"The Common Life"

The twentieth century has put to test the central tenets of the Europ
Enlightenment that culminated in the Kantian self-critique of reason: h
man beings could come to understand themselves, carry out the dut
they assign themselves, and arrive at a rational ordering of the world in t
course of historical development. By bringing together the general id
of responsibility and history, the Enlightenment gave strength to its p
ticular projects of illuminating what was hitherto unknown. Human
could be seen as on the march toward this universal condition of self-f
fillment; history, in turn, could be understood as the product of hum
ingenuity as a whole. Becoming responsible for oneself and taking cha
of the world in which one lives—overcoming, in Kant's words, the inn
tendency toward "immaturity"[1]—doubtless takes a great deal of time a
may even be an "endless task," but each step toward greater responsibil
is a step closer to the goal of history: the establishment of the univer
Rights of Man and the creation of a world in which each person's tale
can develop unhindered. The catastrophic events of the twentieth centu
however, made these convictions untenable, for they showed how th
oughly the connection between responsibility and history could be s
ered. Word and deed could proceed in entirely different directions: as t
Rights of Man were being more widely proclaimed, they were being m
egregiously violated. W. H. Auden and Hannah Arendt belong to the g
eration of European and American intellectuals who experienced th
catastrophic events, and they both undertook the task of developi
novel—and one might say, responsible—responses to the enormity of t
novel phenomena they witnessed: "homelessness on an unprecedent

like sheer insanity.

Both Auden and Arendt experienced these forces firsthand. For e
years Hannah Arendt lived as a "stateless person." As Elisabeth
Bruehl recounts in her fine biography, this tumultuous period bega
Arendt was arrested in Berlin for work she was doing with Kurt B
feld's Zionist organization. Although jailed for only eight days, she
diately recognized that she had to leave Germany. She fled withou
documents through Karlsbad, Prague, and Geneva and eventually
her way to Paris, where she worked first with "Agriculture et Artisar
organization designed to prepare young Jewish émigrés for life in Pa
and later with Youth Aliyah, where she became the secretary genera
Paris office and traveled briefly in that capacity to Palestine. By 19
French government began interning refugees, and Arendt's soo
husband, Heinrich Blücher, spent three months from September
cember at a camp in Villemalard. Only a few months after his
both Arendt and Blücher were called as "enemy aliens" to report fo
port to internment camps. Arendt was interned at Gurs but escap
a few weeks to Montaubon, where by a stroke of luck she met h
band, whose camp had been evacuated when German troops
Paris. Narrowly escaping the French police, Arendt and Blüch
France via Spain and Portugal, landing in New York in 1941, wh
resided for ten years before receiving American citizenship. I
Arendt returned to Europe for six months as executive director
Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, during
time she saw the devastation of the war and guided "an operati
eventually recovered 1.5 million volumes of Hebraica and Judaica
sands of ceremonial and artistic objects, and over a thousand sc
law."[3] Despite the admirable efforts of Young-Bruehl to do
Arendt's life, little is known of her experience of statelessness. Man
private letters are lost, most significantly, perhaps, those she
Blücher during his internment at Villemalard. And Arendt is in a
reluctant to introduce her own experiences into her many broader
sions of the conditions and times through which she lived. Althou
writes extensively throughout her career about the insanity of th
world" and "mad changes"[4] she survived, Arendt writes very little
in her published works or in her private letters, about her own
ences during her eighteen years as a "displaced person." An index

ment: "At the camp of Gurs, for instance, where I had the opportunity of spending some time, I heard only once about suicide."[5] The bitter sarca of the central clause—"where I had the opportunity of spending so time"—clearly registers what remains unspoken: an unwillingness or ability to articulate her own experiences of mad times.

Auden's experiences of the "forces that look like sheer insanity" are l closely associated with his public image than Arendt's—and for good r son: he was never imprisoned or interned. Nevertheless, he was intimat familiar with the events of what he famously called the "low dishon decade" of the 1930s.[6] Having traveled to Spain in 1937, he worked as ambulance driver and propaganda broadcaster on the Republican side. ter realizing that he could successfully make a "fighting demagogic spe and have the audience roaring," he said that he "felt just covered with afterwards" and promised himself never to speak again at a political ga ering.[7] In 1938 he traveled to China with Christopher Isherwood, wh they saw, photographed, and recounted in verse and prose certain eve of the Sino-Japanese War. One of the last lines of their *Journey to a W* summarizes its direction: "And mingling with the distant mutter of gu rilla fighting, / The voice of Man: 'O teach me to outgrow my madness. Significantly less familiar than these episodes to readers of Auden's poe and prose is his service with the American military as a Bombing Resea Analyst in the Morale Division of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. job was to interview German civilians about the effects of Allied bomb on their morale. About this morbid job Auden said little and wrote no ing. Nicolas Nabokov, who also served with this Division, preserves a f of his comments:

> "I know that they had asked for it," [Auden] would say, "but still, this kin total destruction is beyond reasoning. . . . It seems like madness! . . . It is solutely ghastly. . . . [I]s it justified to reply to *their* mass-murder by *our* ma murder? It seems terrifying to me . . . And I cannot help ask myself, ' there no other way?' "[9]

In the course of his "inspection tours" of bombed-out cities Auden a came into contact with survivors of Nazi extermination camps: "'None us could have imagined that [the Germans] could go that far. . . . Th applied to it the same pedantic organizational skills a piano-tuner d when he tunes a virtuoso's concert piano grand,' and Auden would st

with his friend James Stern, another member of the Strategic Bo
Survey, that the two of them would write a book about their expe
in Germany, but on his return to the States Auden simply decline
so.[11] That "none of us could have imagined" what took place also
for Auden at least, that the hitherto unimaginable should not be
into the subject matter of an aesthetic image.

Auden's silence about the catastrophes he "surveyed" is, in sum, t
of another and intimately related catastrophe: that language—whic
source of all human talents and capabilities, especially those of the
can nevertheless be rendered incapable of doing what it is supposed
namely, communicate. Or if it does communicate, it soon become
dacious, regardless of what anyone tries to say. Arendt's silence
even more acute than Auden's. And one suspects that even if we
possession of her lost letters, Arendt's silence would not be fundam
broken. The brutality of the events makes those who experience the
"brutes": bereft of language at the very moment it may be needed
As the etymological relation between *brutality* and *brute* already su
the conviction that brutality is not simply, or even primarily, a p
phenomenon but, above all, a linguistic event is ancient: Thucydid
ter account of the revolution in Corcyra and Sallust's savagely ins
exposition of the corruption to which Roman moral language h
cumbed communicate this conviction with incomparable vivid
Auden and Arendt revive, and revise the terms of, Thucydides' a
lust's ancient conviction. And so, too, in other ways, do the more
members of their generation: Orwell, Camus, and Benjamin—to
only three very different writers from different traditions—all
come to terms with the loss of language from which brutality ari
into which it issues. Wherever language and action no longer corr
with each other; wherever the relationship between language and
is misunderstood, misrepresented, or obscured, there emerge the
tions for brutality. Propaganda, ideology, mass indoctrination, th
nique of the "big lie"—everything that Walter Benjamin summari
der the term "objective mendacity"[13]—falsify reality to such an
that descriptions of the world cannot be distinguished from prescr
for wide-scale murder. As Arendt notes with her usual acumen, "a
class' consisted of people condemned to death; races that are 'u
live' were to be exterminated."[14]

strophic events of the twentieth century that are at every moment respo
sive to the incapacity of language in the presence of outrageous brutal
Whereas the thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment tended
conceive of responsibility in terms of duties toward oneself and othe
Auden and Arendt think of it, as the etymology suggests, in terms of la
guage: they both understand that once language is threatened, no app
to "duties" is of any service, and any such appeal may be nothing oth
than a mendacious mode of irresponsibility. Auden expresses the conv
tion under which both of them conceive of their obligation as writers i
particularly succinct manner: "The duties of a writer as a writer and a c
izen are not the same. The only duty a writer has as a citizen is to defe
language. And this is a *political* duty. Because, if language is corrupte
thought is corrupted."[15] If thought is corrupted—the suggestion runs
not only is there no possibility of "enlightenment," but a finely tuned b
tality can soon take its place.

I. Making Distinctions, Becoming Friends

The duty to defend language against those forces that would corrup
enters into the very texture of both Arendt's and Auden's work. One of
indispensable dimensions of their defense of language consists in maki
distinctions among ethical and juridical terms that are often used int
changeably. As an inconspicuous example of this tendency, Auden int
rupts a wide-ranging reflection on the character of Falstaff he publish
in the journal *Encounter* to distinguish between forgiveness and pardon
Because drama cannot display this distinction with sufficient clarity, f
giveness, according to Auden, cannot be unambiguously made into
dramatic act. For this reason, the parable of forgiveness from whi
Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* can be seen to develop, as Auden p
ceeds to explain, "does not quite work."[17] However one understands
evaluation of the play and its parable—which he compares unfavora
with the Hasidic parable of "the ten principles of service"[18]—his ins
tence that forgiveness be distinguished from pardon implicitly responds
Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*, which he had elaborately praised
Encounter five months before.[19] Apparently, Auden mentioned to Aren
that his Falstaff essay touches on issues with which she, too, is co
cerned.[20] After obtaining a copy of this essay, Arendt writes a tigh

had failed to distinguish between forgiveness and judicial pardon
concession generates a whole series of further distinctions—all of
serve to defend language against the threat of corruption that, as
subtly suggests in his essay, appears in the almost diabolical figure
gelo, who is both pardoned and forgiven at the end of *Measure for M*

Arendt's letter to Auden brings into view the deeply serious and
same time lightly comic relationship between these two equally im
figures of twentieth-century literature and thought. Auden's interl
Measure for Measure can be distilled into a single insight: even Shak
could not produce a drama of forgiveness equal to the absolute cl
Christian charity. Arendt, while recognizing her failure to distingu
giveness from judicial pardon in *The Human Condition*, neverthe
sists on what she modestly calls her "prejudice": "Of course I am
diced, namely against charity. But let me make a stand for my prej
. . . Charity indeed forgives *ueberhaupt*, it forgives betrayal in the
who betrayed—on the ground, to be sure, of human sinfulness and
idarity with the sinner. I would admit that there is a great tempta
forgive in the spirit of Who am I to judge?, but I'd rather resist it.
den's Falstaff essay and, in even more expansive form, *The Dyer's H*
a whole, is committed to the kind of charity against which Arend
her stand:

> Temporal Justice demands the use of force to quell the unjust; it d
> prudence, a practical reckoning with time and place; and it demands
> ity for its laws and its penalties. But Charity forbids all three—we ar
> resist evil, if a man demand our coat we are to give him our cloak also
> to take no thought for the morrow and, while secretly fasting and givin
> we are to appear in public as persons who do neither.[23]

To which Arendt replies in her letter: "I do not know what is mo
cult: to demand a coat or to give the cloak also, but I am quite sure
is more difficult to ask than to give forgiveness."[24]

The fundamentally different attitudes that Arendt and Auden he
respect to Christian charity did not hinder their intellectual exchan
the contrary, this disagreement gives meaning and direction t
friendship. Arendt recognizes Auden's exceptional critical intell
Not only does she concede in her letter that forgiveness must be
distinguished from judicial pardon; she also acknowledges two

we forgive what was done for the sake of who did it" and "You are enti
right (and I was entirely wrong) in that punishment is a necessary alt
native only to judicial pardon." Auden, for his part, calls Arendt "one
the most intelligent persons now living,"[25] and much of *The Dyer's Ha*
closely parallels the direction of thought Arendt takes in her *Human Co*
dition—so much so that an irate reader once wrote an indignant letter
Auden, accusing him of plagiarism. Auden obviously forwarded this lu
crous letter to Arendt, who lovingly preserved it among her papers.[26]
author had failed to note that much of the book was written before
publication of Arendt's volume and that, in any case, Auden acknowled
the similarity between their lines of thought. The epigraph to the essay
voted to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, for example, derives fr
Arendt's discussion of plurality in *The Human Condition* and is in part
ular concerned with what she calls "the faculty of forgiving."[27]

Arendt's letter to Auden, which begins in a mood of serious intellect
debate, ends as an RSVP: "Thanks ever so much for birthday invitati
I accept with pleasure. I'll be a bit late (have a dinner engagement befo
but long before 'carriage time.'" Of the remaining handful of extent l
ters, none is as long, detailed, or philosophically substantial as this o
but all of them share the bantering tone with which the initial letter en
"Carriage time" refers to Auden's habit, from 1955 onward, of closing
annual birthday party invitations with "carriages at one A.M."[28] Althou
they had crossed paths earlier, Auden and Arendt became acquainted o
in late 1958, the same year that *The Human Condition* was first publish
Auden was so taken by the book that he telephoned Arendt to thank
for having written it and then wrote a review for *Encounter*, which
published in June of 1959.[29] His review was so laudatory that the editors
the University of Chicago Press decided to quote a passage from it for p
motional purposes, and this passage continues to be reprinted on the ba
of every volume today: "Every now and then, I come across a book wh
gives me the impression of having been especially written for me. . . .
Human Condition belongs to this small and select class."[30] Althou
Arendt was rather embarrassed by the effusive tone of Auden's review, th
nevertheless developed a close friendship that lasted until Auden's death
1973.[31] Both living in New York City, the two saw each other fairly re
larly, although it was Auden who was more frequently hosted by Aren
and her husband at their home on Riverside Drive. Auden would oft

would fast so long that he would be invited to stay for dinner." ... who worried over Auden and his "slum apartment,"[33] describ... friend's habits with a mixture of deep affection and unmistakable ... She was particularly exasperated by the fact that Auden had only o... which meant that he could never get it cleaned.[34] Despite her ... Arendt tried to look after Auden whenever she could, taking him t... partment store and insisting that he buy a second suit.[35] After ... died in 1970, Arendt gave Auden her late husband's sports jacket... wearing a dead man's coat,' Auden would say, chuckling, very pleas... a good thing was not being wasted."[36] And both might have been ... that they had finally reached a point of compromise with respect to... tian charity: he did not demand the coat, and she did not give him ... also.

Arendt, more importantly, did not give herself to him. Auden as... to marry him in 1970, and she refused. Many years earlier, in 1935, ... had married Erika Mann to secure her a British passport when th... authorities threatened to take away her German citizenship. The... tionship was never consummated, of course: it was a purely legal a... ment intended to provide safe passage to Mann out of Germany. ... theless, they remained married until Mann's death in 1969.[37] Soo... the death of Heinrich Blücher in 1970, Stephen Spender, Auden's... for many years, apparently began sending out feelers on his behalf, ... Mary McCarthy, "wouldn't Wystan make a good husband for Ha... To which she replied, "Are you mad?"[38] Arendt's own reaction to ... proposal was no less extreme:

> Auden came—looking so much like a clochard that the doorman ca... him, fearful that he might be God knows what. The evening was st... say the least. (The following just for you [McCarthy], please rememb... he came back to New York only because of me, that I was of great imp... for him, that he loved me very much, etc. I tried to quiet him down ... ceeded quite well. In my opinion: Oxford where he hoped to go for g... turned him down (I suppose) and he is desperate to find some other ... place. I see the necessity but I know that I can't do it, in other words, ... turn him down. I have a hunch that this happened to him once to... namely being turned down, and I am almost besides myself when I ... the whole matter. But I can't change that; it would simply be suicide-... than suicide as a matter of fact.[39]

however, end their friendship. They continued to see each other until A
den found a place for himself in Oxford after all and left New York
good two years later. Their respect for each other expressed itself in n
merous publications: in addition to his early review of *The Human Co
dition*, Auden dedicated *Forewords and Afterwords* to her; Arendt de
cated her essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations" to Auden.
repeatedly quotes from her writings in *The Dyer's Hand* and *A Certa
World*; she prefaces her great essay on Bertolt Brecht with some lines fro
his poem cycle "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," delivers a moving eulogy
ter his death, and often quotes his poetry in her posthumously publish
Life of the Mind.[40] In addition to these public tributes, they helped a
encouraged each other in various, more private, ways, as well. Arendt r
ommended German translators and had one of her former students
Korean monk, issue Auden an invitation to his monastery in Minneso
"It's a good place to be from every viewpoint," she writes him in the su
mer of 1971, "except weather in the winter."[41] Auden, for his part, tries
persuade Arendt to visit him in Oxford: "I should so love to see you a
visiting Fellow of All Souls," he writes in the summer of 1973, shortly
fore his death, "even though that would mean enduring A. L. Rowse's
natic conversations."[42]

Arendt never made it to Oxford. The last time they saw each other,
sensed the seriousness of his frailty: "I also saw Auden before he left
England. For the first time he looks not only unhappy and neglected
sick. I hope it was only exhaustion from packing and leaving, but I dou
it."[43] Arendt's eulogy begins and ends with the immense misery in wh
he lived his last years. Although she continually refers to his poetry a
emphasizes the greatness of his poetic talent, she also recounts intim
details of Auden's life: that he was forced to use the toilet in the neighb
hood liquor store when the water in his apartment stopped functioni
for example, or when his stained and overused suit suddenly came ap
at the seams—"in brief, whenever disaster hit before your very eyes.
Nevertheless, Arendt opens her eulogy with a statement that would l
her auditors to expect nothing of this: "I met Auden late in life at an
when the easy knowledgeable intimacy of friendships concluded in on
youth can no longer be attained, because not enough life is left, or
pected to be left, to share with each other. Thus we were very good frie
but not intimate friends."[45] With this hairsplitting distinction, Aren

markable features: their shared avidity for making distinctions. *T*
man Condition has no more pressing goal than the articulation of t
tinctions within the *vita activa*, labor, work, and action; elsewhere,
distinguishes "personality" from "individuality";[46] her early reflecti
the course of post-emancipation European Jewry contrasts the Paria
the Parvenu; and even earlier, her dissertation, following Augustine
out the internal divisions within the phenomenon of love. Thro
his career as poet and critic, Auden, who also had a deep familiari
Augustine's writings, concentrated on the infinitely delicate, som
zany, delineation of love in all its "infinite varieties."[47] And in *Th*
Hand, the zeal for distinctions generates a catalogue of wonderful,
tive, and often humorous oppositions: the Virgin and the Dynamo
and Mabels; Prosperos and Ariels; what is boring and what a bo
niuses and apostles; the I and the self. One of Auden's major poe
flects the zeal he shares with Arendt in its very title, *The Sea and th*
ror—where the sea is the place in which distinctions disappear, the
the site of their transfiguration.

Comparing Auden's poetry with Brecht's, Arendt includes in her
an even more unexpected distinction than the one between very go
intimate friends: "Auden, so much wiser—though by no means sm
than Brecht, was aware early on that, 'poetry makes nothing happen
eulogy, unlike a critical essay, is not generally a place for careful d
tions among terms of approbation. Arendt's seemingly pedantic ins
on distinguishing wisdom from intelligence—and compared to Bre
all people!—might seem jarring, even inappropriate, if not unde
from the perspective of the shared avidity for making distinctions t
hallmark of their friendship from the very beginning. Auden int
his reflections on Falstaff to delineate some distinctions that were
from *The Human Condition*. And Arendt responds in kind—no
conceding that forgiveness and pardon are indeed different and th
detailing a set of corresponding distinctions but also concluding
flections with a final distinction that parodies her own apparent pe
"I better stop. I hope you don't think I am being quarrelsome and,
tiresome. But if you do, you will, please, be kind, and forget it."[49] T
tinction between *quarrelsome* and *tiresome*, each of which names a
mind in which one makes too many distinctions, could hardly b
comic. Having written only a few lines earlier, "it is more difficult

parody of her own letter—does not ask Auden to forgive her for be
quarrelsome or tiresome, if either is the case; rather, she bids him "for
it": forget not the previous distinctions, which retain their validity a
significance, but whatever in her remarks would undermine their dev
oping friendship. Arendt's comic send-off contains in miniature her u
derstanding of friendship and reverberates with one of Auden's charact
istic traits: regardless of her strenuous effort to make decisive political a
ethical distinctions among often-conflated terms, Arendt is willing
"forget it" if, under certain circumstances, this effort makes friendship i
possible.[50] And Auden, as Arendt writes, is wise enough to understa
that, for all his life-long passion and need to create poetry, "poetry ma
nothing happen." One of Auden's late poems called "The Common Li
closes with a particularly understated, even prosaic expression of t
shared sensibility:

> and always, though truth and love
> can never really differ, when they seem to,
> the subaltern should be truth.[51]

II. Commensurability

The sensibility Auden and Arendt share also finds expression in one
the major addresses Arendt wrote and delivered during the time in wh
they were first becoming friends, "On Humanity in Dark Tim
Thoughts about Lessing."[52] The address to the "free city of Hamburg"
organized around what Arendt calls Lessing's "highly unorthodox op
ions about truth": "He refused to accept any truths whatever, even th
presumably handed down by Providence, and he never felt compelled
truth, be it imposed by others' or by his own reasoning processes.
Arendt's prooftext for her sympathetic exposition of Lessing's celebrati
of close—but not intimate—friendship is his most famous play, *Nath
the Wise*: "In the end, after all, Nathan's wisdom consists solely in
readiness to sacrifice truth to friendship."[54] As Arendt recognizes, this p
enjoys an iconic status: developed out of Lessing's great friendship w
Moses Mendelssohn, it represents an ideal image of Christian-Jewish
and Islamic—relations. The imperative under which this image opera
is not the Kantian categorical imperative, which, like Christian char

even paradoxical demand that Nathan makes on some of the indi
he meets: "We must, must be friends."[55]

Arendt's address on Lessing amplifies and clarifies her initial le
Auden and can even be seen to determine its horizon. She has a
dice" against Christian charity because it is always unfriendly: frie
is discriminating and makes distinctions, whereas charity cannot
ther. But Auden, who has made clear his prejudice in favor of ch
nevertheless—or for this very reason—a friend: a friend not beca
shares her opinions but because, like Arendt, he recognizes that t
and open exchange of opinions is the *conditio sine qua non* of frie
Whether conscious or not, Arendt and Auden create a friendship
middle years of the twentieth century that resonates with the frie
that developed between Lessing and Mendelssohn in the middle y
the eighteenth—and is almost as unlikely: just as Lessin
Mendelssohn came from, and for the most part remained within, v
ferent worlds, so, too, do Arendt and Auden. None of this sugges
there is a one-to-one correspondence between these four figures: th
ish Arendt for Mendelssohn, and the Protestant Auden for Lessing
reverse, Arendt as a modern Lessing, who champions friendship ov
trine, and Auden as a renewed Mendelssohn, who seeks to find
vincing manner in which a religious doctrine can meet the needs a
mands of his contemporaries. Rather, in both cases, a frie
developed under improbable circumstances because each of the
recognized and appreciated the other's "openness to the world,"[56]
less of any doctrinal allegiances. If ever there arises a conflict b
truth and friendship, truth must be, as Auden writes, "the subalter

This shared sensibility makes the relation between Auden and A
beyond any personal interaction, into an auspicious place to reconsi
"ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. The famous phra
cient quarrel" derives from the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*.[57] Aft
ing concluded their discussion of the just city, Socrates and Glaucon
to the topic of an earlier conversation concerning the various form
functions of poetic language. At the end of this discussion, they dec
ter all, that "we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns
gods and praises of good men."[58] The quarrel between philosophy a
etry can be decided in favor of the former only under the conditio
the two antagonists be commensurable. For Plato, the measure

which is only the imitation of an imitation of the true world, it is the
ambiguous victor. Plato's manner of deciding the "ancient quarrel"—ma
ing poetry and philosophy commensurable by measuring them bo
against the standard of truth—has determined the terms in which the re
tionship between poetry and philosophy has been cast ever since. The P
tonic hierarchy can be altered, of course: the poet can be understood
represent the true world in a more immediate and therefore truer mann
than the philosopher. More radically, the poet in the widest sense of
term—the inventor, the fabricator, the falsifier—can be seen to stand clo
than the philosopher to the truth of chaos: the paradoxical "truth" t
there is, after all, no truth. Nietzsche's "reversal" of the Platonic hierarc
with which both Arendt and Auden were intimately familiar, decides
"ancient quarrel" in favor of poets because they, unlike philosophers,
not measure themselves against fixed and stable standards but, instead, c
ate anew the very standards for their own creations.[59] And this incess
drive toward innovation makes poetic creations more adequate, more fai
ful, and thus "truer" to the only true world: the ever-changing and all-
compassing chaos that philosophers since Plato have erroneously sought
capture, stabilize, and bring into order once and for all. Nietzsche's de
sion of the "ancient quarrel" in favor of the poet issues into a formal pa
dox akin to the "Cretan Liar's Paradox," for the statement that poetry
truer than philosophy presents itself as a philosophical proposition a
must therefore be considered untrue as long as it is true.[60]

The commensurability of Auden and Arendt consists in a shared co
mitment to a different kind of paradox altogether—an ethical paradox
the heart of friendship. Neither follows Nietzsche and dissolves truth in
a powerful error. For both of them, truth remains all-important; it cann
be sacrificed, least of all for the goal of increased power. Yet it must be s
rificed under certain conditions: whenever it makes something like frien
ship—understood in the widest sense as a relation among singular bein
each of whom remains incommensurable with any other—impossib
Truth, in other words, retains all its prerogatives; but it must neverthel
be the "subaltern" as well. Respect for this paradox does not mean, for A
den and Arendt, that they welcome aporias for their own sake; rather, bo
carefully confront paradoxical conditions, circumstances, and formu
tions without either the sanguine-optimistic attitude that all impasses
be overcome or the melancholic-pessimistic attitude that nothing can

to discovering and disclosing the truth, both are equally prepared
linquish a claim to having captured a truth, however large or small
claim destroys the possibility of becoming friends. Such is the f
Arendt's memorable words in her letter to Auden: "I hope you don
I am being quarrelsome and, worse, tiresome. But if you do, yo
please, be kind, and forget it."

One of the surest signs of both Auden's and Arendt's respect f
ethical paradox is their renewed appreciation of *doxa* (opinion). As
qualified champion of *epistēmē* (knowledge), which orients itself
universals, Plato had little regard for the "it seems to me" (*deiknu*
which individuality announces itself .[61] Nietzsche's reversal of Pla
promotes competing perspectives, each of which struggles for
height, which is to say, increased power. What is lost in this "p
tivism" is the common world through which viewpoints become p
tives in the first place; without a common world onto which differe
spectives open, any talk of *perspective* is misplaced. Because Aren
Auden never lose sight of this common world, they never fall into t
mal paradox of perspectivism: if there are only perspectives and n
mon world, there can be no perspectives in the strict sense of th
Arendt and Auden therefore keep perspectives "doxic," and this c
corresponding—ethical—paradox: each *doxa* or opinion claims to b
and yet these claims must be abrogated if any one of them destr
doxic condition of plural perspectives on a world held in comm
grateful appreciation of *doxa* permeates all of Arendt's work and le
example, to her praise of Lessing: "Lessing's greatness does not
consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth
the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that
fore, the unending discourse among men will never cease so long a
are men at all."[62] For Auden, a commitment to, and celebration of,
seems to me" manifests itself with exceptional clarity in the conc
words of his "commonplace book," *A Certain World*:

> What the poet has to convey is not "self-expression," but a view of a
> common to all, seen from a unique perspective, which it is his duty a
> his pleasure to share with others. To small truths as well as great, St.
> tine's words apply. "The truth is neither mine nor his nor another's;
> longs to us all whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly
> account it private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it."[63]