W.H. AUDEN'S *HORAE CANONICAE*

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Abstract

This thesis is a close critical examination of W.H. Auden's most important poetic statement on the nature and function of Christian faith, the Horae Canonicae.

The Introduction gives, in brief, the historical background of the Canonical Hours of worship in the Roman and English Churches, and there is discussion of Auden's particular use of the tradition of the hours. The significant extant criticism of the Horae is surveyed. This study of Auden's poems is presented as being more detailed than any work of criticism presently available, and as a new examination of the Horae Canonicae in the light of the whole of the Auden canon, with particular attention to other of Auden's poetic works analogous in thought, manner and voice to the poetry of the Horae.

The seven poems of the series are examined closely, one chapter of discussion being devoted to each. The argument is put forward that Auden's "hours" are not merely a cyclical devotion, but a progressive and didactic meditation on the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ in the life of each individual willing to accept its claims upon him.

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Contents

Introduction		1
I.	"Prime"	8
II.	"Terce"	19
III.	"Sext"	30
IV.	"Nones"	43
V.	"Vespers"	59
VI.	"Compline"	69
VII.	"Lauds"	81
Bibliography		87

INTRODUCTION

> The Church is consecrated in order that God's praises may be sung within it. This is done in the seven canonical Hours, namely Matins, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

The Horae Canonicae are seven "hours" or periods of Christian worship in each day, established by tradition reaching back virtually to the time of the apostles, and recognized to be the canonical or authorized times of common worship by the established Churches of Rome and of England. In his study of the evolution of services and ceremonies in the Christian church, Mgr. Duchesne outlines the development of the Hours, from the informal prayers at morning and evening said by the devout of the primitive church, into seven distinct offices of devotion:

> The custom was established at an early date of devoting the last moments of the night, the time between cock-crow and sunrise, to private prayer, and also the end of the day. . . . The monks of Syria and Mesopotamia met together, in addition to these, at the three day-hours of tierce, sext and none. At Bethlehem, another office was added at the first hour of day . . . A verse of Psalm cxviii, in which the psalmist says to God that he prays to Him seven times a day, provides a sort of ideal which it was attempted to realise.[1]

The movement from the two informal periods of devotion to the classic pattern of seven hours seems to have proceeded at random pace and by various hands during the third and fourth centuries A.D.[2] As the tradition became

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[1] Duchesne, Christian Worship: Its Origins and Evolution, trans. McClure, pp. 447-449.

[2] Cf. Dix, The Shape of the Liturgy, p. 323 ff.

established, ecclesiastical authorities in the western Church prescribed certain rituals of prayers, hymns, readings from the scriptures, and devotions for each of the periods of worship. In time, all of these elements of worship became established as the tradition of divine service in the canonical hours. Commentaries and apologies were written to celebrate the aptness of the ceremonial worship prescribed by the Church for each hour, citing scripture or traditional Christian writings which identified the subjects of worship themselves, or quoted biblical authority for the practice of such periodic worship on a daily basis. One such apology, for the benefit of those under monastic vocation, is found in the Regula of Saint Benedict:

> The prophet saith: Seven times a day have I given praise to thee. . . . We shall observe this sacred number of seven, if we fulfil the duties of our service in the Hours of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline; for it was of these Day Hours that he said: Seven times a day have I given praise to thee.[3]

A far more popular commentary, less theologically and historically accurate than that of St. Benedict but of much greater influence in the Christian community at large, was the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, whose apology centred upon the events of Christ's passion as the focus for meditation in the Hours. The relevant portions of de Voragine's explication appear as epigraph to this and each chapter in this discussion of Auden's poem.

Except in certain monastic communities, the observance of the seven hours of devotion gradually fell off, and by the sixteenth century

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[3]Benedict, The Rule of Saint Benedict, ed. and trans. McCann, p. 61. Cf. also Salmon, L'Office Divin: Histoire de la Formation du Breviare, p. 18 ff. for similar monastic "Rules", fifth to tenth centuries.

the "Hours" had for the most part been reduced again to morning and evening prayers, whose content changed daily according to the prescribed ceremonies of the liturgical calendar of saints' days and festivals.

There has been no healthy and continuing tradition of literary meditation on the Hours as such, at least since the Middle Ages, excepting the official revisions of the Psalter, Prayer Book and Breviary which generally drew from the recorded meditations of the early church fathers. With the English Renaissance, works like Donne's Corona and Devotions, Herbert's Temple, and Vaughan's Silex Scintillans established a tradition in English religious literature of very personal devotional poetry, whose organization was not likely to be based on traditional church ceremony. These poets and their followers were more inclined to base their meditations upon their private perceptions of the ordering of the Christian life, or upon the pattern of the earthly career of Christ and the lives of the apostles. For his Horae Canonicae, written at various times from 1949 to 1954, Auden returned to the ceremony of the Hours as de Voragine had known them: seven devotions corresponding to seven principal events in the Passion of Christ, in which the most important consideration is the response of the hearer to the events being recalled in the meditations, and ultimately the response of the sinful to the Sinless.[4]

The seven poems which make up the Horae Canonicae describe one man's progress through the day of the Crucifixion. The speaker is a poet who

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[4]The entire question of why Auden should write any Christian poem is beyond the scope of this discussion to answer. The most intelligent and comprehensive treatment available of Auden's spiritual journey from Freud through Marx and Engels to Kierkegaard and Christianity is Justin Replogle's "Auden's Religious Leap", Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, VII (1966), 47-75.

perceives his part in the great event to be that of witness. He brings to the remembrance of his readers the actual event of Christ's passion, the world's attitude toward the figure of Christ and its general culpability in the event of His sacrifice, and the particular responsibility in the matter which is shared by each individual, poet and reader alike. The first three poems describe the individual as he functions in the secular world, and there is a recurring allusion to the biblical accounts of the founding of civilization by Adam and his line. Auden's concern is with man's Fall from grace and into society, and he reflects upon the accomplishments of a social order which had its genesis in disobedience and the rejection of order. Although Auden uses the Crucifixion day as a focal point in the series, the poem's occasion is not restricted to that or any particular time and place. Adam and Cain are considered on common ground with the reader and the poet, the "accomplishments" of all are judged alike, and all are invited to be witnesses (at least) in the central event of the entire piece: the murder of Christ.

The poet's implicit claim is that the sacrificial death of Christ is the centre of the history of the fallen world, and that the fact of the death and the responsibility for it permeate all of human history, including the reader's present. In "Nones", the central poem of the Horae, the speaker grapples with the actual event of the sacrifice, and expresses the unwillingness of all men to come to terms with its reality. There is a gulf perceived between the laudable fact of civilization, the historical accomplishments of science and art and history, and the inescapable fact that all of man's history and accomplishment finds its focus in the death of Christ. Auden ponders the nature and the ultimate fate of a society

whose foundation and progress demand such a price, and considers what evidence there is of man's perfectibility. The possibility of the foundation of an ultimate "Authentic City" of perfect social harmony is considered and abandoned in "Vespers", as the pervasive taint in man's conception of social order is acknowledged to be inescapable. "Compline" is the crisis of the Horae Canonicae. The speaker contemplates the imperfect order of the secular world, and weighs it against that immutable Order which was established before and beyond Time itself. His response is to abandon, for good or ill, the place which he has had, and of which he has taken pride, in the temporal order. By virtue of that sacrifice which spanned the gulf between heaven and earth, the speaker embraces and is embraced by the Order which had been intended for man before Adam's disastrous choice. The Horae end with a hymn of praise for the speaker's rebirth into a new and blessed society, as his perception of "this green world temporal" is broadened to include that Order which it embodies, and by which man again has hope of a true community.

The Horae Canonicae has not received the critical attention lavished upon the rest of the Auden canon, and especially upon the very early poetry. This is due in part to the interest which many critics have taken in the fact of Auden's conversion to Christianity: the Horae are not good fuel for this debate, since the matter had long been settled before their writing. Another favourite topic among Auden critics is the poet's penchant for repeated revisions of his early poetry. The most senior critic, M. K. Spears, does little more with the Horae than to comment briefly upon Auden's departure from the established tradition of

making personal religious experience the focus of devotional poetry.[5] Justin Replogle, who is otherwise the most consistently readable and responsible critic of Auden's work, praises the series for its poetic achievement but ignores the poet's carefully shaded judgements upon the "achievement" of secular civilization. Neither does Replogle see in this poetry any consideration of the nexus between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, which I take to be of pre-eminent concern to Auden in the work. I quote from Auden's Poetry:

> On the whole, "Horae Canonicae", a religious poem about man's inevitable sinfulness symbolized by the crucifixion, becomes mainly a hymn of praise to the blessings of secular civilization. . . . Though a religious poem, "Horae Canonicae" is about the holiness of sinful secular life. It says nothing at all about transcendence. . . . Auden's thinking in the poem might be summed up by saying that since to be human is to sin, nothing could be more common and less worthy of special attention than sin itself.[6]

The most extensive treatment available of the Horae is that of Richard Johnson in his work entitled Man's Place. On occasion, Johnson does indulge a tendency to read Auden's work as philosophical text first, and as poetry second. In spite of this tendency, his discussion of the individual poems, and especially of their technical achievements, is usually well worth reading. Johnson does acknowledge that Auden is presenting a picture of two kinds of order in the work, and sees the distinction between the "order" of the fallen world which is presented from "Prime" to "Vespers" from the Order which is celebrated in "Lauds". However, he does not see in "Compline" the poet's transition from the lower to the higher plane. Because of this omission, his reading of the end of the series seems, to myself at

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[5] Cf. Spears, The Poetry of W.H. Auden, p. 334.

[6] Replogle, Auden's Poetry, pp. 84-85.

least, wrong, and thus his critique of the work as a whole lacks a centre. I quote from Johnson's comments upon "Lauds":

> [It is] a demonstration, highly artificial, of the order that could and should but does not exist in the fallen world of history. Auden dangles, as it were, this purest and most cyclical poem at the end of the series to demonstrate the chasm between its formal, artistic harmony and the cacophony of existence. The juxtaposition completes his diagram of possible modes of existence and of the chasm in which man, trying to act in the fullest sense of the term, exists.[7]

I have attempted to make of this, my own commentary upon the Horae Canonicae, a more detailed critical analysis of the poetry than is presently available. I have sought to substantiate my readings of these seven poems by putting before the reader passages from elsewhere in the Auden canon which seem to me analogous in technique or thought or voice to that which Auden presents in the Horae. It is my hope that the reader will find these meditations upon the canonical hours to be (as I have found them) a poetic masterwork, and perhaps the most interesting of the later chapters in Auden's creative history.

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[7] Johnson, Man's Place: An Essay on Auden, p. 207.

I

"PRIME"

> At the first hour, Christ came most often to the Temple, and the people came to meet Him there; He was presented before Pilate as soon as it was day; and at that selfsame hour He appeared to the women after His Resurrection. Hence at this hour of the day we praise God in the office of Prime, in order to imitate Christ, to thank Him arising and appearing, and to give the first fruits of the day to God, the Principle of all things.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

In the first of Auden's canonical hours, there is a celebration of a very particular Christian mystery; that is, the nexus of the eternal and the temporal. While the poet's principal concern in the Horae Canonicae is with the ominous intersection of worlds at the Crucifixion, in "Prime" the celebration is of the first meeting of God with man, in the moment of creation. Here the speaker adopts the role of the newly formed and inspired Adam:

> Simultaneously, as soundlessly,
> Spontaneously, suddenly
> As, at the vaunt of the dawn, the kind
> Gates of the body fly open
> To its world beyond, the gates of the mind,
> The horn gate and the ivory gate
> Swing to, swing shut, instantaneously
> Quell the nocturnal rummage
> Of its rebellious fronde, ill-favoured,
> Ill-natured and second-rate,
> Disenfranchised, widowed and orphaned
> By an historical mistake:
> Recalled from the shades to be a seeing being,
> From absence to be on display,

Without a name or history I wake
Between my body and the day.[1]

Auden's poetic style is here quite mannered and self-conscious, making abundant use of alliteration and assonance, and much irregular end-rhyming in the sixteen-line stanzas of syllabic metre. In this first stanza, there is allusion made to three distinct modes of perception and being: sleep, suspension between sleep and wakefulness, and wakefulness. While the speaker is asleep, he is a captive in the world within, for "the shades" are dominated not by the "I", but by the body and the "nocturnal rummage" of dreams. Upon reaching consciousness, the speaker becomes "on display"; that is, he enters the fallen world of men, the world of guilty experience. The movement from the sleeping to the waking worlds is described in the simple statement "I wake", at the conclusion of the stanza. This moment of waking is celebrated as a moment of blamelessness, yet it is without dimension, since we are told that the speaker's return from the world of the unconscious and his entry into the waking world occur "simultaneously". Yet all of the frenzied activity described in the stanza (the flying-open of the "kind gates", the swinging-to and swinging-shut of the dream gates, the quelling of the "fronde") occurs within this frozen moment. Auden is toying with the reader's perception here, demanding that he acknowledge the possibility of feverish action and complete suspension of action occupying the same moment (if indeed there are "moments" in eternity). He employs

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[1] Auden, "Prime" from Horae Canonicae, in Collected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), p. 475. Hereafter, quoted passages from the Horae will be identified in the text, by individual poem title and page reference to this text, which will appear in parentheses after each quotation. All other Auden references are to the same text, and will be identified by "Auden" and the page number in parentheses following each.

these tactics to remind the reader that the skills of temporal perception are of severely limited value when one's consideration is of the things of eternity. This is Auden's poetic imitation of the nexus of the eternal and temporal worlds which is the thematic crux of the Horae. His implicit caution is that the reader is not likely to find the concepts involved easy to assimilate.

The "vaunt of the dawn" seems to pose a threat to the individual, since this vaunt is made before the "kind gates", the eyes. Because "kind" expresses beneficence and goodness as well as naturalness, the effect of the irresistible light upon the eyes is as a surly intrusion. This "threat" is explained in the lines which follow, for there is a tension between the body's "world beyond" (the world of the day and the conscious mind) and its correlative world within. This inner world of the subconscious is in a highly volatile state; for the malcontent anarchic force of its dreams, a "nocturnal rummage" as of vermin, must be "quelled" by the shutting of the gates of true and false dream. It should be noted that "true" dreams are here not considered more worthy, nor less dangerous, than "false": any such activity, if outside the civilizing capacity of the mind is, whether of itself good or bad, a threat to the order. The character of these dreams is humourously conveyed in the melodramatic terms of derogation "ill-favoured / Ill-natured and second-rate", but the tone is quickly modified by the second triad of description: "Disenfranchised, widowed and orphaned". It is as if the poet felt safe in satirizing the quality of the mind's preoccupations in dream, but was sobered by the other implications of the "historical mistake": "Disenfranchised, widowed and orphaned" speaks of the loss of precious relationship

with our erstwhile King, Bridegroom and Father. Even the euphemisms for responsibility in the Fall ("historical mistake", "history") betray a wish for retreat from the facts of man's first crime and sustained exile from Eden. The stanza ends with explication of the occasion itself, the instant in which the "I" is suspended between "body" and "day", which is the cause of celebration in the second stanza.

The second stanza of the poem is a hymn of joy for the moment of blamelessness:

> Holy this moment, wholly in the right,
> As, in complete obedience
> To the light's laconic outcry, next
> As a sheet, near as a wall,
> Out there as a mountain's poise of stone,
> The world is present, about,
> And I know that I am, here, not alone
> But with a world and rejoice
> Unvexed, for the will has still to claim
> This adjacent arm as my own,
> The memory to name me, resume
> Its routine of praise and blame,
> And smiling to me is this instant while
> Still the day is intact, and I
> The Adam sinless in our beginning,
> Adam still previous to any act.
>
> ("Prime", p. 475)

The language here is self-conscious and apparently whimsical, but by no means awkward or inexact. The sober considerations of the previous stanza concerning the relationships severed by disobedience are for the moment subordinated to the speaker's joy while "smiling to [him] is this instant". Yet the thought of relationship certainly informs the speaker's ostensibly rambling pattern of thought: the quality of blessedness is sketched in the "Holy . . . wholly" pun, and in the speaker's momentary awareness of being "not alone", "While still the day is intact". The physical world

is itself praised explicitly for its proximity, and the celebration of God's presence in the world is only tenuous and implicit, in the Hopkinesque treatment of "Out there as a mountain's poise of stone".

In the midst of this hymn of praise, Auden introduces the elements of qualification which serve again to remind the reader of the transience of this moment of blamelessness: we are, after all, to consider all of the experience here described as perceived by the poet in the dimensionless instant between the statements "I wake", and "I draw breath". Celebration of the blessings of the world's proximity is exchanged for the inevitable reminder of the curse, which will occur when the "adjacent arm" (note the clinical modifier) is "claimed". In the negatives "Unvexed", "sinless" and "previous", there is the clear suggestion of their antitheses. Auden defines by opposites to turn our consideration from the blessings of the Edenic state to that singular "act" and its continually evolving ramifications with which the figure of Adam is inevitably associated.

The similarities of "The Dark Years" with "Prime" have been noted by several critics,[2] and certainly the likenesses are striking, especially in the first few stanzas of the earlier work:

> Returning each morning from a timeless world,
> the senses open upon a world of time:
> after so many years the light is
> novel still and immensely ambitious,
>
> but, translated from her own informal world,
> the ego is bewildered and does not want
> a shining novelty this morning,
> and does not like the noise or the people.

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[2] Cf. especially Johnson, Man's Place, p. 178 ff.

> For behind the doors of this ambitious day
> stand shadows with enormous grudges, outside
> its chartered ocean of perception
> misshapen coastguards drunk with foreboding,
>
> and whispering websters, creeping through this world
> discredit so much literature and praise. . . .
>
> (Auden, p. 222)

The sense of the individual's "fall" into the world, which re-occurs daily, is certainly present in the earlier poem, as is the link between an anxious and rigorously subjugated guilt and one's pride in accomplishing, making and doing. The significant addition in "Prime" is the figure of Adam, and with it the introduction of the themes of relationship: the God-man relationship which was severed when man took upon himself the role of maker, and the tainted relationships of the human family which (through Cain) manifested themselves in murder, and in a civilization which became not an emulation of the Edenic order, but a blasphemous counterfeit of the promised New Jerusalem.

The beginning of the third stanza describes the speaker's descent from the midpoint of blamelessness to the final position in the world of time. This is described in terms which again recall Adam's lapse:

> I draw breath; that is of course to wish
> No matter what, to be wise,
> To be different, to die and the cost,
> No matter how, is Paradise
> Lost of course and myself owing a death:
>
> ("Prime", p. 476)

"I draw breath" recalls the biblical image of Adam's vivification ("And the Lord God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life", Gen. 2: 7), but here the allusion is ironic, since it is not God's will being performed here, but man's. The "holy insufflation" of "Winds" (Auden, p. 426) becomes

an act of the speaker's own will: "that is of course to wish . . . ". The Serpent's rationalizations are adopted in this first act of the will, but the noble-sounding motives "to be wise, / To be different", and the litany of "No matter what, . . . No matter how" seem rather hollow, when one considers that the whole leads to the speaker's inevitable recognition of himself as "owing a death".

From contemplation of his debt, the speaker retreats to yet another celebration of the beautiful "world beyond":

> The eager ridge, the steady sea,
> The flat roofs of the fishing village
> Still asleep in its bunny
> Though as fresh and sunny still, are not friends
> But things to hand, . . .
>
> ("Prime", p. 476)

There has been no qualitative change in the world, only in the speaker, but the effect of personal change is to change his perception of that which is outside the personal. There is animation here in the "eager ridge" and the "steady sea", and there is whimsy in the choice of the dialect word "bunny" (for "ravine") and in its rhyme with "sunny" in the middle of the following line. Yet these things do not maintain their amiable relationship with the speaker. Although they remain "as fresh and sunny still", they are no longer "friends" because the speaker's <u>own</u> position has changed.

The world external to the speaker is now made up not of "friends" or equals in Creation, but of "things to hand", at once immediately <u>available</u> to him, and also <u>to be used</u>. It is this latter sense of "to hand" which is the more important in this context, for by it Auden stresses lapsarian man's role as maker; a role which was usurped from God in

the decision which led to man's Fall:

> . . . this ready flesh
> No honest equal, but my accomplice now,
> My assassin to be, and my name
> Stands for my historical share of care
> For a lying self-made city,
> Afraid of our living task, the dying
> Which the coming day will ask.
>
> ("Prime", p. 476)

Here we see mutability not only in relationships between men, or between man and the natural world, but within the internal community of a man's motives, designs, purposes and needs. That which was only an "adjacent arm" is metamorphosed, first into "this ready flesh", next "my accomplice", and finally "my assassin". The memory has fulfilled its threat to "name" the speaker, and this name now "Stands for [his] historical share of care / For a lying self-made city". "Care" is a significant word in this stanza, since it carries at once the suggestions of anxious guilt for the sinful act and of compassionate concern for the state of the world and its people. This ambiguity is firmly tied to Auden's generally ambiguous treatment of the "city", which is a dominant concern in the series. The city is "lying", since it denies the pattern which God designed by which men might live together, but is also "self-made", an artificial accomplishment of which man may be justly proud. The negative connotations of "care" come through the poetry of "Prime" quite clearly, but it is as well for the reader to recall that Auden also treats of "care" in the positive sense, as in the earlier poem "Tonight at Seven-Thirty" (from Thanksgiving for a Habitat):

> . . . the funniest
> mortals and the kindest are those who are most aware
> of the baffle of being, don't kid themselves our care
> is consolable, but believe a laugh is less

> heartless than tears, that a hostess
> prefers it.
>
> (Auden, p. 534)

The "leap" from the speaker's allusion to Adam, to mention of the "self-made city", is made more comprehensible when one considers the history of Adam's family. Adam's firstborn, Cain, became the first murderer when he killed his brother Abel in jealousy:

> And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell . . . And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.[3]

Cain's transgression, which brought upon him the second divine curse, was instrumental in bringing to fulfillment the original curse which Adam and Eve incurred upon themselves in their first sin. They had been cautioned by God that they should not eat of the forbidden fruit, "for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die".[4] Abel's was the first human death, and so the first demonstration of that original curse. After description of the killing of Abel, the Genesis account continues with a brief history of Cain's family, including

> Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle. And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ. And Zillah, she also bare Tubal-cain, an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron.[5]

In short, the artificers and skilled craftsmen of the world were considered to have descended in the line of Cain, and their collective

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[3]Gen. 4: 4-5, 8.

[4]Gen. 2: 17.

[5]Gen. 4: 20-22.

accomplishments led newly "civilized" man swiftly to the building of Babel:

> And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly . . . let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.[6]

This is the more ominous aspect of the "lying self-made city" of which Auden writes, for Babylon is the biblical model for that which the poet considers a "too-great city", a city whose spectacular achievement still cannot cover its guilt.

This is the central ambiguity of the Horae Canonicae, from which the other ambiguities depend: man's first choice was disobedience, which led to separation from God. But this in turn led men to band together, becoming citizens (albeit of an imperfect, and even at times diabolical, community) and makers in their own right. Auden's cogitations upon the effects of choice, upon the position of Man the creator before a Creator whose first commandment is that "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me"[7], and more generally upon the very nature of the human civilization whose foundation was disobedience to the divine rule, informs the thought of the entire series. The foundations of the discussion are laid here in the first poem, but the whole of the seven poems are used by the poet in the development of this theme. A close reading of the Auden canon shows that the same concerns have been with the poet, in one or another form, from the beginning. Two passages in particular will illustrate that

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[6] Gen. 11: 3, 4.

[7] Ex. 20: 3.

"choice", and the "guilt" which depends upon that choice, are essential to the Auden definition of civilized man. The first is from the "Sonnets from China", the second from "The Guilty Vicarage":

> So from the years their gifts were showered: each
> Grabbed at the one it needed to survive;
> Bee took the politics that suit a hive,
> Trout finned as trout, peach moulded into peach,
>
> And were successful at their first endeavour.
> The hour of birth their only time in college,
> They were content with their precocious knowledge,
> To know their station and be right for ever.
>
> Till, finally, there came a childish creature
> On whom the years could model any feature,
> Fake, as chance fell, a leopard or a dove,
>
> Who by the gentlest wind was rudely shaken,
> Who looked for truth but always was mistaken,
> And envied his few friends, and chose his love.
>
> (Auden, pp. 149-150)

> From the point of view of ethics, desires and acts are good and bad, and I must choose the good and reject the bad, but the I which makes this choice is ethically neutral; it only becomes good or bad in its choice. To have a sense of sin means to feel guilty at there being an ethical choice to make, a guilt which, however "good" I may become, remains unchanged.[8]

"Prime" leaves the speaker with just this "sense of sin", as he enters into the world of action and choice in "Terce".

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[8] Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays, p. 157.

II

"TERCE"

> At the third hour, Christ was crucified by the tongues
> of the Jews, was scourged at the pillar by Pilate . . .
> and at this same hour the Holy Ghost was sent.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus
> de Voragine

In "Terce", the speaker whose voice we heard in the first poem is seen to prepare himself for the exigencies of his day in the "world without". The focus of the allusion to the biblical account of the founding of society now shifts: from Adam, and his spiritual relationships to Creator and Creation, to the second generation, Cain's generation, as it takes up its vocation:

> After shaking paws with his dog
> (Whose bark would tell the world that he is always kind),
> The hangman sets off briskly over the heath;
> He does not know yet who will be provided
> To do the high works of Justice with:
> Gently closing the door of his wife's bedroom
> (Today she has one of her headaches),
> With a sigh the judge descends his marble stair;
> He does not know by what sentence
> He will apply on earth the Law that rules the stars:
> And the poet, taking a breather
> Round his garden before starting his eclogue,
> Does not know whose Truth he will tell.
>
> ("Terce", p. 476)

The technique of the poem imitates the relaxed manner of its dramatis personae, as we meet them before they adopt the official roles which will be theirs in the coming business day. Auden stays with the syllabic metre of "Prime", but in the second poem the stanzas are shorter (thirteen lines) and there is no important use of rhyme at all. The effect is very much

relaxed, and the self-conscious quality which was so evident in the first poem is virtually non-existent in "Terce". Only the barest suggestion of alliteration is used; for example, in the first stanza the device is employed to aid the reader in associating the "hangman" with his "heath", and the adverb "gently" is similarly linked with the unofficial actions of the "judge". There is clearly to be an event in this coming day which will draw hangman, judge and poet together, but for the moment Auden is content to stress their commonality and shared humanity, in the context of their several preparations for the day which they will share. Auden wishes to stress in the first stanza of "Terce" that all human experience is interdependent, that in Donne's words "No man is an Island, entire of it self". He accomplishes this by defining hangman, judge and poet by their relationships: the hangman's with his dog, the judge's with his wife, and the poet's (by inference) with ourselves, his readers. As kindness is the dominant characteristic of the hangman (of which, we are assured, his dog will bear witness), so the judge is seen to be solicitous for his still-sleeping wife. The judge's "sigh" is not reproachful toward his wife (since he does not rouse her to be its witness) but merely wistful, and perhaps also a signal to us that he remembers a time when his wife's "headaches" were not so common as to demand the practical distinction between his bedroom and "his wife's". The poet's dominant concern is not explicit in the stanza, but it may be inferred that his attitude to us his readers is a combination of that of priest to people, instructor to pupil, and friend to friend: it is one of love in its various aspects, for presumably one does not write poetry for purely selfish motives (or at least not often, or for long). The hangman's location, "the heath", shows

that in the typology of the poem he represents the natural man; the judge's "marble stair" speaks of the necessary rigidity and codification of the Law through which he serves blind Justice; and the poet's "garden" reinforces his position as the artist, who presents Nature "to advantage dressed".

All three of the principals of this first stanza are gently mocked by the poet, lest we take their vocations too seriously and neglect their common humanity. Thus the hangman is introduced to us in the action of "shaking paws with his dog", and Auden makes a dark joke about the practical nature of the hangman's job by drawing our attention to "the high works of Justice". The judge "sighs", and the prestige of his occupation is slightly diminished when one considers the contrast drawn for us by Auden between the macrocosmic and ideal "Law that rules the stars", and the microcosmic and actual application of that Law on the earth, which is the partial prerogative of the judge. The poet's lofty aim of drafting a new "eclogue" is undercut slightly by the fact that he is "taking a breather" in his garden beforehand: the juxtaposition of the classical form's title, and the very homely action of its would-be maker, serves to de-mystify both the man and his craft. It is perhaps because of the lightly ironic touches in these descriptions that we are able to take "Justice" and "the Law" seriously, as the ideals to which the hangman and the judge aspire in their vocations: we are asked only to consider their imperfect manifestations on earth, much as the hangman and judge must consider them, and this is possible. These men may have the theoretical assumption that they serve the ideals of Justice and Law, but if asked informally, would reveal that they perceive their vocations to be the hanging of criminals and the judging

of legal cases, respectively. The poet's motive, however, is more of a problem: we may well accept his devotion to Truth, and recognize that he may be able to bring something of Truth to his poetry, but Auden raises a very serious question about the relationship of the actual to the real in this instance: the poet "Does not know whose Truth he will tell." Does the poet tell God's Truth, or another? If there be more than one Truth, there might well be more than one Justice and Law, and those concepts will thus cease to be regarded as ideals. Put another way, without an absolute Truth, real and comprehensive Justice is impossible, as is the perception and application of a righteous Law. In "The History of Truth", Auden emphasizes the centrality of this one ideal:

> Truth was their model as they strove to build
> A world of lasting objects to believe in,
> Without believing earthenware and legend,
> Archway and song, were truthful or untruthful:
> The Truth was there already to be true.
>
> This while when, practical like paper-dishes,
> Truth is convertible to kilowatts,
> Our last to do by is an anti-model,
> Some untruth anyone can give the lie to,
> A nothing no one need believe is there.
>
> (Auden, p. 463)

It is remarkable that Auden does not put forward any real solution to his own questions concerning the nature of Truth (whether absolute or relative), either in "The History of Truth" or in "Terce", except by implication. It is as if the poet feels it his responsibility merely to pose the questions; that it is for his readers to make their own decisions on the basis of that information which he provides. This may be the fruit of genuine humility on Auden's part, but it seems here uncomfortably close to intellectual irresolution, in a poet so habitually

tough-minded and alert to philosophical debate.

At the conclusion of the first stanza, the three persons who are discussed have been in one sense denied their own personalities, in that they are named by their functions: he who hangs, he who judges, and he who makes poetry. This is a common method of reference to those with whom our only contact is "professional", and is thus much more an urban than a rural habit of mind. In "Lakes", Auden speaks of "the city where one panics / At nothing noticing how real one is" (Auden, p. 430), and it is perhaps this sort of "panic" which causes the craftsman of the first stanza to retreat within the shell of his own personality in the second:

> Sprites of hearth and store-room, godlings
> Of professional mysteries, the Big Ones
> Who can annihilate a city
> Cannot be bothered with this moment: we are left,
> Each to his secret cult. Now each of us
> Prays to an image of his image of himself:
>
> ("Terce", p. 476)

Corresponding to the three men who are immediately concerned with the events of the coming day, in this stanza we are introduced to the three superstitious "divinities" of public activity: the "sprites" who influence the fortunes of the labouring class, the "godlings" of the rising executives, and the "Big Ones" invoked by figures of established Authority. Yet in this instance, each individual finds that his own personal deity is uninterested in that with which he is so concerned: "we are left / Each to his secret cult", and the feeling is not a comfortable one. The figure in the Auden canon who best expresses that alienation which is the tonal foundation of this stanza is the Wall soldier in "Roman Wall Blues":

Over the heather the wet wind blows,
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.

. . . . . .

When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.

(Auden, p. 121)

The man who finds himself a "Wall soldier" without really knowing how he came to be such, is without vocation or purpose apart from his concern for his own survival, with as many comforts as can be safely and practically laid on. As the soldier's "goal" is modest ("I shall do nothing but look"), and postponed to such an indefinite future that disappointment is not a realistic possibility ("When I'm a veteran"), so the individual in "Terce", sans the occupational mask, asks for very little. There is a "prayer" of sorts, but the man who prays does not offer to meet with God himself, does not risk confronting that Truth whose identity was briefly considered in the first stanza, but "Prays to an image of his image of himself". This is patently <u>not</u> Truth, but a synthetic image of rather dubious workmanship. This "image of an image" is without any guarantee of consistency between the artifice and the internal vision, since the artificer does not trouble to provide himself with the best available model.

Throughout the discussion of this second section, I have used the third person in order to continue the sense from the first stanza which concerned itself with the "others", hangman, judge and poet; but it should be noted that Auden has in this second stanza cemented the

identification between "poet" and readership: the declared subject is now not "him" or "them", but "us". Brought so close to the pattern of thought by this simple device, we are likely to find the superficiality of "our" prayer somewhat disquieting:

> 'Let me get through this coming day
> Without a dressing down from a superior,
> Being worsted in a repartee,
> Or behaving like an ass in front of the girls;
> Let something exciting happen,
> Let me find a lucky coin on a sidewalk,
> Let me hear a new funny story.'
>
> ("Terce", p. 476)

"Our" concerns are strictly selfish, and, as might be expected from the context within which Auden has framed the "prayer", revolve around the fears of living below our own images of ourselves, or the images of ourselves which we would like to fix upon the imaginations of those whom we meet. The "dressing down", "being worsted", and "behaving like an ass" would indicate to ourselves and to the world that we are not as competent, clever and cultured as we could wish; yet these attributes are, at best, under but our partial control. The "positive" requests, for "something exciting", "a lucky coin" or "a new funny story", betray a mere craving for diversion from the truth of our own condition: of these we cannot possibly have control, and thus our only hope here would seem to be of propitious circumstances. Without even the dubious comfort of superstitious belief, Auden is saying, a man's "spiritual" condition, his attitude to that outside of natural laws or of his own personal control, is pathetic in the extreme. The same theme is expressed rather more gently in "In Praise of Limestone": --

> . . . Not to lose time, not to get caught,
> Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble
> The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
> Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these
> Are our Common Prayer . . .
>
> (Auden, p. 415)

-- and it is quite clear that Auden is having his ironic way with both of these "prayers", because in each of them he shows that nothing about us is more common and predictable than our feverish concern to be unique and spontaneous.

The most striking aspect of the third stanza of the poem is its insistence upon the present moment and the personae of the coming action:

> At this hour we all might be anyone:
> It is only our victim who is without a wish,
> Who knows already . . .
>
> ("Terce", p. 476)

It is "this hour", <u>now</u>, that preparation must be made for the action by which the coming day is to be known. "We" are the principals now, and our opposition is already "our victim". The crucifixion which is alluded to here is spoken of by the poet as being so definite and inevitable an action as to be virtually complete <u>now</u>, in the same moment in which it is merely being considered as the principal event of the yet coming day, much in the same manner that the Old Testament prophets wrote of the events which were to come. In one sense, "our victim" is a pathetic figure because his fate is inevitable, and because he is alone while we have the comfort of belonging to "us". The victim is also said to be "without a wish", much as the luckless trio in the "crucifixion" scene of "The Shield of Achilles":

A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came:

(Auden, p. 454)

Yet the phrase "without a wish" carries with it more than the sense of having no "hope for help", since in the previous stanza of "Terce" just such a "wish" (our "prayer") has been clearly articulated, and has betrayed our pathetic lack of spiritual resources. Since "our victim" is "without a wish", it is inferred that he at least is not a member of this spiritually impoverished class, and this is borne out by the information that he "knows already" (since our "prayer" betrayed our principal concern as being fear of the unknown demand to be made upon us). The other significant aspect of the victim's knowledge suggested here is that he has no need of the diversion which "we" crave: his "image of himself" is clear, and he makes no attempt to cloud it.

With these considerations in mind, the parenthetical comment upon "our victim"'s knowledge becomes not merely the brief consideration of the "Christian paradox of God's omnipotence and man's free-will" noted by Fuller[1], but an inversion, even a diabolical inversion, of the roles of judge and accused:

(that is what
We can never forgive. If he knows the answers,

---

[1]Fuller, A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden, p. 236.

Then why are we here, why is there even dust?)
("Terce", p. 476)

It is "we" who are contemplating the crime of murder, and yet in this "aside" the poet has made it seem that it is "our victim" who stands in need of our forgiveness. A yet more interesting paradox raised here is that of the Incarnation: omniscient God, since (in the person of Christ) becoming flesh or "dust" as Adam, limits himself to the resources of a man. Auden gives full reign to the irony here, since the human birth and death of the agent of forgiveness are those things which put Christ in the role of "our victim"; yet in the parenthetical comment these are rather petulantly considered as guilty acts which should require God to ask forgiveness (in the role of defendant) and ourselves to grant it (in the role of judge).

From this point, the poet retreats to that aspect of divine knowledge which most significantly affects us as we face the crucial day: "our victim . . .

Knows already that, in fact, our prayers are heard,
That not one of us will slip up,
That the machinery of our world will function
Without a hitch, that today, for once,
There will be no squabbling on Mount Olympus,
No Chthonian mutters of unrest,
But no other miracle, knows that by sundown
We shall have had a good Friday.

("Terce", pp. 476-477)

The pathetic requests for a day free from uncomfortable mishap, which so reduced "our" dignity in the second stanza of the poem, are here still further reduced. Our deepest concerns for the day are put on the level of fear of a pratfall, but even this may be avoided, as we are assured

that "not one of us will slip up". "Our world" is made to seem soulless and without true thought or emotion in the mechanical metaphor, and even the image of the terrestrial "machine" is similarly reduced, in the promise that it will today function "without a hitch". Our failure of belief is mocked in the promises that we will not be at the mercy, today, of the whims of a classical pantheon; but neither can we expect the intervention of the God to whom we (may) pay lipservice: there will be "no other miracle". The poem ends with a terrible reduction of the concept of "goodness": today "our victim", our God, will die, but for the rest of us the day may be described as "good". This follows on the notion of relative Truth raised earlier in the poem, for if goodness, Justice and Law are also relative, then each individual is placed at the centre of his own universe, and the fate of "our victim" leaves us untouched. This is the darker side of the eternally disinterested world which Auden contemplated in "Musee des Beaux Arts":

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position; how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window or
> just walking dully along;
> How when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
> For the miraculous birth, there always must be
> Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
> On a pond at the edge of the wood:
> They never forgot
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
> Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
> Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
> torturer's horse
> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
>
> (Auden, pp. 146-147)

III

"SEXT"

> At the sixth hour, Christ was nailed to the Cross, and darkness came over the whole earth, that the sun, mourning for the death of its Lord, might be covered with sombre weeds, and might not give light to them that were crucifying the Lord.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

Auden's focus in "Prime" was upon the individual man as he was defined by his nature, either innocent or fallen. The relationship most important to a man by this definition was that between himself and his God. In "Terce", second of the series, the individual was considered not only for what he was, but also for what he did, as occupation and nature met in Cain's generation of craftsmen. The most important relationships considered in "Terce" were accordingly first those with the individual's family, and then with the "world beyond" at large, the world in which a man's craft is performed and judged. "Sext" is at once Auden's celebration of vocation, and his analysis of the process by which the craftsman may be subsumed into the crowd, abandoning personal vocation for corporate action. Since some sacrifice of personality is inevitable in becoming part of a larger body, it is no longer the quality of the individual's soul which is examined by the poet in "Sext", but the spiritual nature of the entire community of men.

Auden's technique in the third poem is spare and reserved, with little recourse to poetic showmanship. The basic poetic unit of "Sext"

is not the syllable or the metrical foot, but the "gathering" of two lines, which arbitrarily gives poetic organization to the prose-like discussion. The poetic counterpoint is thus between the natural speech rhythms of the prose sentences, of which the chief effect is aural, and the artificial two-line unit, which is perceived by the reader visually. By this device, the poem demands very particular attention from the reader, while it maintains the utmost clarity and apparent ease of expression. Professor Johnson's notes on Auden's style in this poem are very much to the point:

> The style is conspicuously bare, but at the same time almost fastidiously careful, using constructions that make no jumps and leave out no steps whatsoever. . . . The poem is neither verbose nor terse, but, rather, exact, and the diction is simple, latinate, and somewhat technical. The painstaking manner of "Sext" is the precise equivalent of the impersonal concentration on a job being done; the poem embodies that "eye-on-the-object look."[1]

The pattern of the poem is built around yet another triad, in which Agent, Authority and Witness, which are objectifications of the hangman, judge and poet of "Terce", unite in the event of the Crucifixion. The centre of the poem is implied only. The three elements of agent, authority and witness are here being marshalled for their co-operation in the event of the sacrifice which is to come, but the event itself is not shown us. This is a presentation of the Crucifixion from the perspective of a witness who stands at the foot of the cross itself, and looks outward and downward to watch the preparation for the sacrifice, a mustering of forces on three fronts. The first section of the poem is a celebration of the fact of vocation, the near-perfect union of a man and his work:

---

[1] Johnson, Man's Place, p. 194.

You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,

you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon

making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading,

wear the same rapt expression,
forgetting themselves in a function.

How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look.

To ignore the appetitive goddesses,
to desert the formidable shrines

of Rhea, Aphrodite, Demeter, Diana,
to pray instead to St. Phocas,

St. Barbara, San Saturnino,
or whoever one's patron is,

that one may be worthy of their mystery,
what a prodigious step to have taken.

There should be monuments, there should be odes,
to the nameless heroes who took it first,

to the first flaker of flints
who forgot his dinner,

the first collector of sea-shells
to remain celibate.

Where should we be but for them?
Feral still, un-housetrained, still

wandering through forests without
a consonant to our names,

slaves of Dame Kind, lacking
all notion of a city,

and, at this noon, for this death,
there would be no agents.

("Sext", pp. 477-478)

The poem begins by making very clear the distinction between mere action for its own sake ("what someone is doing") with that action which is ideally suited to the individual by whom it is performed. "Vocation" implies not only the public function of the working man, but a particular function to which that man has been called. In a poem such as this which presupposes a Christian frame of reference, "vocation" must therefore imply that the occupation of the individual has been established from beyond mere personal or even human choice: it implies the Voice itself. This should draw the consideration of the reader back to the first of the Horae, since "Prime" presented Adam as the creation of God, and the Genesis account which was there alluded to certainly equates creation with vocation: "And God said, Let there be Light . . ." The event of the Fall which so shadowed the figure of the once blameless Adam in the earlier poem is present in "Sext" as well, since Auden glosses the word "vocation" with the phrase "forgetting themselves in a function". It was the Fall which made Man conscious and ashamed of his own condition, and thus the "forgetting" oneself is put in terms of a return, however brief and illusory, to that condition of innocent oblivion. Behind the simple phrase "forgetting themselves in a function" is quite a complex and subtle problem of relationships. The "forgetting" is a means to the end of the "function", which is itself a means to the end of the accomplishment (whether material product or action), which in turn is a means to the end of acceptance either in the secular community of producers or in the sight of God. In the story of Cain and Abel alluded to earlier, Cain sought the popular acceptance, Abel the divine.

Auden goes on to explain, somewhat perversely, that it was this

desire in man to be a maker which led him from the "formidable shrines" of the pagan deities who governed the most basic personal gratifications, to the Christian saints of craft patronage. There is some genuine celebration here of a devotion to duty not founded on appetite, and of the "nameless heroes" in whom such devotion first developed. Yet the "heroes" are of the generation of Cain, and Auden indulges his own taste for playful irony to remind us of that fact, by pushing alliteration beyond its serious limits with "the first flaker of flints / who forgot his dinner", and by suggesting that the first "religious" celibate was dedicated merely to the collection of sea-shells.

The alternative to this society of makers, our slavery to "Dame Kind", is painted very darkly in "Sext", and this is yet more easily observed when one considers what Auden says of Dame Kind in the poem bearing her name:

> Steatopygous, sow-dugged
> and owl-headed,
> To Whom -- Whom else? -- the first innocent blood
> was formally shed
> By a chinned mammal that hard times
> had turned carnivore,
> From Whom his first promiscuous orgy
> begged a downpour
> To speed the body-building cereals
> of a warmer age:
> Now who put <u>us</u>, we should like to know,
> in <u>Her</u> manage?
>
> (Auden, p. 503)

In "The Geography of the House", Dame Kind (travelling under the name of "Mrs. Nature") is considered as the goddess of the bowels, which suggests the poet's reason for describing uncivilized man as "Feral [perhaps a visual pun on "fecal"] still, un-housetrained". Certainly

our condition as makers would seem to be presented in a better light than any alternative condition. Yet against the repulsive possibilities of life without civilization, Auden juxtaposes the image of the immediate and particular "accomplishment" of civilized man which will distinguish "this noon" from all others: the Crucifixion. One might rationalize that the poet's concept of "vocation" incorporates the calling of the agents of Christ's death from before the foundation of the world, and thus the "city" is involved intimately in the more fortunate aspect of the felix culpa, but the fact remains that it is the spiritual condition of the civilization which demands the death. Auden may still be in a celebratory mood, but he has certainly included the warning that his celebration is of a tainted good.

The second section of "Sext" devotes itself to a consideration of yet three more participants in the order of the "civilized" world, as the general, the bacteriologist and the prosecutor represent Authority:

> You need not hear what orders he is giving
> to know if someone has authority,
>
> you have only to watch his mouth:
> when a besieging general sees
>
> a city wall breached by his troops,
> when a bacteriologist
>
> realizes in a flash what was wrong
> with his hypothesis, when
>
> from a glance at the jury, the prosecutor
> knows the defendant will hang,
>
> their lips and the lines around them
> relax, assuming an expression
>
> not of simple pleasure at getting
> their own sweet way but of satisfaction

at being right, an incarnation
of Fortitudo, Justicia, Nous.

You may not like them much
(who does?) but we owe them

basilicas, divas,
dictionaries, pastoral verse,

the courtesies of the city:
without these judicial mouths

(which belong for the most part
to very great scoundrels)

how squalid existence would be,
tethered for life to some hut village,

afraid of the local snake
or the local ford demon,

speaking the local patois
of some three hundred words

(think of the family squabbles and the
poison-pens, think of the inbreeding),

and, at this noon, there would be no authority
to command this death.

("Sext", pp. 478-479)

Auden's discussion of the Authority which is to command the sacrificial death is more straightforward than was his treatment of the "agents" in the first section of the poem. It is much more clearly a case of compromise in the second section, as the "courtesies" obviously held dear by the poet ("basilicas, divas, / dictionaries, pastoral verse") are measured against the scurrility of the "scoundrels" necessary to their foundation. The revered attributes are not the Christian pietas and charitas, but the classical humanistic virtues of "Fortitudo, Justicia, Nous". As Replogle remarks:

> Without those deplorable Utopians, without hangmen, judges, Caesars, and the world's Ethical power establishment, men would still be sunk

> in squalid Stone Age barbarism, "tethered for life to some hut village" . . . Next to that, civilization, though built with a sinful "cement of blood" . . . looks very good.[2]

Yet again, there is the matter of the event of this day, which is set against the virtues creditable to the machinery which allows it to happen, as "this noon" and "this death" are repeated from the first section of the poem, in a refrain intended once more to qualify the poet's celebration.

In the third section of "Sext", Auden abandons his somewhat romantic justification of the authoritative "scoundrels", to consider those who are called upon to witness the great event. The poet's analysis of his subject in this third section is intensive, and the discussion decidedly un-euphemistic:

> Anywhere you like, somewhere
> on broad-chested, life-giving Earth,
>
> anywhere between her thirstlands
> and undrinkable Ocean,
>
> the crowd stands perfectly still,
> its eyes (which seem one) and its mouths
>
> (which seem infinitely many)
> expressionless, perfectly blank.
>
> The crowd does not see (what everyone sees)
> a boxing match, a train wreck,
>
> a battleship being launched,
> does not wonder (as everyone wonders)
>
> who will win, what flag she will fly,
> how many will be burned alive,
>
> is never distracted
> (as everyone is always distracted)

---

[2]Replogle, Auden's Poetry, pp. 83-84.

by a barking dog, a smell of fish,
a mosquito on a bald head:

the crowd sees only one thing
(which only the crowd can see),

an epiphany of that
which does whatever is done.

Whatever god a person believes in,
in whatever way he believes

(no two are exactly alike),
as one of the crowd he believes

and only believes in that
in which there is only one way of believing.

("Sext", p. 479)

The governing tone of the section is established in its very first lines, as the "poetic", Homeric epithet of "broad-chested, life-giving" for Earth is immediately undercut by the practical mention of "her thirstlands / and undrinkable Ocean". In this, Auden echoes part of Alonso's letter to Ferdinand in The Sea and the Mirror:

How narrow the space, how slight the chance
For civil pattern and importance
Between the watery vagueness and
The triviality of the sand,
How soon the lively trip is over
From loose craving to sharp aversion,
Aimless jelly to paralysed bone:
At the end of each successful day
Remember that the fire and the ice
Are never more than one step away
From the temperate city; it is
But a moment to either.

(Auden, p. 322)

This is an image of Dame Kind in bad humour, and suggests that the more basic reason for the foundation of a human community was not the "courtesies of the city" at all, but in fact the comfort of having a large group of allies in the face of this implacable and hugely powerful enemy.

The body of those who are to witness, "the crowd", is hardly represented sympathetically by the poet. It is described as some nameless monster of forgotten mythologies: Motionless, one-eyed, and with an infinity of mouths. There is singleness of purpose in the crowd which certainly matches the single eye for horror, since the "monster" perceives neither the actual event, the potential outcome of the event, nor the distractions from the event. "The crowd sees only one thing", and that thing is the form of that Force which governs the event which they "witness". The "unity which seems to be promised in the end of the section just quoted is unity only in a tyrannical belief: there is no co-operation in this, nor any agreement between individuals, but only the subordination of personal to corporate thought and belief. It seems clear that the avowed purpose for the celebration of Agents and Authority in the poem is completely divorced from the nature of the Witness, since the "crowd" can hardly be considered to have received mass vocation to <u>their</u> duty. Yet in the last lines of the poem it appears that something about the phenomenon of the crowd is essential to the poet's perception of the nature of the community of men:

> Few people accept each other and most
> will never do anything properly,
>
> but the crowd rejects no one, joining the crowd
> is the only thing all men can do.
>
> Only because of that can we say
> all men are our brothers,
>
> superior, because of that,
> to the social exoskeletons: When

have they ever ignored their queens,
for one second stopped work

on their provincial cities, to worship
The Prince of this world like us,

at this noon, on thie hill,
in the occasion of this dying?

("Sext", pp. 479-480)

Ostensibly, Auden is celebrating the phenomenon of the crowd as having a humanizing or at least civilizing function, as setting the community of men apart from the insect communities. Johnson explains this reading of the section:

> Men, when reduced to the lowest common denominator of anonymity as members of the crowd, still have a potentiality for transformation into a higher order of plurality; the unfreedom and the disorder of the historical world of fallen man can be redeemed into actuality. . . . Man must fall from nature even to have the potential to achieve the order of "community", "a group united by a common love of something other than themselves" reference to p. 64 of The Dyer's Hand , because such love depends on consciousness.[3]

Yet Auden is particularly careful in his essay on the subject to distinguish the group which he calls the "crowd" from that which is his "community", and his comments would seem to contradict the view that a progression from the former to the latter condition is expected, or even possible:

> A crowd is comprised of n 1 members whose only relation is arithmetical; they can only be counted. A crowd loves neither itself nor anything other than itself; its existence is chimerical. Of a crowd it may be said, either that it is not real but only apparent, or that it should not be.[4]

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[3]Johnson, Man's Place, p. 192.

[4]Auden, "The Virgin and the Dynamo", in The Dyer's Hand, p. 63.

If it is only because of the fact that we can be part of the crowd that we are different from the insects, then surely such a difference is not sufficient cause for real celebration. As the Second Shepherd remarks in the Christmas oratorio For the Time Being, "merely to add to a crowd with one's passionate body, / Is not a virtue." (Auden, p. 290)

In the last lines of the poem, the occasion of the Crucifixion is made explicit in terms of time, place and action involved: "at this noon, on this hill, / in the occasion of this dying". To this, the poet adds that the public's motive for assembly is "to worship / The Prince of this world".[5] Auden uses this title of Satan to ensure that the essential irony of the "celebration" in "Sext" is not going to be misunderstood, that we his readers should not mistake the means for the end in the manner depicted in the ninth of the poets "Sonnets from China":

> He looked down in all His wisdom from His throne
> Down on the humble boy who herded sheep,
> And sent a dove. The dove returned alone:
> Song put a charmed rusticity to sleep.
>
> But He had planned such future for this youth:
> Surely, His dity now was to compel,
> To count on time to bring true love of truth
> And, with it, gratitude. His eagle fell.
>
> It did not work: His conversation bored
> The boy, who yawned and whistled and made faces,
> And wriggled free from fatherly embraces,

---

[5] Cf. Jn. 14:30.

But with His messenger was always willing
To go where it suggested, and adored,
And learned from it so many ways of killing.

(Auden, pp. 152-153)

IV

"NONES"

> At the ninth hour, Christ gave up the ghost, the soldier opened His side, . . . and Christ ascended into Heaven.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

"Nones" is an archaic spelling variant of the word "nonce", which Shakespeare and his contemporaries used in the phrase "for the nonce" to indicate the present or immediate moment of some event. Auden followed the punning suggestion given him by the Latin title of the "ninth hour", and accordingly set his consideration of the Crucifixion in a kind of "ever-ever land" in which the lapses in time between the first murder, the Crucifixion of Christ, and the reader's present, are denied:

> What we know to be not possible,
> Though time after time foretold
> By wild hermits, by shaman and sybil
> Gibbering in their trances,
> Or revealed to a child in some chance rhyme
> Like will and kill, comes to pass
> Before we realize it. We are surprised
> At the ease and speed of our deed
> And uneasy: It is barely three,
> Mid-afternoon, yet the blood
> Of our sacrifice is already
> Dry on the grass; we are not prepared
> For silence so sudden and so soon;
> The day is too hot, too bright, too still,
> Too ever, the dead remains too nothing.
> What shall we do till nightfall?
>
> ("Nones", p. 480)

In this first stanza, the poet identifies both himself and ourselves with the members of the "civilized" order who in "Terce" prayed for safe and

untroubled passage through this day. Contrary to "our" expectations, and as predicted by the "wild hermits" and the "shamans and sybils" who are traditionally mistrusted by the established order, the Crucifixion of Christ has been accomplished. The dramatic contrast in the stanza is between "our" perception of an orderly universe, in which such things are not considered possible, and the rude physical evidence which negates that perception: "the blood / Of our sacrifice is already / Dry on the grass". The speaker's shock cannot be attributed to innocent surprise at the fact of the Crucifixion, since as early as "Prime" he admitted knowledge of "the dying / Which the coming day would ask". Rather, his discussion here is informed by the head-shaking sense of disbelief felt by a child who has committed some extraordinary crime against his parents' law: he is not particularly surprised at having been able to perform it, but his faculties rebel at accepting the crime as his own. There is a sudden moment of illumination, in which the guilty one realizes that his own action has changed him, at least in his own sight, and possibly in the sight of those whose opinion he values most. Even when the event has been foreseen as inevitable, there is a reflexive attempt to make of it an objective fact, and to deny its personal effect. This complex of emotions is better understood when we consider the importance here of the submerged, yet pervasive, allusion to the history of Adam and his sons in the series. As we have read through the Horae, we have been witnesses already to the Fall, and to Cain's choice of the course which will put himself in the position of "maker" as God. In the first stanza of "Nones", we are intended to be reminded of the next principal event in the lives of the line of Adam: Cain's murder of Abel. Adam and Eve had

been cautioned by God that they must not touch the fruit of the tree, "for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2: 17). Yet they did eat of the fruit, and were not immediately struck down, but in fact the Serpent's promise was illustrated, that they should "be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3: 5). It was only when Cain's jealousy of Abel led him to commit fratricide that the truth of God's warning, and the falseness of the promises of the Serpent, were manifested. In a world which had hitherto not seen death, Abel's murder must have been an incredible shock, an absolute and hideous negation of everything in their experience. Although they knew that they and their children must die for their transgression, Abel's sudden and awful stillness was, when it came, precisely that which they knew "to be not possible". Auden here brings us in the historical present to the scene of the Crucifixion, with the perspective of the incredulous witnesses of the first death. It is little wonder that it "comes to pass / Before we realize it"; that is, the event is real <u>in fact</u> before it can be comprehended, and acknowledged by us to be "real". The "chance rhyme / Like <u>will</u> and <u>kill</u>" which can reveal the truth to a child, is demonstrated in the very words spoken to express our shock, as "We are surprised / At the ease and <u>speed</u> of our <u>deed</u>" (emphasis mine). Auden does not dwell on the spiritual or ethical ramifications of the sacrifice, but like the "wayside crucifixes" described in "Mountains", bears "witness to a physical outrage" (Auden, p. 429). Against the comfortable atmosphere of the Mediterranean siesta hour (for which "we" had prepared) is set the physical evidence of the corpse, for which "we are not prepared", which "remains too nothing". Even the sibilance of the line, "silence so sudden and so soon", is a reminder of

the twisted words of the Serpent. The stark understatement of the principal image of the death ("the blood / Dry on the grass"), made possible by setting the occasion of the poem after the actual Crucifixion, saves the poetry from the melodrama which colours so many renderings of Christ's passion. This crucifixion scene is as effective in its spare technique as the earlier Auden treatment of the same theme, which it recalls:

> Eyes look into the well,
> Tears run down from the eye;
> The tower cracked and fell
> From the quiet winter sky.
>
> Under a midnight stone
> Love was buried by thieves;
> The robbed heart begs for a bone,
> The damned rustle like leaves.
>
> Face down in the flooded brook
> With nothing more to say,
> Lies One the soldiers took
> And spoiled and threw away.
>
> (Song VI of "Ten Songs",
> Auden, p. 212)

It seems that the speaker in "Nones" might wish that the evidence of the Crucifixion be "thrown away" in the same manner, as he complains, "the dead remains too nothing". Time seems to be suspended in the hours of darkness following the death, and is no longer man's ally but his enemy, to be passed by as quickly and as quietly as possible, until "nightfall". This recalls the grim prediction of "Prime", that the fallen body is no longer the "honest equal" of the soul, but "my accomplice now, / My assassin to be". There is presage here of evil consequences which are to radiate from this act as ripples on a pond. The "nightfall" serves to remind of "the cool of the day" in which the newly-fallen Adam and

Eve hoped to hide their guilt from the sight of God. It is also the time for sleep, and the individual's abstraction from responsibility, as was stressed in "Prime".

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker looks around himself to see how the other members of the "cloud of witnesses" are faring with their new load of guilty responsibility:

> The wind has dropped and we have lost our public
> The faceless many who always
> Collect when any world is to be wrecked,
> Blown up, burnt down, cracked open,
> Felled, sawn in two, hacked through, torn apart,
> Have all melted away. Not one
> Of these who in the shade of walls and trees
> Lie sprawled now, calmly sleeping,
> Harmless as sheep, can remember why
> He shouted or what about
> So loudly in the sunshine this morning;
> All if challenged would reply
> -- 'It was a monster with one red eye,
> A crowd that saw him die, not I.' --
> The hangman has gone to wash, the soldiers to eat:
> We are left alone with our feat.
>
> ("Nones", p. 480)

Of the hangman, judge and poet who in "Terce" represented the principal interests in the event of the Crucifixion, now only the last remains, and ourselves with him. We no longer have even the comfort of number, for "we have lost our public", and we are now to face the consequences of mob action as individuals. There is the hint of a kind of metamorphosis involving the erstwhile crowd which has "all melted away", like the hallmarks of civilization which vanish before the eyes of a distrustful poet in "Mountains":

> . . . Soon
> Tunnels begin, red farms disappear,
> Hedges turn to walls,
> Cows become sheep . . .
>
> (Auden, p. 429)

The constituents of the crowd which demanded the death of Christ, and invoked their own curse,[1] are now prepared to deny any responsibility in the matter, since they are no longer a part of that crowd.[2] Yet in the excuse offered by these "harmless" men, the poet has included a reminder of their guilt. In the hastily offered alibi, "It was a monster with one red eye, / A crowd that saw him die, not I", the defendant is betrayed by the "chance rhyme" of "eye" with "I". The poet fulfills his function after the agents and authority of the great event have discharged theirs, for it is his task to bring the event to the remembrance of its several participants.

In his role as civic conscience, the poet has for allies the very artifacts of "civilized" society:

> The Madonna with the green woodpecker,
> The Madonna of the fig-tree,
> The Madonna beside the yellow dam,
> Turn their kind faces from us
> And our projects under construction,
> Look only in one direction,
> Fix their gaze on our completed work:
> Pile-driver, concrete-mixer,
> Crane and pick-axe wait to be used again,
> But how can we repeat this?
> Outliving our act, we stand where we are,
> As disregarded as some
> Discarded artifact of our own,

---

[1] "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children." (Matt. 27: 24, 25)

[2] Kierkegaard, Point of View, p. 114: "A crowd . . . renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction."

Like torn gloves, rusted kettles,
Abandoned branch-lines, worn lop-sided
Grindstones buried in nettles.

("Nones", pp. 480-481)

The common "accomplishments" of civilization which were praised in "Sext" seem to have been stripped of their significance in the light of the terrible "accomplishment" of the death of Christ. Auden's peculiar Madonnas look not to the evidences of our several vocations in building the civilized community, but upon the "completed work" of the sacrifice. Professor Fuller suggests that the poet's emphasis is on the disparity between the incomplete work of civilizing ourselves, and the complete work of the murder:

> The presence of the Madonna symbolizes man's betrayal of his potentiality: the building of the city is only half-finished, and it seems impossible that it should ever be completed by men who themselves feel like discarded artifacts.[3]

Yet this is only a small part of the significance of these images. Auden removes the grieving Madonna from her traditional position at the foot of the cross, or weeping over the body as it is entombed, and places her in three separate and untraditional contexts, to establish the pervasiveness of her reproach to us. The "green woodpecker" may speak of the natural world over which Adam was granted dominion, the "fig-tree" of man's accomplishment in the field of agriculture, and the "yellow dam" of the modern technical achievements of industrial society. In all of these areas the Madonna's reproach is felt: men can no longer find solace in their situations or their accomplishments, because of the crime of which the

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[3]Fuller, A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden, p. 237.

Madonna bears witness with the poet, and with man's own tools and "works". In "New Year's Letter", Auden wrote of the common blame which is not covered, but rather emphasized, by man's achievements:

> Yet our equipment all the time
> Extends the area of the crime
> Until the guilt is everywhere,
> And more and more we are aware,
> However miserable may be
> Our parish of immediacy,
> How small it is, how, far beyond,
> Ubiquitous within the bond
> Of an impoverishing sky,
> Vast spiritual disorders lie.
>
> (Auden, pp. 165-166)

The euphemisms employed for the murdered Christ ("our completed work", "this", "our act") betray the guilt which the speaker suggests that we would be glad to bury under consideration of our more civilized artifacts and actions. The list of "discarded artifacts" which ends the stanza is familiar Audenese, as the poet dwells on the minutiae of the landscape of the urban fringe familiar to him. The last item, the "worn lop-sided / Grindstones buried in nettles" is an image of a different sort from its fellows in the stanza, since it recalls the two biblical images, of Christ the Rock,[4] and of the thorns with which he was crowned for the Crucifixion. Auden has invested the last image with this symbolic import in order to re-establish the pervasiveness of the witness of the Crucifixion in the world of men and their accomplishments.

In the fourth stanza of "Nones", the same call to remembrance is heard, here not from the artifacts of civilization, but from the actions:

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[4]"The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." (Ps. 118: 22-23; applied by Christ to himself in Matt. 21: 42)

This mutilated flesh, our victim,
 Explains too nakedly, too well,
The spell of the asparagus garden,
 The aim of our chalk-pit game; stamps,
Birds' eggs are not the same, behind the wonder
 Of tow-paths and sunken lanes,
Behind the rapture on the spiral stair,
 We shall always now be aware
Of the deed into which they lead, under
 The mock chase and mock capture,
The racing and tussling and splashing,
 The panting and the laughter
Be listening for the cry and stillness
 To follow after: wherever
The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
 There will also be this death.

("Nones", p. 481)

This stanza is in some respects a gloss upon the phrase, "What shall we do till nightfall?". The avocations of gardening, sports, and collecting stamps are no longer sufficient diversion for the individual, because of the terrible effectiveness of "this mutilated flesh" as a reminder of his guilt and sin, and ultimately of his own death. In an essay entitled "Dingley Dell and The Fleet", Auden comments upon the significance of games:

> No human being is innocent, but there is a class of innocent human actions called Games.
>
> A game is a closed world of action which has no relation to any other actions of those who play it; the players have no motive for playing the game except the pleasure it gives them, and the outcome of the game has no consequences beyond itself . . .
>
> The closed world of the game is one of mock passions, not real ones. Many games are, formally, mock battles, but if any one of the players should feel or display real hostility, he immediately ceases to be a player.[5]

As he describes the post-crucifixion world in "Nones", such "games" have lost their ability to give innocent pleasure, since they will now always

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[5] Auden, The Dyer's Hand, p. 421.

serve to remind of the real "passion". The favourite haunts which appeal to the senses, and the sensual ecstasy alluded to in "the rapture on the spiral stair", serve now only to bring the mind and soul back to the event of this one day. Lovers' game-playing too has its delights tarnished by the grim echo of "laughter" with "after", as the singular death must now cast a shadow over all other actions, including the metaphorical "death" of sexual climax. This was touched upon earlier by Auden in the poem "1929":

> So, insecure, he loves and love
> Is insecure, gives less than he expects.
> He knows not if it be seed in time to display
> Luxuriantly in a wonderful fructification
> Or whether it be but a degenerate remnant
> Of something immense in the past but now
> Surviving only as the infectiousness of disease
> Or in the malicious caricature of drunkenness;
> Its end glossed over by the careless but known long
> To finer perception of the mad and ill.
>
> (Auden, p. 52)

In the conclusion of the stanza, the optimistic speech of Duke Senior (from As You Like It) --

> Sweet are the uses of adversity,
> Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything.[6]

-- is returned by Auden in grim parody, which stresses that it is not "good in everything" which will be found by men in the world after the event of this day, but testimony of the crime:

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[6] II, i, 12-17; The Complete Works of Shakespeare, eds. Ribner and Kittredge, p. 365.

. . . wherever
The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
There will also be this death.

("Nones", p. 481)

In the fifth stanza, it becomes increasingly clear that for the poet and his audience, the "witness", responsibility is not so easily abandoned:

Soon cool tramontana will stir the leaves,
The shops will re-open at four,
The empty blue bus in the empty pink square
Fill up and depart: we have time
To misrepresent, excuse, deny,
Mythify, use this event
While, under a hotel bed, in prison,
Down wrong turnings, its meaning
Waits for our lives. Sooner than we would choose
Bread will melt, water will burn,
And the great quell begin, Abaddon
Set up his triple gallows
At our seven gates, fat Belial make
Our wives waltz naked; meanwhile
It would be best to go home, if we have a home,
In any case good to rest.

("Nones", p. 481)

As if stirring himself from his own thoughts in anticipation of the "tramontana", the poet retreats from consideration of the pervasive reminders of the death, and concentrates instead on the "ordinary" circumstances which follow upon the extraordinary event. However, the new significance of the "ordinary" will not be ignored. "The empty blue bus in the empty pink square" are childishly "cute" in their pastel colours, but ominous in their emptiness. There is "time" to manipulate the witness of this day into harmless myth or irrelevant history, but that time will be ended "Sooner than we would choose". As the poet imagines the ultimate effect of the crime upon the criminal, his poetry turns to peculiar images of the apocalypse, in which mythological

companions of Satan receive their mortal allies with something less than diplomatic courtesy. These evil consequences, the retribution for the actions of the day, are inevitable. As the poet dwells on them, it is almost as if they are also to be desired, as fit penance for our guilt. Emble alludes to this submerged desire for retribution in The Age of Anxiety:

> . . . precarious on the
> Fringes of their feeling, a fuzzy hope
> Persists somehow that sometime all this
> Will walk away, and a wish gestates
> For explosive pain, a punishing
> Demanded moment of mortal change,
> The Night of the Knock when none shall sleep,
> The Absolute Instant.
>
> (Auden, pp. 362-262)

No matter what course we may pursue after this death, "its meaning / Waits for our lives", and the only deliverance (and counterfeit deliverance at that) is the "nightfall" mentioned in the first stanza. Until we achieve the unsatisfactory cover of the "cool of the day", or the final oblivion wished for in the last "nightfall", all that is left for us is "to go home, if we have a home". The ambiguity of our own will, whether to meet with our judgement directly or to postpone such meeting indefinitely, recalls the attitude expressed towards the occult "door" in the opening poem of "The Quest":

> Out of it steps our future, through this door
> Enigmas, executioners and rules,
> Her Majesty in a bad temper or
> A red-nosed Fool who makes a fool of fools.
>
> Great persons eye it in the twilight for
> A past it might so carelessly let in,
> A widow with a missionary grin,
> The foaming inundation at a roar.

> We pile our all against it when afraid,
> And beat upon its panels when we die . . .
>
> (Auden, p. 224)

In the sixth stanza of the poem, Auden represents the dreams which fill the mind during the siesta, as the guilty soul now succumbs to a "diurnal rummage" of the images of a terrible fear:

> That our dreaming wills may seem to escape
> This dead calm, wander instead
> On knife edges, on black and white squares,
> Across moss, baize, velvet, boards,
> Over cracks and hillocks, in mazes
> Of string and penitent cones,
> Down granite ramps and damp passages,
> Through gates that will not relatch
> And doors marked Private, pursued by Moors
> And watched by latent robbers,
> To hostile villages at the heads of fjords,
> To dark chateaux where wind sobs
> In the pine-trees and telephones ring,
> Inviting trouble, to a room,
> Lit by one weak bulb, where our Double sits
> Writing, and does not look up.
>
> ("Nones", pp. 481-482)

It is not punishment, the logical consequence of misdeed, which is feared by the dreamer. It is "the dead calm" which proves the times to be out of joint, which must be escaped. Because it is not the expected, logical coda to the terrible score of the day's event, the quietness of the siesta hour makes the dreamer sensitive to the turmoil within himself, as his subconscious must now deal with the conscious mind's involvement in the Crucifixion. The nightmare images have their unity in being pictures not of actual pain and punishment, but only of the fear of such. The information that the dreamer feels himself to be "pursued by Moors" should recall the figure of Othello to the mind of the reader, as a symbol of the tyranny of the unknown, feared to be known. The fact that the robbers

are only "latent", that there is no proof that the villages are in fact "hostile" except in the conviction of the dreamer, that the "telephones ring, / Inviting trouble" without any indication of their invitation having been accepted, makes these images more unsettling than if the forebodings had been manifested. The same device was used by the poet in the fifth of his "Five Songs":

> 'O what was that bird,' said horror to hearer,
> 'Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
> Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
> The spot on your skin is a shocking disease.'
>
> (Auden, p. 60)

The most haunting of all these images is the last, as we see what seems to be our own body (perhaps after it has been abandoned by the soul) and find it too pre-occupied, in writing something we cannot clearly see, even to attend upon our arrival. This is a Prufrockian image of being seen through or ignored, an image also perhaps of our own lack of integrity, of a terrible self-knowledge, or the classical fear of death as transformation into a bloodless, joyless and absolutely ineffectual wraith. The same fear attached itself to the prosperous subject of the eighth poem of "The Quest":

> All that he put his hand to prospered so
> That soon he was the very King of creatures,
> Yet, in an autumn nightmare trembled, for,
>
> Approaching down a ruined corridor,
> Strode someone with his own distorted features
> Who wept, and grew enormous, and cried Woe.
>
> (Auden, p. 226)

In contrast to the disordered mind, and as a result of the abstraction of this disorder in the sleep of the siesta, the body restores itself:

That, while we are thus away, our own wronged flesh
 May work undisturbed, restoring
The order we try to destroy, the rhythm
 We spoil out of spite: valves close
And open exactly, glands secrete,
 Vessels contract and expand
At the right moment, essential fluids
 Flow to renew exhausted cells,
Not knowing quite what has happened, but awed
 By death like all the creatures
Now watching this spot, like the hawk looking down
 Without blinking, the smug hens
Passing close by in their pecking order,
 The bug whose view is balked by grass,
Or the deer who shyly from afar
 Peer through chinks in the forest.

("Nones", p. 482)

The poet's emphasis here is that the body, released from the tyranny of the mind, returns again to its identity as a fine organic machine, or alternatively as a part of the community of the natural order, "like all the creatures". The flesh has been "wronged" in that it must bear the brunt of the Crucifixion's immediate effect upon the individual. Although the mind and soul are most culpable in the death, the first response to the carnage is visceral. If physical retribution were in order for this crime (as might be expected for the crime of murder) it would again be visited chiefly upon the body. It is because the body has been "wronged" by the mind and soul that its loyalty cannot be depended upon, that it can turn from "honest equal" to "accomplice" to "assassin". There is some danger here that, as we read this, we may be tempted to opt for the convenient role of our own mere biological niche (as pure animal) and neglect that part of ourselves which is temporarily "away" in sleep. Yet Auden has provided for that impulse, for in the "peaceable kingdom" of Nature which he describes, he has in light strokes drawn a "trophic hierarchy" (in the biologist's term) or "food chain" (in the layman's).

The grass is consumed by the bug, which is food for the hens, which in turn provide livelihood for the hawk. Not one of these creatures is in fact "awed by death" in the strictest sense, for all but the bug depend on the death of another being to provide for their own lives. If we were to imagine ourselves as part of their order in any truly practical way, it would be necessary to assume the limitations of perception of the "bug whose view is balked by grass", the unblinking predatory instinct of the hawk, or the smugness of the hens "in their pecking order". Only the deer seem to be represented sympathetically, and it is their abstraction from the great event, rather than their participation, which makes them symbolic of the real process and character of Nature, as their fellows in "The Fall of Rome":

> Altogether elsewhere, vast
> Herds of reindeer move across
> Miles and miles of golden moss,
> Silently and very fast.
>
> (Auden, p. 258)

V

"VESPERS"

> At eventide Christ . . . was taken down from the Cross and laid in the sepulchre, and manifested Himself to the two disciples in the garb of a pilgrim; and for all these things the Church gives thanks in the office of Vespers.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

"Vespers" is the intermezzo of the Horae Canonicae, a brief and comparatively relaxed respite, in a style between prose and verse, from the vigorous poetic intensity of "Nones". It is an opportunity also for the reader to gather his strengths about him, in preparation for consideration of the last poems of the series. The poem considers the ramifications of the sacrifice of "Nones" in the civilization which allowed, and even demanded it. Yet the subject of Christ's death is for the most part only implicit in "Vespers". The explicit occasion of the poem is a confrontation (of sorts) between the witnessing poet of the first poems and an apparently unsympathetic "Utopian", who is nevertheless another of the "crowd" who chose not to retain the comfortable anonymity and irresponsibility of that role.

One reason for the poet's allusive treatment of the Crucifixion in "Vespers" is that he considered the crime of murder to demand not mere personal, but civic satisfaction. Following upon the individual's recognition of personal responsibility in "Nones", in this poem the consideration is of the state of the polis in a world after Eden and

after Calvary. Auden discusses the peculiarly public quality of the crime of murder in an essay exploring the genre of the murder mystery, entitled "The Guilty Vicarage":

> There are three classes of crime: (A) offenses against God and one's neighbor or neighbors; (B) offenses against God and society; (C) offenses against God. (All crimes, of course, are offenses against oneself.) . . .
>
> Murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand atonement or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has a direct interest.[1]
>
> (emphasis mine)

It is this "direct interest" of society which brings the poet to make of "Vespers" a confrontation between two social idealists. The Arcadian contemplates the perfect social harmony of Eden, which was spoiled forever by the Fall. The Utopian contemplates the building of an actual, perfect, secular community. Implicit in the work is the knowledge held by each of these men of their part in the Crucifixion just past. As murderers in the eyes of the poet, each claims omnipotence for himself:

> Murder is negative creation, and every murderer is therefore the rebel who claims the right to be omnipotent.[2]

As an aspect of Godhead, omnipotence carries with it omniscience, and it is thus hardly surprising that the two opponents in "Vespers" are unable to reach agreement.

The first section of the poem[3] is a picture of the city as it appears after the Fall and the Crucifixion:

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[1] Auden, The Dyer's Hand, p. 149.

[2] Ibid., p. 152.

[3] The divisions of the poem are for the purposes of this discussion only: they are not Auden's, but my own.

If the hill overlooking our city has always been known as Adam's Grave, only at dusk can you see the recumbent giant, his head turned to the west, his right arm resting for ever on Eve's haunch,

can you learn, from the way he looks up at the scandalous pair, what a citizen really thinks of his citizenship,

just as now you can hear in a drunkard's caterwaul his rebel sorrows crying for a parental discipline, in lustful eyes perceive a disconsolate soul,

scanning with desperation all passing limbs for some vestige of her faceless angel who in that long ago when wishing was a help mounted her once and vanished:

For Sun and Moon supply their conforming masks, but in this hour of civil twilight all must wear their own faces.

And it is now that our two paths cross.

("Vespers", p. 482)

As Auden presents it here, civilization is quite literally in the shadow of Adam. It is not the glib politician, the charming socialite and the cerebral philosopher who people this landscape, but the drunkard and the whore, whose griefs are part of the fabric of their lives. This is Eliot's "violet hour", the hour in which Prufrock must labour "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet",[4] the period in which the patina of civilization wears thinnest. There is now no longer any camouflage available to the individual, and the citizen may examine himself (and may be examined) more closely and objectively than could be possible either in the daylight of vocational responsibilities, or the night hours of strictly private pursuits.

As the two principals of "Vespers" confront each other, Auden stresses that their experiences are, for practical purposes, mutually

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[4]Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1962, p. 14.

exclusive. However, the reader of the series brings to this poem the very recent and vivid memory of the Crucifixion scene, and with it the knowledge that this experience at least has been shared by both of the men in this "meeting":

> Both simultaneously recognise his Anti-type: that I am an Arcadian, that he is a Utopian.
>
> He notes, with contempt, my Aquarian belly: I note, with alarm, his Scorpion's mouth.
>
> He would like to see me cleaning latrines: I would like to see him removed to some other planet.
>
> Neither speaks. What experience could we possibly share?
>
> Glancing at a lampshade in a store window, I observe it is too hideous for anyone in their senses to buy: He observes it is too expensive for a peasant to buy.
>
> Passing a slum child with rickets, I look the other way: He looks the other way if he passes a chubby one.
>
> I hope our senators will behave like saints, provided they don't reform me: He hopes they will behave like <u>baritoni cattivi</u>, and, when lights burn late in the Citadel,
>
> I (who have never seen the inside of a police station) am shocked and think, 'Were the city as free as they say, after sundown all her bureaus would be huge black stones.':
>
> He (who has been beaten up several times) is not shocked at all but thinks, 'One fine night our boys will be working up there.'
>
> You can see, then, why, between my Eden and his New Jerusalem, no treaty is negotiable.
>
> ("Vespers", pp. 482-483)

The reader is well advised to be wary of the poet's diatribe against the Utopian, since all of the information concerning that worthy's antipathy to the Arcadian speaker is inferred only: not so much as a word passes between them. It is patently impossible that, under such conditions, "Both simultaneously recognise his Anti-type", even if both <u>are</u> looking

"at the scandalous pair" on the horizon. Although we may hear much in the poem that is passionately and sincerely in Auden's voice, we must also keep in mind that the basic "confrontation" will never escape from the inverted commas. The distinctions drawn between the perspectives of the two men are mostly comic in their pettiness. The poet is very much aware that by changing his enemy's astrological sign to "Scorpion" he undermines the seriousness of them both. Yet there is a sobering thought within the flat statement, "Neither speaks". We know from "Sext" that Auden equates practical communication with civilization itself; thus the refusal to speak is a refusal of the very idea of the City. The difficulty between these two men is hidden in the rhetorical question which follows: "What experience could we possibly share?" Again, we as fellow-witnesses of the death of Christ know that the one "experience" definitely shared by these two is the experience of this day. To come to terms with the knowledge of the death is to throw the first span across the gulf which divides Arcadian and Utopian.

The third section of the poem is devoted to the practical distinctions between the ideals of the two principals, as the "artistic" Eden is weighed against the "pragmatic" New Jerusalem:

> In my Eden a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to get born: In his New Jerusalem a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born.
>
> In my Eden we have a few beam-engines, saddle-tank locomotives, overshot waterwheels and other beautiful pieces of obsolete machinery to play with: In his New Jerusalem even chefs will be cucumber-cool machine-minders.
>
> In my Eden our only source of political news is gossip: In his New Jerusalem there will be a special daily in simplified spelling for non-verbal types.

> In my Eden each observes his compulsive rituals and superstitious tabus but we have no morals: In his New Jerusalem the temples will be empty but all will practise the rational virtues.
>
> One reason for his contempt is that I have only to close my eyes, cross the iron footbridge to the tow-path, take the barge through the short brick tunnel and
>
> there I stand in Eden again, welcomed back by the krum-horns, doppions, sordumes of jolly miners and a bob major from the Cathedral (romanesque) of St. Sophie (Die Kalte):
>
> One reason for my alarm is that, when he closes his eyes, he arrives, not in New Jerusalem, but on some august day of outrage when hellikins cavort through ruined drawing-rooms and fishwives intervene in the Chamber or
>
> some autumn night of delations and noyades, when the unrepentant thieves (including me) are sequestered and those he hates shall hate themselves instead.
>
> So with a passing glance we take the other's posture. Already our steps recede, heading, incorrigible each, towards his kind of meal and evening.
>
> ("Vespers", pp. 483-484)

There is very little novelty in the two positions outlined here at which the Arcadian and the Utopian draw their battle lines. Certainly the Arcadian's fondness for "obsolete machinery to play with" will be familiar to the reader who recalls the Bucolics --

> When I seek an image
> For our Authentic City
> (Across what brigs of dread,
> Down what gloomy galleries,
> Must we stagger or crawl
> Before we may cry -- O look!?),
> I see old men in hall-ways
> Tapping their barometers,
> Or a lawn over which
> The first thing after breakfast,
> A paterfamilias
> Hurries to inspect his rain-gauge.
>
> ("Winds", Auden, p. 426)

-- as will his distrust of the highly-visible and intrusive form of

government favoured by his opposite number:

> I'm nordic myself, but even so
> I'd much rather stay
> Where the nearest person who could have me hung is
> Some ridges away.
>
> ("Mountains", Auden, p. 429)

In the positions outlined in "Vespers", there does not seem to be any fundamental motive either for violent disagreement or for real unity between the antagonists, as in the Apollonian-Hermetic dialectic, "Under Which Lyre", from which it was adapted:[5]

> Related by antithesis,
> A compromise between us is
> Impossible;
> Respect perhaps but friendship never:
> Falstaff the fool confronts forever
> The prig Prince Hal.
>
> (Auden, p. 260)

This is not an epic battle for the sake of grand philosophies, but a petty squabble between a "fool" and a "prig". Yet there is a practical and important contrast between the means the Arcadian employs to realize his Eden, and the Utopian's projected realization of his New Jerusalem. In his essay "Dingley Dell and The Fleet", Auden details this difference:

> . . . I suspect that between the Arcadian whose favorite daydream is of Eden, and the Utopian whose favorite daydream is of New Jerusalem there is a characterological gulf as unbridgeable as that between Blake's Prolifics and Devourers. . . .
>
> The psychological difference between the Arcadian dreamer and the Utopian dreamer is that the backward-looking Arcadian knows that his expulsion from Eden is an irrevocable fact and that his dream, therefore, is a wish-dream which cannot become real; in consequence, the actions which led to his expulsion are of no concern to his dream. The forward-looking Utopian, on the other hand, necessarily believes that his New Jerusalem is a dream which ought to be realized so that the actions by

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[5] Cf. Fuller, A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden, p. 237.

> which it could be realized are a necessary element in his dream; it must include images of the Day of Judgment.[6]

The Arcadian poet indulges in mere pleasurable day-dreaming, and is thus able, if only in his reveries, to "stand in Eden again". In contrast, the Utopian opponent dreams of working towards an actual civil revolution, with the same bitterness of heart imputed to the grain farmer in "Plains":

> If I were a plainsman I should hate us all,
> From the mechanic rioting for a cheap loaf
> To the fastidious palate, hate the painter
> Who steals my wrinkles for his Twelve Apostles,
> Hate the priest who cannot even make it shower.
> What could I smile at as I trudged behind my harrow
> But bloodshot images of rivers howling,
> Marbles in panic, and Don't-Care made to care?
>
> (Auden, p. 433)

Even so, the gentler poet does not trouble to work towards an understanding, or even to preach against the cruelty which runs beneath the Utopian's "ideals". Instead, each of these two quits the brief and unpleasant company of the other with all speed, remaining "incorrigible each". The reader is reminded again of Auden's pun in the title of the poem "Under Which Lyre", for it does not seem from this parting in "Vespers" that any vital distinction could or should be drawn between these two, each of whom walks solitary now "towards his kind of meal and evening".

In the final section of the poem Auden discards his mask of animosity towards the Utopian, to consider this very ordinary "confrontation" from a greater height, putting it in the context of the extraordinary day:

> Was it (as it must look to any god of cross-roads) simply a fortuitous intersection of life-paths, loyal to different fibs?
>
> Or also a rendezvous between two accomplices who, in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting

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[6] Auden, The Dyer's Hand, pp. 409, 410.

> to remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth?) of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget,
>
> forcing us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence)
>
> on whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy are alike founded:
>
> For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.
>
> ("Vespers", p. 484)

As both of the philosophies to which the men profess devotion are forgotten, there seems at least the hope here of a basis for genuine community. The Arcadian and Utopian are able, by their mutual influence, to see their own guilt as accomplices in the murder more clearly than the wrongness of the opposing ideology is felt. By meeting in this way, each becomes in effect the auditor of the other's confession. Auden treats of the need for such confession humourously in "Letter to Lord Byron":

> For since the British Isles went Protestant
> A church confession is too high for most.
> But still confession is a human want,
> So Englishmen must make theirs now by post
> And authors hear them over breakfast toast.
> For, failing them, there's nothing but the wall
> Of public lavatories on which to scrawl.
>
> (Auden, p. 77)

Common to both of these works is the poet's conviction that confession of guilt is basic to the spiritual health of a man. This is the unique function of the City as Auden relates it in "Vespers", that each citizen should be reminded daily of his guilt in the death of the "Sin Offering" which established the city. There can be none of the love between its constituents which characterizes "our Authentic City" until this sacrifice

has been offered and accepted:

> . . . love
> Needs more than the admiring excitement of union,
> More than the abrupt self-confident farewell,
> The heel on the finishing blade of grass,
> The self-confidence of the falling root,
> Needs death, death of the grain . . .
>
> ("1929", Auden, p. 53)

Finally, it may seem odd that in a series which devotes itself to consideration of the day of the Crucifixion the poet seems to intimate that Christ's death is itself merely one of a series: "call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering". It may be that, since the name of Christ itself is <u>not</u> included in the list, the poet means to imply that the "sin offerings" named are in fact mere types, or temporary manifestations, of the one true and eternal Sin Offering. In any case, the momentary confusion is genuine, and, I think, intended by Auden: we should remember that his own disciples did not recognize Christ on the road to Emmaus.

VI

"COMPLINE"

> In the hour after sunset He sweated drops of blood, was entrusted to the tomb and reposed there, and brought the message of peace to His disciples after His Resurrection; and for these things we give thanks in the office of Compline.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

"Compline" is the final third of the poetic trinity in the Horae Canonicae which includes "Prime" and "Nones". These three poems are related technically by their identical form, of loose syllabic metre in sixteen-line stanzas, their mechanical likeness emphasizing that their themes are complementary. In "Prime" we witnessed a re-enactment of the Fall, as the individual prepared for his day. "Nones" contemplated the Sin Offering made at Calvary, as man's sin brought him to commit the murder of the innocent Christ. In "Compline" these two events, severally tragic, are brought together to show the greater plan of the "divine comedy". The sacrifice of "Nones" is in this poem ultimately accepted by the speaker, and applied to the sinful Adamic nature acknowledged as his own in "Prime". The result is the reunion of a man with his God, as man accepts the atoning and God the propitiatory work of the sacrifice.

In the first stanza the poet finds himself at last alone with his thoughts concerning the remarkable day just now drawing to a close:

> Now, as desire and the things desired
> Cease to require attention,
> As, seizing its chance, the body escapes,
> Section by section, to join

Plants in their chaster peace which is more
 To its real taste, now a day is its past,
Its last deed and feeling in, should come
 The instant of recollection
When the whole thing makes sense: it comes, but all
 I recall are doors banging,
Two housewives scolding, an old man gobbling,
 A child's wild look of envy,
Actions, words, that could fit any tale,
 And I fail to see either plot
Or meaning; I cannot remember
 A thing between noon and three.

("Compline", p. 484)

Near sleep, the speaker finds that the daytime appetites, which in "Terce" identified him with the order of the animals, are just now beginning to leave him at peace. As the body gradually re-assumes control over its animal nature, the poet imagines that his body is becoming increasingly vegetable, joining the "chaster peace" of that lower order. Auden's image of the regression from animal to vegetable conveys at once the admission of a failure of the personal will, and the suggestion that this sleep is for the speaker emblematic of his own death. The identical associations are conveyed in these passages from The Age of Anxiety:

. . . Nature rewards
Perilous leaps. The prudent atom
Simply insists upon its safety now,
Security at all costs; the calm plant
Masters matter then submits to itself,
Busy but not brave;

. . . . . .

. . . Earth takes charge of,
Soil accepts for a serious purpose
The jettisoned blood of jokes and dreams,
Making buds from bone, from brains the good
Vague vegetable;

(Auden, p. 347, p. 350)

Auden employs an unusual technique to imitate the speaker's lethargic

drift away from strenuous thought, and towards sleep. In the form chosen for this poem, there is no regular pattern of end-rhymes or end-stops, and thus the individual lines of verse run on naturally. Auden reinforces this tendency to enjambment, and fosters a smooth and langorous verse-quality, by occasionally rhyming a word at the end of one line with another at or near the beginning of the next. Thus, "desired" in the first line strikes an echo with "require" in the second; "past" (l. 6) rhymes with "last" (l. 7); "all" (l. 9) with the second syllable of "recall" (l. 10); and "tale" (l. 13) with "fail" (l. 14). The stanza is twice punctuated by fragments of prose, as if in mimic of an attempt to fight the body's selfish demand for rest. The first instance of this shows the speaker searching his mind for "The instant of recollection / When the whole thing makes sense"; the second is his admission of failure in the attempt, as he confesses: "I cannot remember / A thing between noon and three". There is a subtle tension between the two principal words used by the speaker to describe his intended activity here. The stanza itself is a tolerable "recollection"; that is, the images have been gathered together from what memory of the day is retained by the mind. There is, however, little real evidence of "re-membering"; of organizing memory into a coherent artificial pattern, or of perceiving its natural wholeness.

In the second stanza, the speaker does discover pattern, at once within himself (in his own body), and beyond the boundaries of the world:

> Nothing is with me now but a sound,
> A heart's rhythm, a sense of stars
> Leisurely walking around, and both
> Talk a language of motion
> I can measure but not read: maybe
> My heart is confessing her part

In what happened to us from noon till three,
 That constellations indeed
Sing of some hilarity beyond
 All liking and happening,
But, knowing I neither know what they know
 Nor what I ought to know, scorning
All vain fornications of fancy,
 Now let me, blessing them both
For the sweetness of their cassations,
 Accept our separations.

("Compline", pp. 484-485)

It appears from this that the speaker intuits the rhythms of the stars and of his own heart to be somehow manifestations of the same order, but he remains unable to discover the character and origin of that order. Strict empirical observation is within his capabilities, but true analysis is not; he calls it "a language of motion / I can measure but not read". Yet the speaker does interpret at least a part of this "language" when he speaks of the guilt of his own heart in the event of the day, and of the celestial "hilarity", the unsearchable and eternal joy to which the stars bear witness. It is as if the speaker is able indeed to pierce the twofold mystery (at least intellectually) but is unwilling to embrace that which he perceives: "Now let me . . . accept our separations". The mystery is twofold because it affects both the temporal plane upon which men live, and the eternal plane which is the dimension of God. In historical time, "what happened to us from noon till three" was the greatest tragedy imaginable: the Son of God was butchered by those to whom he had come to bring the message of divine love. From the perspective of eternity, the Crucifixion was the final pen-stroke of an awesome plan providing propitiation and absolute atonement for the sins of men, and thus providing also for the re-establishment of a true community between creature and

Creator. This is the double significance of Christ's "It is finished" (Jn. 19: 30): a cry at once of despair of life, and of final and unqualified victory. When the speaker holds himself aloof from this terrible knowledge, "scorning / All vain fornications of fancy", he actually attempts to deny his own conviction of personal guilt in the death ("What we know to be not possible"), and denies also the divine plan for the final satisfaction of that debt. The speaker argues that, since his own life is governed by the Adamic order, he must remain forever separate from the stars and the heart which are ruled by the greater Order; that the gulf between man and the rest of Creation is unbridgeable. In fact this is not so, the "cassations" are of his own making. His attempt is to escape from the responsibility of wilful separation from the Order, by pleading that such separation is inevitable.[1]

In the third stanza, the speaker imagines soon giving himself over, not to the great Order just dimly perceived, but once again to the "nocturnal rummage" of his disquieting dreams:

> A stride from now will take me into dream,
> Leave me, without a status,

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[1] If "Compline" and the Horae Canonicae ended with this stanza, they would substantiate Professor Replogle's analysis of the general thematic trends in Auden's mature poetry. I quote from Auden's Poetry, p. 89:

> The intellectual search ended in the 1940's; the 1950's and 1960's celebrate what has been found: that life is blessed. . . . Men, all imperfect and sinful, are good. Imperfection and sinfulness themselves become good in a sense. They make life what it is, men what they are; and both are blessed. . . . many things might be improved, but not man's imperfect nature, the certainty of his bewilderment, and his incorrigible error -- and in any case these limitations make life more a delight than a painful burden.

This is, however, only the midpoint in the penultimate poem of the series: the Horae Canonicae's concluding words on "imperfection and sinfulness" must yet be attended to.

Among its unwashed tribes of wishes
 Who have no dances and no jokes
But a magic cult to propitiate
 What happens from noon till three,
Odd rites which they hide from me -- should I chance,
 Say, on youths in an oak-wood
Insulting a white deer, bribes nor threats
 Will get them to blab -- and then,
Past untruth is one step to nothing,
 For the end, for me as for cities,
Is total absence: what comes to be
 Must go back into non-being
For the sake of the equity, the rhythm
 Past measure or comprehending.

("Compline", p. 485)

In "Prime", the dreams were presented as the political enemies of the conscious mind, an insurgent force which was "quelled" immediately upon the arrival of consciousness. In "Compline" the same dreams are imagined not as actively opposing the works of the conscious mind, but as having the priestly function "to propitiate / What happens from noon till three" under the rule of consciousness. Again, the speaker's involvement in the Crucifixion is betrayed by his use of the word "propitiate": propitiation is hardly required for an act of virtue. The specific nature of the crime is indicated in the progression from mention of the dream's oak-wood fertility ritual to the speaker's anticipation of his own death ("the end . . . is total absence"). Clearly, if "the equity" demands the death of the individual in propitiation for his crime, that crime must have been the death of another. The speaker will not yet come to terms with this knowledge, preferring instead to reiterate the stoic dictum that death is the end of all things. He thereby reduces the final identification of "citizen" with "city" to only the sameness of their deaths. The speaker's fatalism is insidious, since at this moment he denies that which in the

last stanza he affirmed, that the Order manifested by the rhythms of the stars and the heart could be "measured", if not "read"; for here the "equity" is "Past measure or comprehending".

This is the moment in the Horae Canonicae at which the movement of the speaker's will must determine our judgement of the final relationship of the poet to his subject. This moment of decision corresponds to one of the moments of Christ's passion traditionally celebrated in the office of Compline, which de Voragine records as: "In the hour after sunset He sweated drops of blood". Christ's terrible decision is put thus in the Luke account:[2]

> Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done. . . . And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground.

In the final stanza of "Compline", the speaker is confronted with the choice complementary to that made by Christ in Gethsemane; that is, to decide absolutely for acceptance of the sacrifice made by Christ, or for His rejection:

> Can poets (can men in television)
> Be saved? It is not easy
> To believe in unknowable justice
> Or pray in the name of a love
> Whose name one's forgotten: libera
> Me, libera C (dear C)
> And all poor s-o-b's who never
> Do anything properly, spare
> Us in the youngest day when all are
> Shaken awake, facts are facts,
> (And I shall know exactly what happened
> Today between noon and three)
> That we, too, may come to the picnic
> With nothing to hide, join the dance

---

[2] Lu. 22: 42, 44.

As it moves in perichoresis,
Turns about the abiding tree.

("Compline", p. 485)

The contrast between the lethargic fatalism of the third stanza, and the dynamic question ("Can one . . . be saved?") which begins the fourth, could hardly be more marked. It is the equivalent in verse of the "leap of faith" from the plane of the temporal and the terrestrial to that of the eternal and celestial. The poet now confronts the certainty of his own sin, and the judgement of eternal separation from God which depends upon that sin; and finds it "not easy / To believe in unknowable justice". Yet, as Caliban warns the audience of The Sea and the Mirror, it is a "delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge" (Auden, p. 339).[3] Thus the speaker moves from his admission of knowledge of the judgement upon his sin, to prayer, "in the name of a love". In one of the "Shorts" published in 1964, Auden demonstrates the same movement of thought; putting aside the immediate temporal concerns to beg the work of that love which is beyond the temporal:

A moon profaned by
Sectarian din, death by
Fervent implosion: --
Possibles. But here and now
Our oath to the living word.

(Auden, p. 541)

The earlier mythologizing of the Sin Offering ("Call him Abel, Remus, whom you will . . . ") betrays the speaker here, as he finds he has "forgotten" the particular name of this "love". Yet the prayer itself, first for personal salvation and then in intercession for "dear C", is spare and

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[3]This passage was brought to my attention in a similar context, by Professor Replogle's discussion of the play in Auden's Poetry, p. 77.

personal and extremely compelling: "libera me . . . ". Replogle (presumably responding to the request on behalf of the "poor s-o-b's") describes this passage as "a self-mocking comic prayer . . . which forgives everyone, speaker included, for whatever fumbling sins bewildering existence makes inevitable".[4] In fact the prayer in this stanza is not comic, except incidentally, nor is it so much "self-mocking" as self-effacing. In much of the mature poetry, Auden insists upon using this brand of humour in precisely this manner, to lighten his most poignant declarations of emotion, drawing the attentions and sympathies of his readers away from himself or his persona, and towards the poem. Auden's rationale in this matter may be inferred from his general comments upon the genre of devotional poetry, in Postscript: Christianity and Art:

> Poems, like many of Donne's and Hopkins', which express a poet's personal feelings of religious devotion or penitence, make me uneasy. . . . A poet must intend his poem to be a good one, that is to say, an enduring object for other people to admire. Is there not something a little odd, to say the least, about making an admirable public object out of one's feelings of guilt and penitence before God?[5]

Although we must to some extent accept Auden's apology for his antipathy toward the strictly personal voice in devotional poetry, it remains a very peculiar position for a self-confessed Christian poet to take up, especially in a work of this order. The offices of the canonical hours were, after all, instituted for the purposes of witness and remembrance, among others. Auden himself says (in "Terce") that the role of the poet is to give out the Truth, and in each of the Horae discussed thus far,

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[4] Auden's Poetry, p. 84.

[5] Auden, The Dyer's Hand, p. 458.

we as readers have been called to remembrance of our common responsibility in the matter of the sacrifice. It seems that the poet would proscribe certain aspects of the Truth he tells, as somehow unsuited to poetic expression. The claim (by inference) is that not all experience is the stuff of poetry. Add to this his contravention of the hoary tradition in Christian literary and theological circles of public confession as a means of encouragement and of keeping one's brother from sin, "for the edification of the saints", and Auden's position on this matter becomes increasingly suspect. Yet the Horae Canonicae does have for its persona a "poet" who is for practical purposes indistinguishable from the poet, and Auden's own dedication to the subject of this work can hardly be doubted; thus his insistence on the use of this technique to keep the tone of the poetry amiable may be at least partially understandable. It is certain that in other of his works Auden has reiterated the message of this prayer repeatedly and quite without irony; that personal responsibility in sin requires personal response to the sacrificial love which offers absolution. Gabriel's address to Mary in For the Time Being has both a particular significance for the human mother of Christ, and a general significance in this matter of the individual's responsibility in the face of the sacrifice:

> When Eve, in love with her own will,
> Denied the will of Love and fell,
> She turned the flesh Love knew so well
> To knowledge of her love until
> Both love and knowledge were of sin:
> What her negation wounded, may
> Your affirmation heal today;
> Love's will requires your own, that in
> The flesh whose love you do not know
> Love's knowledge into flesh may grow.
>
> (Auden, p. 278)

The compelling "salvation" lyric from "Ten Songs", in which Auden's privacy is protected by the devices of persona and obviously artificial occasion, demonstrates precisely the desperate emotional investment which the poet felt it necessary to omit from the more apparently personal meditations of "Compline":

> We, my darling, for our sins
> Suffer in each other's woe,
> Read in injured eyes and hands
> How we broke divine commands
> And served the Devil.
> Who is passionate enough
> When the punishment begins?
> O my love, O my love,
> In the night of fire and snow
> Save me from evil.
>
> (Auden, p. 214)

The poet's anticipation of "the youngest day", the last day of Time itself, is in this poem much unlike the macabre images of the Day of Judgement with which the "Nones" dreams were filled. Auden's description of the day --

> . . . when all are
> Shaken awake, facts are facts,
> (And I shall know exactly what happened
> Today between noon and three)

-- owes much of its vigour and precision to its echo of the corresponding passages in Paul's first Corinthian epistle:

> Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.
>
> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.[6]

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[6] I Cor. 15: 51-52; 13: 12.

The image of the "picnic" for the Marriage Supper of Christ is again typical of Auden's often whimsical treatment of his most serious themes, and recalls the images of the "real republic" from "New Year's Letter":

> Warm in your house, Elizabeth,
> A week ago at the same hour
> I felt the unexpected power
> That drove our ragged egos in
> From the dead-ends of greed and sin
> To sit down at the wedding feast,
> Put shining garments on the least,
> Arranged us so that each and all,
> The erotic and the logical,
> Each felt the placement to be such
> That he was honoured overmuch,
> And SCHUBERT sang and MOZART played
> And GLUCK and food and friendship made
> Our privileged community
> That real republic which must be
> The State all politicians claim,
> Even the worst, to be their aim.
>
> (Auden, p. 177)

One of the blessings of the day of the "picnic" is that all of us who have been indicted in the matter of the Crucifixion will then be shriven absolutely, "With nothing to hide". The same detail is included in the vision of the "faultless love" and the "life to come" of "In Praise of Limestone":

> . . . In so far as we have to look forward
> To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
> Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
> These modifications of matter into
> Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
> Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
> The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
> Having nothing to hide.
>
> (Auden, p. 415)

Auden's final image in "Compline" is of an ultimate personal involvement of the souls of men with the triune personality of God, an eternally harmonious "dance" whose still centre is the Tree of Life.

VII

"LAUDS"

> It was in the morning that God . . . created the world, and rose from the dead. Hence we sing Lauds at that hour, in order . . . to thank God for our creation and for His Resurrection.
>
> The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine

"The chief end of man" is, according to the Scotch Catechism, "to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever". "Lauds", last of the Horae Canonicae, is a hymn which praises and glorifies the perfect and eternal Order which has been re-established in the day of these Hours. When in "Compline" the speaker finally accepted the claims of the "victim" upon his life, it became possible for him in effect to re-enter Eden, to stand again before God as did the unfallen Adam, "naked, . . . and not ashamed" (Gen. 2: 25). "Prime" considered the first hour of the day as being for each individual a re-enactment of the Fall. This poem praises, at the end of one day and in anticipation of the next, the resurrection to a new life for the "many", made possible by the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the One.

Spears has identified the form of "Lauds" as being derived from the Spanish cossante.[1] It is constructed of couplets whose lines are severally complete and end-stopped, the balance of the two images in each couplet being reminiscent of the formal parallelism of the Psalms. To

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[1] Spears, The Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 320 ff.

each couplet is appended the unchanging refrain "In solitude, for company", as a ritual response to the "text" of each new verse. The individual lines of verse are repeated regularly according to the rule of the form, interweaving the several images of the new life in a simple and delicate litany. The whole is Auden's poetic representation of the occupation of the blessed in their new home, "the dance" which "moves in perichoresis, / Turns about the abiding tree":

> Among the leaves the small birds sing;
> The crow of the cock commands awaking:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> Bright shines the sun on creatures mortal;
> Men of their neighbors become sensible:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> The crow of the cock commands awaking;
> Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> Men of their neighbors become sensible;
> God bless the Realm, God bless the People:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding;
> The dripping mill-wheel is again turning:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> God bless the Realm, God bless the People;
> God bless this green world temporal:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> The dripping mill-wheel is again turning;
> Among the leaves the small birds sing:
> In solitude, for company.
>
> ("Lauds", pp. 485-486)

The principal celebration is of community, that wholeness of a body of creatures which Adam rejected when he chose the fruit, which Cain rejected in slaying Abel, which the two idealists in "Vespers" could not imagine between them. Because of the re-union of man and God, the harmony of the

natural order and its divine origin are celebrated in the images of "this green world temporal", with its "small birds" and "bright sun". True community among men is deemed possible for the first time, as the "mass-bell" calls them to participate in the celebration. These are the former members of the "crowd" who, like the speaker, have since recognized and accepted the work of the sacrifice in their own lives. They have thus left the natural order, where true community is impossible, and become members of the Order of the blessed in the "green world temporal", the community whose spiritual centre is the Tree of Life. There is no longer the need of the Good Samaritan parable to teach the citizen his duty toward his fellow, as it is a part of the new Order that "Men of their neighbors become sensible". The natural order and the civic order (both now seen to be manifestations of the greater Order) unite, as "Bright shines the sun on creatures mortal".

The "dripping mill-wheel" is quite naturally associated in our minds with Nature's fecundity, because of its function in turning the grist-stones, and because it is powered by falling water. In addition, since T. S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi", it must in this context also carry associations with the Incarnation and the Crucifixion:

> Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
> Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation,
> With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
> And three trees on the low sky.[2]

The union of the images of fertility, the Passion, and the Nativity in Eliot's poem makes it uniquely suited to its place (by allusion) in "Lauds".

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[2]Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1962, p. 109.

The "crow of the cock" recalls one of the most significant of the secondary incidents in the account of Christ's passion. Peter's confident proclamation of unqualified loyalty to Christ, and his dismal failure in the actual trial of that loyalty, are recorded in these passages from Matthew's gospel:

> Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. . . .
>
> And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter [the third time], Surely thou also are one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the words of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.[3]

The story of Peter does not end with this episode. Like the witness of the Crucifixion in "Compline", who was sorely tempted to deny his part in the event, and yet finally made his declaration of faith in the efficacy of the sacrifice, Peter was given another chance. After the Resurrection, Christ met the disciples on the shore of Gennesaret, and echoed the challenges of those before whom Peter had denied Him, by repeating his question three times:

> Christ saith to him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.[4]

It was this conversation which finally broke the will of Peter, forcing

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[3]Matt. 26: 33-34; 73-75.

[4]Jn. 21: 17.

available to those for whom the "I" is culpable in the central event of the Horae Canonicae. This community of regenerated souls are united not by their common ideology or mutual need, but "united by His Word". Auden expresses their relationship to their Founder in his "Anthem":

> Let us praise our Maker, with true passion extol Him.
> Let the whole creation give out another sweetness,
> Nicer in our nostrils, a novel fragrance
> From cleansed occasions in accord together
> As one feeling fabric, all flushed and intact,
> Phenomena and numbers announcing in one
> Multitudinous oecumenical song
> Their grand giveness of gratitude and joy,
> Peaceable and plural, their positive truth
> And authoritative This, an unthreatened Now
> When, in love and in laughter, each lives itself,
> For, united by His Word, cognition and power,
> System and Order, are a single glory,
> And the pattern is complex, their places safe.
>
> (Auden, p. 257)

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