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## **On Auden's Comic Vision: Auden's Poetry**

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## ON AUDEN'S COMIC VISION

AUDEN'S POETRY. By Justin Replogle. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969. xi, 258 pp.

"Every work of a writer should be a first step, but this will be a false step unless, whether or not he realize it at the time, it is also a further step. When a writer is dead, one ought to be able to see that his various works, taken together, make one consistent *oeuvre*."<sup>1</sup>

Auden need not wait for such a posthumous evaluation of his various works. Already one is rendered him by Justin Replogle in this very recent critical study. At the outset Replogle declares that what should come out in any large scale examination of a man's art is a pattern of development or growth. He proceeds to write about Auden's poetry in three different ways, describing it "as a storehouse of ideas, as a dwelling place of speakers, and (in Auden's neat phrase) as a verbal contraption." (p. ix). Aware that none of these makes a satisfactory description by itself aware, too, that poetry is not one element alone but all three, Replogle reiterates that together these begin to describe "the kind of thing poetry is." (p. ix) Thus, in the first three chapters, he traces the growth of ideas, personae and style towards what he takes to be Auden's greatest achievement — the late comic poetry — to which he devotes the last chapter.

Replogle finds traces of a nascent pattern of ideas in Auden's early poems which were inspired by a fairy-tale myth world. This was Montmere, devised by The Gang — young Auden and his allegory-prone friends, E. Upward, C. Isherwood, C. Day Lewis, S. Spender and Rex Warner. In Auden's poems (1928-1933) words such as "frontier", "leap", "mountain" are rich with mythic meaning. The main figures most often live on the wrong side of the frontier where they struggle and suffer the torments of the sick. Some hope to cross the border to the regenerative valleys beyond. Some take to the mountains and are deceived. It is not difficult, says Replogle, to see a Freud-Lawrentian climate in this psychological allegory. Instinct (Id?) atrophied by mores (Superego?) results in illness both personal and cultural. Cure demands a change in the individual. Languishing instincts must be released but once released, languish again to be ascendant in the next dialectical leap. The life force busy cleansing and purging becomes also the death force — thus the cycle of life.

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 31.

Replogle explains that when the attention is shifted to politics and history this notion of dialectics becomes Marxist. Modern society suffers repressive forces which emanate from a cultural status quo. In the individual psyche such forces (Superego?) stifle the vital (Id?). In society at large, repressive forces inhere in the entrenched power of the state, primarily the economic machinery. These forces, whether external or internal, have as stalwart defenders the middle and upper classes. Hence, Replogle explains, Auden did not simply skip from Freudian into Marxist myth. In retrospect his so-called Marxist poetry (1933-1941) shows the deepening and maturing of one conceptual pattern. Auden's Marxism, Replogle decides, is more a conception of human nature, a diagnosis of social illness, rather than a partisan program for action. While a change did take place, it consists in his more definite hold on the empirical epistemology which lies at the base of Marxist ideology.

Replogle then discusses how Auden's "sudden" religious "leap" into Kierkegaardian thought can now be seen as indeed a "small hop" and not really unexpected. Replogle explains that all empirical philosophies begin with the notion that action produces knowledge. Knowledge arises from the human need to make his world by shaping observation into hypothesis. Hypothesis enables man to control himself and his environment. Control is freedom. Thus, action produces knowledge; knowledge produces control, and control enlarges human freedom. The Marx-Engels' dialectics, much simplified, is the interaction between environment and man. Replogle explains: Acting on environment, organisms change themselves and in turn change their environment. This transformed environment acted upon, again further modifies them, they modify it and so on. Such a philosophy puts squarely on man the responsibility for choosing what to do. Hence, Engels' definition: Freedom is consciousness of necessity. Says Auden: "We live in freedom by necessity." But while man's freedom is so depressingly limited and his control so small, the empirical view of man can optimistically celebrate unrealized potentialities for human freedom. "Life remains a blessing," says Auden. Marxism, which did little to support this feeling, gave way to faith. In Kierkegaard, Replogle declares, Auden found not only philosophical reasons for accepting life but a theology as well which insists that it must be accepted. Replogle explains that Kierkegaard's philosophy is the Marx-Engels epistemology plus God. Put simply it is an empirical philosophy insisting, contrary to all empirical evidence, that God exists. That this belief is contradictory and absurd is precisely Kierkegaard's point. Life is absurd because though God exists, men, confined to their empirical knowledge, cannot know him or even demonstrate his existence. The entire universe submits to God's inscrutable ultimate design. Man can only choose to submit or "to try" to rebel. Hence, man's freedom is merely the absence of rebellion. Freedom is the appreciation of necessity. "To sin," says

Auden, "is to act consciously against what seems necessary." Destined to live in a world of perpetual Becoming, man can never escape into Being. Hell fire is "*the pain to which we go/ If we refuse to suffer.*" Replogle shows that all the long works after *New Year Letter* (1941) are dialectical landscapes dramatizing the journeys men make to cross frontiers separating Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious existence — Kierkegaard's dialectical triad. The intellectual search over, poems of the 1950's and 1960's celebrate what has been found: Life is not just a religious necessity but a secular pleasure — the world, though not the best imaginable is the best possible and can be accepted with joy.

Replogle then attends to Auden's speakers; and, since personalities are determined less by what they talk about than by how they talk, Replogle looks for the "message of style." The two main personalities he discerns are what he calls Poet and anti-poet. They owe their existence to the two opposing parts of Auden's temperament — one which attracts him to art and the other to life. Their voices are distinguished not just by ideas, beliefs, feelings, experiences but also by syntactical habits, rhetorical patterns, levels of usage, favorite words, repeated figures, and other stylistic devices. Auden's poetry, Replogle declares, is the result of his attempt to control and accommodate these opposing temperamental forces. Since he apparently could not completely reject either, permanent success depended on his finding some way to fuse together these incompatibilities. Auden "had to learn how to make poems that mocked poetry and how to believe in something that laughed at the pretensions of belief" (p. 99). Replogle finds that Auden did learn, and the resulting poems assert the value of both Life and Art.

Replogle further characterizes speech habits of the personae, in the process defending Auden's unfashionable conceptual prosody. The poet has chosen to rely primarily on the property of words to produce intellectual states (rather than feeling) through meaning (rather than sound). For this, Auden has been labelled "classicist" or "Augustan" and in the hands of critics who call "Fancy" a lesser thing than "Imagination" his poems have suffered. Replogle proves that far from being flat sentences of direct conceptual statement, Auden's verses are powerfully charged. Here lies his skill. To serve the artist who ornaments language with concepts rather than feelings are stylistic devices which Replogle explains at length: subject, tone of voice, level of usage and incongruity. He discovers that the artist who habitually makes art out of different usage levels and tones of voice inevitably becomes a comic artist. Wit first appears, then burlesque, slapstick and farce. To become a comic artist, all Auden had to do was develop fully his own linguistic practices. In this he was guided by a temperament which was attracted to extremes of seriousness and mockery. Hence he learned to speak all sorts of

high and low languages, and in the end, to speak all at once, to make out of incongruous usage levels a high art form that in the very nature of its language carries a profoundly comic vision of life.

For indeed, Replogle says, comedy in Auden is both a vision and a style. The comic view in the literary cliché is the opposite of the tragic view, but the two begin with the same fact. Man imperfect, perpetually falls. Looked at from up close these falls seem painful and disastrous, even if ennobling. From farther off they seem less painful and even amusing. Hence the difference between the comic and tragic view is largely a matter of distance. In his Kierkegaardian faith, Auden is indeed able to keep the comic stance — all the inevitable suffering attendant upon imperfect human experience are benignly absurd and insignificant, set against the ultimate design. Replogle devotes the last pages to examining techniques Auden has used in exploiting incongruity, the source of verbal excitement in his latest poems. He concludes that the intellectual search, the temperamental affinities, the skills of his craft unite in a person we now can call AUDEN. Indeed Replogle has found Auden's art one consistent *oeuvre*.

Although backing off from his subject far enough to see the jagged as smooth, to measure leaps as steps, to discern paradoxes and fuse apparent incompatibles, Replogle does not sacrifice clarity and focus. A reader not too versed in modern philosophy can gain from his explanations and illustrations. While Replogle frankly admits these as simplifications, they are nevertheless accurate. He questions facile labels and displays evaluative insight into other major Auden critiques. In discussing personae and style Replogle abandons a distant perspective for the proximity of a literary sleuth in search of figure recurrences, usage distinctions, linguistic peculiarities and other devices. His readiness to define and illustrate poetic practices, to enumerate and classify and illustrate verbal properties, together with his habit of discussing and evaluating his own critical procedure, has made of Replogle's book a model for poetry criticism applicable to other poets' works as well. In an area where much still remains to be done, this University of Wisconsin professor of English has made a valuable contribution, a critical text no student or teacher of Auden's poems can justly ignore.

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### THREE ASPECTS OF EDUCATION TODAY

THE WORLD OF EDUCATION. Selected Readings. By Rena Roy. New York: Collier-Macmillan International, 1968. xi, 554 pp.