The Poetics of Humiliation: Revisiting W. H. Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*

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Abstract

Given that most students encounter poems in anthologies removed from their initial published context, poetry books offer us a chance to see a poet's project in a different light, allowing us to piece together connections and gain a greater appreciation and critical scope than individual, uncontextualized poems might allow. By revisiting W.H. Auden's 1955 poetry collection, The Shield of Achilles, republished as a critical edition last May by Princeton University Press, I offer a reading that attends to a running thread in Auden's work, thereby connecting the collection's three constituent parts. My essay argues first that, in the wake of modernity, Auden's Shield poses the question of human solidarity, seeking an answer to the question of how humans might love their neighbors. By reading a selection of poems in Auden's collection, I argue that Auden contributes a "poetics of humiliation," which I take to be lyrical self-degradation of both the lyricist and the reader. I contend that by engaging in humiliation, Auden places the lyrical subject in a sinful, low condition in which the only remaining option is a radical, willful acceptance of grace, the likes of which offer an opportunity to have a sacramental vision of the neighbor.

***Keywords*:** W.H. Auden, humiliation, poetry, classical

One is perhaps reluctant, however, to only give a selection of a novel, though some do, but a poem removed from its book raises less eyebrows. Why? By republishing *The Shield of Achilles* in May of 2024, Princeton University Press contested a gap in our critical approach to poetry. Despite committees bestowing awards onto poetry collections yearly,[1] readers seldom regard poetry within its book-length context. We instead tend to relegate the contents of poetry books to anthological selections.[2] Unlike canonical novels, poetry collections stand to be forgotten, so it remains significant that publishers find it good and necessary to extend the life of an author's collection. Alan Jacobs, editor of this recent critical edition of Auden's *Shield of Achilles*, suggests that it "is an integral work of art."[3] In general, this case could be made for many poetry collections, should we credit that poets are just as artful as novelists in structuring the wider context of their work, so Jacobs is right also to attribute this "integration" to Auden's work.

The answer to this essay's opening question is beyond the scope of this piece, but I do hope instead to challenge the conventional standards by which we often approach poems by revisiting Auden's 1955 work. To revisit a poetry collection is to engage thoughtfully with its content in a manner that anthologies may not allow. We face something like an artistic intent by placing a work within its structural context, and this allows us readers a better window into the arch of a poet's perspective as well as a greater density of interpretive thought. A poem like "The Shield of Achilles" stands alone, yet its significance within its 1955 publication compels us to consider not just the poem's project but also the larger scope of Auden's project. Why does the collection's

[1] *The Shield of Achilles*, for example, won the 1956 National Book Award for poetry.

[2] We should recognize, however, that poets often create anthologies of their own work, which warrant their own critical assessments.

[3] Jacobs, Alan. "Introduction." Auden, W.H., *The Shield of Achilles,* edited by Alan Jacobs (Princeton UP, 2024), x. All subsequent citations of Jacobs's introduction and Auden's *Shield* will come from this edition and be cited parenthetically.

second part begin with it? What is its relationship to other poems in the collection? We can raise such questions only by attending to a book's vision. My critical revisitation or "review" argues that the scope of Auden's *The Shield of Achilles* posits what I refer to as a *poetics of humiliation*, in which the lyric imagination degrades itself and its speaker, perhaps compelling its reader to do likewise. For Auden, this humiliation reflects what he stylized as his "return to Christianity," for his collection, in its poetics of humiliation, offers a mimetic attempt to contemplate the mystery of coming to terms with the limitations of the human person, and as it grapples with such difficulties, it finds within the experience of limitation a grace that opens us to regard our neighbor.

In this way, "The Shield of Achilles" and the other poems in the collection stand in Auden's corpus as continued examinations into the problem of human solidarity in the modern age, asking the question, "Given the world as it is, how do I love my neighbor?"[4] Auden's poetry often uses the familiar imagery of modernity to raise the question of how we can live together given how divided we are—given, too, that we might destroy one another any moment.[5] His poetry provokes its reader because it unveils a strident sense of human weakness, thereby forcing the reader, alongside its lyricist, to confront the dread of becoming human. From such dread, however, springs human solidarity, because it is by such dread that one recognizes, too, the human in their neighbor. Only by humiliation—self-effacing, self-affronting, self-conscious intentions to posit one's weakness—that one might, as the titular poem portrays it, "weep *because* another wept" (25; my emphasis).

Such an argument necessitates seeing some connection between the poem's various parts. Given the name of the collection, there is some justification to begin with the "Shield of Achilles" as an orientating device. The poem appropriates Book XVIII of the *Iliad* in which Achilles's mother, Thetis, beseeches the god Hephaestos to make armor for her son worthy of his great glory. Auden uses this narrative to emphasize the dissonance between the classical, totalized world of the Greeks and the fragmentary condition of the world after the Second Great War. The poem contrasts Thetis's expectation of a glorious shield with the terrifying reality of what Hephaestos renders, and it differentiates its mimesis through a repetition of antithesis between expectation and reality, potency and actuality. While Thetis seeks "vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities / And ships upon untamed seas," she finds instead "[a]n artificial wilderness / And a sky like lead" (23). The first stanza of Auden's poem gives the sense that the world is not quite the same, the implications of which suggest art cannot be the same.

While the geographical ramifications of modernity are evident in these antithetical descriptions, so too are its moral ramifications. In the penultimate stanza, we meet a "ragged urchin," whose condition is anything but righteous given the logic of the world he enters. Were this ragged urchin capable, he would impose upon himself an ethics with which he is unfamiliar. We learn that the space in which he lives is one in which atrocities such as murders and rapes "[w]ere axioms to him, who'd never heard / Of any world where promises were kept / Or one could weep because another wept" (25). The resounding bleakness cannot be quelled, but it will be suffered. Just as the ragged urchin lacks the imaginative capacity to envision a world in which humans empathize with one another, so too does the poem portray others living in this same condition. Stanza two of the poem shows "[a] million eyes, a million boots in line, / Without

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[4] See his famous mid-career poems "As I Walk Out One Evening" (1937) and "September 1, 1939" (1939), which both offer some contemplative disposition towards the topic of human solidarity.

[5] See Auden's 1965 essay for *The New York Times*, "The Corruption of Innocent Neutrons," in *Prose, Vol. V,* edited by Edward Mendelson (Princeton UP, 2015), 160-164.

expression, waiting for a sign" (23), and stanza three promptly answers their waiting when they hear a bodiless voice proving "by statistics that some cause was just" (23). The deliberation of men behind closed doors, who find their warmongering just and expect other humans to fall in line, makes ready the urchin's appearance in the penultimate stanza. They are the offspring of the same violent world, and it is this logic that Hephaestos's artistry follows.

The poem's mimetic effect is less contained in its ekphrastic "shield" than it is in the artifice that is the twentieth century itself. Thetis, Hephaestos, and Achilles only remind us of what disparity exists between the idealized past and the deadly present. Even as Hephaestos "hobbled away" and Thetis weeps at the end of the poem, the speaker reminds its reader that the god creates the shield not for Thetis but for Achilles, of whom Auden lays adjective after adjective to describe as "the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles / Who would not live long" (25). By reworking an ancient, classical image to construct one pertinent to the modern, Auden suggests that even the mimetic works of the twentieth century endow themselves not with the beauty that we expect from them but rather the evil from which they are concocted. Achilles's art is, at the end of the day, a weapon of war, a gift for one who delights in its affairs. One can imagine the onslaught of twentieth century propaganda and the mass production of weapons as a kind of artistry in which annihilation is the final cause and the measure of art. "Art" becomes artifice, and artifice is politically effective and destructive to human affections. To become re-affected, to be "disenchanted and disintoxicated" as Auden would later suggest in *The Dyer's Hand* (1962).[6] Auden's poetry, then, offers a corrective to our dwindling, disaffected sensibilities, and his poetics functions, then, as a rhetorical candor by putting before his readers their feeble conditions. Opening the collection's second part, the title poem evidences the fact of what so many of us are: we are the Thetis who cannot face the truth of the world, the Hephaestos whose truth-telling lacks charity, or the Achilles whose warmongering delights himself. This focus binds the work's constituent parts and offers a spiritual vision that distinguishes Auden from angry cynicism: instead of looking outwards and condemning the world, Auden's work asks its reader to look inward as an act of spiritual humiliation. Only by attesting to the low status of one's qualities will one find a suitable response to the spiritual condition of the whole. Even as "The Shield of Achilles" proposes a nightmarish reality greatly antithetical to an ideal one, its self-confronting rhetorical appeal becomes a necessary corrective to opening its reader to grace. If Auden's collection has a narrative arc, it seems most apparent in how his three parts develop a poetics of regarding the self with humility then ends with a unifying sense of human collectivity under Christian grace. My argument implies, then, that the collection's title poem constitutes something like a lyrical occasion—a context from which the poet binds other poems. In the case of "Shield," Auden introduces the disparity between neighbor and self in modernity, about which he compels his reader to examine throughout the collection's three parts, which include "Bucolics," "In Sunshine and In Shade," and the sequence of poems unified under the Latin title *Horae Canonicae*.

The first part contains seven pastoral-like poems that account for some aspects of nature, exploring the relationship between a natural setting and its influence on the lyricist. "Woods," written in nine sestains, considers forestry, with the main idea being, "The trees encountered on a country stroll / Reveal a lot about a country's soul" (8). After developing the idea that humans appropriate woods for their uses, the final stanzas conclude:

A small grove massacred to the last ash,
An oak with heart-rot, give away the show:
This great society is going smash;

[6] See Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (Vintage Books, 1989), 27

They cannot fool us with how fast they go,
How much they cost each other and the gods!
A culture is no better than its woods. (9)

Auden imagines the natural elements one encounters as a revelation of oneself; the final stanza reminds us that what we do to the world reflects who we are. Because our destructive efforts suggest an outpouring of our destructive souls, we simultaneously condemn ourselves because our actions are symptomatic of our spiritual condition. Our landscapes somehow become images of what we are, and whether we project ourselves onto them or they onto us, we are left with something nearly determinative. Auden thereby develops a paradox: although we have the power to cut down a forest, our seeming power only portrays the status of our hearts. We are, then, subject to our wrongs, and what appears to be power is in the final analysis really weakness as we succumb to the quality of our work. We do not, in other words, run perpendicular to what exists apart from ourselves, but we run parallel. The content of our being exists in union with the production of our actions. We are not, then, above what we do, but what we perform is the material of who we are. We cannot escape ourselves, and we are reminded of this very reality in the world we either choose to embrace or shun. Thus our being subjected makes its lyricist strangely weak in the very act of asserting power.

Yet weakness itself is nothing for which to despair. The final bucolic, "Streams," a poem of eighteen quatrains, begins by describing the tranquility of resting by the water with the narrator offering praise, attributing to it "[p]ure being" (17). After a series of dreams, the narrator wakes to conclude that the water must be grateful "to run with the human race" (20), because, the poet muses, it wishes "the least of men their / Figures of splendor, their holy places" (20). The poet's understanding of the streams alludes to the consolation of nature. It provides the lowest of men a setting for introspection, and it thereby allows something sacred to come out of such introspection. Nature, then, humbles us, whether we seek to dominate it or allow nature its due.

This concern with humility and weakness continues into the second part of the collection, which at times displays Auden's ironic dark humor. In the "heroic" couplet, "Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier," Auden's brevity provokes self-reflection: "To save your world you asked this man to die: / Would this man, could he see you now, ask why? (37). The poet's presupposing notion here is the disparity between what the soldier died to save and the object of his saving. When one recognizes that the columns on which our society stands are solidified on the bones of others, one must reckon ourselves with *how* their living honors the dead. The poet contrasts the contemporary world with its medium of communication, that being the heroic couplet, about which he asks us to be suspicious. We ask now, does the life of the living rewrite history, making those who were heroes into monuments of dread?

Auden does not answer such questions, but his asking them offers implications; we are left to imagine the full extent of what he describes. Despite the ambiguity of some of his work, *Shield* is most interested in poetically portraying the paradoxical struggle of the human soul, not in answering questions. His poetry consistently emphasizes the human condition of toeing the line between good and corruption without necessarily making a positive or negative claim. In this way, it attacks the limitations of being able to treat any person as exhaustively "good" or "bad." Yet Auden affirms a sinful nature—one that unceasingly conflicts with the soul's potential and desire to rise above its nature. In "The Truest of Poetry is the Most Feigning," the speaker describes the sinful nature of man to illuminate man's relationship to creativity. Written in couplets, the poem's final stanza highlights the tension of making art as a sinner:

For given Man, by birth, by education,
Imago Dei who forgot his station,
The self-made creature who himself unmakes,
The only creature ever made who fakes,
With no more nature in his loving smile
Than in his theories of a natural style,
What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
Can trick his lying nature into saying
That love, or truth in any serious sense,
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence. (32)

The opening verbal play of the poem's final stanza offers two alternatives to what follows: is Man *forgiven,* or are we to consider the next lines *given* what Man already is? The verbal play, the refusal to "solve" the problem, anticipates the conclusive movement. Although created in the image of God, the person retreats from this status, and that naturally determines poetic action. Auden imagines poetry here as the act of "verbal playing" by which we "trick" our "lying nature" by affirming something to which we are only halfheartedly committed. When we speak of love, for example, we do so as unfit lovers. To call love or truth a "reticence" here indicates that such poetic affirmations are acts against our natural tendencies, yet such diffidence also carries grace as it reveals our need for grace itself. This approach to art bears something like an Augustinian will, with the conceit of the poem being the existential task of having to throw ourselves at something we are neither fit to receive nor ready to perform. His poem tells the truth, then, by humiliating the power we think we have over even our creative acts.

Auden offers theological perspective consistent with Augustine, who exercises a self-oriented rhetoric of candor and humiliation throughout his *Confessions*. On more than one occasion, Augustine even speculates the possibility of God mocking him.[7] But Augustine's attention emphasizes the chief virtue of any Christian: humility. While Auden's lyrical occasion in parts I and II of his work heed humility, the final section of Auden's poem extends his poetic project into the question of how a Christian should respond to such self-aware limitations. In navigating these humiliating limitations, Auden digs a passage into repentance and faith, so *The Shield of Achilles* concluding with the religious sequence of poems *Horae Canonicae* or "Canonical Hours," a poem that portrays the complexities of the religious life of a sinner by drawing a connection between liturgical devotion and the execution of Christ, seems a fitting end.

The poem's epigraph, "*Immolatus vicerit*" (42), haunts the sequence as it contrasts the temporal with the eternal in its grammatical construction. The Latin verb "vicerit," being in the *future perfect* tense, suggests the spiritual dimension of the work as ongoing, not limited to its historical situation. The epigraph's translation, "Sacrificed, he will be victorious," evinces the spiritual conflict of the limited vision of humans by mapping them *in* temporal history while they experience an event with eternal, ongoing ramifications. The narrator emphasizes this temporality in "Prime," relating, "The world is present, about, / And I know that I am, here, not alone" (45). His chronological limitation contrasts his place in history with the divine time of the event itself. Each section in the poem is named after an hour in the canonical hours—Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline, and Lauds—and, in constructing his poem this way, Auden envisions the phenomena of encountering the eternal in the chronological, the infringement of divine, kairotic time on human time. As the eternal intrudes on the temporal, the speaker's guilt opens him up to

[7] See Augustine's *Confessions,* I.6.7, III.10.18, and VI.6.9.

receiving grace, however, for the object of his murder *was* "sacrificed" (*immolatus*) but *is* "victorious" (*vicerit*). In the very self-abashing of the human's temporal condition, the work contrastingly offers its speaker grace on account of its Christian vision. The poem renders guilt temporal but forgiveness eternal.

In "Prime," the narrator describes himself and his city as sinful by nature, expressing this temporal guilt as the fulfillment of an impulse against a moral intrusion:

> 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. (46)

As he and his accomplices prepare for the execution to come, he is struck by his implicit acceptance of its arrival, thereby likening himself to a guilty participant in the event to unfold. Although he may not have performed the act itself, his willingness to go along with it makes him sinful—and the anxiety of this sinfulness increases as the sequence progresses.

In "Nones," having already committed the act, the guilt of it stains the narrator as well as the geography of the locale:

> the blood
> Of our sacrifice is already
> Dry on the grass: we are not prepared
> For silence so sudden and so soon;
> The date is too hot, too bright, too still,
> Too ever, the dead remains too nothing. (53)

These lines demonstrate the temporal anxiety of having to live with the guilt of one's actions. The Experience becomes modified as a kind of "too-muchness" when its subject cannot bear the weight of responsibility. The spiritual condition hangs in temporal suspension, for the promise remains undelivered and the guilt too persisting. The poem continues by describing the narrator's desire for reprieve from the silent aftermath of the execution because the context of silence causes reflection. Poetic excuses offer no solution; despite whatever justifications can be given, the execution and "its meaning / Waits for our lives" (55). Given this condition, the mimetic turn offers a surprising reconciliation not by suggesting some retreaded point about art being salvific but instead by degrading the artistic act itself. Embodying guilt means that even poetic expressions to push beyond such guilt only retain the condition of sin. What reprieve do our institutions, mimetic renderings, or even our repressive instincts have when measured against what we know to be true? It does not take a Christian imagination to belittle oneself to this state; rather, all one must know is the consequences of the givenness of one's character. Are humans basically good? Even if they are, an individual fails enough to warrant the question. Are poets basically good? Any self-examining artist ought to have the humility to say otherwise.

The penultimate poem, "Compline," asks this very question: "Can poets… / Be saved?" (61). Read in conjunction with Auden's portrayal of poetry in "The Truest Poetry," the question becomes whether there is grace for those who deceive, who attempt to justify their wrongdoing in verbal play, who use art as artifice such as "The Shield of Achilles" implies. In the sequence of the poem, sleep offers no consolation for the events that transpired. The poem's contrition reaches its zenith in humility. When self-justification is impossible, when one's conscience is guilty, one must

ask for intercession, praying for knowledge of the meaning of one's guilt and requesting to "come to the picnic / With nothing to hide, join the dance / As it moves in perichoresis, / Turns about the abiding tree" (61). The near-final action of Auden's sequence posits an act of willfulness to embody a radical shift by relying on the Trinitarian movement and taking such a movement on for oneself.

Horae Canonicae ends with the benedictive "Lauds" as a conclusive action to the poet's radical shift, which celebrates the natural and temporal world, giving a new vision in which "[m]en of their neighbors become sensible" (62), a stark contrast to the ragged urchin's mutilated sensitivity in the title poem. Because nature becomes a key element of the collection's ending, we find ourselves returning to the "Bucolics" of Part I with a sacramental vision, a renewed understanding of the true meaning of these things, by which we can see differently because we see them with the humility our weakness begets. We repeat with Auden's speaker, as a liturgy would induce us, "God bless the Realm, God bless the People, / God bless this green world temporal" (62) Each of the three-line stanzas in "Lauds" ends with the refrain, "*In solitude, for company*," affirming, in repetitive liturgy, *how* we bless and *for whom* we bless. Humans act alone, for individuals alone are responsible for their actions, yet they do it for the benefit of their neighbors, to have solidarity with the other, to "weep because another wept" (25).

In Auden's work, empathy's cost is exceedingly great, as it will have nothing but humiliation. It demands we reimagine who we are, and that we degrade ourselves, yet this humiliation will be the only method of solidarity. Auden's corrective poetics in *The Shield of Achilles*, which I have here called the poetics of humiliation, qualifies the human person as inept but not incapable of living virtuously. For Auden, one must have the humility to recognize their shortcomings, accept their station, affirm their need for grace given our flesh, and then look on our neighbors and see them for what they are: humans. Looking at others with grace, crediting them their humanity, and having the empathy to weep with them is Auden's humanist response to the crisis he diagnoses in "The Shield of Achilles." Revisiting Auden's collection attends to his poetics as being larger than his collection, even if it takes a poetics of humiliation to compel the human heart to walk its path.

Works Cited

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