

Abstract:

Travis McDonald: “‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’: Elegy for a Man and an Ideal”

W. H. Auden’s 1939 elegy for W. B. Yeats recognizes the passing of his contemporary as well as his own belief in the social efficacy of poetry. The form of the elegy serves the traditional commemorative purpose while simultaneously enabling Auden to critique both Yeats and politically intentioned art.

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats”: Elegy for a Man and an Ideal

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In W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", an elegy is composed not only for the passing of Yeats, but for the author's rejection of the social viability of art as well. In step with John Milton's "Lycidas" and other such works, Auden seemingly presents readers with a pastoral elegy for the death of his contemporary. However, the death of William Butler Yeats is not the only loss treated in the poem. While in earlier works Auden expresses a certain optimism towards the political efficacy of art, later poems expose a rejection of that ideal. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" represents a transitional period where Auden began losing faith in what poetry could accomplish. Therefore, the elegy recognizes a second passing, the author's loss of faith in the political power of art. While Auden's poem mimics the traditional elegy in form, the author functionally perverts the typical use of such a composition. Rather than lamenting these two losses, the elegiac tradition is used to become critical of both Yeats and the social efficacy of art. Conventionally, the pastoral elegy adheres to a certain series of elements. First an invocation occurs, followed by an expression of angst, and concluding with resolution and acceptance. Auden adapts this sequence in his critique of Yeats and the social viability of art. Aligning with the three separate sections of the work, Auden's progression presents the subjects and concepts to later be scrutinized, becomes critical of the merit of these entities, then reconsiders and interprets the impact and significance of each. The simultaneity in the critique of these two ideas allows Auden to arrive at a single eloquent expression, appropriate for both subjects.

The significance of W. H. Auden's decision to write in the pastoral elegiac form is paramount in a critical assessment of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". Specifically, particular attention must be paid when a divergence from this tradition occurs. In the moments where Auden separates his work from the elegiac genre, the critical and analytical features of the piece are most apparent. Auden's piece conforms to the traditional form in two significant ways, the

conversational tone and imitation of the elegiac procession. In his book The Later Auden: From “New Year Letter” to *About the House*, George W. Bahlke discusses Auden’s use of the pastoral elegy. “Although the six-line stanza is dominant in the first section there is no fixed line length; here the absence of formal pattern and the ease of movement from line to line support the conversational and reflective tone of the poetry” (18). A fundamental element of pastoral poetry is the basic depiction of a conversation between two shepherds. The Pastoral elegy retains this aspect while adding a reflective element as well. In addition to the conversational tone, a certain sequence is traditionally included in this genre. Bahlke asserts, “[t]he three sections of Auden’s Elegy form a progression from incident through reflection to a final epitaph and invocation” (18). As will be discussed later, the ways in which Auden operates within each section of this sequence separates his work from tradition. Besides a manipulation of the elegiac progression, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” also resists convention in regards to the absence of mourning. Although the subject is death and a certain dark and reflective tone is present, the lamentation of a loss does not seem to occur. In fact, in Auden: A Carnival of Intellect by Edward Callan, the modernist’s specific views are revealed. “Speaking about his elegies on Freud and Yeats, Auden said: ‘These elegies of mine are not poems of grief. Freud I never met, and Yeats I only met casually and didn’t particularly like him. Sometimes a man stands for certain things, which is quite different from what one feels in personal grief’” (147). Therefore, the elegiac form is not employed for customary practice of bereavement; instead, Auden utilizes this mode to evaluate the inherent power of art. In effect, there seems no better way to evaluate poetry than to do so posthumously. Once a poet passes, the art stands alone without the possibility of defense by its creator. Essentially, this environment allows one to examine the substance of a work in a vacuum. The intended message of a poem or reputation of the poet holds no significance to the

presence of a work; in fact, the immortality of art rest purely in the quality of the work itself. Auden also uses this very notion when considering the social significance of art. Similar to the presence of a work separated from its author, the value of art is defined not by what it accomplishes politically, but how well it forges a connection with readers. The elegy allows Auden to separate art from the intention and influence of the artist in order to more effectively examine the former. However, imitating this traditional form allows the work to be elegantly critical and remain accessible to audiences.

The first section of the poem essentially states the events that have taken place and introduces ideas that will be rejected and reevaluated in the subsequent segments. In contrast with the other two sections, the first part of this elegy adheres closest to the traditional genre. This segment not only relates the conditions of Yeats' death but invokes the poet as iconic figure. Consequently, Auden manages to satisfy the elegiac form and present concepts to later be criticized at the same time. With regards to Yeats, Auden begins explicitly by relating the basic state of affairs. For instance, the cold and unforgiving nature imagery sensuously relates the fact that Yeats died in winter. Furthermore, in "The Elegiac Act: Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'" Edward W. Rosenheim Jr. writes, "Auden signals his intention of memorializing, in verse, the greatest poet of the twentieth century" (423). Even as this poem is much more than a simple elegy, whether ironic or not W. H. Auden is essentially offering a remembrance of Yeats. Nevertheless, this first section also functions as a venue for the poet to introduce notions that will come into question later in the work. For example, beginning in the third stanza Auden wrote, "[t]he current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers./ Now he is scattered among a hundred cities/ And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections" (17-19). The most important aspect to note is that Yeats himself is being "admired" and "scattered among a hundred cities",

not his poetry. In regards to the artist as creator, this is the very issue Auden later argues against. At this moment, a certain importance and prowess is given to the artist over the art. Rosenheim contends, “[t]he poet's death and the profound questions it introduces become the occasion for considering the poetic gift-and, again as in other elegies, by establishing the kind of immortality which poets enjoy, the work celebrates the immortality of poetry itself” (423). Although Auden will later reject the importance of the stature and intent of Yeats, the poet utilizes these ideas to foreshadow the analysis that will follow. As Rosenheim says, Auden introduces “the occasion for consideration”. While these ideas are yet to be questioned by Auden, they are essentially presented to the audience to be contemplated.

Similar to the consideration of Yeats, this first segment also introduces concepts about the political efficacy of art that will later be scrutinized. Specifically, a comprehensive review of the natural and artificial imagery reveals the notion of consciously intended social significance in poetry. Whereas in the following sections this notion will be refused and re-evaluated, the poet simply presents the concept of poetry with the ambition of a political consequence. For instance, “[t]he wolves ran on through the evergreen forests” (I.8) refers to an instinctive and primal world. At the outset, the natural world appears to be balanced by the artificial and willfully created human realm. For instance, Auden suggests a certain unity when he wrote, “snow disfigured the public statues” (I.3). However, Edward Callan conveys how this balance breaks down. “The initial imagery of natural vitality and conscious fabrication is followed by an image of the city of the mind in dissolution...The imagery therefore emphasizes the role of the poet’s consciousness rather than his unconscious (as the Bardic notion would have it) in the making of a poem” (148). Again, the first section emphasizes consciousness, intention, and the artist’s aspirations. In a sense, this portion of the work asserts the status quo, the apparent consensus of

the general public. Auden introduces the ideas of Yeats reputation as significant and politically oriented poetry so that he can reject them in part two.

In the second section, Auden becomes overtly critical of Yeats and rejects his contemporary's aspirations for political consequence. In pastoral poetry a similar angst is expressed; however, these feelings are directed toward death itself, not the deceased. This section begins by relegating the iconic depiction of Yeats. The claim, "[y]ou were silly like us" (II.1) essentially reduces Yeats to the level of everyone else. This idea directly conflicts with the belief that the affections of Yeats' audience were for him rather than his art. The intention and political ambition inserted into his work lent nothing to the success of Yeats' art, it was the skill implemented in the writing rather than the consequence that brought such acclaim. In her essay "The poet in Wartime: Yeats, Eliot, Auden", Lucy McDiarmid discusses Auden's critique of Yeats. "His poetry survives his political interests not through humility or sensibility, but through sheer talent. Poetry itself has a survival instinct, and great poetry creates its own world even when poets try to force it into other worlds: 'it survives, a way of happening, a mouth'" (103). Consequently, the longevity and acclamation the poetry receives has no particular relationship to any quality of the artist as a person. The idea that Yeats was "silly like us" (II.1) does not degrade his work, for the man himself does not affect the success of a poem. Furthermore, McDiarmid comments on the political aspirations of Yeats' work as well. "His sin is reactionary politics, and he is pardoned by Time not for any act of self abnegation but for writing well" (103). With respects to what Yeats hoped to accomplish with his poetry, his failure in this venture is again overcome by his skill. The very same poetic aptitude that pardons his supposed iconic status, forgives his failed political intention as well.

Bordering on the critique of Yeats in part two of the poem, Auden also contemplates the inability of poetry to be applicable in the social realm. As visibly as he confronted Yeats, Auden fundamentally challenges the idea that poetry is able to accomplish any tangible result. However, Auden discretely foreshadows the following section by inferring that the art does live on, despite impotent intention. This leaves the reader to wonder how art and artist may be immortalized if the aforementioned aspirations are not achieved. With a particular directness, Auden declares that “poetry makes nothing happen” (II.36). Though his focus is the political consequence of poetry, this line makes that idea even more poignant by denying the ability of art to accomplish anything. Edward Callan claims that “[s]uch disclaiming of poetry’s power to influence events may pain those who which to cling to the notion of the Bard; yet Auden has bluntly said that no poem of his, or of another, saved even one Jewish victim of the death camps” (150). The “pain” that this notion may cause to those who revere the concept of a bard would fit neatly in Auden’s conviction. The very idea of the bard resists Auden’s assertion of political impotence in art. In fact, Auden further rejects the Bardic tradition when he disdainfully wrote about “[t]he parish of rich women” (II.2). A principal element of the Bard was to be employed by a patron, the “rich women” mentioned here refer to the women who compensated Yeats.

The third section contains a certain reconsideration of the points rejected in part two; however, Auden does not renege on those assertions, rather the significance of Yeats and the efficacy of art are considered in a different light. While he does not concede his earlier position about the irrelevance of political intention, Auden asserts that Yeats did not immortalize his art; rather he was immortalized by his art. Nevertheless, a tonal shift occurs, introducing a measure of un-ironic veneration and admiration for the deceased poet. The second section of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” was largely an attack on Yeats as a person. At first glance this notion seems to

make Auden guilty of the very thing he criticizes Yeats of. Paul S. Stanfield comments on this in his book Yeats and Politics in the 1930s saying, “[w]hat a poet thinks is of no consequence, for he makes no difference by what he writes, and so must be judged only on whether he has written well or ill. On that score, Auden graciously allow, Yeats passes with flying colours. From this assumption on the nature of poetry comes, perhaps, the idea that Yeats transgressed in confusing politics and aesthetics” (6). Since political intention has no power in creation, aspirations of social change consequently should not be held against the artist. Such intention is of no consequence to anyone, not even critics. What does matter is that Yeats exercised remarkable skill in his poetry. Auden sums this up when he wrote, “[time] [w]orships language and forgives/ Everyone by whom it lives;/ Pardons cowardice, conceit,/ Lays its honours at their feet” (III.50-53). Regardless of failed political intention, time still honors the great skill of these poets. Essentially, Auden contends that Yeats is worthy of immortality, if only for the quality of his work.

Similar to his seemingly respectful invocation of Yeats in the final section, Auden also re-evaluates his perspective on the efficacy of art. Again, the Author does not falter from his denial of political viability in poetry; nevertheless, Auden does consider the presence that art does have in the social realm. While in the previous segment Auden maintains that “[p]oetry makes nothing happen” (II.36), in part three he does not fully reject the power of art. In the final stanzas of the piece Auden wrote, “[poetry can] [s]till persuade us to rejoice;/ With the farming of a verse/ Make a vineyard of the curse,/ Sing of human unsuccessful/ In a rapture of distress/...Teach a free man how to praise” (III.69-77). Although the denial of political consequence remains, W. H. Auden admits that poetry can eloquently depict the world and potentially connect people under a shared anxiety. Alan Jacobs recapitulates this assessment in

What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry. “[T]he point is that art, while it cannot of its own power *enforce* any alteration of consciousness or morality, can *help* those who would be joined together to find their desired unity... Yet even this [artists] can do successfully only if the public they serve is small enough for real commonality of purpose to be possible... Art serves local understanding only because it is the only kind of understanding available” (53). Poetry does have the ability to accomplish something, only its achievements bear no connection to authorial intention or political ambition. In fact the social presence of a work exists in the way that it unites people through a shared experience. The events that follow the forging of such a bond acquire no direction or influence from the art that initiated it. Subsequently, the only aspect that the artist contributes to the longevity and presence of such a work is the skill required to affect readers in such a profound way.

An understanding of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” develops in three basic stages, each less apparent than the next. First, the poem is most clearly an elegy, fulfilling the formal requirements expected in the pastoral genre. Upon examination, audiences quickly become aware that Auden diverts from convention and inserts a criticism of the man he elegizes. Finally, the least apparent venture of the poet is to elegize the loss of an ideal, his belief in the social efficacy of art. In the same way that Auden does not wholly reject Yeats; neither does the poet constitutionally deny the social presence of art by the end of his piece. However, he does conclude that both the political ambition of Yeats and the socially oriented intention of poetry is of no particular significance. In actuality, the presence of these works depends entirely on the skill by which they were forged. Yeats’ works did not achieve such prominence by the intention of the man, but rather the elegance of his verse. Similarly, regardless of political impotency, a

finely crafted poem does have the capacity to unify readers through a collective understanding of their own human experience.

## Annotated Bibliography

Auden, W. H. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. 798-800

Bahlke, George W. The Later Auden: From "New Year Letter" to *About the House*. Piscataway: Rutgers UP, 1970. Bahlke commences largely in a defense of Auden's vision, arguing that while Auden's poetic style may have fluctuated during his career his works never became tactless. The criticism begins in the thirties and continues until the time that the book was written (1970), continually justifying the consistent relevance of his poems. George Bahlke begins his composition with an intimate discussion of the elegiac genre and Auden's experience with the form.

Callan, Edward. Auden: A Carnival of Intellect. New York: Oxford UP, 1983. Like many of his colleagues in Auden criticism, Edward Callan's book spans the length of W. H. Auden's published works; however, the book focuses heavily on "the spirit that informs [them]" (vii). Callan investigates Auden's treatment of the human condition and his expression of the society that he perceived around him. Additionally, the tenth chapter of the text engages in an in depth analysis of Auden's perspective on Yeats.

Jacobs, Alan. What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1998. This book tracks the dynamic nature of Auden's work with a contention that the poet lost touch with his early genius over time. While a comprehensive scope of variables are considered, this criticism relies primarily on biographical elements such as religion on the modernist's body of work. In the forth

section of his study, Alan Jacobs discusses at length the Artist's views on the efficacy of art during the late 1930's.

McDiarmid, Lucy. "The poet in Wartime: Yeats, Eliot, Auden." Critical essays on W. H. Auden. Ed. George W. Bahlke. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991. 97-106. This essay surveys how the works of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Elliot, and W. H. Auden were affected by their experience with war. McDiarmid considers pieces from each poet, examining how their opinions and beliefs about war manifest in their creations. While the influence of warfare is primary in her critique, the author also relates the perception of Yeats and Art in Auden's elegy.

Rosenheim, Edward W. Jr. "The Elegiac Act: Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats.'" *College English* 27.5 (1966): 422-425. Rosenheim argues that an audience's satisfaction with a work is largely tied to the idea that the piece successfully pursued an intellectual challenge. In regards to "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", Auden essentially engaged in the tremendous task of elegizing a poetic master. The article discusses W. H. Auden's achievement of this feat and the subtle criticisms that he managed to insert as well.

Stanfield, Paul S. Yeats and Politics in the 1930s. New York: Saint Martin's P, 1988. This text analyzes politics and Yeats' views on such matters in the final ten years of his life. While the book is considerably biographical, Stanfield also examines how these views appear in W. B. Yeats' poetry. Furthermore, the author illustrates how his political views are critiqued in W. H. Auden's body of work.