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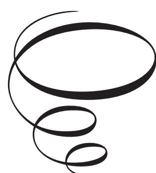
Boutheina Boughnim Laarif

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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To the memory of W. H. Auden

This Old Man's Face
(Dedicated to W. H. Auden)

Furrows-like wrinkles crisscross
His once childish, smooth face…
Countless lines, they seem to have been etched,
Not by Time's chisel,
But by the relentless caress
Of smoking's streaks—
Ascending, submerging his face…
His deceivingly worn eyes
Are two impish children hiding
Behind dangling, half drawn blinds…

—Boutheina Boughnim Laarif

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ABSTRACT

Though Auden has often been hailed as the twentieth century's master of metre and most outstanding practitioner of traditional poetic forms, his metrical art still remains a mystery, as far as its real significance is concerned, a significance which transcends the rhetorical value. The aim of this book is to shed a new light on this enticing appeal of formal poetry which induced Auden into composing in almost every possible stanza form. In order to work out a 'new' appreciative assessment of Auden's formal art, I thought I would harness to this task Amittai Aviram's theory of poetic rhythm which is a fairly new, and rather challenging, theory of rhythm that transcends the common literary critical process, based on the rhetorical assessment of rhythm in poetry.

Aviram's theory not only transcends, but clearly revolutionises, our common interpretive ways turning them upside down by regarding rhythm rather than meaning as the starting point in interpreting poetry; it is the poem's ideas and theme which express and strengthen rhythm and 'not' the other way round. Such conception of rhythm, as allegorized by meaning (images and metaphors), breathes a new life in the outworn Russian formalist tradition. It basically draws on Nietzsche's allegorical theory of the lyric, exposed in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, Aviram does not stop at Nietzsche's oeuvre, but provides a compelling, well-referenced, postmodern reading of Nietzsche's theory to elaborate his own theory of poetic rhythm. Thus, by adhering to Aviram's 'new' theory of poetic rhythm, I have decided not to adopt the current critical procedure which is most often based, in critical analysis, on thematic classification. Rather, I thought I would start from a formal analysis of the intrinsic features of the different poetic forms in Auden's large repertoire.

Turning to Auden's poetry today may be said to be urged by both literary and political contexts; in an age marked by uncertainties and an upsurge of violence, poetry's voice, regrettably, reverberates less forcefully, sinking in a state of formal loosening. Hence, this book may be said to be prompted by a 'necessity' to revive the interest in Auden's poetry, especially as "in recent times, W. H. Auden has largely been neglected." (Nirmal Dass, 12) A reconsideration of Auden's conception of the nature of poetry and its status enables us to encrypt his verbal art, assess its multiple effects and appreciate the metrical range that has helped the poet

handle so subtly his twofold inquiry: What is poetry? What is its use? The path to the answer may be blazed by Aviram's transcendental conception of rhythm.[1] Using Aviram's theory of Rhythm to unpack Auden's poetic aesthetics has not been attempted, to my knowledge, as yet.

[1] For the poems' scansion, I use Derek Attridge's metrical notification provided in his latest book dealing with prosody entitled *Meter and Meaning*. All the symbols used are provided in the appendix.

INTRODUCTION

To claim that Auden is a formalist[1] poet brings nothing new. However, what I seek to achieve in the present section is to better appreciate his formalism: explore its roots, reasons and repercussions with a view to applying to his poetry a theory of poetic rhythm that starts from but goes beyond formalism, being philosophically nuanced. Thus, I shall start by probing Auden's foregrounding of formal poetry and traditional poetic forms, and intent refusal to give in to the temptation to write in free verse, unlike his predecessors, Eliot and Pound.

Generally accredited as "the unequalled master of English poetic technique, inspiring the formalism of the next generation of American poets… Auden in fact paves the way for a poetics of postmodernism."[2] As a matter of fact, Auden still intrigues the postmodern reader. His commitment to metred verse, as we shall see, is not a mere aesthetic choice aiming at sophistication and technical bombast. It is a genuine, almost natural, choice. It stems from an inborn infatuation with language rhythms and sound combinations. Such infatuation Auden traces back to his adolescence, in which he was not a particularly ardent reader of poetry but rather of adventure and even technical books, as he acknowledges in an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on the 11th of June 1965:

> [M]y favourite books bore such titles as *Underground Life*, *Machinery for Metalliferous Mines*, *Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor*, and my conscious object in reading them had been to gain information about my sacred objects… Looking back, however, I now realize that I had read the technological prose of my favourite books in a peculiar way. A word like *pyrites*, for example, was for me not simply an indicative sign; it was the Proper Name of a Sacred Being, so that when I heard an aunt pronounce it *pirrits*, I was shocked. Her pronunciation was

[1] I use here the word formalist to refer not to the theoretical thinking of Russian Formalism (though Auden's conception of the nature and function of poetry is not without formalist undertones) but to the writer of formal verse or poetry set in traditional poetic forms.
[2] Emig Rainer (1-2)

> more than wrong, it was ugly. Ignorance was impiety. (Auden's emphasis; 5-6)

Auden's sacrosanct reverence towards the phonetic properties of language led him to widen the scope of language, even non-poetic, whether technical or scientific, from a mere referential code to an almost mystic experience, turning "an indicative sign" into "the Proper Name of a Sacred Being." To better clarify his rather mystic, Plato-reminding, conception of the notion of mimesis and the mimetic potential of language, Auden refers to the Bible's first chapter *Genesis* in which the Lord brought to "unfallen Adam" all the living creatures to name; and whatever the name Adam ascribed, it was the creature's "Proper Name." Interestingly, Auden makes the following analogy:

> Here Adam plays the role of the Proto-poet, not the Proto-prose writer. A Proper Name must not only refer, it must refer aptly, and this aptness must be recognized like a line of poetry, a Proper Name is untranslatable. Language is prosaic to the degree that 'It does not matter what particular word is associated with an idea, provided the association once made is permanent.' Language is poetic to the degree that it does matter. (6)

Auden's assertions, especially the last sentence, are not without formalist undertones as he foregrounds the self-referential quality of poetic language. Claiming that "[l]anguage is poetic to the degree that it does matter" unmistakably echoes the formalist conception of poetic language as a distinct, unique use of language based on a particular phonic and rhythmic orchestration, investing each word with unique sonorous and semantic resonance, or as Raman Selden puts it, referring to the formalist conception of poetry as "exercis[ing] a controlled violence upon practical language, which is therefore deformed in order to compel our attention to its constructed nature." (10) It is within this current of thought that Auden refers, in his lecture, to Mallarmé's definition of the poet as the one who "de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total," (6) which might be approximated in English as: "out of several terms reconstructs a total word." Auden's almost exclusive interest in the formal and phonic properties of words is attested again in his regarding philology as "the most poetical of all scholastic disciplines." (6) What he finds edifying in this science is the fact that it is based on "the study of language in abstraction from its uses so that words become, as it were, little lyrics about themselves." (6) Turning not only words but whole lines into "little lyrics" seems, most probably, one of Auden's most compelling artistic precepts. What Auden means by the quality of words (and even lines) being "lyrical about themselves" is their aptitude to inspire an internal,

almost intrinsic, harmony between the what and the how, not in Pope's sense of imitative harmony (expounded in "Essay on Criticism") but in a more philosophical, existential sense. The experience of an "untranslatable" linguistic combination that allies matter and manner seems to be the essence of poetry, as Valéry asserts in this passage quoted by Auden himself in his lecture:

> The power of verse … is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it *says* and what it *is*. Indefinable is essential to the definition. The harmony ought not to be definable; when it can be defined it is imitative harmony and that is not good. The impossibility of defining the relation, together with the impossibility of denying it, constitutes the essence of poetic line. (Auden's emphasis, 7)

The fact is that poetic art, especially formal verse, is all about this tricky balance between form ("what it is") and content ("what it says"), between artifice and substance. When the latter slips naturally, without much constraint, into the garb it is offered and fits unaffectedly into it, then the alchemy, or what Valéry calls "indefinable harmony," takes place.

One cannot read Valéry's assumptions on the essence of verse, quoted by Auden in his *Inaugural Lecture*, without instantly recalling Archibald MacLeish's memorable poem "Ars Poetica." As the poem runs in sustained statements from the opening on how "[a] poem should be" to the closing: "[b]ut be," it can only be quoted in full:

> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit,
> Dumb
> As old medallions to the thumb,
> Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
> Of casement ledges where the moss has grown–
> A poem should be wordless
> As the flight of birds.
> A poem should be motionless in time
> As the moon climbs,
> Leaving, as the moon releases
> Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,
> Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves
> Memory by memory the mind–
> A poem should be motionless in time
> As the moon climbs.
>
> A poem should be equal to:
> Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea–
A poem should not mean
But be.
A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,
Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves.
Memory by memory the mind–
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.
A poem should be equal to:
Not true.
For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea--
A poem should not mean
But be.

MacLeish's recommendations on poetic art are worth considering one by one. First, and quite significantly, MacLeish recommends that "[a] poem should be palpable," which foregrounds the physical experience of rhythm and sound; the sensuous simile ("As a fruit") mirrors such recommended physicality. In the second place, and quite adamantly, MacLeish insists that a poem be "mute," "[d]umb," "silent." One may ask the following question: how could poetry be speechless while it makes use of the medium of speech that is language? What MacLeish implies by insisting on the "muteness" of the poem is rather its mutedness. In other words, a poem is not devoid of meaning or discursive ideas but is crafted in such a tactful way that it does not disclose the secret of its genesis by eschewing a too-overt self-consciousness. In *Forewords and Afterwords*, Auden sets forth the same recommendation:

> In any poem, some lines were "given" to the poet, which he then tries to perfect and others which he had to calculate and at the same time make them sound as "natural" as possible. It is more becoming in a poet to talk of versification than of mysterious voices, and his genius should be so well hidden in his talent that the reader attributes to his art what comes from his nature. (365)

MacLeish's use of the word "wordless" in the line "A poem should be wordless" is more to be understood in the sense of speechless out of admiration rather than mute. For MacLeish, a poem is more an aesthetic experience than a communicative act; so it is for Auden, who contends that "… poetry makes nothing happen."[3] In this sense, poetry, as MacLeish maintains in the second stanza, "… should be motionless in time."

Being not historical in essence, poetry is not concerned with truth. MacLeish goes as far as claiming in the third stanza that "[a] poem should be equal to: / Not true." His claim is, significantly enough, echoed in the title of one of Auden's poems. The title in question is "The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning." Auden deliberately, most probably, misquotes Shakespeare's line, on the one hand, to echo the deceptive quality of language as a referential medium and, on the other, to set forth the suggestion that truth is not poetry's primary concern. Fuller draws our attention (233) to the fact that Auden expands on Touchstone's "syllogism" in the original quotation (in *As You Like it* (III, iii))[4] based on the idea that if poetry is the language of lovers and if lovers feign most of what they say in poetry, then the truest poetry is the most feigning. Auden's account of such reasoning goes as follows:

> By all means sing of love but, if you do,
> Make a rare old proper hullabaloo:
> . . . .
> Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever,
> And do not listen to those critics ever
> Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books
> Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks,

For Auden, it is quintessential that one should "sing of love," provided he ingeniously and craftily makes use of his medium; that is, language. Auden's placing of the manner at the forefront of the poet's concerns is wittily echoed in his pressing injunction ("By all means") and the long, insistent noun-phrase endowed with an armature of epithets: "a rare old proper hullabaloo" which he assimilates with the standard "proper" love

[3] Auden's poem: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

[4] The line in question is fully quoted by Hecht (417):
"Audrey: I do not know what poetical is. Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?
Touchstone: No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning, and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said, as lovers, they do feign."

poem. Quite significantly, Auden draws an analogy between poetic and gastronomic arts to warn against the intrinsic dullness of unsophisticated craft: "[p]lain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks." The purposefully humorous tone of Auden's phrase ("a rare old proper hullabaloo") and of the whole stanza hides, in fact, sombre undertones. Auden's intent insistence on the manner at the expense of matter is to be understood as a contained contention of the inappropriateness of the latter, whether it be a love sentiment or any other truth. In the last stanza, Auden asserts that:

> For given Man, by birth, by education,
> Imago Dei who forgot his station,
> The self-made creature ever made who fakes,
> With no more nature in his loving smile
> Than in his theories of a natural style,
> What but all tales, the luck of verbal playing,
> Can trick his lying nature into saying
> That love, or truth in any serious sense,
> Like orthodoxy, is a reticence?

If "truth" is a "reticence" in essence, then poetry's ultimate concern is not the quest for truth but perhaps the turning away from it and the unreserved indulgence in verbal sophistication as a counterpoint to the impenetrable truth's "reticence." Thus, to keep to the syllogistic vein of Auden's line, the "truest," i.e. the most emblematic, poetry is the one that conceals best the truth by either being obscure (and that was Auden's choice in *The Orators*) or being astutely worked out in terms of both rhythmic and sound elaboration. According to Auden, love poetry and, by inference, poetic art is all about being "… subtle, various, ornamental, clever." This is so because as he makes clear in his essay "Writing," included in his memorable book on the nature and function of poetry and art in general, *The Dyer's Hand*:

> What makes it difficult for the poet not to tell lies is that, in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities. The reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in a poem in order to enjoy it. Knowing this, the poet is constantly tempted to make use of an idea or a belief, not because he believes it to be true, but because he sees it has interesting poetic possibilities.[5] (28)

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[5] However, Auden insists, as he carries on, that for a poet, "it is certainly necessary that his emotions be deeply involved." (28)

The final recommendation formulated by MacLeish on poetic art is that "[a] poem should not mean/But be." Likewise, Auden envisions poetry as "a way of happening." A poem is not valued for the message it communicates as much as for the pleasurable aesthetic experience it offers. It is to be more experiential than factual. Thus, writing or reading poetry is to go through a lively aesthetic and intellectual experience. In this sense, Auden fully agrees, in his collection of critical essays entitled *Forewords and Afterwords*, with Valéry in that:

> A poem ought to be a festival of the intellect, that is, a game, but a solemn, ordered, and significant game, and a poet is someone to whom *arbitrary* difficulties suggest ideas. It is the *glory* [my emphasis] of poetry that the lack of a single word can ruin everything, that the poet cannot continue until he discovers a word, say, in two syllables, containing P or F, synonymous with *breaking-up* [Auden's emphasis], yet not too uncommon. The formal restrictions of poetry *teach* [my emphasis] us that the thoughts which arise from our needs, feelings, and experiences are only a small part of the thoughts of which we are capable. (363-4)

Accordingly, poetry's imposed formal rules, which may be taxed as arbitrary and daunting, serve, in fact, to spur the poet on to widening the scope of his intellect by exploring new ideas, on an equal pedestal, as interesting possibilities contributing to the elaboration of the craftily assembled jigsaw puzzle that is his poem.[6] For Auden, the poet's intent efforts to satisfy the formal and metrical constraints of verse are all in his honour, as long as those efforts remain barely perceptible to the reader. His claim about the recommended sagacious subtlety of metrical art reminds us of Yeats (to whom he dedicated his memorable elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"), who acknowledges in his poem "Adam's Curse" that: "A line will take us hours maybe;/Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,/Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

Poetic art according to Auden is all about reconciling craft, artfulness with apparent artlessness, what he refers to above as "nature." Such a claim may seem illogical at first: how can purely formal constraints bring to bear a "natural" quality on poetic language? Auden provides the answer:

> If they [formal restrictions] were purely arbitrary, then the prosodies of different languages would be interchangeable, and the experience which

[6] By claiming that "a poet is someone to whom arbitrary difficulties suggest ideas," Auden manifestly gives priority to form over meaning and images. His conception is in tune with Nietzsche's allegorical theory of poetry as expounded by Aviram in the second chapter.

> every poet has had, of being unable to get on with a poem because he was trying to use the "wrong" form for his particular poem until, having found the right form, the *natural* form, composition proceeded freely, would be unknown. (Auden's emphasis, 364)

Auden does not regard "formal restriction" or metrical rules as "arbitrary" as they are thought to be. In fact, they stem from the language's intrinsic prosodic specificities, which makes them confer a "natural" quality on poetic language, so much so that these "formal restrictions," together with the other formal sound devices, make the quintessence of a given language, as Auden claims:

> To discover the essential and unique qualities of a language, one must go to its poetry for it is the poet … who attempts to remove all noises from speech leaving only the sounds. The conventions of a poetry, its prosodic rules, the kinds of verbal ornamentation, rhymes, alliteration, etc., which it encourages or condemns can tell us much about the way in which a native ear draws this distinction. (358)

Thus, the "prosodic rules" and sound patterns of poetic language are so deeply embedded in the nature and characteristic of a given language, that for the "native ear" it becomes hard to get accustomed to other prosodies of different languages. As an instance of the "natural" quality of poetic language, Auden compares accentual languages' versification, or prosody, based on the alternation of accents[7] with the rules of French versification based on syllable-count:

> When I hear a native recite German or Spanish or Italian poetry, I believe, however mistakenly, that I hear more or less what he hears, but if the reciter is French, I know I am hearing nothing of the sort. I know, in an academic way, the rules of classical French verse, but the knowledge does

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[7] Auden's claim about the rather "natural" quality of prosodic rules, notably Anglo-Saxon, may be better understood in the light of Attridge's clarifications:

> When we hear a burst of spoken language we do not hear an undifferentiated sequence of syllables; we are aware of larger structures created by variations in the prominence and duration of the syllables, and by the occurrence of pauses between them …. These features are an essential part of language, and the ability to use them is learned at a very early age …. Poetic form relies on the moulding and ordering of such features of speech into patterns more aesthetically interesting, and more expressive, than those of ordinary language. (62)

Attridge adds (78) that "a native speaker of English, because of his knowledge of the patterns of stress-placement in the language, perceives the stress-contour even if the cues are only partially present, or sometimes in their absence altogether."

> not change my habit of hearing. For example, to my ear, trained on English verse, the prevailing rhythm of the French alexandrine sounds like the anapestic rhythm … (358)

Auden maintains that not only are metrical rules intrinsic to the language’s proper prosodic feature but also wholly set forms. If certain forms become long-seated traditions pertaining to a given language, like the English heroic couplet vs. the French alexandrine, it is because they are moulded from the very prosodic characteristics of that language, so much so that Auden regards formal traditions, above, as “natural.” Thus, seeking to thrust a given language into an inadequate prosodic mould proves valueless, no matter the effort that it takes, as Auden maintains: “While it is true that nothing which is without effort and attention is likely to be of much value, the reverse proposition is not true: it would take an immense effort, for example, to write half a dozen rhopalic hexameters in English, but it is virtually certain that the result would have no poetic merit.” (365)

Thus, the poetic art of verse, or metred poetry, is not a strenuous, dull exercise of resolving equations of versification but a lively experience that stems from both the poet’s and his medium’s, i.e. language, needs. It is far from being a predetermined, conclusive experience, as Auden argues: “… art and craft are not the same: a craftsman knows in advance what the finished result will be, while the artist knows only what it will be when he has finished it. But it is unbecoming in an artist to talk about inspiration; that is the reader’s business.[8]” (264)

Accordingly, form is not a coffin in which meaning and ideas are swathed. A poem is a living entity, governed by an ever-dynamic process of interpretation. It “survives in the valleys of its making,” Auden claims in his elegy to W. B. Yeats. Auden states that it is “unbecoming” of the poet to appropriate any insight or “inspiration,” as he should leave to the reader the task of deciphering that jigsaw puzzle and enter into the “carnival of intellect,” as he refers to it above. The poet’s courtesy, which Auden ascribes to the poet, to assign “inspiration” to the reader foregrounds his conception of poetry as a personal experiential process, an aesthetic experience in which each indulges in his own way.

While the poet “does not know in advance the finished result” of his oeuvre, this does not mean that he conceives it in a moment of “trance” for that would lead to a petty result, as Auden maintains: “If poems could be created in a trance without the conscious participation of the poet, the

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[8] Auden obviously has a reader-oriented conception of poetry, which underlines the importance of the reader’s response to the poem both mentally and physically.

writing of poetry would be so boring or even unpleasant an operation that only a substantial reward in money or social prestige could induce a man to be a poet.” (83)

Poetic creation, according to Auden, involves both the poet’s conscious side, which is his craft, and inspiration. It is almost a schizophrenic experience in which the poet has to reconcile between “two people” within himself maintains: “It is true that, when he is writing a poem, it seems to a poet as if there were two people involved, his conscious self and a Muse whom he has to woo or an Angel with whom he has to wrestle, but, as in an ordinary wooing or wrestling match, his role is as important as Hers.” (83) The poet’s task becomes even further complicated as he has to ‘court’ another ‘match’ (86): “The poet has to woo, not only his Muse but also Dame Philology.” The poet’s indebtedness to the latter is such that it leads Auden to claim “[a] poet is the father of his poems; its mother is a language …” (83)

However, the fact that language is not the exclusive medium of poetic art is, for Auden, both a misfortune and a chance:

> It is both the glory and shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words and words are products, not of nature, but of a human society which uses them for a thousand different purposes. In modern societies where language is continually being debased and reduced to nonspeech, the poet is in constant danger of having his ear corrupted, a danger to which the painter and the composer, whose media are their private properties, are not exposed. On the other hand he is more protected than they from another modern peril, that of solipsist subjectivity; however esoteric a poem may be, the fact that all its words have meanings which can be looked up in the dictionary makes it testify to the existence of other people … a purely verbal world is not possible. (84)

Thus, language is the common cord that binds the poet and his speech community. However, for the poet to transmute language into poetic language is all about knowing how to adjust his hold on this cord. As a matter of fact, the poet has to mind his hold on his medium lest it should be too firm, with the risk of his slipping into affectation, or it be too loose and he risks falling into laxity.

According to Auden, the poet’s handling of language, so that it abides by poetic standards of form and sound patterns, has to eschew both forcing it or being sloppy. His task consists of finding a happy medium between affectation and negligence and acceding to what Auden calls “a happy household”: “Rhymes, metres, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly

happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk and dishonest." (86)

Accordingly, Auden overtly advocates unaffected formal poetry, which he regards as the quintessence of poetic art. His intent refusal to give in to the temptation of indulging in free verse, as his predecessors Eliot and Pound tended to do, may be accounted for out of fear of losing the forcefulness of the medium he handles best, his strong suit, poetic composition. Auden declares, right after the passage quoted above, that:

> The poet who writes 'free' verse is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry, and darning for himself. In a few exceptional cases,[9] this manly independence produces something original and impressive, but more often the result is squalor—dirty sheets on the unmade bed and empty bottles on the unswept floor. (86)

Auden's unconditioned vocation for metred formal verse has, as we shall see, personal, aesthetic and ideological reasons. The personal, or biographical, reasons include the major influences that helped forge Auden's poetic art, while the aesthetic relate to the poet's own aesthetic convictions, tastes and precepts as to the nature and function of poetry. Finally, the ideological reasons that helped crystallize those artistic precepts are mainly embedded in the deep-seated belief (not necessarily left-wing) in the powerfully rallying potency of rhythm.

On a personal level, Auden traces, in his inaugural lecture, his preference for formal poetry to the influence of his very first mentor, Thomas Hardy, whom Auden hails for:

> [H]is metrical variety, his fondness for complicated stanza forms, were an invaluable training in the craft of making. I am so thankful that my first master did not write in free verse or I might then have been tempted to believe that free verse is easier to write than stricter forms, whereas I know it is infinitely more difficult.[10] (10)

It seems Auden took his cue from his "old master" for his description of Hardy fits him perfectly as well. Both "metrical variety" and the "fondness of complicated stanza forms" are salient traits in Auden's poetic art. His

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[9] Auden is probably pointing here to Eliot and Pound, whom he read and appreciated (Hecht, 130).

[10] While acknowledging the "infinite difficulty" of writing in free verse, Auden did not feel the need to take up the challenge throughout the bulk of his poetry (except in one poem, "Le Musé des Beaux Arts"), which is not really due to the daunting demands of free verse, although they may be so for it to be exceptional, but to Auden's deep-seated conviction of the incomparable forcefulness of formal poetry.

wide repertoire of poetic forms and metrical experimentation, ranging from the traditional form, like the ballad, the sonnet or the ode to more complicated ones like the sestina, the limerick or villanelle and even old Anglo-Saxon alliterative metres, shows an insatiable versatility that testifies to the poet's keen interest in the art of composition. Interestingly, Auden refers to poetic art as "the craft of making" to remind us of the Greek etymology of poetry (poemia), which meant anything made or done, a work or a poem. Auden's consecration of prosodic proficiency is further evoked in one chapter of *Forewords and Afterwords*, entitled "A Tribute to Stravinsky," in which he precisely pays tribute to this composer, whom he regards a "paradigm of the creative artist," a "model" for budding artists, whether they are musicians, painters or writers, to take as an example. (432) What Auden acclaims in Stravinsky is his "conception of artistic fabrication," or artistic genesis. Auden, rather acquiescently, reiterates Stravinsky's words: "I am not a mirror, struck by mental consciousness. My interest passes entirely to the object, the thing made." (432) Auden agrees with Stravinsky on his conception of artistic vocation as creation. He further corroborates him by acknowledging that: "An artist, that is to say, should think of himself primarily as a craftsman, a "maker," not as an "inspired" genius. When we call a work "inspired," all we mean is that it is better, more *beautiful* than we could possibly have hoped for." (my emphasis, 432)[11]

Auden's foregrounding of formal poetry, apart from being traceable to his first artistic influence embodied in Hardy, stems from, one is tempted to say, a sheer love of the craft and a conviction that it constitutes the essence of all "beautiful" art. Such conception, which is not without Kantian undertones, is traceable to the fact that poetry, being fundamentally based on a heightened use of language through its resort to rhythm and sound patterning, becomes, as Auden maintains, "a way of happening," a process in the making, a temporal event, mainly thanks to its use of rhythm, which imparts on it this temporal dimension. Thus, the rhythmic properties based on stress patterning, intrinsic in poetic art, confer on poetry an enduring quality.[12] Auden draws an interesting analogy between

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[11] Similarly, Auden refers to another artist's conception of poetic art – not a musician but a painter, Van Gogh (for Auden, what holds for music and painting also holds for poetry), whom Auden quotes: "The *laws* of the colours are unutterably beautiful, just because they are not *accidental* … I think that in art, the old-fashioned idea of innate genius, inspiration etc., I do not say must be put aside, but thoroughly reconsidered, verified—and greatly modified." (301)

[12] In his lecture, Auden declares that the best definition of poetry he could think of is describing it as "memorable speech." (14)

the carpenter and the artist, and notably the poetic artist, to highlight the lasting quality of art, which is embedded in a perpetual polishing of the craft:

> "…The difference between a pure craft, like carpentry, and art is that when the carpenter starts work he knows exactly what the finished product will be, whereas the artist never knows just what he is going to make until he has made it. But, like the carpenter, all he can or should consciously think about it is *how* to make it as well as possible, so that it may become a *durable* object, permanently "on hand" to the world. (my emphasis, 432)

This enduring quality, which Auden imparts to the astutely crafted artistic creation, notably (formal) poetry, may be said to be even further fostered in English prosody, or Anglo-Saxon prosody, due to its malleability and formidable formal variety. In his *Inaugural Lecture*, Auden goes back as far as Wyatt's time, that is, the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in which accentual verse was the dominating prosodic practice. As a counterpoint to this practice, which Auden regards as "metrical anarchy," Wyatt sought to introduce the "accentual-syllabic" metrical measure.[13] However, the transition did not occur overnight and Wyatt's efforts were a "failure" (Auden regards them as far from being so, but rather an idiosyncratic practice). In his *Inaugural Lecture*, Auden argues:

> Between Wyatt and the present day lie four hundred years of prosodic practice and development. Thanks to the work of our predecessors any school-boy can today write the regular iambics which Wyatt, struggling to escape from the metrical anarchy of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, found so difficult. Our problem in the twentieth century is not how to write iambics but how not to write in them from automatic habit when they are not to our genuine purpose. What for Wyatt was a failure is for us a blessing. (19)

[13] Wyatt was among the influential figures that introduced "accentual-syllabic" prosody into the long-seated accentual tradition of the Middle Ages, under the influence of other languages like French and Italian, as Steele reports:

> "Middle English and Early Modern English poets adopted a pan-European prosodic outlook …. As has been noted, from the Norman Conquest to the fifteenth century, England was virtually bilingual. As accentual-syllabic versification developed in Chaucer and Gower in the fourteenth century—and as it was reclarified and elaborated by poets from Wyatt and Surrey to Sidney and Spenser—French and Italian verse were the chief influence on native practice." (136)

Having "failed" to produce tightly regular iambic pentameter lines, Wyatt composed poetry with a unique, forceful quality;[14] his failure is a "blessing" in that it shows the resourcefulness of an idiosyncratic prosodic practice. What Auden hails in Wyatt's case is the genetic process of his revolutionary prosodic experiments, the fact that the new, burgeoning prosodic model he sought to introduce (the strong-stress-syllabic metre) stemmed from a natural personal malaise towards the reigning stress rhythm versification and a real urge Wyatt experienced towards regularity as a counterpoint to stress rhythm. Though the outcome of his efforts to write regular iambics did not achieve the tight regularity of today's strong-stress-syllabic prosody, his lines are endowed with a unique, enduring quality. Auden quotes, in his *Inaugural Lecture*, lines by Wyatt, which, for all their inadequacies at fulfilling the exigencies of a regular iambic pentameter, which was after all the intention of Wyatt's prosodic endeavours, remain intensely memorable for Auden. The lines in question are the following:

Wherewith Love to the harts forest be fleeth
Leaving the enterprise with pain and cry,
And there him hideth and not appeareth.
What may I do? When my master fearth,
But in the field with him to live and die,
For good is the life ending faithfully.

Auden declares: "I found the rhythm of these lines strangely beautiful, they haunted me and I know that they have had an influence upon the rhythm of certain lines of my own." (18) Among those "certain" lines, which Auden claims to be infused with the peculiar, "haunting" rhythmic flow of Wyatt's lines, we may refer to the following lines from Auden's memorable poem "If I Could Tell You," which are infused with the same rhythmic and lyric delicacy:[15]

o B O B o B O =o- B
The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,
o B o B o b o B oB
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;

[14] Attridge regards Wyatt's poetry as being infused with a baffling "continuing vitality." Despite the numerous failings of Wyatt's rhythms, his "metrical intentions remain one of the most enduring of prosodic mysteries." (345)
[15] The scansion markers used in my scansion throughout the present dissertation are provided in the Appendix.

B o B O b -o= B O B
Time will say nothing but I told you so,
o B o B o B o B o B
Perhaps the roses really want to grow,
o B o B ~o~ B o B
The vision seriously intends to stay;
=o- B b -o- B b o B
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Both Wyatt's and Auden's lines owe their particular meditative, rhythmic swing to their natural, "non-automatic" use of metre, notably the pentameter, through the expressive use of initial inversions, for instance, which was out of experimental "failure" for Wyatt but for Auden a prosodic "blessing," as Auden claims above.

While reciting Wyatt's lines in his *Inaugural Lecture*, Auden indicates the placing of beats from the third line till the sixth to show their frequent inadequate occurrence coinciding with normally unstressed monosyllabic words (like the preposition "to" and the modal "may"), or syllables that would not normally be stressed (like the last syllable of "faithfully"):

/ / / / /
And there him hideth and not appeareth.
/ / / / /
What may I do? When my master feareth,
/ / / / /
But in the field with him to live and die,
/ / / / /
For good is the life ending faithfully.

Auden comments that: "Since they cannot be read this way without sounding monstrous, one must say that Wyatt failed to do what he was trying to do, and a literary historian of the sixteenth century will have to censure him. Luckily I am spared this duty and can without reservation approve." (18-19)

If Auden can "approve," it is because Anglo-Saxon prosody, being fundamentally stress-based, has this particular asset inherent in its malleability, which makes it embrace a wide range of poetic forms and metrical variations.[16] Auden, rather proudly, makes the comparison, in

[16] Such variations include inversions, demotion, promotion, etc.

Forewords and Afterwords, between English and French prosodies. The passage is worth being quoted in full:

> To an English poet, French poetry seems to suffer from a lack of formal variety …. Any form, be it the French alexandrine or the English heroic couplet, however admirable a vehicle originally, tends to exhaust its possibilities in the hands of two or three masters, and their successors must either find quite different forms or be doomed to remain epigone. If it is rare to find a modern French poem that is not written in free verse …. While formal poems are still common in modern English poetry, the lack of resilience in the official forms of French verse may be partly responsible. By comparison with French, English seems an anarchic amateur language, but this very anarchy, if it stimulates revolt against it, can give rise to new and living structures. Would Valery, I sometimes patriotically wonder, have finished his poetic career so soon if he had had the vast resources of *our* tongue, with all the prosodic possibilities which its common syllables permit, to play with? (Auden's emphasis, 365)

Manifestly, Auden rejoices, not without a patriotic vein, at having English, his mother tongue, as the vernacular for his poetic art. Auden creatively tried his hand at a wide range of poetic forms; his astute handling of the stanza form and revival of alliterative verse and other ancient poetic forms like the ballad, the ode, the limerick, the elegy, the rhyme royal or heroic couplets[17] make him not an "epigone" but an ever-insatiable master of metre, perpetually in quest of self-renewal.

Auden's polymorphous mastery of metre and unconditioned attachment to formal poetry is certainly not directed at prosodic posturing but stems from both a personal need and conviction. In this sense, Auden envies his predecessors, like Picasso and Eliot, whose modernist innovations were the crystallization of an inner artistic process, comparable to Wyatt's deep-felt urge towards syllabic rhythm, and not a historically commissioned retaliatory reaction. In *Forewords and Afterwords*, Auden acknowledges:

> When I contemplate the contemporary artistic scene, I realize how extraordinarily lucky those whom we think of as the founders of "modern" art, Stravinsky, Picasso, Eliot, Joyce, etc., all were in being born where they were, so that they reached manhood before 1914. Until the First World War European society was in all significant aspects still what it had been in the nineteenth century. This meant that, for these artists, the need they all felt to make a radical break with the immediate past was an artistic, not a historical, imperative, and therefore unique for each one of them. None of them would have dreamed of asking: "What kind of music

[17] Each of these poetic forms is addressed in the forthcoming chapters.

> or painting is 'relevant' in the year 1912?" Nor did they think of themselves collectively as the avant-garde…. (434)

Whereas Auden acclaims the natural artistic transition into modernism undertaken by Eliot, he did not, for all that, entirely enact his formal precepts. Auden's intent attachment to formal verse and abandonment of free verse may be said to have two main reasons. First, the fact of not being mature enough to experience an ahistorical, authentic, pressure-free artistic urge towards change before the occurrence of the event that would irrevocably alter man's condition – the First World War. The second reason for Auden's steady espousal of formal poetry is, partly, due to his heartfelt distrust towards the "High Modernism" of Eliot and Pound, which he taxes for being elitist and egotistical. He, rather disappointedly, accounts for the evolution of poetry's function after the advent of the industrial revolution and the birth of modern individualism, his acrid rejection of the elitist precepts of Eliot's modernism palpable throughout the following passage:

> The industrial revolution broke up the agricultural communities, with their local conservative cultures, and divided the growing population into two classes: those whether employers or employees who worked and had little leisure, and a small class of shareholders who did not work, had leisure but no responsibilities or roots,[18] and were therefore preoccupied with themselves. Literature has tended therefore to divide into streams, one providing the first with a compensation and escape, the other, the second, with a religion and a drug. The Art for Art's sake of the London drawing-rooms of the 90's, and towns like Burnley and Rochdale,[19] are complementary. (328)

Auden does not underrate the artistic achievement of modern poets; what he has reservations about is the degree to which their writings may be dauntingly obscure. What is worth noting is that Auden's hostile reaction to the potentially alienating elitism of high modernist poetic language signals a shift in his conception of poetic creation, which occurred in the late thirties. Before the thirties, Auden's poetry, though formal, was tinged with obscurantism, like his oracular work *The Orators* (Dawson, 179). From the late thirties, Auden wilfully discarded densely obscure language for a more accessible rhetoric. For such accessible

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[18] Auden's allusion to the fact that Eliot is an American-born British poet is amusing here as he will choose to have the same status, but the other way around, after the outbreak of the Second World War.

[19] Auden is, most probably, alluding here to Baudelaire, whom he considered a "dandy." (R.D. Brown, 181)

rhetoric, no better verbal formula could he find than in the oral tradition of light verse, which is why he took up the task of assembling a formidably wide range of ballads and folksongs into an anthology, which he edited (1938) and entitled *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*.

Auden's fervent advocacy of light verse and adoption of folksong formal tradition, like the ballad form, rest upon both ideological and aesthetic bases. Ideologically, Auden firmly believed in the social role of poetry. He regarded poetry's concerns and practices as germane to every layer of society, which was the case of the pre-industrial societies to which he yearned as a counterpoint to the alienating modern individualist societies marked by an impassable gulf between the post-industrial man and the self-centred intellectual artist. In his "Letter to Lord Byron," Auden clearly formulates this yearning:

> The important point to notice, though, is this:
> Each poet knew for whom he had to write,
> Because their life was still the same as his.
> As long as art remains a parasite,
> On any class of persons it's alright…

Auden's recommendation that "art," and poetry in particular, be accessible to "any class of persons" is not out of a mere leftish fancy, as F.R. Leavis, rather severely, commented about Auden's poetry, which he regards as more "sophisticated" than anything else (130). Rather than seeking to direct his poetry towards a limited politically-constrained sphere, what Auden really sought through poetic creation was to achieve the standard of universal art, to have poetry, as hoped for in the lines above, "remain a parasite." One way of heightening this 'parasitical' presence is through the infectious, class-free power of rhythm and sound. The natural appeal and rallying potency of rhythm and sound are intrinsic in human nature, and started operating on man ever since he started using his voice, as Auden, precisely, reminds us:

> Speech originated in noises made during group excitement. Excitement seems naturally to excite movement. When we are excited, we want to dance about. Noise was thus in the beginning associated with movement of a group—perhaps dancing round food or advancing together to attack. The greater the excitement, the more in sympathy with each other each member of the group is, the more regular the movements; they keep time with each other; every foot comes down together. (307)

Auden's argument that "[t]he greater the excitement, the more in sympathy with each other each member of the group is" consecrates the rallying

effect of sound and, subsequently, rhythm, whose engaging power depends on the degree of regularity, which explains, in a way, Auden's penchant for metred formal poetry.[20] The word "foot" in the quote above is by no means innocent. Indeed, Auden carries on with the enticing power of regular movement over man and draws an analogy between the regular physical dancing movements and the recurring metrical patterns of poetry:

> Again, imagine a circle of people dancing; the circle revolves and comes back to its starting-place; at each revolution the set of movements is repeated. When words move in this kind of repeated pattern, we call the effect of the movement in our minds the metre. Words arranged in metre are verse. The feeling, as it were, excites the words and makes them fall into a definite group, going through definite dancing movements … Metre is group excitement among words, a series of repeated movements. The weaker the excitement, the less the words act together and upon each other. Rhythm is what is expected by one word or another. (307-08)

According to Auden, the driving effect of metrical arrangement is what imparts to poetry its forcefulness; by irresistibly drawing the reader into experiencing what is being said through engaging in regularly recurrent experiences of setting expectation, reaching fulfilment and/or undergoing tension, metre is poetry's device to heighten its message, if ever there is a message. Metre spurs the readers' attention and prompts them to stretch their ear more readily. In this sense, Auden argues that among the many definitions of poetry, the best for him is identifying it with "memorable speech:"

> Of the many definitions of poetry, the simplest is still the best: 'memorable speech.' That is to say, it must move our emotions, or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and *the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence*, *to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender*, as we do when talking to an intimate friend. (My emphasis, 327)

Poetic language, due to its unique handling of rhythm and sound, kindles the readers' senses and stirs their emotions in an almost intimist way. The irresistibly engaging drive inherent in metrical arrangement invests each word in a line of poetry with an exclusive semantic and emotional resonance, a sort of "aura," as Auden maintains, while expanding on his

[20] Auden's claim about the driving power of regular rhythm and sound, inducing men into "sympathy with each other," has also significant philosophical and psychoanalytic echoes, as we shall see in the theory of poetry developed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

analogy between our response to poetic language and our talking to an intimate friend:

> We must, in fact, make exactly the opposite kind of mental effort to that which we make in grasping other verbal uses, for in the case of the latter the aura of suggestion round every word through which, like the atom radiating lines of force through the whole of space and time, it becomes ultimately a sign for the sum of all possible meanings,[21] must be rigorously suppressed and its meaning confined to a single dictionary one. For this reason the exposition of a scientific theory is easier to read than to hear. No poetry, on the other hand, which, when mastered, is not better heard than read is good poetry. (327)

For Auden, thus, "good poetry" resonates, thanks to its diligently "mastered" rhythmic and sound elaboration, in the same forceful way when perceived mentally by readers as physically by hearers or reciters; its compelling appeal remains intact.

Auden's foregrounding of metred verse stems from the firm conviction that poetry is not a kind of proposals-provision, as he insists: "… one must show those who come to poetry for a message, for calendar thoughts, that they have come to the wrong door …." (330) In other words, there is nothing we already know that is not written in poetry. However, what poetry enables both writer and reader, through the unique arrangement of its sounds, is to experience their reality differently, to heighten their consciousness of themselves and the world around them. Such conception of the defamiliarizing potential of poetic language is clearly expounded in the following passage, in which Auden argues that:

> Because language is communicable, what they [poets] do for society is much the same as what they do for themselves. They do not invent new thoughts or feelings, but out of their skill with words they crystallise and define with greater precision thoughts and feelings which are generally present in their class and their age. To adapt the saying of the old lady: "We know what we think when we see what they say." (370)

Auden's conception of the function of poetic art is not so much communicative (in the sense of message or thought-provider) as experiential. Poetry communicates experience; each poem is a unique verbal modulation of a human experience. Learning to read a poem, to undergo its rhythms and be

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[21] Auden's cosmic conception of word selection in poetic art, according to which a word's "aura" encompasses multiple semantic choices as long as its rhythmic and sound properties satisfy the rhythmic patterning's demands, reminds us of the formalist notion of "polysemy."