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**Ladislav Vít, 2022. *The Landscapes of W. H. Auden's
 Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes*
 (New York and London: Routledge)**

Ladislav Vít's *The Landscapes of W. H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes* is a slim volume. Yet, in this case, the size is inversely proportional to its content—and solid content it is. In his monograph, Vít addresses Auden's interest in geography and landscape as a type of derivate of the poet's boyish fascination: "Auden was so bedazzled by rocks, the land and its texture that he had intended to embark on a career in the natural sciences before pursuing his poetic vocation. Alston, its adjoining area of former lead-mines, along with Iceland and its rural, Nordic, insular culture, elicited from Auden strong topophilic sentiments. These two regions in particular embodied his idea of sacred landscapes and represented the major constituents of his personal mythical geography" (1). This sentiment and connection with specific regions (England, the North Peninsines, Iceland) provided inspiration that would eventually elevate them to what Auden would consider a 'good place.'

Vít picks up from there and structures his argument around Auden's reflecting on place and landscape while correcting the misconception of the poet's alleged lack of interest in the subject matter. In doing so, the critic reaches for a handy concept of *landguage* that he borrows from Sten Pultz Moslund and applies the term to "the nature of Auden's imaginative dynamic which drives his production of these places and their *landscapes in language*" (4). Vít's scrutiny of Auden's literary topography "and their landscapes from the perspective of human geography in relation to the notions of borders, local uniqueness and spatial experience" brings new insights into the poet's literary imagination.

Ladislav Vít's competence in this area is well documented. He received his PhD from Charles University Prague. The title of his thesis, *Topophilia and Escapism: W. H. Auden's Interwar Poetics of Place (1927-1938)*, already indicates Vít's scope of interest which materialized in the volume dedicated to the topic

of landscape in Auden's poetry. Ladislav Vít works at the University of Pardubice in Czechia where he teaches a few literary courses (Introduction to Literature, History of British Literature, etc.); yet, his main focus firmly remains on the work of W. H. Auden and the Interwar period.

The book is divided into five chapters—the final one works rather as a summary of the previous four, though. Chapter one (“The Map of Auden’s Mythical Geography Affinities”) explores several issues, one of them being Auden’s understanding of the notion of ‘topophilia.’ The poet emphasized the fact that it is less about the love of nature and more about a particular space, or landscape and the way it evokes past events, the way it gives a sense of history associated with this landscape. Certainly, there is a direct link between Auden’s reasoning in this matter and two other poets, Thomas Hardy and John Betjeman, who were his source of inspiration in that respect. This section of the book concentrates on Auden’s particular interest in (if not attachment to) the landscape of such diverse places as England and Iceland. The area of the North Pennines also draws the poet’s attention. The regional diversity inspires him to ponder the issues related to border(s) or boundedness, and to an inherent quality of any island—its insularity. By extension, such ruminations influence Auden’s views on England in the broader context of “cultural diversity and international hybridisation” (20).

The title of chapter two, “My ‘Great Good Place’ in the Pennines,” clearly suggests its focus: the mountains in Northern England where Auden found his source of poetic inspiration. This section revolves around the writings that Auden produced at the turn of the decades (late 1920s and early 1930s). Ladislav Vít provides an in-depth analysis of the Pennines region, outlining a particular dichotomy between the natural aspects of the landscape and the man-made artefacts. Such an (un)natural clash gives rise to deliberations on, if not negative, certainly contradictory consequences of human behavior, painting a less-than-perfect image of the landscape. Vít opens the chapter with a close reading of “The Watershed” (1927), which subsequently serves as a point of departure for the running themes that pop up in other poems—themes tied to other (more specific) landscapes and (more general) places. The author develops his argument to demonstrate “how Auden works with topographical details from the perspective of place conceptualized as a unique, bounded, static and internally defined locality” (20). Having this in mind, the critic extends his discussion to the investigation of the mutual relationship between the human figure and the landscape, and how this relationship operates within a broader context of Auden’s philosophy.

The following chapter (“‘My Tutrix’: England in Auden’s Poetry”) zooms out in its perspective and tries to offer a more general outlook at the importance of England in Auden’s poetry. Vít analyzes a selection of poems from the 1930s and argues that the poet’s engagement in public matters was reflected in his attitude towards the exceptionality of England. On the one hand, he was aware of (his) certain social commitments and responsibilities, while, on the other hand, it had a somewhat destabilizing effect on Auden’s approach to, for example, the idea of his social standing as a poet and a member of the elite. Vít focuses on Auden’s perception of England’s identity understood in terms of its geographical (‘geography of rejection’) as well as cultural aspects. The author provides an insightful interpretation of Auden’s poem “Letter to Byron” (1937) that contains critical remarks on William Wordsworth.

In chapter four (“My Dream Exile on an Island with a Halo”), Vít critically evaluates Auden’s travel book written in verse and in prose. *Letters from Iceland* was published in 1937 and reflects Auden’s memories of his journey to the titular island in the summer of 1936. The volume is important for several reasons and Vít should take full credit for his refreshing take on a book that, when published, was met with a fair share of controversy, mainly because of Auden’s unorthodox formal approach to a more traditional format of this type of literature. The poet’s version of a travel book is a mix of sometimes serious, sometimes lighthearted tones and narrative styles. Also, its epistolary format creates a platform that enables Auden to elaborate on his topophilia in a foreign, that is non-English, context. Vít uses this opportunity to not only evaluate a poet’s ability to promote his ideas but also acquaint the reader with an additional context of Auden’s literary topography. Yet, if one moves beyond the form, what becomes quite apparent is Auden’s introspective look into his *landguage*. One may safely assume that it resulted from Auden’s experience of having worked with documentary filmmakers associated with the General Post Office Film Units. The collaboration provided the poet with inspiration and appreciation for a new form of the visual recording of reality. As a result, the writer translated his cinematic experience into a novel form of a travel book containing photographs embedded in various literary forms and styles.

The concluding (and the shortest) chapter entitled “Roots, Routes and Landscape” sums up the analyses included in the previous book sections. The critic emphasizes Auden’s spatial imagination that enabled the poet to approach individual places as manifestations of human existence and, by extension, places the poet’s output in a broader context of writings on topography and spatial

representation. Vít rightly concludes that “Auden’s poetic *landguage* also flows into the long tradition of English topographical poetry as well as recent theorising about landscape” (139). This, in turn, provides the “vantage point, wide horizons and a presence of subjective brooding in topographical poetry [that] is echoed in contemporary perspectives on the idea of landscape and its experience” (140).

Vít’s book comes as a volume in the series (“Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture”) the aim of which is to reinvigorate the interest of researchers in familiar and well-explored themes. However, as the Series Editor acknowledges, there is a need to take a novel approach and “take note of new or neglected ones. A vast array of non-human creatures, things, and forces are now emerging as important agents in their own right. Inspired by human concern for an ailing planet, ecocriticism has grappled with the question of how important works of art can be to the preservation of something we have traditionally called ‘nature’” (2). *The Landscapes of W. H. Auden’s Interwar Poetry* fits this context very well. Ladislav Vít offers a scholarly, yet accessible account of Auden’s work (and life), at the same time revisiting the poet’s interwar works from a new, refreshing perspective. Although the volume is primarily aimed at academic readers, its lucid style makes it readable for anyone interested in Auden’s poetry and all things related to space and landscape.