

"I consider Iceland / [...] a very nice land" : communicableness and co-creativity in W.H. Auden's and Louis MacNeice's Letters from Iceland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie**

Band (Jahr): **72 (2022)**

PDF erstellt am: **29.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-976362>

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“I consider Iceland / [...] a very nice land”:¹ Communicableness and Co-Creativity in W.H. Auden’s and Louis MacNeice’s *Letters from Iceland*

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Keywords: co-creativity, collaborative writing, communication, Iceland, role-playing

1. Introduction

In the summer of 1936, W.H. Auden went on a journey to Iceland in the company of Louis MacNeice. The outcome of this journey is an unconventional travel-book, the fulfilment of a commission by Faber & Faber.² *Letters from Iceland*, published in 1937, assembles poems by both authors, letters they wrote to actual and fictional friends at home and abroad, snippets from earlier travel accounts and Icelandic sagas, as well as photographs taken by Auden (see Bryant 1991; Regard 2017). The book has left critics somewhat bewildered. It has been called a “literary anomaly” (Greaves 2016: par. 3):

As a modernist collage, it fails to deliver for various reasons: because its “democratic” tone is inconsistent with high modernism, because it doesn’t appear to be an autonomous, autotelic artefact but on the contrary to be composed of a miscellany ranging from poetry to private letters to pages of facts and figures, not to mention a camp exercise in transgendered comic fiction, and also because both poets have plundered it and published discrete parts elsewhere (Greaves 2016: par. 3).

Greaves goes on to cite James Matthew Wilson (2007), who regards the book as “the last, best joke of high modernist literature” and suggests embracing *Letters from Iceland* “because it is *less* than the sum of its parts”. In this contrary manner, he arrives at a thorough defence of the book:

The achievement of the volume as a whole lies in the way it insists on being at once a campy, trivial miscellany for tourists and an extended reflection on the problematic of modern European life. This synthesis [makes it] [...] one of the most complex and entertaining literary works of the modernist period (Wilson 2007: n.p.).

1 The quotation is from “Letter to Lord Byron”, Part IV (see *Letters*: 215). All quotations refer to this edition.

2 The commission had replaced an earlier one by Jonathan Cape, who had originally asked Auden to write a novel (see Mendelson 1996: 767).

This still does not fully answer, however, the question of what this book actually *is* and how it integrates its form with its purpose. We suggest looking at its very last section for a clue, the poem written as an “Epilogue” by MacNeice, “For W. H. Auden”. MacNeice describes the undertaking, in retrospect, as a holiday: “Holidays should be like this” (*Letters*: 288) – a line in which “this” not only refers to the journey but also, in the fashion of the most canonical of English poetry, to the written work itself. The trip and the book are “Free from over-emphasis” (*Letters*: 288) and “Sandwiched in a graver show” (*Letters*: 287), a momentary respite from the world which looms before and after, as the references to the Spanish Civil War and the “Aryan” Olympic Games with their sinister forebodings remind us. The keynote of this epilogue, however, is loneliness: “Now the winter nights begin / Lonely comfort walls me in” (*Letters*: 287):

Here in Hampstead I sit late
Nights which no one shares and wait
For the 'phone to ring or for
Unknown angels at the door;

Better were the northern skies
Than this desert in disguise –
[...] (*Letters*: 289).

By contrast, we learn what the trip was and the book is: whereas the speaker sits alone in the desert disguised as a comfortable Hampstead home and without anyone establishing contact (by phone or at the door), the journey and the book are all about companionship and communication. In the light of MacNeice’s epilogue, the point of *Letters from Iceland* is that it is by Auden *and* MacNeice, and that all its items are covered by the title, *Letters ...*, no matter whether the individual pieces are expressly presented in letter form or not. Writing is social in its mode of production and its correspondence with a reader (the recipient of the letter but also the external reader participating in the communication).

Even the book’s ostensible theme, Iceland and its people, participates in the collaborative nature of the work. In the Preface, for instance, Auden and MacNeice write:

A travel book owes so little to the writers, and so much to the people they meet, that a full and fair acknowledgement on the part of the former is impossible.

We must beg those hundreds of anonymous Icelanders, farmers, fishermen, busmen, children, etc., who are the real authors of this book to accept collectively our gratitude (*Letters*: vii).

Accordingly, in MacNeice’s epilogue, there is nothing worse than being cut off, living in “a pit / Humming” (*Letters*: 289):

With the fear of loneliness
And uncommunicableness;
All the wires are cut, my friends
Live beyond the severed ends (*Letters*: 289).

In Iceland, no man was an island; the trip was an experience of togetherness and communication. “So I write these lines for you” writes MacNeice in the next stanza (*Letters*: 290), meaning both Auden and the reader: the lines of the poem are the lines that are not cut and establish a permanent connection. MacNeice’s wonderful coinage “un-

communicableness” (which has not made it into the *OED*, even though there is an entry for “communicableness”) is like a portmanteau he has brought back, containing – despite its feared negation – the “ableness” and being “communicable” in the sense of being connected (*OED* 1.), ready to converse (*OED* 4.), and suitable for communication (*OED* 6.).³ In the desired holiday spirit of the poem, we also notice a “cable” in the word, echoed by the “wires” of communication that the speaker fears will be cut.

In the double perspective of being socially written and written as communication, *Letters from Iceland* can be read as a poetics of co-creativity. In this sense, form and purpose of the book are one, and we may appreciate it without having to be irritated by the fact that it is neither primarily a travel-book about Iceland nor an “autonomous, autotelic artefact” (Greaves 2016: par. 3). As Tim Youngs (2004: 69) has pointed out, referring to Paulin (1978: 73), Auden and MacNeice’s book is characterized by a “social form in keeping with their democratic interest in people rather than landscape”. While this is plausible, we would still like to point out that communication and co-creativity are not just devices to come to terms with Iceland, but Iceland and its co-authoring people are integrated into the creative communication which is the point of the book. In MacNeice’s poem “Iceland” (*Letters*: 252–254), Iceland itself becomes an image of the book and journey being “Sandwiched in a graver show” (*Letters*: 287): neither the “trippers North” nor “the people themselves / Who live here” have minds that are a “match / For this land’s girth” (*Letters*: 253). The speaker evokes an Icelandic past (“ancestors”) in which the end of the world was envisaged as a “Relapse to rock” and “The strife of life / Were an interlude / Which soon must pass” (*Letters*: 254).

In this apocalyptic prospect, the islanders are perceived as people who “Ignore / The brooding fear” (*Letters*: 253). As MacNeice’s epilogue shows, this cannot be done forever. But still there is no alternative to a co-creative communication that strives to extend itself as far as possible. Structurally, this is reflected in *Letters from Iceland* through the use of a framing technique marked by Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron” at the beginning, and “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament” at the end, before the epilogue. Since “Letter to Lord Byron” is continued throughout the book, it becomes a structural device itself, but throughout its parts remains an extension of communication into the past. The “Last Will and Testament” not only stands out as the one co-authored poem in a co-authored book but also, by virtue of the genre it parodies, as an extension of communication into the future. For these reasons, the two poems will deserve a closer look as contributions to a poetics of co-creativity. The authors’ role-playing on the stage of Iceland stands in the middle (“Hetty to Nancy”) and also merits special attention as a reflection on collaborative imagination.

3 The praise for coining the expression “communicableness” should go to John Donne; see *OED*. For definitions, the *OED* refers to the slightly later synonym “communicability” and implicitly points to its portmanteau-like quality: “The quality or fact of being communicable; ability to communicate or be communicated.” We recognize the two definitions by segmenting the compound “communicableness” as either “communicable-ness” or “communic-ableness”.

2. “I brought a Byron with me to Iceland”: W.H. Auden’s “Letters to Byron”

The “travel book” opens with the first of altogether five “Letters to Byron” composed by W.H. Auden.⁴ In the opening stanzas, Auden voices an apology to the earlier author:

Excuse, my lord, the liberty I take
 In thus addressing you. I know that you
 Will pay the price of authorship and make
 The allowances an author has to do.
 A poet's fan-mail will be nothing new.
 And then a lord – Good Lord, you must be peppered,
 Like Gary Cooper, Coughlin, or Dick Sheppard,

 With notes from perfect strangers starting, “Sir,
 I liked your lyrics, but *Childe Harold's* trash”,
 “My daughter writes, should I encourage her?”
 Sometimes containing frank demands for cash,
 Sometimes sly hints at a platonic pash,
 And sometimes, though I think this rather crude,
 The correspondent's photo in the rude (*Letters*: 3).

The overall tone is rather tongue-in-cheek, as the verse epistle “places us firmly in a milieu that is both social and fantastic” (Moir 2016: 170). Auden is aware of the “liberty” he is taking – not only in addressing such a famous author but also in his transgressing a temporal boundary. 112 years after Byron’s death, Auden puts himself in the position of a fan: “A poet’s fan-mail” is ambiguous as well, referring both to Byron but also to himself and playing with Byron’s image as a celebrity who received both “demands for cash” and “hints at a platonic pash”.⁵

As if in anticipation of reactions to the *Letters from Iceland*, with criticism of their “anomaly” and incoherence, Auden refers to Byron’s *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in itself charged with “structural incoherence” (Beatty 2019: 264).⁶ From the beginning, we also get allusions to Auden’s contemporaries, in a vein similar to Byron’s references in his poems (see Youngs 2004: 73): he refers to Byron’s being “peppered” like Gary Cooper, the actor, as well as the priests Charles Coughlin and Richard Sheppard – strange bedfellows, as one may note.⁷ Byron is thus turned into a contemporary of Auden’s. The second stanza ends with another apparently anachronistic reference, namely “The correspondent’s photo in the rude”, entailing an obvious paronomasia (rude, nude) and continuing the half-serious

4 See chapters I, V, VIII, XIII, XVI. The fifth letter was entirely omitted from the second edition (published in 1967), and the “Last Will and Testament” “accordingly renumbered XVI”; see Auden (1996: 803 n).

5 The *OED* defines “pash, *n.*” as: “Passion, amorous feeling; a brief infatuation, a crush.”

6 The fact that Auden uses the Chaucerian rhyme royal, whereas Byron in *Childe Harold* uses Spenserian stanzas (see Beatty 2019: 265), adds a further historical dimension to the poem.

7 Mendelson (1996: 774 n. 179) writes in his annotation on Auden’s first letter to Byron: “Father Charles Coughlin’s right-wing religious broadcasts had a huge audience in America; the milder Richard Sheppard, canon of St Paul’s, had a comparable British audience”.

tone and setup of the letter.⁸ As the letter continues, the topic of communication is addressed in stanza 3:

And as for manuscripts – by every post ...
 I can't improve on Pope's shrill indignation,
 But hope that it will please his spiteful ghost
 To learn the use in culture's propagation
 Of modern methods of communication;
 New roads, new rails, new contacts, as we know
 From documentaries by the G.P.O. (*Letters*: 3).⁹

The “modern methods of communication” are, however, not something that Auden particularly cherishes, as he points out as he goes on: since confession is no longer available to Englishmen on the “British Isles [that] went Protestant” (*Letters*: 3), “there's nothing but the wall / Of public lavatories on which to scrawl” (*Letters*: 4). It is, eventually, his loneliness that instigates him to write the letter: “The fact is, I'm in Iceland all alone” (*Letters*: 4).¹⁰ Since the point of the journey to Iceland was to be the communication of poets (see MacNeice's loneliness in Hampstead after their return, as expressed in the epilogue), Auden seeks the companionship of a fellow poet, even while MacNeice is still absent.

But why Byron? It is only later in the course of *Letters from Iceland*, in chapter XI, that Auden comments on his “Letters to Byron” and reveals Byron to be a model for the poet as traveler, in his second letter to Erika Mann Auden:

Friday. [...]

In the bus to-day I had a bright idea about this travel book. I brought a Byron with me to Iceland, and I suddenly thought I might write him a chatty letter in light verse about anything I could think of, Europe, literature, myself. He's the right person I think, because he was a townie, a European, and disliked Wordsworth and that kind of approach to nature, and I find that very sympathetic (*Letters*: 148).

Auden would reiterate the issue he was having with Wordsworth in his entry on “George Gordon Byron” for *Fifteen Poets* (written in 1938, published in 1941): “he [Byron] became a great poet. For Byron was not really odd like Wordsworth; his experiences were those of the ordinary man. He had no unusual emotional or intellectual vision” (Auden 1996: 489). Apart from a shared dislike of Wordsworth and his attitude towards nature, Auden chooses Byron exactly for what MacNeice, in the epilogue, was to praise about their time in Iceland, “[w]ith no miracles evoked”: “In that island never found / Visions blossom from the ground” (*Letters*: 288). Neither Auden nor Byron nor MacNeice wander lonely as a cloud, spotting daffodils before the inward eye in a bliss of solitude.

8 According to Mendelson (1996: 774 n. 179), the photo in question was sent to Auden by the American poet Frederic Prokosch. The reference is a veiled allusion known to few of Auden's contemporary readers, exactly in the manner of Byron.

9 The acronym most probably stands for “General Post Office”. Bryant (1997: 67) comments on this: “This allusion to *Night Mail*, *BBC: Voice of Britain*, and other films about national communications points to documentarists' ostensible purpose of promoting connections among Britain's various citizens; in other words, documentary itself was a new form of communication”.

10 Mendelson (1996: 768) states that, “Auden left for Iceland around 16 May [sic] 1936. MacNeice joined him around 8 or 9 August”. The date given here is wrong: Auden was still in Hull by early June, and left for Iceland from there (see, for example, Regard 2017: par. 3).

From the beginning, Auden is aware of the fact that Iceland is not really what is at stake in the travel-book he was commissioned to write:

This letter in itself will have very little to do with Iceland, but will be rather a description of an effect of travelling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one's past and one's culture from the outside. But it will form a central thread on which I shall hang other letters to different people more directly about Iceland. Who the people will be I haven't the slightest idea yet, but I must choose them, so that each letter deals with its subject in a different and significant way. The trouble about travel books as a rule, even the most exciting ones, is that the actual events are all extremely like each other – meals – sleeping accommodation – fleas – dangers, etc., and the repetition becomes boring. The usual alternative, which is essays on life prompted by something seen, the kind of thing Lawrence and Aldous Huxley do, I am neither clever enough nor sensitive enough to manage (*Letters*: 148–149).

Auden's letters to Byron are hence part of his strategy not to "become [...] boring"; they are part of his plan to be entertaining, to communicate, as he points out in the conclusion to the first letter: "So this, my opening chapter, has to stop / With humbly begging everybody's pardon. [...] / Last from the general public he must beg / Permission now and then to pull their leg" (*Letters*: 10). This goes well with the holiday-like nature of the book, and is indebted to Byron himself, who loved to make fun of his public.¹¹ In fact, the letter inspires him to be funny, or at least so he finds (on this topic, see Regard 2017: par. 7):

Reykjavik, Sunday, August 9th

It's a very long time since I added anything to this letter, but I have been absorbed in the Byron letter. I've finished a draft of the first canto and bits of the second and third. My trouble is that the excitement of doing a kind of thing I've never tried to do before keeps making me think it's better and funnier than it is, which is the reverse of what I usually find (*Letters*: 155–156).

Auden here presents himself as working simultaneously on letters to different addressees, creating a network of communication that allows him to connect the past with the present, Byron's style and method with present-day concerns. As Youngs (2004: 73) notes:

The plodding iambic pentameter and hard rhyme of that last line suggest the tedium of the models for travelling and writing that Auden is supposed to follow – and won't. Instead, supposing Byron wants news about present-day England, he runs through for the dead poet's sake – and in homage to him – some tendencies and features of the modern age.

Accordingly, he comments, for instance in his second letter (chapter V), on the current state of affairs in his country:

Byron, thou should'st be living at this hour!
 What would you do, I wonder, if you were?
 Britannia's lost prestige and cash and power,
 Her middle classes show some wear and tear,
 We've learned to bomb each other from the air;
 I can't imagine what the Duke of Wellington
 Would say about the music of Duke Ellington.

¹¹ See Martin (1982: 53 and 61–62) for stylistic ineptitude as a joke readers failed to detect; see also Lahrsow (2021: 227 n. 333.).

Suggestions have been made that the Teutonic
Führer-Prinzip would have appealed to you
As being the true heir to the Byronic –
In keeping with your social status too
(It has its English converts, fit and few),
That you would, hearing honest Oswald's call,
Be gleichgeschaltet in the Albert Hall.

“Lord Byron at the head of his storm-troopers!” (*Letters*: 50–51).

To imagine Byron “living at this hour” allows Auden to foreground the absurdities of his own age: the loss of prestige, the bombing, the fascist movement in Germany. These images of Byron against a fascist background are evoked only to be discarded next: “You never were an Isolationist; / Injustice you had always hatred for” (*Letters*: 51). Auden once more foregrounds the sense of community, and the very fact that Byron “never” was “an Isolationist” makes him the perfect candidate to now sound the complaints to about the current age:

Forgive me for inflicting all this on you,
For asking you to hold the baby for us;
[...]
And every man in every generation,
Tossing in his dilemma on his bed,
Cries to the shadows of the noble dead (*Letters*: 53).

The reference of “noble dead” is left ambiguous: it may be the plural form that Auden is referring to here – but he may also position Byron as a single point of address, the “noble dead” that all facing the “dilemma” of the current political and historical situation will turn to and cry. Byron will remain a “shadow”, but he is nevertheless one of the “sentinels” that “keep their sleepless station”: he remains one of those to whom the present writer may turn for guidance in stylistic and political respects.

As he continues with his three further letters, Auden comments on Byron’s “poetic style” (*Letters*: 103) and on “Art” in more general terms (*Letters*: 106–107). But, rather than begin “at the beginning” (*Letters*: 107) of art in “ancient caves”, he straight turns to the “English eighteenth century” “for the purposes” he has “in view” (*Letters*: 107), and he ends on “Those with originality of vision” (*Letters*: 109), who, in contrast with the preceding generation of “hack” (*Letters*: 109) writers, depending on patronage, “Jumped at the chance of a secure position” (*Letters*: 109). He concludes by pointing to the difference between that “happy crowded floor” (*Letters*: 110) of poets and their situation “Today”:

[...]
many are in tears:
Some have retired to bed and locked the door;
And some swing madly from the chandeliers;
Some have passed out entirely in the rears;
Some have been sick in corners; the sobering few
Are trying hard to think of something new (*Letters*: 110).

Byron is the one who knows “the terror that for poets lurks” (*Letters*: 111), and he asks him to shout out some warning (*Letters*: 111): “Ora pro nobis, please, this evening, won’t you?”. Byron, accordingly, is not only used as a sounding-board for the current political situation but he also is asked to step in for the poet as he belonged to a better generation in the history of “Art”. It is the Augustan rather than the Romantic Byron that Auden addresses (see Paulin 1978: 73): as the *Letters from Iceland* show, there is no focus on nature, and the landscape overall is of little interest, except as the rock that confines the interlude of life. Travel becomes the means for personal exchange, and Auden’s search for a historical conversational partner is instigated by travelling. As he concludes the final letter to Byron (Part V, chapter XVI), Auden writes:

I hope this reaches you in your abode,
 This letter that’s already far too long,
 Just like the Prelude or the Great North Road;
 But here I end my conversational song.
 I hope you don’t think mail from strangers wrong.
 As to its length, I tell myself you’ll need it,
 You’ve all eternity in which to read it (*Letters*: 259).

Auden ends his letter as much in a tongue-in-cheek manner as he opened it, and he ends on “conversation”: It is the “conversational song” that has inspired him to think about all sorts of contemporary topics, on art, on literary history etc. – but the effect is mutual as Byron, at least in Auden’s imagination, will profit from its content and even its length.

3. “So it looks like a week of pussy-talk in the lava-fields”: Role-Play and Collaborative Imagination in MacNeice’s Letter “Hetty to Nancy”

In chapter XII, around the middle of *Letters from Iceland*, we read a letter very different from the one (or five) sent to Byron by Auden. Louis MacNeice’s “Hetty to Nancy” is a travel diary in letter form, beginning on August 17th (“Monday I think, but you can’t be sure in these parts”; *Letters*: 167), with daily letters until August 27th (with a gap on the 26th). *Hetty* is the pseudonym MacNeice chooses for himself when he addresses his former fellow student and friend Anthony Blunt, aka *Nancy*. With these pseudonyms he opens the playful correspondence with his interlocutor about the adventures in Iceland that also includes Auden, who is called *Maisie* in the exchange, and a group of schoolboys who become their fellow tourists and are turned into girls:¹²

Here I am with Maisie in a tent and on our left side is another tent and on our right side is another tent. And what do you think are in those tents? SCHOOLGIRLS! Would you believe it? [...] Well, Maisie said it would be much cheaper to have these girls along. [...] Four girls – Ruth, Anne, Mary, and Stella – and a marm called Margery Greenhalge (*Letters*: 168).

12 See also Greaves (2016: par. 7, n. 15) on Blunt and his friendship with MacNeice. Moir’s (2016: 175) reading of “‘Hetty’ for ‘heterosexual’” makes little sense; ‘Hetty’ is a short form of ‘Esther’, which means *star* (see Yonge 1884: 57) – which can then be linked with the photograph (see *Letters*: 169) of “Stella’s boot”. See Bryant (1997: 83) on this photograph: “By showing only the boots, Auden masks the wearer’s gender so he can attribute them to MacNeice’s character ‘Stella’”. Bryant notes that this may in fact be a self-portrait by Auden, but the play with names equally suggests that it is MacNeice’s.

In this letter, as Bryant notes, MacNeice “parodies the masculinity of conventional travelogues with purple prose and a comic gender reversal” and “gives an amusing account of a camping and riding expedition the authors made with a group of English schoolboys” (Bryant 1997: 66). In comparison to the letter to Byron, where collaboration takes place by imaginatively evoking an addressee from the literary past who is envisaged as the understanding model of the writer’s own method of social writing, “Hetty to Nancy” is addressed to a fictional person who can be identified in the manner of a *roman à clef* as a living person. The knowing reader collaborates in the fiction by recognizing who is who. The key is the gender switch, which also applies to the two writers on tour. The aim of this fictional transvestitism seems to be pure fun and holiday spirit, but we nevertheless think that “Hetty to Nancy” also reflects on co-creativity beyond the identification game. Imaginative role-playing and disguise indicate the realm in which collaboration takes place. When the two writers work together and turn actual Iceland and an actual journey into a book, they become someone else, a pair of women sharing a makeshift tent, self-ironically observant of each other’s whims and idiosyncrasies and always ready to give advice to their reader(s). Iceland, as Auden later in the book says in his “Letter to Kristian Andreirsson, Esq.,” “should be an ideal place for a really live drama” (*Letters*: 238), and MacNeice tries this out at once in their imaginary game.

The role-play begins with the address “Dearest Nancy” and the notion that “The hammer and sickle are all right where they belong but they don’t suit lady dons” (*Letters*: 167), with MacNeice alluding to their professional status and warning Blunt not to “get political” (*Letters*: 167).¹³ Even the serious statement is embedded in a joke, with Hetty commenting on the strangeness of the tent that Maisie brought along to Iceland. The letter continues in this vein, and it is full of anecdotes as well as complaints as to Maisie’s idiosyncrasies and the adventures they experience:

There were sundry hot springs steaming away in the valley and Maisie who likes to play at being Every Girl Her Own Billican, insisted on making tea in one of them. Needless to say it was unspeakable as the springs are full of sulphur. The geysir was better value, it went off just as we were beginning to despair of it, a sweet little thing so slim and girlish, the girls devised a game of throwing a tin cup on to it, the jet of steam works like a catapult and you should have heard how Miss Greenhalge laughed. [...] The girls among themselves call her La Paloma, you know how romantic they are in these schools. In Reykjavik I found a letter from a little girl called Elsie comparing me to a whole string of heroines, the first being Lucrezia Borgia and the last being Elizabeth Barrett Browning. So it looks like a week of pussy-talk in the lava-fields. Not that Miss Greenhalge would encourage that sort of thing. On the contrary she believes in making her girls like public schoolboys [...] (*Letters*: 173–174).

In the latter quotation, the whole gender reversal game is turned around once more: Miss Greenhalge, in real life a male teacher, “believes in making her girls like public schoolboys”. Entering wholly into the role-play he has instigated, MacNeice as Hetty finds him/herself romantically transformed into several contrary heroines at once by an admiring schoolgirl. The joke seems to be that being more like public schoolboys would prevent such “pussy-

13 Allison (2010: 227–230 [Kindle]) states: “There is no record, incidentally, of any correspondence between MacNeice and Blunt on the subject of the Soviet Union or suggestion that MacNeice knew anything about Blunt’s activities as a spy.”

talk”, with the three actual public schoolboys involved (Auden, Blunt, and MacNeice) surely knowing better. (No pussy-talk in the lava-tories for them).

At the end of the day, or so MacNeice-Hetty suggests, gender does not really matter. Referring to Maisie, s/he states how Maisie is in favour of the sexes being approximated anyway:

Maisie by the way is sleeping in this tent in pyjamas and was very shocked because I got into my sleeping-bag without undressing. To see Maisie struggling out of her undies in two square foot of space makes you realize what built the British Empire. She has been reproving me incidentally for mine – not my Empire, my undies – she says that to wear crêpe-de-chine panties may be all right for Metro-Goldwyn Mayer but it won’t do round the Langjökull. But then Maisie, who is a shirt-and-tie girl herself, is all for the approximation of the sexes; she says that to emphasise one’s femaleness is a relic of barbarism like men wearing beards, and that if I do nothing else on this trip it is essential that I shall reduce my bust measurement (*Letters*: 174–177).

Both are shown by MacNeice to enter into the imaginative gender-play whole-heartedly and hence reduplicate the fiction and the collaborative role-play once it has been initiated. Auden-Maisie presenting herself like a boy among the rocks of Iceland has something of Rosalind playing Ganymede in the Forest of Arden. Overall, the atmosphere in the group of travellers appears to foster such attitudes:¹⁴

One good mot on this occasion: Greenhalge suddenly said ‘O here’s a knave with such a sympathetic expression’ to which Ruth replied quietly ‘Then it must be a queen’. Maisie was frightfully pleased. The Icelandic cards all have different faces, you see, and there’s no doubt that our present company see little need for a world of two sexes (*Letters*: 190).

That all this would happen in a letter to Blunt is not coincidental either: as at least a few earlier letters by MacNeice to Blunt illustrate, this fellowship-creating role-playing was part and parcel of their correspondence. Fictions were thus as much part of their actual lives as of Auden and MacNeice’s travel-book, a purportedly factual genre. While on a golfing holiday at Portstewart, MacNeice sent a letter to Blunt on September 25, 1926, referring to a museum visit in Dublin and the art he saw there: “A Greco of Vision of St. Francis all slate blue with white streaks splashed with yellow & framed very suitably in darker slate blue & v. tarnished gilt. A decorative group by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta which rather fascinated me – very sensuous very lush, very Susie” (MacNeice 2010: 3175–3181 [Kindle]). Referring to Carter (2001: 48), Allison notes that “They’d invented girl’s names for each other: MacNeice was ‘Susie’, Blunt was ‘Antonia” (MacNeice 2010: 3251 n. 7 [Kindle]; see also Allison 2010: 191–192 [Kindle]). In a letter from 3 February 1934, MacNeice addresses Blunt as “Heilige Stumpf”, in a literal translation of ‘Holy Blunt’ (MacNeice 2010: 5854 [Kindle]), on 3 August 1936 as “dearie” (MacNeice 2010: 6578 [Kindle]), and in a letter to Eleanor Clark from 14 May 1939, he felt the need to reply to an apparent accusation and bout of jealousy:

14 On the general atmosphere of role-playing, see also the following passage: “I had an excellent horse today, a large black one with a white star on its forehead, and we got our best gallop yet across a long expanse of grey sand by a lake called Sandurvatn. In our heart of hearts I think we were all playing sheikhs” (*Letters*: 204).

Darling, my love, [...]

Yes, darling, of course the Empire State is our building. & now I don't know what you mean about Letters from Iceland: I didn't write any letters in it calling anyone darling except an entirely fictitious piece – a long private joke which you would hate – called ‘Hetty to Nancy’ in which everyone's sex was inverted – *Nancy representing a man we know called Anthony*. The fact that later I met & became very intimate with a girl called Nancy is coincidence [Nancy Coldstream]. Anyhow, darling, I don't advise you to read the Iceland book as it is all playboy stuff & you would dislike it still more than Lions & Shadows. (I told you that I had written lots of junk.) If you would like to read anything else by me, I suggest my translation of the Agamemnon; I am rather proud of some of the choruses (MacNeice 2010: 8105–8111 [Kindle]; emphasis added).

Eleanor Clark must have referred to the opening of the second letter, written on August 18th: “Darling, *darling*, DARLING, it is very lucky your poor friend Hetty is alive” (*Letters*: 177). A few years later, MacNeice explains away the collaborative imaginative role-play and also belittles the co-creative effort when he reduces the “Iceland book” to “playboy stuff.” The very dismissal, however, confirms the companionship created by role-playing and fiction. The letter reads rather like an attempt to demarcate different spheres of communication by different kinds of (co-)creativity. But this runs against the poetics of *Letters from Iceland*. It is towards the conclusion of the book that both authors acknowledge the all-embracing collaborative endeavour, despite all rivalry and teasing.

4. The Give-and-Take of Co-Creation: “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament”

The last part of *Letters to Iceland* before MacNeice's epilogue is formed by the most social piece of all, as it is not only written by the two poets in collaboration but also establishes links with a vast range of persons. “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament” is composed of 202 *terza rima* stanzas and a final quatrain which are held together by the speech act of a bequest. In its half mocking, half serious tone it fits perfectly with *Letters from Iceland* as a whole. The exaggeratedly formal beginning parodies the genre of the last will, with the first word, “We”, even evoking the notion of a royal plural – which is then quickly dispersed by the names of the two authors. Royal connotations come back with the mentioning of the Danish King in the second stanza, which counterbalances the somewhat bathetic reference to the shape of Iceland:

We, Wystan Hugh Auden and Louis MacNeice,
Brought up to speak and write the English tongue
Being led in the eighteenth year of the Western Peace

To the duck-shaped mountainous island with the Danish King
[...] (*Letters*: 260).

The dating of the document by a specific number of years makes one first expect a continuation “... of the reign of ...”, which would support the royal and biblical connotations.¹⁵ But as we realize that poets are the legislators of this mock-solemn textual world,

15 See, for example, 2 Chronicles (36:19): “In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah was this passover kept”.

their having learned “to speak and write the English tongue” is apparently the one important fact to know about the testators. The royal *we* is actually a choric *we*, with the two writers speaking together in making their proclamation.

The very first word of the “Last Will and Testament” thus brings up the issue of collaboration and communication. Critics have interpreted differently the way in which joint authorship is realized in this poem. Greaves (2016: par. 20), for example, points out:

in the “Last Will and Testament” we notice that although the poets signed it together, their initials are used to indicate who wrote what. It is as if, even in this apotheosis of their writing partnership – which is [...] a grand finale in which, we may imagine, the poets were also saying their farewell to their partnership – it was important to symbolize their distinctness.

This statement is problematic. For example, there are no initials at the beginning. They only set in with stanza 13 (*Letters*: 262), marked “L.” for Louis MacNeice, followed by “W.” for Wystan Hugh Auden in stanza 26 (*Letters*: 263). In each case, the “we” that marks the first twelve stanzas is replaced by “I” when the individual speakers set in. Then, in stanza 32 (*Letters*: 264), we get the initials of both, “W.L.”, clearly indicating a choric speech by both authors again, which corresponds to their reverting to plural “we”. This pattern is repeated throughout the poem, which is why it does not make sense to speak of the authors finding it “important to symbolize their distinctness” (Greaves 2016: par. 20). Sometimes, even single lines are marked by the initials of both.¹⁶ They rather find it important to signal that they speak both as individuals *and* together. In fact, for two thirds of the poem, neither “W.” nor “L.” speaks alone.¹⁷

For the same reason, it does not seem plausible to find “[t]he idea of a singing contest [...] perhaps most fully developed” in this poem (Moir 2016: 176). If any musical analogy is to be applied, it would make more sense to see the poem modelled on antiphonal chants with alternating choric and individual voices, which befits the solemn overtone especially of the beginning and the liturgical and religious ring of the last stanzas:¹⁸

And to the good who know how wide the gulf, how deep
Between the Ideal and the Real, who being good have felt
The final temptation to withdraw, sit down and weep,

We pray the power to take upon themselves the guilt
Of human action, though still as ready to confess
The imperfection of what can and must be built,
The wish and power to act, forgive, and bless (*Letters*: 287).

The quatrain which replaces the *terza rima* in the last stanza emphasizes this religious ring by making the rhyme “confess” and “bless” stand out, as it is added to the *terza rima* pattern fulfilled by the imperfect rhymes on “felt”, “guilt”, and “built”. The communal prayer (“We

16 See, for example, the following line in st. 161 (*Letters*: 281): “And to John Davenport a permanent job to hold”.

17 If we include the opening part as spoken by both “W.” and “L.”, 407.5 of the 610 lines of the poem are spoken by the two of them. 140 lines are marked by “L.” and 62.5 lines by “W.”.

18 See also the two poems by George Herbert called “Antiphon”, which combine choric with individual voices.

pray”) with which the poem ends confirms that any indication of distinctness is part of a formal arrangement rather than a sign of actual authorship. As Edward Mendelson and Richard Davenport-Hines explain in their commentary,¹⁹ the process of composition was a back-and-forth between the two authors:

In the first stage, Auden and MacNeice planned the poem while MacNeice (using a notebook now in the Poetry Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo) wrote out brief outlines and a draft list of recipients. Not all the names in the draft list appear in the finished poem, and not all the names in the poem are in the draft list.

In part of MacNeice’s outlines and draft list he wrote Auden’s or his own first initials in the margin next to individual bequests or categories. These initials make it possible to identify the authorship of most stanzas that in the printed text are initialled by both authors, and show that some bequests initialled (and probably devised) by one author were put into verse by the other (Mendelson 1996: 799).

What follows is an inevitably speculative reconstruction of authorship by Mendelson and Davenport-Hines on the basis of this complex documentary evidence. We have an outline, a draft list, and a published poem that are each marked by initials but not consistently so. Together, they offer a relatively rare and fascinating record of the process of collaborative writing, which also shows how easily stylometric methods of authorship attribution fall short of grasping the issue at hand.

What makes this collaboration even more entangled is the fact that, while it is MacNeice’s notebook from which we learn about the composition, the idea of such an imaginary bequest seems to go back to Auden’s play *The Froppy* of 1930 (see Mendelson’s and Davenport-Hines’s note in Mendelson 1996: 781; see also Auden 1988 b: 465). It had also been taken up by Auden in the play *The Dance of Death* (1933) (see Auden 1988 a: 104–105). The ventilated idea of an immaterial “Last Will and Testament” seems to have been followed by a list of recipients from the past and the present, as well as a draft of what to bequeath to whom. As a next step, the two poets assign to each other the task of turning the individual legacies into verse, generally with one stanza for each bequest. Apparently, at a later stage the finished stanzas and lines are ascribed to speakers, i. e. to either of the two or to both in common. Thus Mendelson and Davenport-Hines, on the basis of the notebook, tentatively and retrospectively identify individual versifiers for the lines and stanzas marked by both their initials in the published work. Sometimes one poet even wrote out the stanzas ascribed individually to the other one in the finished book.²⁰ The process is particularly revealing about collaborative authorship because of the nature of the speech acts imitated: bequests have ‘authors’, i. e. are authorized by a testator, but this person need not be the same as the one who writes the last will. Accordingly, Auden and MacNeice ascribed the different bequests to those authors (i. e. testators) for whom it seems most plausible to make them.

19 Mendelson (1996: xi) notes in the acknowledgements to his edition that the explanatory notes to the “Last Will and Testament” were written in collaboration with Davenport-Hines.

20 See, for example, Mendelson (1996: 799): “Auden wrote the stanzas from ‘We leave a mens sana’ through ‘The Dock, in all respect’, including the lines about Marlborough initialled by MacNeice (pp. 362–63)”. For the stanzas in question, see *Letters* (268–269).

For example, MacNeice's initials are attached to the bequest "To Marlborough College I leave a lavatory / With chromium gadgets and the Parthenon frieze" (*Letters*: 268) since this is the boarding school he attended together with Anthony Blunt, even though it seems it was Auden who put the bequest into verse. The initials in the published version therefore mark the speakers as testators rather than the authors of the verse lines or even the one who came up with the specific idea.

The effect of this is a performative play with voices and identities, not unlike what we have seen in the "Hetty to Nancy" part. The speaker is not necessarily the same as the author or the fictional testator, even though all of them can be connected to the same two names of actual poets. We find a similar play with biographical identity in Christopher Isherwood's *Good-bye to Berlin* published two years later (as well as in his 1938 *Lions and Shadows*, mentioned above in MacNeice's letter to Eleanor Clark), but the point of the game in "Last Will and Testament" is co-creativity. The verse form itself binds the two authors together; as Mendelson and Davenport-Hines put it: "The interlocking terza rima of the poem suggests that Auden and MacNeice wrote it together while working in the same room" (Mendelson 1996: 799). To no small degree, their co-creativity consists in the constant handing over of the rhymes which connect each stanza to the one before and the one following it, no matter if it was written by and/or ascribed to the one or the other, or both. The effect is not unlike the famous encounter sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1.5.92–105), to which Romeo and Juliet contribute equally, taking up each other's rhymes (see Bauer/Zirker 2019). Auden and MacNeice do so, too, and are thus real-life examples of what Shakespeare imagined, even though sometimes, like Shakespeare, they only create the fiction that their characters (named "W." and "L.") interlock their lines. If the Marlborough College bequest, for example, was written by Auden (though ascribed to MacNeice), he cleverly pretends a somewhat uncouth switch between the two authors by slantly rhyming "L.'s" "lavatory" with "W.'s" "from me": "And Holt three broken promises from me." This last line of the stanza refers to Auden's former school, Gresham (at Holt, Norfolk) and reflects in metre and rhyme the "broken promises" that he resentfully leaves to it.

The bequests range from the genuine and heartfelt to the ironical and sarcastic, and combine the biographical and personal with witty and acerbic comments on nearly everyone relevant (or not) to the culture and politics of their time. The web of references is so dense that it requires sixteen pages of annotations in Mendelson's edition, in comparison with seven pages for the rest of *Letters from Iceland*. The social, Augustan nature of authorship could not be brought home more clearly, as we find the allusive, satirical blending of the private and the public reminiscent of the *Dunciad* and other works by Alexander Pope, with whom Auden in particular has often been compared (see, for example, Callan 1983) and on whom he published an essay in the same year as *Letters from Iceland*. A representative stanza is the following one marked "L." in the book:

Item I leave my old friend Anthony Blunt
A copy of Marx and £1000 a year
And the picture of Love Locked Out by Holman Hunt (*Letters*: 274).

Blunt, MacNeice's old friend from Marlborough College, now shows up under his own name, and "L." combines mild public teasing with what is apparently a personal in-joke, a

perceived need for money going along with the adoption of Marxism, as well as Blunt’s sexual preference camouflaged by a mock art-historical reference.²¹

As the example shows, the choice of the bequest as a satiric device turns out to be extremely clever, since it combines the legatee’s perceived weaknesses and shortcomings with the promise of gift-giving. It is the expression of a humanist belief that this poetic form of giving may bring about a change for the better, even if the bequest, in such cases, must necessarily become a form of prayer:

For the lost who from self-hatred cannot hide,
Such temporary refuge or engines of escape
From pain as Chance or Mercy can provide (*Letters*: 286).

Accordingly, the poets waver between gift and belief when they express their wish and conviction:

On each the guilt of failure, and in each the power
To shape, create and move, love and rejoice (*Letters*: 260).

The creative and artistic (“shape, create and move”) is joined in one line to the interpersonal (“love and rejoice”). In this way, the “Last Will and Testament” becomes a bequest of co-creative poetics.

Conclusion

By choosing the genre of the letter, Auden and MacNeice present Iceland not so much as an object (in spite of the charts and graphs included) but as an occasion for communication. They do not just write about their trip, but the trip prompts them to be co-creative and establish bonds in writing, both between each other and between themselves and their addressees. In doing so, *Letters from Iceland* reaches out to the past, the present, and the future. Within this framework, our three examples show three different patterns of co-creative communication. In the “Letter to Lord Byron”, Auden adopts the Augustan writer as a model for his own attitude and mode of writing. But by turning him into the addressee of his own verse epistle, Auden also reverses the direction and creates a fellowship; Byron becomes a contemporary by the modern poet writing like him, and to him. In “Hetty to Nancy”, MacNeice fictionally enacts the bonding created by adventurously travelling together. Again, it is the communication by letter that establishes the community of players. The mixture of fact and fiction in the identities of the participants and addressee extends this community beyond the realm of the game itself. Finally, in “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament”, the two poets transcend their separate authorial identities by a complex process of speaker assignment which has been mistaken by critics for an insistence on individual authorship. By devising this letter as a last will and testament, Auden and MacNeice define their co-creative community as action: as wish-fulfilment and correction. The 29-year-olds take leave of their trip, their book, and the world, but what might appear

21 See Mendelson (1996: 791): “The bequest of a copy of ‘Love Locked Out’ is an elaborate art-historical and sexual joke. The painting of a naked child trying to open a locked door was by Anna Lea Merritt, not Holman Hunt, but it quotes extensively from Hunt’s ‘The Light of the World’, which portrays a clothed adult Christ knocking at a door”.

suicidal is in fact engagement and intervention. The bequest is the mock-heroic disguise of the satirists' belief in being able to do things with words.

The doom to be kept off as long as possible is, in the words of MacNeice's epilogue, the moment when "The gun-butt raps upon the door" (*Letters*: 290). This is the very opposite of co-creative communication. The rapping of the gun-butt metonymically represents the totalitarian collective that threatens to replace any communicableness:

Whenever he endorses Hobbes' report
 "The life of man is nasty, brutish, short",
 The dragon rises from his garden border
 And promises to set up law and order (*Letters*: 52).²²

In this sense, Auden's and MacNeice's Iceland as the site of co-creative communication is the alternative to the Iceland of Nazi ideology. Neither the island nor the book is a site of communist collectivism either. As Wilson (2007: n.p.) puts it, *Letters from Iceland*

may appear at first as an experiment in collectivist art after the fashion of Bertolt Brecht, wherein the notion of bourgeois property is challenged by the refusal to assign a single auteur. The subsequent pages disabuse us of this notion and indeed suggest that the conversion from a loose Marxism toward a Christian humanism was already well underway. Attribution to either Auden or MacNeice appears at the end of nearly all the seventeen chapters.

While *Letters from Iceland* is plausibly not "collectivist", we are not sure about the alternatives offered here (somewhere between "bourgeois property" and "Christian humanism"). As we have seen, the "Last Will and Testament" contradicts the idea of author attribution, and Auden's own ideas of collaborative authorship do not support the emphasis on separation. As Badenhause (2012: 353) remarks:

In one reply to "arrogant and stupid reviewers" trying to identify individual voices in co-authored works, Auden explained that partners "in a literary collaboration" "must surrender the selves they would be if they were writing separately and become one new author; though, obviously, any given passage must be written by one of them, the censor-critic who decides what will or will not do is the corporate personality".²³

While there is an identification of authors in *Letters from Iceland*, this is, as the "Last Will and Testament" shows, part of the game rather than an insistence on separateness. Even though MacNeice, in a letter to T.S. Eliot (20 August 1937), seems to assert his own substantial co-authorship of the book (see MacNeice 2010: 7396–7402 [Kindle]), we read this not as a denial of joint authorship but as an assertion of its very nature: this is a game that could not have been played by a single actor alone. In *Letters from Iceland*, the two authors do not become "one new author" in a simple sense either. They become one as their co-creative community adopts an identity of its own.

²² See also Paulin (1978: 67).

²³ The reference is to the essay "Translating Opera Libretti", written in collaboration with Chester Kallmann; Badenhause is quoting from Auden (1963: 483).

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