

Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

Holly Henry

Abstract. In July 1969, the *New York Times* inquired whether the poet W.H. Auden would compose a poem on the significance of the upcoming Apollo 11 lunar landing. The newspaper planned to print the poem, front page, the day Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped foot on the Moon. Auden turned down the offer. However, within several weeks he drafted his own poem about the Moon landing, later published in the *New Yorker* in September that year. Taking a skeptical view of the space race that led up to the Apollo 11 mission, Auden in his poem titled 'Moon Landing' observes: 'A grand gesture. But what does it period?/ What does it osse?'. Auden likewise shrewdly observed: '[F]rom the moment/ the first flint was flaked this landing was merely/ a matter of time'. This paper explores the ways Auden's poem, reaching from the Paleolithic to the Space Age, contends that the arts are just as important as the sciences for the survival of Homo sapiens.

In July 1969, the *New York Times* inquired whether the poet W.H. Auden would write a poem on the significance of the upcoming Apollo 11 lunar landing scheduled to take place on July 20th. The newspaper planned to print the poem, front page, the day Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were to step foot on the Moon. Auden turned down the offer, subsequently accepted by Archibald MacLeish, whose poem 'Voyage to the Moon' appeared instead in the July 21st issue. This paper explores Auden's keen interest in technology, archaeology, astronomy and space science and how he wove his reading in these disciplines into his poem 'Moon Landing' and to what purpose.

In the *Times* reportage celebrating the first men to walk on the Moon, John Wilford Noble had written, '[I]t was man's first landing on another world, the realization of centuries of dreams... a triumph of modern technology and personal courage, the most dramatic demonstration of what man can do if he applies his mind and resources with single-minded determination'.¹ In that July 21st issue, the *New York Times* provided extensive coverage of the astronauts' recorded exchanges with Mission

¹ John Wilford Noble, 'A Powdery Surface is Closely Explored', *New York Times* (21 July, 1969): p.A2.

222 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

Control as well as comments by astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin regarding what they saw and experienced when they set foot on the lunar regolith. On Page 11 of the *Times* issue, Israel Shenker opened his article on the successful landing of Apollo 11's crew with: 'The biped who walks like a god and acts like a man now stands triumphant on the moon....'² According to NASA's Apollo 11 Mission Overview, approximately 650 million people worldwide watched the grainy television broadcast of Armstrong and Aldrin as they descended the lunar module's ladder and bounded across the lunar surface.³

Attached to the ladder of the Apollo 11 Lunar Excursion Module, or LEM, is a plaque that reads: 'Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon, July 1969 A.D. We came in peace for all mankind'.⁴ This reportage would clearly have been known by Auden, who had been living in New York City since 1939. However, he remained skeptical of NASA's rhetoric regarding the Moon mission being solely driven by peaceful exploration.

In fact, within weeks of the successful mission, Auden began drafting his own poem about the Moon landing, published in September that year in the *New Yorker*. Auden opened his poem with the following:

It's natural the Boys should whoop it up for
so huge a phallic triumph...
made possible only

because we like huddling in gangs and knowing
the exact time....⁵

² Israel Shenker, 'Throughout History, Restless Men Have Always Been Lured by the Unknown', *New York Times* (21 July 1969): p.A11.

³ Anon., 'Apollo 11 Mission Overview' at <https://www.nasa.gov/missions/apollo-11-mission-overview/>. [accessed 20 December 2024].

⁴ Anon., 'July 20, 1969: One Giant Leap for Mankind' at <https://www.nasa.gov/history/july-20-1969-one-giant-leap-for-mankind/#:~:text=We%20came%20in%20peace%for,off%20Hawaii%20on%20July%202024>. [accessed 30 December 2024].

⁵ W.H. Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Volume II, 1940-1973*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), pp.659–60 (p.659).

Auden was a master of poetic forms, and several literary scholars have noted that Auden designed his poem with elements of the Horatian Ode, stanzas of which usually contain two to four lines of roughly the same meter and are written in a conversational tone. While 'Moon Landing' is set in four-line stanzas and adopts a conversational tone, these are not the only elements Auden borrows from the ancient Roman poet Horace. In his odes, Horace repeatedly praised Augustus for eradicating civil war and restoring peace following decades of destruction throughout what was then known as Italia. Paul J. Krause contends that in multiple celebratory odes regarding Augustus, Horace does not praise Augustus as a military leader but instead commends him for making possible 'the Edenic ideal' of civil peace, restoration of the countryside, and a return to an agrarian way of life.⁶ In 'Phoebus volentem', Horace wrote: 'Your Augustan age,/ Caesar, has given rich crops back/ To our fields.../ While Caesar is guardian of the state, neither civil war/ Nor civil madness will drive away our peace,/ Nor will anger beat out its swords/ And set city against unhappy city'.⁷ Krause contends that 'in nearly all of his poems' regarding Augustus, Horace celebrated Augustus for restoring 'agricultural prosperity'.⁸ Interestingly, Horace's ode 'Phoebus volentem' opens with the poet's claim that Phoebus, also known as the Greek figure of *Apollo*, forbids him to write of war; Horace chooses instead to celebrate the peace Augustus has brought to his homeland.

Following Horace's strategy of celebrating peace upon Apollo's command, Auden's ode to the Apollo 11 mission refuses triumphant approval of the epic journey. The first line of Auden's poem refers to 'the Boys', NASA's engineers and astronauts responsible for the Apollo missions, who are later described in the poem as 'the von Brauns and their ilk'.⁹ Immediately readers sense Auden's underlying mistrust that the

⁶ Paul J. Krause, 'Yearning for Eden: Horace and the Romance of Agrarianism', *Front Porch Republic* (14 Feb. 2020), Academia.edu, pp.1–8 (p. 6), https://www.academia.edu/42187553/Yearning_for_Eden_Horace_and_the_Romance_of_Agrarianism [accessed 19 August 2025].

⁷ Horace, 'Phoebus volentem', cited in Paul J. Krause, 'Yearning for Eden: Horace and the Romance of Agrarianism', *Front Porch Republic* (14 Feb. 2020), Academia.edu, pp.1–8 (p. 6), https://www.academia.edu/42187553/Yearning_for_Eden_Horace_and_the_Romance_of_Agrarianism [accessed 19 August 2025].

⁸ Paul J. Krause, 'Yearning for Eden: Horace and the Romance of Agrarianism', *Front Porch Republic*, p.6.

⁹ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems in The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.659.

Moon missions were driven solely by exploration; of course, he was keenly aware of the Cold War interest by both the US and the Russians in being the first to land on the Moon.

Taking a skeptical stance regarding the space race that led up to the Moon landing, Auden's poem declares, 'A grand gesture. But what does it portend?/What does it foreshadow? We were always adroit/with objects than lives, and more facile/ at courage than kindness....'¹⁰ The word 'osse', Auden explained, was chosen to mean 'to presage', or to portend, as in warning of a possible negative outcome. But it also connotes 'to ossify', to turn into bone, or to be fossilized. Indeed, the poem's narrator shrewdly observes in the next few lines that 'from the moment/ the first flint was flaked this landing was merely/ a matter of time'.¹¹ In boldly claiming that from the first flaked flint the Moon landing was inevitable, Auden's poem reaches from the Palaeolithic to the Space Age and offers both a caution and a hope for the future of our species.

Nina Martyris writes that Auden's poem 'evokes with breathtaking economy the epic arc of human [history] from man's first tryst with fire to his bounding among lunar craters a quarter of a million miles away'.¹² Yet, under Auden's pen, the events of the Moon landing are deemed less than momentous. The poem's narrator claims 'the motives that primed [the mission] were somewhat less than *menschlich*,' less than benevolent, humane, or perhaps even less than kind.¹³ But why might Auden have taken such a stance concerning one of humankind's greatest achievements?

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) was born in England. He was the son of a physician who was a medical researcher and an 'expert in archaeology and languages, who became a professor of public health' at the University of Birmingham.¹⁴ His mother was a nurse and devout member of the Anglican Church. Fascinated by geology, mining engines,

¹⁰ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.659.

¹¹ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems in The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.659.

¹² Nina Martyris, 'Auden's Grumpy Moon Landing Poem', *The Paris Review* (19 July 2019). <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/07/19/audens-grumpy-moon-landing-poem/> [accessed 20 December 2024].

¹³ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems in The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.659.

¹⁴ Edward Mendelson, quoted. in Danny Heitman, 'The Messy Genius of W.H. Auden' *National Endowment for the Humanities* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2018). See <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2018/summer/feature/the-messy-genius-w-h-auden> [accessed 31 December 2024].

and astronomy as a youth, Auden read widely in his father's library, which inspired his interest in science and technology. Given Wystan's early interest in trains and old mining works, he thought he would become a mining engineer. Auden's older brother John, who became a geologist, recalled that their 'father's interests went beyond medicine, especially to archaeology, the Classics, and Icelandic sagas', and that as children John and Wystan 'studied menhirs and stone circles, gold and lead mines, blue-john caverns, pre-Norman crosses and churches'.¹⁵

In 1925, with a scholarship in natural science, Auden enrolled at Christ Church, Oxford, but later changed his focus to literature. After receiving his degree, Auden taught at preparatory schools in Scotland and England and often delighted students with discussions of science. At The Downs School in Colwall, England, Auden 'entranced [his charges] with his eccentricity, tireless energy and sense of fun'.¹⁶ He was a prodigious reader, and devoured everything from the Classics in their original languages, to discoveries in archaeology, and developments in physics, astronomy and cosmology. He read widely in literature, philosophy, theology, as well as science fiction and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Throughout his writing career, Auden often investigated the sweep of human experience, from the Palaeolithic to the Space Age. For Auden, twentieth century experience and culture clearly carried the vestiges of the Palaeolithic or Neolithic. Auden viewed modern culture as only slightly removed from Neolithic stone technologies and cultures. For instance, in his poem 'Prologue: The Birth of Architecture' (1965), Auden writes:

From gallery-grave and the hunt of a wren-king
to Low Mass and trailer camp
is hardly a tick by the carbon-clock, but I
don't count that way nor do you:
already it is millions of heart-beats ago
back to the Bicycle Age,
before which is no *After* for me to measure,
just a still prehistoric *Once*
where anything could happen. To you, to me,
Stonehenge and Chartres Cathedral,
the Acropolis, Blenheim, the Albert Memorial

¹⁵ John Auden, 'A brother's viewpoint', *W.H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1975), p.26.

¹⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p.143.

226 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

are works by the same Old Man
under different names....¹⁷

In this poem, the phrase 'the same Old Man' equates Neolithic peoples with ancient Greek and even modern architects. The past extending back from the 'Bicycle Age' is merely the 'prehistoric *Once*'. Auden considers Neolithic gallery-graves, the most common megalithic tomb in Western Europe, on the same level as Blenheim Palace.

Likewise, in a poem titled 'The Old Man's Road' (1960), Auden muses on the still travelled and visible foot-worn paths of Neolithic times, that wind, he states, '[b]y stiles, gates, hedge-gaps...[o]ver ploughland, woodland, cow meadows,/Past shrines to a Cosmological myth.../Near hill-top rings that were so safe then,/Now stormed easily by small children'.¹⁸ In this case, the shrine to a 'Cosmological myth' most likely refers to Stonehenge, and even today Neolithic footpaths connect sites such as Stonehenge to the thousands of stone circles and hillforts scattered across the British landscape.

It is perhaps not surprising that Auden characterized his beloved home in Kirchstetten, Austria, bought in 1957, in a poem titled 'The Cave of Making' (1964), as only slightly removed from early Homo sapien rock shelters: 'For this and all enclosures like it the archetype/is Weland's Stithy, an antre...'.¹⁹ The word 'stithy' is an archaic form of smithy or blacksmith's shop. The poem actually refers to Wayland's Smithy, a Neolithic chambered long barrow that dates between 3590 and 3550 BCE, and is a 50-minute walk from the Uffington White Horse and the nearby Uffington Castle, an early Iron Age hillfort in Oxfordshire.

Archaeologists in the early twentieth century often discussed modern technology as the mere outcome of Palaeolithic and Neolithic technologies. Among these was the famous and widely-read Australian archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, who wrote in the 1925 Preface to *The Dawn of European Civilization*:

The monuments of early man are but insignificant bits of flint and stone, bronze and baked clay. Yet such fragments embody

¹⁷ W.H. Auden, 'Prologue: The Birth of Architecture', *About the House* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, pp.505–06 (p.506).

¹⁸ W.H. Auden, 'The Old Man's Road', *Homage to Clio* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, pp.483–84 (p.483).

¹⁹ W.H. Auden, 'The Cave of Making', *About the House* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, pp.508–13 (508).

concretely the achievement of our... ancestors. In such rude implements are revealed the preconditions of our gigantic engines and the whole mechanical apparatus that constitutes the material basis of modern life. ...[T]he invention of a new way of hafting an axe formed a necessary prelude to the invention of the steam-engine or the aeroplane.²⁰

Childe was the Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh from 1927 to 1946, and then served for a decade as director of the Institute of Archaeology in London. He was the first president and a co-founder of Britain's Prehistoric Society in the mid-1930s, and was internationally recognized for his publications on European and Near Eastern Prehistory. Childe is best known for his excavations, from 1927 to 1931, of Skara Brae, the Neolithic village in northwestern Scotland on the Orkney island of Mainland.

'Moon Landing' has been deemed by literary scholars as one of Auden's lesser poems, possibly as he declined to praise such an enormous feat. Indeed, the poem is largely dismissive of the astronauts' achievement, especially in such lines as:

Worth *going* to see? I can well believe it.
Worth seeing? Mneh!...
give me a watered
lively garden...

where on August mornings I can count the morning
glories, where to die has meaning,
and no engine can shift my perspective.

...Hybris comes to
an ugly finish....²¹

Given Auden's youthful passion for engines, the awe of the Saturn V's lifting power would have surely impressed him. Equipped with five F-1 engines to create a lift-off thrust of 7.5 million pounds at launch, the Saturn

²⁰ V. Gordon Childe, 'Preface to the First Edition [1925], *The Dawn of European Civilization*. 2nd edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1927), p.XV.

²¹ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems in The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, pp.659, 660.

228 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

V had the equivalent power of more than 85 Hoover Dams.²² What then accounted for Auden's demurring regarding the Apollo 11 mission?

Rather than quoting in his poem phrases by Neil Armstrong regarding humankind's 'giant leap' or Buzz Aldrin's description of 'magnificent desolation' of the lunar landscape as reported in the *New York Times*, Auden instead cited, as Nina Martyris points out, 'his hero Dr. Johnson, who, when asked whether or not the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland was worth seeing, responded, "Worth seeing, yes; but not worth going to see"'.²³ Auden instead, explains Martyris, 'compares, even if indirectly, the cratered moonscape to the Giant's Causeway, another geological wonder comprising a vast volcanic expanse of thousands of interlocking hexagonal basalt columns'.²⁴

Auden's seeming disenchantment with NASA's epic Moon landing is perhaps twofold. First, he was well aware that the Saturn V rockets that carried the Apollo astronauts to the Moon were developed under the direction of Wernher von Braun, the former German aerospace engineer, and any hint of fascism haunted Auden. He knew that von Braun's team at Peenemunde had developed the V2 Rocket, the first long-range guided ballistic missile used in war; it was also the first missile launched into space, in June 1944, and to officially cross the Karman line, which demarks the Earth's atmosphere from outer space. Secondly, when in 1939 Auden emigrated to the US, he was sorely lambasted for leaving England just as World War II began. Consequently, at the end of the war, Auden decided to volunteer for the US Strategic Bombing Survey that sent him along with a team to Germany to survey and document what they saw of Nazi concentration camps, and the decimation from Allied bombings. Auden reported how an entire town could be destroyed in thirty minutes of aerial bombardment.

Auden concludes 'Moon Landing' with the following:

Our apparatniks will continue making
the usual squalid mess called History:

²² Anon., 'F-1 Rocket Engine', National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian, https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/rocket-engine-liquid-fuel-f-1/nasm_A19700271000 [accessed 30 December 2024]. Also see Anon., 'Cradle of Aviation Museum' at <https://cradleofaviation.org/history/saturn-v-rocket.html#:~:text=The%20rocket%20generated%2034.5%20million,for%20a%20lunar%20landing%20mission> [accessed 30 December 2024].

²³ Martyris, 'Auden's Grumpy Moon Landing Poem', *The Paris Review*.

²⁴ Martyris, 'Auden's Grumpy Moon Landing Poem', *The Paris Review*.

all we can pray for is that artists,
chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it.²⁵

The poem looks askance at von Braun and his 'apparatchiks', a term Auden invents by combining the Soviet 'apparatchik', a devoted member of the Communist Party, with the name Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite.

Though Auden clearly read about, and was fascinated by, physics and space science, he also warned that harnessing the atom for destructive purposes could bring about the end of civilization as we know it. Auden emphasized in his poetry and prose that the Universe is indifferent to our species' survival. In his poem 'A Walk After Dark' (1949), the narrator contemplates the beauty of the stars shining seemingly sentinel yet '[u]nconscious of final ends' over '[o]ur post-diluvian world'.²⁶

In writing 'Moon Landing', Auden seemed more interested in focusing readers' attention on the Earth, even as in December 1968 the crew of Apollo 8, during the first Moon mission, upon seeing Earth appear to rise over the lunar landscape, scurried to capture on black and white, and color, film the gibbous Earth above the cratered lunar wasteland. On their fourth orbit of the Moon, as they rounded the Moon's limb from its far side, Apollo astronaut Jim Lovell urged Bill Anders to snap the iconic color photos of *Earthrise*. The photos were not part of the mission plan. Yet, as Lovell and the Apollo 8 crew later explained, what that first trip to the Moon most powerfully impressed upon them, was not the cratered lunar surface, but the living planet that lay off its shores roughly 240,000 miles away.

Auden couldn't help but have been awed by those *Earthrise* images that adorned Presidents' offices, corporate boardrooms, and entire walls of university lecture halls and helped launch the Environmental movement of the 1970s. In fact, he often felt humbled in the company of scientists. In an essay titled 'The Poet & the City', Auden noted: 'The true men of action in our time, those who transform the world, are... the scientists.... When I find myself in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a room full of dukes'.²⁷

²⁵ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.660.

²⁶ W.H. Auden, 'A Walk After Dark', *Nones*, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, p.393.

²⁷ W.H. Auden, 'The Poet & the City,' *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (Whitstable: Latimer Trend, 1962), p.81.

230 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

Scant commentary has been published regarding Auden's reading regarding advances in astronomy, cosmology, space science, and quantum physics, yet Auden was fascinated by all these. He often contemplated our place on earth, orbiting a seemingly ordinary star, in an ever-expanding Universe. In a poem titled 'New Year Letter' (1941), Auden writes:

How hard it is to...
Learn who and where and how we are,
The children of a modest star,
Frail, backward, clinging to the granite
Skirts of a sensible old planet...
In SITTER's swelling universe,
How hard to stretch imagination
To live according to our station.²⁸

Here he assumes his readers are well aware of the Dutch astronomer and physicist Willem de Sitter, credited by astrophysicist W.H. McCrea as being the originator of the notion of an expanding Universe.²⁹

American theoretical physicist and science writer Jeremy Bernstein offers some of the clearest insights into Auden's access to leading physicists and cosmologists of his day. Bernstein recounts that in the Fall of 1957, he began a two-year stint as a postdoc at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. At the time, J. Robert Oppenheimer was director of the Institute. American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a friend of Auden's since 1940, also was at the Institute, teaching temporarily at Harvard and Princeton. Auden too was in Princeton that Fall, giving the Christian Gauss lectures on literary criticism at Princeton University. Wystan and Reinhold had published favorable reviews of each other's books and often discussed theology. As Reinhold's wife Ursula was keen to introduce Auden to Robert Oppenheimer, a lunch was arranged with Oppenheimer, Auden, the Niebuhrs, and included, among others, Jeremy Bernstein. 'I wish I could tell you that the conversation was memorable,' reports Bernstein in his

²⁸ W.H. Auden, 'New Year Letter, Part II', *The Double Man, The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, p.17.

²⁹ W.H. McCrea, 'Willem de Sitter 1817-1934', *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 82, no. 3 (March 1972): pp.178-81 (p.181). <https://articles.adsabs.harvard.edu/pdf/1972JBAA...82..178M> [accessed 31 December 2024].

book *Quantum Leaps*.³⁰ ‘Oppenheimer, who was sitting across from Auden, seemed rather ill at ease. At one point he told Auden that he had studied Sanskrit in Berkeley in the 1930s. This did not make any impression and Auden and Ursula Niebuhr then engaged in a lively conversation.... After lunch, I took Auden to meet [the theoretical physicist Freeman] Dyson’, who also was teaching at the Institute for Advanced Study.³¹

In retrospect, Bernstein lamented that he hadn't asked Auden during that lunch why, in his poem ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ (1936), Auden included the following lines:

Rhyme-royal's difficult enough to play
But if no classics as in Chaucer's day,
At least my modern pieces shall be cheery
Like English bishops on the Quantum Theory.³²

Rhyme royal is a type of poetic rhyme scheme first used in English poetry by Geoffrey Chaucer, and Auden was a master of rhyme schemes. Upon asking Freeman Dyson which bishop Auden had meant to refer, Bernstein reports that Dyson's ‘answer was immediate, the Bishop of Birmingham, Ernest William Barnes’.³³ Bernstein explains that E.W. Barnes was a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge and did ‘very significant work in pure mathematics’.³⁴ However, Barnes left his science career and eventually became the Lord Bishop of Birmingham in Auden's hometown. From 1927 to 1929, Barnes also delivered a lecture series on science and theology at the University of Aberdeen as part of the prestigious Gifford Lectures, which invited acclaimed scientists such as Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, Arthur Eddington, Alfred North Whitehead and many notable others to present Gifford Lectures at four Scottish universities. Established in 1887 by Adam Gifford, a Scottish judge and member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Gifford lectures continue today.

³⁰ Jeremy Bernstein, *Quantum Leaps: How Quantum Mechanics Took Over Science* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), [accessed via www.worldscientific.com 30 December 2024].

³¹ Bernstein, *Quantum Leaps*, p.3.

³² W.H. Auden, ‘Letter to Lord Byron (W.H.A.)’, Part I, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp.15–22 (p. 19).

³³ Bernstein, *Quantum Leaps*, p.4.

³⁴ Bernstein, *Quantum Leaps*, p.5.

Bernstein explains that Auden likely read E.W. Barnes' explication of Quantum Mechanics in Barnes' book *Scientific Theory and Religion*, (1933), a collection of Barnes's Gifford Lectures.³⁵ This 685-page tome included detailed chapters on Space-Time, the Special Theory of Relativity, General Relativity, electricity and magnetism, Quantum Theory, the Solar System, and Galactic nebulae, among other topics.

Additionally, the acclaimed German novelist Thomas Mann was a close friend to Albert Einstein and to Auden, who in 1934 married Mann's daughter Erika, solely so that she could obtain a British passport to escape Nazi Germany. After emigrating to the U.S., Thomas Mann taught at Princeton University from 1938 to 1941. Mann biographer Stanley Corngold claims that a Princeton newspaper referred to Mann and Einstein as 'good friends'.³⁶ While there does not appear to be a record of Auden and Einstein meeting, Mann may have offered Auden insights on Einstein's ideas if not introduced the two men.

In the poem 'Moon Landing', Auden refers to the property he purchased in Kirchstetten as his 'several', or his enclosed private property, which was located in the same village as the home of the celebrated Austrian poet Joseph Weinheber. In a poem in honor of Weinheber published in 1969, the same year humans first landed on the Moon, Auden wrote:

No one, so far as we know,
has ever felt safe:
And so, in secret regions,
good family men
keep eye, devoted as monks
on apparatus
inside which harmless matter
turns homicidal.³⁷

³⁵ Ernest William Barnes, *Scientific Theory and Religion: The World described by Science and its Spiritual interpretation* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1933).

³⁶ Jeffrey Meyers, 'The Prince of Princeton: Thomas Mann's Life in Academia', *The Article.com* (24, April 2022), a review of Stanley Corngold's *The Mind in Exile: Thomas Mann in Princeton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022). <https://www.thearticle.com/the-prince-of-princeton-thomas-manns-life-in-academia>. [accessed 30 December 2024].

³⁷ W.H. Auden, 'Five Occasional Poems: Joseph Weinheber', *City Without Walls* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, pp.568–71 (p.570).

Here, the ‘good family men’ keeping watchful eye ‘on apparatus inside which harmless matter turns homicidal’ are suggestive of Oppenheimer’s Manhattan Project team, who on 16 July 1945 tested the first atomic bomb on the desert sands of New Mexico. A few years after NASA’s first Moon landing, in a poem celebrating animal intelligence titled ‘Address to the Beasts’ published posthumously in 1974, Auden troubles over the possibility of a wide-spread nuclear war:

Indeed, one balmy day,
we might well become
not fossils, but vapour.³⁸

What did the Moon landing osse or presage for Auden? As noted earlier, the word osse suggests the word to ossify, to be hardened into bone, or to become fossilized. Indeed, Auden’s concern was not only that *Homo sapiens* would one day become nothing more than fossils in the geological strata, but perhaps be erased altogether from earth’s rock layers.

It is not surprising then that Auden’s poetic reflection on the Moon landing orients readers’ attention not to the achievements of humankind, but back to the earth as the only habitat for life, so far as we yet know, in the Universe. His ‘Moon Landing’ poem additionally suggests the fragile state of our world after the development of atomic weapons and intercontinental missiles, the prototype of which was the V-2 rocket. In his ‘United Nations Hymn’, commissioned in March 1971 by the United Nations, Auden wrote, ‘Let music for peace/ Be the paradigm,/ For peace means to change/ At the right time,/ As the World-Clock/ Goes tick and tock’.³⁹ Auden’s ‘World-Clock’ likely refers to the Doomsday Clock created in June 1947 by the artist Martyl Langsdorf for the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*; for reasons beyond the threat of nuclear holocaust, such as climate change and food insecurity, at the time of this writing the Doomsday Clock stands at 89 seconds to midnight.⁴⁰ The very first time

³⁸ W.H. Auden, ‘Address to the Beasts’, *Thank you, Fog and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, p.708.

³⁹ W.H. Auden, ‘United Nations Hymn’, *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems, Vol. II*, pp.680–81 (p.68).

⁴⁰ I am grateful to Dr John Hatch at Western University, Canada, for information on artist Martyl Langsdorf, whose husband was Manhattan Project physicist Alexander Langsdorf, Jr. The Atomic Heritage Foundation reports that Martyl Langsdorf first drew her idea of the Doomsday Clock on the back of a copy of Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas, ironically suggestive of Auden’s suggestion that the

234 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

the Clock was set that close to midnight was in 2023. The Doomsday Clock was established by former Manhattan Project scientists who assisted in constructing the atomic bomb but who argued against using the weapon against people.⁴¹

In the closing lines of 'United Nations Hymn', Auden writes:

So may the story
Of our human city
Presently move
Like music, when
Begotten notes
New notes beget,
Making the flowing
Of time a growing,
Till what it could be
At last it is...
Where Fate is Freedom,
Grace and Surprise.⁴²

What the 'artists, chefs and saints' of Auden's 'Moon Landing' offer are their humble insights regarding, and gratitude for, the earth as habitat, as bounty for sustenance, and as muse for both art and science. During an interview at Swarthmore College in 1972, Auden pointedly noted: 'I wrote several things about Hitler in the thirties, but nothing that I wrote... shortened the war by five seconds'.⁴³ For Auden, the arts and sciences are the most important human inventions in the toolbox of our species' survival mechanisms. Both must be used he posited for the purposes of

arts are as necessary to humankind's survival as the sciences. See Atomic Heritage Foundation: Martyl Langsdorf at <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/profile/martyl-langsdorf/> [accessed 1 August 2025].

⁴¹ Louise Lerner, 'The Doomsday Clock, explained', *U Chicago News*. See <https://news.uchicago.edu/explainer/what-is-the-doomsday-clock> [accessed December 31, 2024].

⁴² Auden, 'United Nations Hymn,' *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.681.

⁴³ 'W.H. Auden at Swarthmore: An Hour of Questions and Answers with Auden, Part 2' (15 November 1971). https://www1.swarthmore.edu/library/auden/QandA_pt2.html. [accessed 31 December 2024].

peace. Two thousand years before Auden, Horace had written in an ode titled 'Altera iam tertitur':

So let us seek the Blessed Fields and Wealthy Isles, where every
year the land unploughed gives grain,
And vines unpruned are never out of flower,
And olive shoots unfailing bud, and set their fruit,
And dusky fig ungrafted graces its own tree....
Enchanted, we shall wonder at it all.⁴⁴

Horace 'more than any other of the grandiose poets of antiquity', writes Paul Krause, 'yearn[ed] for a restored Eden where the peaceful harmony of life in a garden would be our eternal home'.⁴⁵ Auden similarly opined in 'Moon Landing': 'I once rode through a desert/ and was not charmed: give me a watered lively garden/...where on August mornings I can count the morning/glories, where to die has meaning,/ and no engine can shift my perspective'.⁴⁶ These lines evoke the enchanted garden Horace celebrated.

A volume titled *What I Believe: 13 Eminent People of Our Time Argue for their Philosophy of Life*, published eleven years after Auden's death, included published statements by scientists and artists such as Bertrand Russell and H.G. Wells. Leading off the volume was a statement by Auden; the second statement was by Albert Einstein, who concluded his essay with: 'It is enough for me... to reflect upon the marvellous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature'.⁴⁷ Auden hoped his literary works might inspire a similar humility, as well as a sense of gratitude for the Earth as a fragile oasis of life whirling on through the vast abysses of space. He was ever hopeful that our species might build a

⁴⁴ Horace, 'Altera iam tertitur', cited in Paul J. Krause, 'Yearning for Eden: Horace and the Romance of Agrarianism', *Front Porch Republic* (14 Feb. 2020), Academia.edu pp.1–8 (p.8).

https://www.academia.edu/42187553/Yearning_for_Eden_Horace_and_the_Romance_of_Agrarianism [accessed 19 August 2025].

⁴⁵ Krause, 'Yearning for Eden: Horace and the Romance of Agrarianism', *Front Porch Republic*, p.8.

⁴⁶ Auden, 'Moon Landing', *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Poems*, p.659.

⁴⁷ Albert Einstein, *What I Believe: 13 Eminent People of Our Time Argue for their Philosophy of Life*. ed. Mark Booth (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), pp.25–27.

236 Exploring Auden's 'Moon Landing'

future free of nuclear annihilation and one in which our fate truly is
'Freedom, Grace and Surprise.'