Notes on the Neo-Classical Strain in Poems of W. H. Auden

James E. Kulas

Early in his study at Christ Church, Oxford, Wystan Hugh Auden was aware that he would become a poet ("I mean a great poet," he informed his tutor).[1] Among the poets he admired then were two who had not been much in favor for well over a century, the outstanding poets of the neo-classical age, John Dryden (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744). At age sixty-two, reviewing a biography of Pope, Auden wrote, "As I get older and the times get gloomier and more difficult, it is to poets like Horace and Pope that I find myself more and more turning for the kind of refreshment I require."[2] Horace, the ancient Roman lyric and satiric poet, had also been a favorite and a model of the English neo-classical poets, themselves eminent satirists. Auden on occasion spoke glowingly of the work of Pope's great contemporary, Jonathan Swift, a genius in satiric prose if below Dryden and Pope in poetry. To what extent, we may ask, did Auden share and reflect not only the satiric impulse but also other qualities and values of literary neo-classicism?

In *The Dyer's Hand* Auden gave his opinion that our age was not one in which satire could flourish: "...for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering....in public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the only possible kind of attack is prophetic denunciation."[3] Nevertheless, while acknowledging in a humorous mood in his verse "Letter to Lord Byron" (1936)

that he "can't improve on Pope's shrill indignation,"[4] Auden at various stages in his career did produce notable satiric verse, sometimes in entire poems though more often in brief passages. As the neo-classicists were masters of the pentameter couplet (or Swift, of the tetrameter couplet), it is not surprising that Auden, who excelled in virtually all verse forms, should have shone in the satiric use of couplets.

In "The Unknown Citizen" (1939), a satire both of the unthinking, passive and conformist citizen and of the social and political agencies that foster and control him, the verse from is "free," without metrical regularity, but rhyme is used throughout, most often in pairs. The colloquial quality of free verse is appropriate to the sanguine air of the government official who honors the nameless, deceased citizen, while the rhymes provide the notes to enhance the author's irony and mockery. The citizen was one who "bought a paper every day" and whose "reactions to advertisements were normal in every way"; and "When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went." (Sometimes internal repetitions make a line's rhyme.) "Was he free? Was he happy?" the official asks. "The question is absurd: /Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." (CP, 252-3) As Aldous Huxley had done in the novel *Brave New World* (1932), Auden in his poem satirically exposes a society in which the individual has dwindled to anonymity, and in which both the ruled and the ruling have lost the meaning of freedom and happiness.

Like Dryden, Pope and Swift, Auden was an excellent "occasional poet," that is, composing in response to notable events as they occured: births and deaths and their anniversaries, meetings and visits, weddings, wars. The Soviet Union's crushing of the Czechoslovakian revolution

brings a scathing response from the poet in "August 1968." Superior and brutal force in this conflict is personified as a monster, a victorious ogre: "About a subjugated plain, /Among its desperate and slain, /The Ogre stalks with hands on hips, /While drivel gushes from his lips." (CP, 804) Though the Ogre wins by strength, he "cannot master Speech," and is therefore subhuman, in spite of his human shape. The drivel from his mouth is tyranny's feeble propaganda to justify its bloody dead. Auden's terse satiric couplets here are reminiscent of Swift's in severity and style.

More often, Auden's satire is of the gentler, Horatian kind, employing the darts of wit rather than the broadsword of wrath. As a student he had heard, "Good poetry is classic and austere," (CP, 110) but believed that " comedy shall get its round of claps, too. /According to his powers, each may give; /Only on varied diet can we live." (CP, 98) And Auden did not disdain publishing scores of two- three- and four-liners, which he called simply Shorts, plus many limericks (not excepting the bawdy ones). His three-liners often appear as brief as haiku, but differ usually in syllable-count and almost always in content and spirit from the Japanese poems. In the series of haiku-like stanzas that make up his sketch of himself at fifty-nine, in "Profile," we find, "Gluttony and Sloth /have often protected him /from Lust and Anger." (CP, 774) His wit could hit home, too.

But it is to a poem of September, 1939 that we turn for a curious blending of mild satiric humor and tender sentimentalism. Such a blend was found in the Restoration comedies of Dryden's time as well as in some plays by Pope's contemporaries. The speaker in Auden's "Law Like Love" reflects wryly and wittily on what the

"Law" is to various classes of people. To the gardeners it is the sun; to the old it is their wisdom, but to the young, their senses. The priest calls the Law the words in his "priestly book"; the judge splutters, "Law is... is... is... is... is The Law." Scholars write, "Law is only crimes/Punished by places and by times." Other groups say it's their Fate, or their State, or it "is no more." To the crowd, "Law is We"; to the idiot, Me.

Finished with his catalogue of non-knowers about the Law, the speaker now addresses his (assuming a male speaker) beloved about what he thinks the Law is. He doesn't know, and won't presume to attempt a definition. Yet he and his lover share "The universal wish to guess" what it is. So he ventures:

> ...I can at least confine
> Your vanity and mine
> To stating timidly
> A timid similarity,
> We shall boast anyway:
> Like love I say.
> Like love we don't know where or why,
> Like love we can't compel or fly,
> Like love we often weep,
> Like love we seldom keep. (CP, 262-3)

By Law, it seems clear, the speaker means authority, and the claim to authority of the groups mentioned. Through wit and dramatic irony and mockery, he undercuts the claim to authority of the more pretentious of the groups: priests, judges, scholars, and the crowd. In contrast, the gardeners' simpleminded definition of Law is attractive. But what impresses us most is the nature and attitude of the speaker.

"He" (let us say) stands with his beloved, for whom he also speaks, far from the others (save, perhaps, the gardeners). As lovers, they know only, "Gladly or miserably /That the Law is," not what it is. Thus, authority, to lovers who are conscious of the inadequacy or absurdity of others' claims to authority, may be only their dear mutual love. Such love the speaker advances timidly as just a similarity to Law or authority, and his descriptive notes on such love at the end strike a responsive chord among lovers of all ages and places: it is free and irresistible, and often painful and impermanent. Objectively we may point out that human love proves to be, also, often lawless, even destructive. Yet so engaging is the speaker's diffidence and tentativeness in offering his "boast" that we feel we have here the ideal of love between two who are mutually dear persons (and who may or may not be physical lovers--nor even young!). Written just after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, "Law Like Love" may be said to voice a strong skepticism of authority in State and Church, institutions whose laws had once again not kept mankind from madness. Yet the poem sounds and echoes at last as a strong but gentle affirmation: though with love as with Law "We don't know where or why," still our trouble with the Law is great and dark while that with our personal love is kindly between us.

The Restoration and eighteenth-century poets had a penchant for the epigram and aphorism. Dryden's "Great wits are sure to madness near allied,..."; Pope's "To err is human, to forgive, divine." and "Hope springs eternal in the human breast; /Man never Is, but always To Be blest." —these are but a few of the more famous among the epigrams which abound in their poems. It is not surprising that Auden, in his emulation of the neo-classicists' conciseness, and

as shown in the many hundreds of pentameters and tetrameters he penned, should have fashioned a goodly number of unforgettable lines. His trimeters and dimeters, too, carry epigrams.

Here one chooses one's own favorites. Other readers in Auden's *Collected Poems* might mine other favorites; and it is best in any case to first experience the most memorable lines in context.

"Let us honour if we can /The vertical man, /Though we value none/But the horizontal one." (CP, 53) We may scarcely or seldom, for political or other reasons, honor the living person of merit; the safely dead one may inspire us, and will never belie our praise. * "Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return." "We must love one another or die."[5] (from "September 1, 1939") War begins. Apropos, Auden offers a stark corollary to the Golden Rule, Do to others as you want them to do to you. * "Time that is intolerant/ of the brave and innocent, /And indifferent in a week/To a beautiful physique, /Worships language and forgives/Everyone by whom it lives;"[6] Human virtue and beauty are forgotten by Time, but Time honors those, regardless of faults, who make living language. * '"Life remains a blessing/Although you cannot bless."' "You shall love your crooked neighbour/With your crooked heart."' (CP, 135) We are blessed even if unblessing. And we shall love our neighbor even though he be ourself! "I count myself a man of letters/Who writes, or hopes to, for his betters." (CP, 852) Happily others also bought his books. * "None of us are as young/as we were. So what? /Friendship never ages." (CP, 883) Even so. * "O every day in sleep and labour/Our life and death are with our neighbour." (CP, 243) Again, neighbor and we are "one another," wherever or however we be. * And the terse last verse in *Collected Poems* is summary and

climactic: "goodness is timeless." (CP, 897)

In the versatile and wide-ranging genius of John Dryden — he was renowned in satiric, lyric and dramatic poetry, literary criticism, and verse and prose translation — are two poems celebrating the power and the values of music, "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, 1687" and "Alexander's Feast," both poems being set to music. The more famous of these, "A Song..." begins with a paean to harmony, tuneful "heavenly harmony" as the celestial creative force in the universe which climaxes in mankind. Humanity's discovery and development of music as a godlike power to "raise and quell" every passion is then demonstrated in five stanzas which in turn resound with strains and feelings special to the trumpet, drum, flute, violin, lyre, and chiefly Cecilia's "sacred Organ" to which "vocal breath was given." The "Grand Chorus" completes the circle of musical creation with a vision of the Day of Judgment when the angelic "Trumpet shall be heard on high." Thus Dryden's tribute is framed in a spiritual, quasi-religious glow.

Besides the number of essays and reviews Auden wrote in appreciation of music, opera and composers,[7] his poetic career includes libretti and numerous "Songs."[8] Auden's "Anthem for St. Cecilia's Day" is dedicated to his composer friend, Benjamin Britten.

Unlike Dryden's tribute to music, Auden's "Anthem..." is not composed in a time of peace. In 1940 war is spreading over Europe. Given Auden's preoccupation with the contemporary event and human condition, rather than (at least in his early thirties) with a traditional Christian view of humanity, it is not surprising that his presentation of music and its function is different from Dryden's. Auden extolls the "holy lady" for her "song in perfect calm" which she accompanies

in tremendous notes; the organ she plays is "to enlarge her prayer." But as she plays by the sea, the sounds excite Aphrodite, the goddess of love, Venus, to rise up naked and ride the waves, and angels are also enchanted to appear. Thus with the tone of reverence and loveliness the sensual note is also sounded. The bounty of music is universal and profound, and goes even to "the wicked in Hell's abysses" and abates their pain. (CP, 280-2) Yet, we see, this is a world, a society different from Dryden's in which there are the damned, and they not beyond all help, and in which loveliness is not only for the ear but for the eye and the hand, and that not without problems.

Auden invokes the blessed patroness to appear to and inspire musicians: "come down and startle／Composing mortals with immortal fire." Responding to the poet's call, Cecilia speaks; it is really the voice of music identifying itself.

I cannot grow;
I have no shadow
To run away from,
I only play.

I cannot err;
There is no creature
Whom I belong to,
Whom I could wrong.

I am defeat
When it knows it
Can now do nothing
By suffering.

All you lived through,
Dancing because you
No longer need it
For any deed.

I shall never be
Different. Love me.

This is the serene freedom of music, even in an age full of error and pain far more than Dryden's, innocently transcending loss in movement

and melody, and ever so. Who then can resist her final plea?

Compelled or emboldened by the plea, the poet invokes her again in her realm of "Calm spaces unafraid," where dwell not only Sorrow and Hope in their abstract purity but also similarly even Dread. And from our world of disorder and abyss the poet pleads to her: "Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange."

Cecilia answers, addressing us as dear children and acknowledging the "dreadful things" we did, but chiefly exhorting: "O hang thy head, /Impetuous child with the tremendous brain,... O weep away the stain, /Lost innocence who wished your lover dead, /Weep for the lives your wishes never led." The words instruct as well as exhort: our great brainpower is uncontrolled, or, as a general put it after the invention of the atom bomb, "We have become mental giants while remaining moral midgets." But primarily Cecilia sings a call to us for remorse for our loss of innocence, goodness and hope.

At last, poet and patroness and musicians join in an anthem of remorse and resolve, thanksgiving, blessing and faith. The heroic couplets of the poet are each exalted by a line of Cecilia's.

O cry created as the bow of sin
Is drawn across our trembling violin.
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain.
O law drummed out by hearts against the still
Long winter of our intellectual will.
That what has been may never be again.
O flute that throbs with the thanksgiving breath
Of convalescents on the shores of death.
O bless the freedom that you never chose.
O trumpets that unguarded children blow

About the fortress of their inner foe.

O wear your tribulation like a rose.

Auden's tribute to music owes its formal inspiration to Dryden, and Auden emulates Dryden's excellence in creating in verse a variety of musical effects. Auden goes beyond Dryden, however, as he presents music as a multifarious voice for a changed and more-complex society, for a humanity beset by more-frequent or more-intense problems of doubt and loss. In an Age of Anxiety, as Auden termed it, there is no "great Creator's praise" in an anthem to music, as with Dryden; instead there is naked Aphrodite, Hell, Dread, the "lover dead," and the "still/Long winter." Yet music remains the international voice and language, and connects even those, all of us, whose wars are not only with the country next door, as in Dryden's day, but with neighbors across the world and those dead and gone. We and those who come after us may hear music, in Auden's "Anthem..." (and in other, wordless music of all times and places), that lastingly voices understanding or acceptance, devotion, consolation, inspiration, remorse and joy. Or simply, perhaps, admiration and love of a pattern of melody and rhythm.

In a commemoration poem on the bicentennial of Mozart's birth, Auden wrote at the end, " In all hearts, as in our finale, may/Reason and Love be crowned, assume their rightful away." (CP, 581) The alexandrine last line and its personifications of reason and love are reminiscent of neo-classical poets, the best of whom Auden helps us keep in mind. When he died, Auden himself, as he had said of W. B. Yeats, "became his admirers." (CP, 247) Some part of our admiration is for how Auden emulated Dryden and Pope, and he has left us ample reason to trust that he will be similarly honored by poets and

other admirers to come.

Notes:

1. *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982, p. 54.
2. "A Civilized Voice." A review of *Alexander Pope*: The *Education of a Genius* 1688-1728, by Peter Quennell." *The New Yorker*, 22 February, 1969. In *W. H. Auden: Forewords and Afterwords*. Selected by Edward Mendelson. New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1989, p. 124.
3. *W. H. Auden: The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 385.
4. *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1991, p. 81. Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Auden's poems refer to this edition and will be cited in the text as CP, with page number.
5. *W. H. Auden: Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber, 1979, pp. 86, 88. The poem "September 1, 1939" is not included in *Collected Poems*, as Auden did not wish it to be preserved. However, it has remained a favorite with readers.
6. *Selected Poems*, p. 82. These lines, though admired by many readers, are omitted by Auden in later editions of his poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats."
7. In addition to reviews in *Forewords and Afterwords* (Note 2), see the four essays dedicated to Igor Stravinsky in The *Dyer's Hand* (Note 3). With Noah Greenberg and Chester Kallman, Auden edited *An Elizabethan Song Book*.
8. In *Collected Poems*, see "Five Songs" (57), "Twelve Songs" (135),

"Ten Songs" (265), "Five Songs (573), "Two Songs" (781), songs in "The Sea and the Mirror" (410), and "United Nations Hymn" (827).