places these two speakers in Chapter I, giving them the power of introduction, but featuring two additional chapters with many other poems, suggesting that their vow to silence requires qualification. The organization of *The Sea and the Mirror* moves towards greater trust in art, eventually accepting the positive spiritual good of art. Chapter II expresses the ethical force of art through conventional forms, and Chapter III affirms the transcendent ability of art in an authentic and wholistic way.

In the second chapter of the collection, the majority of the characters speak *sotto voce* in conventional forms that instantiate their social and moral *ethoi*. These characters dwell in the realm of the ethical, that is to say, society. For them, poetry is a way of understanding definitive moments of life, such as marriage and politics. "Life" as I am using it here corresponds to Kierkegaard's "ethics"; both refer to the way that people live or fail to live a good life in their choices and social bonds. Mendelson writes of Auden that "[t]raditional forms and regular metres were among the means by which he evoked an order that existed prior to any personal intervention: physical laws, bodily instincts, social conventions, beliefs and habits inherited from a family or a culture" (Mendelson xiv). These characters each discuss their choices and habits. In some sense, the entire collection of poems takes on this "prior order" because it is presented as a commentary on Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which Auden himself inherited. Auden, though,

explores this further. By using strict forms such as Antonio's *terza rima*, Ferdinand's Petrarchan sonnet, Sebastian's sestina, and Miranda's villanelle, and supplying each with a refrain, Auden uses the regularity of the form to draw attention to how we live. In his monologue, Antonio imaginatively spurns his brother, saying, "Break your wand in half, / The fragments will join; burn your books or lose / Them in the sea, they will soon reappear, / Not even damaged: as long as I choose / To wear my fashion, whatever you wear / Is a magic robe" (Auden 144-145). The power of Antonio's threat relies on his direct address—within the drama—of Prospero. Antonio does not here question how the wand and book function as Prospero's, Shakespeare's, or Auden's artistic power. Rather, Auden regulates the rhythm to emphasize Antonio's immorality. Ferdinand's monologue, too, a Petrarchan sonnet written in iambic hexameter, reveals his moral activity in the first two lines, "Flesh, fair, unique, and you, warm secret that my kiss / Follows into meaning Miranda" (Auden 145). Ferdinand's love confession introduces an important distinction in the ethical realm: the role of the other. In the fourth line, Ferdinand refers to Miranda as, "Dear Other" (Auden 145), showing that the "other" is a crucial element of the ethical realm. However, all these characters interact with the "other" in terms of other people. The human other manifests itself in a concern for charity and politics, expressed in Gonzalo's concern that, "All have been restored to health / All have seen the Commonwealth" (148), Alonso's advice that "[W]hen warm multitudes cry / Ascend your throne majestically," (149), and Miranda's statement that, "[T]he poor and sad are real to the good king" (155). Not only Ferdinand's love poem, but also the other character's concern for politics reveals the ethical sensibility of each character. In Chapter II each character expresses a "self-forgetfulness," as noted by Lucy McDiarmid (McDiarmid 74). The moral aspect of art is not questioned in their monologues, for the art is assumed to be able to discuss morality.

Of all the poems in *The Sea and the Mirror*, Caliban's extensive prose poem obeys convention the least and affirms most the transcendence of art. In Chapter II, the characters use art to contemplate life. In Chapter III, Caliban prioritizes a discussion of art, but attempts ultimately to defend the legitimate connection of art to life. That is to say, Caliban claims that theater and poetry are not empty words, but can have real bearing on our understanding of life and our moral choices, which include also the activity of art. Because of its conspicuously unusual form and incisive questions, Caliban's monologue constitutes the crux of the poem upon which all questions of art and life most heavily rest. Caliban's intricate, unrelenting prose voice consistently and extensively refutes false understandings of art before finally affirming its ability to transcend. Spanning twenty-two pages, Caliban's poem challenges and sometimes even blames readers, subjecting them to complex and willful form that nevertheless resolves in a fully integrated understanding of art. Art, to Caliban, is all at once ethical, aesthetic, and transcendent. Mendelson writes that, for Auden, "the most unconventional form, such as the extravagantly varied prose of Caliban's impersonations...could contain uncompromising statements of psychological and ethical necessity" (Mendelson xiv). The unconventionality of his poem demands that the reader abandon all presumption and enter with new eyes; Caliban deconstructs art, as the Stage Manager and Prospero do, before remaking it to inspire the reader's understanding and love of art.

Though the Stage Manager and Prospero speak to other characters, Caliban extends the furthest, speaking "to the Audience" itself, including the reader of his monologue. Caliban begins not only by addressing the Audience, but by adopting its voice, saying, "*I speak your echo*" (Auden 156), before introducing the questions Auden has been grappling with throughout the poem. In this section, the audience (through Caliban) imaginatively addresses Shakespeare.

First, the audience questions Prospero's release of Ariel. The artist's release of the aesthetic principle constitutes an attempted moral act that the Audience, relayed by Caliban, suspects to be impossible. In the first audience-echo paragraph, the audience ponders how "imprisoned, by you...we are, we submit, in no position to set *anyone* free" (Auden 156). Though the Audience acknowledges the ethical power of art—here called, "our native Muse" (Auden 156)—"to combine and happily contrast, to make *every* shade of the social and moral palette contribute to the general richness" (Auden 157). This insight, like Chapter II of Auden's poem, legitimizes the ethical power of art in its visionary imagination, which puts people together irrespective of class to draw out the power of compassion. However, the Audience continues to question how art, which lives always and inaccessibly "on her side of the curtain" (Auden 159), can empower people to act morally. Even if the characters are moral, the Audience fears that art is so unfamiliar that it cannot change the activity of our lives. The unconventionality of art, rather than appreciated as an opportunity to question oneself, is rejected out of fear. Even the ethical force falls apart in the face of alienating social habit that accepts that "without a despised or dreaded Them to turn the back *on*, there could be no intimate or affectionate Us to turn the eye *to*," a difference Auden frames in terms of classes of respectable, genteel folk versus the people across the tracks who "have never said anything witty" (Auden 160). Indeed, the power of art becomes construed increasingly as not merely neutral, but destructive. At the end of its tirade, the Audience says, "For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and incommoded the poetic, that is a mere bagatelle compared to the damage which the poetic would inflict if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real" (Auden 164). Art and the real, to the Audience, should have nothing to do with each other, for whatever moral power art does possess destroys the real.

Before fully addressing this question, Caliban, reassuming his voice and perspective, addresses the question of art as a morally neutral, aesthetic power, responding to the concerns of the Stage Manager and Prospero. As he did when adopting the voice of the Audience, Caliban begins by ruminating on the implications of Ariel's release. However, Caliban imagines a young man who has "decided on the conjurer's profession" (Auden 164), that is, the profession of the artist. Notably, Auden uses the second person throughout this section, again addressing the audience directly. This young man uses Ariel's aesthetic power like a slaver, as Prospero could be accused of doing, making Ariel, "come when [he] call[s]" (Auden 165). Though the enslavement of Ariel is immoral, Ariel's release is not the release of Ariel but the creation of Caliban. Describing the scene of the young artist's unsuccessful release of Ariel, Caliban says,

Striding up to him in fury, you glare into his unblinking eyes and
stop dead, transfixed with horror at seeing reflected there, not what
you had always expected to see, a conqueror smiling at a
conqueror, both promising mountains and marvels, but a gibbering
fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar, for this
time indeed you haven't the only subject that you have...at last
you have come face to face with me. (Auden 166-167)

Like the Stage Manager and Prospero, Caliban scorns art that concerns itself with nothing but the aesthetic realm. Control over Ariel indicates a poetics driven by ego. Ariel's release, an attempted act of will, actually subjects the "conjurer" to "the all too solid flesh" (Auden 167), symbolized here by Caliban. Rather than keeping art and life separate, as the Audience insisted earlier, Caliban symbolically states that art and life are integrally related, and both are the object and subject of the artist.

After his consistent revisions of wrong opinions of art, Caliban offers a robust understanding of art correctly understood. Caliban's deconstruction of art is sometimes mistaken by critics, such as McDiarmid, as a disavowal of art. The imprisonment of both the audience and the characters in art, especially in theater, becomes for McDiarmid a denial of "the spiritual significance of art." Caliban, she goes on to say, can be taken most seriously because he undermines even himself (McDiarmid 74). However, to construe Caliban's correction of false opinions as a rejection of art is to miss Caliban's real mission, which is to convey the true worth of art. Caliban thoroughly, even gruffly, understands his situation as a staged character, saying, "[T]here was not a single aspect of our whole production, not even the huge stuffed bird of happiness, for which a kind word could, however patronizingly, be said" (Auden 177). If Auden had ceased writing at this point, the collection of poems would be about the art's folly and alienation from life. However, to end there is to stilt the complete work. More than any other character, Caliban defends the value of art, justifying Shakespeare in his work and Auden in his own poetry. In his last words, Caliban almost echoes Prospero: "There is nothing to say. There never was been.... There is no way out," but then says:

[N]othing has been reconstructed; our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have: only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch – we understand them at last – are feebly figurative signs, so that...we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours. (Auden 178)

The art, Caliban says, does not merely function as an imperfect means to an end or a way of encountering life by encountering its opposite. Rather, it is "not in spite of them but with" the pieces of stage and theater that we are blessed by God. Art affirms life in its activity. While the characters of Chapter II assume the moral value of art, Caliban truly justifies the ways of art to man. The characters who inhabit the ethical realm see the "other" as their fellow neighbor, whereas Caliban sees art in its relation to "that Wholly Other Life," God, and God's "perfected Work," life. Though Caliban had to insult the staginess, correct the young artist, and echo the dubious audience first, he ultimately affirms art as a way of receiving "authentic moral pardon" (Auden 178). Morality, Caliban says, is not only the object of art, but an essential aspect of the artist's creation and the audience's reception. His rambling prose poem, highly intricate and at times insulting, resolves in a series of beautiful ideas inextricable grammatically and logically from his previous deconstructions. Caliban's wholly other form prepares the reader for his idea of the "Wholly Other Life," the transcendent whose existence confirms that "the sounded note" of art "is the restored relation" (Auden 178).

Ariel, understood by Auden as the aesthetic principle, speaks the final monologue in the collection of poems and thus functions organizationally as the conclusion of Auden's poetic journey. Ariel speaks in regulated but unconventional form, but his poem includes an Echo by the Prompter. This echo, along with Ariel's love for Caliban, breaks Ariel out of a morally ambivalent aesthetic realm. In form and in his very words, Ariel depends on the other. Ariel speaks three stanzas of ten lines each in trochaic tetrameter, including three catalectic lines in the sixth, seventh, and ninth lines. Unlike the Stage Manager and Prospero, Ariel's verse is entirely consistent from stanza to stanza, indicating the ethical status of art. Though Ariel's verse has no traditional precedent, the aesthetic form remains regular, including the echo of "I" by the

Prompter, and thus embodies the harmony of art with both beauty and ethics. The Stage Manager and Prospero confess their discomfort with the moral good of art, but Ariel, functioning as the principle of art, seems not to be an “Unfeeling god.” Rather, Ariel, addressing Caliban, speaks like a jealous lover, metaphorically showing that “Elegance, art, fascination” is “Fascinated by / Drab mortality” (Auden 178). Prospero worries that art understood exclusive of anything else is “malicious by nature.” Ariel, however, shows that art cannot function exclusive of anything else. In the very structure of the poem, Ariel depends on his addressee, Caliban, and his prompter. Ariel begs of Caliban, “For my company be lonely / For my health be ill: / I will sing if you will cry,” followed by the Prompter’s “...I” (Auden 179). Though Ariel is not a person but a principle, his poem reveals Auden’s understanding of art itself, which is “Helplessly in love” with Caliban (Auden 178). Ariel, standing for art, is inextricable from Caliban, standing for life. They, in an analogical sense, are the sea and the mirror – the physical force of the sea and the *mimesis* of the mirror, needing one another to understand themselves. Ariel’s monologue, the last monologue of all, dispels the Stage Manager’s and Prospero’s fear that art is indifferent to life. Rather, art can transcend only when it is fascinated with life.

Auden cloaks *The Sea and the Mirror* in layers of art, using a play and the voices of its characters to move through different forms and therefore different understandings of art’s relation to life; Auden’s work affirms that art, no matter who the speaker, bespeaks morals, and through his poetic journey concludes that the transcendence of art enlivens it beyond its stagedness. The characters of Chapter II implicitly understand the morality of form, speaking in forms that embody – or threaten, in the case of Antonio – tradition, beauty, and charity. Art, to the characters of Chapter II, relates to life because it lives with them. Though valuable, this understanding of art cannot counter the Stage Manager and Prospero, who, because they are

artists themselves, fear that art is a morally ambivalent vacuum. The forms of their monologues nod to tradition while subverting it, informing the force of their artistic wills over the force of tradition; for them, art is a morally inert power for beauty, and they cannot trust themselves to even speak. Ariel's form bridges the gap between the aesthetic and transcendent, undercutting his own artistic force by having a radical dependence. Caliban, whose form spans dozens of pages, whose concatenated voice intelligently insults everyone and everything, operates on no assumptions. For Caliban, the value of art is not assumed, as with the characters of Chapter II. However, he does not understand himself as a morally bankrupt artist. He, more than any other voice, sees that he is not a person but a principle, not an audience but a character, a piece of theater who can bespeak the value of theater. Johnson writes that, "The work is equally a discourse on the limitations and dangers of art misused and a celebration of its right use: to make us see; to show us our place...." (Johnson 59). Auden begins with doubt in the significance of art, but his intentional experiments show a poet coming to terms with art as not just a beautiful artifact, but also an authentic moral force of ethical and transcendent goodness.

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