

# Anthropological Poetics: Auden's Typology of Heroism

by WILLIAM C. JAMES

It is Auden the writer of nonfictional prose more than Auden the poet who has interested and engaged me. For Auden, as he criticizes and reviews, introduces and edits, summarizes and reflects upon the work of others makes the act of literary criticism itself an art. In the act, though, of immersing himself in the art of others he has implied that his "nature is subdu'd / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand." Not only, however, does Auden's criticism take on the colours and hues of "what it works in," but at times he imparts new tints and shades from his own palette to the material upon which he is working. At such times as these his criticism becomes an art.

The simile of the dyer's hand, borrowed for the title of a collection of essays from a Shakespearian sonnet,<sup>1</sup> suggests a surrender of the critic to the art which he is criticizing so that, like the dyer's, his hand becomes coloured as he dips it into the vat. But the implication of the humility and passivity of the critic, in spite of the strong suggestion that the criticism itself thereby partakes of the qualities of the art-work, is perhaps too self-effacing for such a critic as Auden. I want to suggest that as critic his nature is far from being subdued to the materials he works in, and that, to alter the reading which he would undoubtedly have given to the dyer's hand simile, he himself has concocted a large part of the recipe for the dye into which he dips the materials fabricated by the pens of other authors.

Auden's critical corpus appears at first to be a very mixed bag, its subjects ranging from Greek literature to the detective story, from Shakespeare to Kafka, from Cervantes to Tolkien. Moreover, the diversity of the subjects treated seems to be equaled only by the eclecticism of his method, for the works commanding his attention seem not to be brought under the aegis of any single univocal mode of approach and interpretation. My argument is that this critical corpus is unified, however, and that a significant part of its unity comes from what I call "Auden's Typology of Heroism". For just as Auden has claimed that a

common notion of the hero underlies a particular period of literature, so too I want to claim that three basic heroic types underlie Auden's own discussions of individual heroes in various periods and literatures. Furthermore, this typology which he has used so flexibly and so well stems from a theological understanding of man, an anthropology, with its sources in Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr.

In the introduction which Auden provided to his selection, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*,<sup>2</sup> he spends some time in laying out Kierkegaard's well-known Spheres of Existence – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Auden, in this Introduction to Kierkegaard, approaches these three categories historically, rather than typologically, describing the aesthetic sphere in terms of the Greeks' understanding of their gods, the ethical sphere in terms of Greek philosophy, and the religious sphere in terms of the revealed religion of Judaism and Christianity. In the aesthetic religion of the Greek gods, then, survival is a matter of strong and decisive action empowered by the passions which are in their turn bestowed by divine visitations or good fortune. The aesthetic individual is neither good nor bad, only strong or weak, fortunate or unfortunate. He is destroyed in the end by Fate, by a flaw in the nature of existence and not in his character, for eventually either the passage of time or the inevitability of death robs him of the gifts granted by fortune. The ethical religion of Greek philosophy finds in man's reason a permanence beyond the transience of the passions. The strength or weakness, fortune or misfortune of the aesthetic individual is replaced here by the knowledge or ignorance of the Good. And yet this knowledge of the Good does not automatically carry with it the ability of the knower to will the Good. Unlike the aesthetic man of power who *does*, the ethical hero is the man who *knows*, and the religious hero, finally, is the man who *obeys*. If for the aesthetic man the great evil to be avoided is weakness, and for the ethical man it is ignorance, then for the religious man evil is sin, that is, rebellion against the relation one necessarily has with his Creator. And finally, Auden (still, it must be remembered, in the process of introducing the Kierkegaardian Spheres of Existence) distinguishes among these spheres in terms of the differing commands laid upon men: the aesthetic man is told, "Do what you must"; and the ethical man is instructed, "These are the things which you may or must not do"; but the religious man is called to duty – "Choose to do what at this moment in this context I am telling you to do."

The place in his literary criticism where Auden uses Kierkegaard's categories

most conspicuously is in the third part of his book, *The Enchafèd Flood*.<sup>3</sup> There Auden describes the hero as the exceptional individual who possesses one of three kinds of authority over the average: the aesthetic hero whose exceptional gifts of fortune make him more beautiful, cleverer, or more powerful than the average; the ethical hero "who at any given moment happens to know more than the others";<sup>4</sup> and the religious hero "who is committed to anything with absolute passion"<sup>5</sup> whereas the others are only lukewarmly or dispassionately committed to what is true or else are absolutely committed to falsehood. The most frequent examples cited by Auden to illustrate these three heroic types are the aesthetic heroes of Greek epic or tragedy such as Odysseus or Oedipus, the ethical heroes of the Greek philosophers among whom Socrates is pre-eminent, and the religious heroes of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures such as Abraham or Job.

In other essays, though, and especially in his "Introduction" to Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals*,<sup>6</sup> Auden has chosen to discuss the three types of human individuality which the hero can exhibit, rather than the three kinds of heroic authority. The basic typology remains the same, however, in either case, the chief difference being that now its theoretical bases lie more in Reinhold Niebuhr than in Søren Kierkegaard. "Man," Auden declares, following Niebuhr, "is both nature and spirit, he possesses both kinds of individuality, and one of his major problems is to determine what relative importance to assign to each, and how to reconcile them."<sup>7</sup> In these terms, then, the Greek poet saw man as a hero in the realm of nature where his uniqueness was a matter of being something that other men were not as the result of being endowed with exceptional gifts. The Greek philosophers saw man as a hero in the realm of spirit where his uniqueness resulted from his ability to transcend his passions and his fate by his own will. The religious hero, however, is a hero both in the realm of nature and in the realm of spirit at once. He has no exceptional gifts like the poetic hero, only an exceptional task to which God calls him and to which he must be obedient. Nor can he know the mind of God in the manner in which the philosophical hero can know ideas; he can only obey or disobey God's commands. Auden concludes, then that "only the religious hero is an historical individual at every moment of his existence"<sup>8</sup> and that he has "a spiritual freedom which is lacking in both the tragic and the philosophical hero."<sup>9</sup>

The language here used by Auden to describe the hero's individuality will,

of course, be familiar to readers of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* where as early as the third page of the first volume Niebuhr is emphasizing that "man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form," at the same time as he emphasizes that "man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason, and the world."<sup>10</sup> So, then, "man stands too completely outside of nature and reason to understand himself in terms of either without misunderstanding himself."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, "the essence of man is his freedom" as he "stands at the juncture of nature and spirit."<sup>12</sup>

The differences, however, between Kierkegaard's Spheres of Existence as Auden employs them to talk about types of heroic authority, and Niebuhr's model for understanding man in terms of nature and spirit as Auden uses it to talk about kinds of human individuality are not significant. For whether he is drawing upon Kierkegaard or Niebuhr, Auden tends to subordinate both thinkers to that pattern or architecture of things which exists at the back of his mind, as he claims, quoting Chesterton, it exists at the back of every artist's mind.<sup>13</sup> Though Auden is far from being a theorist of literature, what theoretical underpinnings there are to his work as a practical critic tend to derive from a theological anthropology, a principled and disciplined view of man which in turn informs and directs his reflections upon the human subject which literature both creates and reveals. For this reason I want to say that his poetics, such as it is, is an anthropological poetics, though by that adjective I mean to claim no more than that it is a poetics grounded in a Christian view of man.

How, then, is this typology of aesthetic, ethical, and religious heroism employed by Auden? Primarily he seems to use it to modify the usual generic distinctions made in relation to heroism. For instance, in his essay entitled "The Ironic Hero" on *Don Quixote*, Auden begins: "Heroes are conventionally divided into three classes, the epic hero, the tragic hero, and the comic hero. Don Quixote fits none of them." Then, he goes on to demonstrate that Don Quixote is "a portrait of the Christian saint,"<sup>14</sup> or, as he states elsewhere, he is "a representation, the greatest in literature, of the Religious Hero."<sup>15</sup> Baudelaire's Dandy, on the other hand, is an inversion of the religious hero because, like Lucifer, he rebels and "asserts his freedom by disobeying *all* commands."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Melville's Captain Ahab, in a lead article in *The New Times Book Review*, is seen as a "Christian Tragic Hero," and a negative parody

of the possibility of becoming a saint, the saint being, once again, "the individual who of his own free will surrenders his will to the will of God."<sup>17</sup> This is the call which Ahab hears and rejects in favour of his commitment to the pursuit and death of Moby Dick. In *The Enchafèd Flood* Auden describes Ahab as one who before his initial encounter with Moby Dick was an exceptional man, an aesthetic hero, who then suffers a tragic fall in the Greek sense and ends up enacting "every ritual of the dedicated Don Quixote life of the Religious Hero, only for negative reasons."<sup>18</sup>

Another essay describes the fairy-tale hero as the opposite of the epic or aesthetic hero because the epic hero manifestly displays exceptional gifts whereas the hero of the fairy-tale "is not recognizable as a hero except in the negative sense" because he appears to the outward eye least likely to succeed.<sup>19</sup> For the most part, then, the Greek conception of the aesthetic or ethical hero – that is, the epic or tragic hero and the contemplative hero – serves in Auden's scheme to provide a touchstone whereby he then displays what is distinctive about more modern and Christian modes of heroism. Interestingly enough, in an essay on *The Lord of the Rings* entitled "The Quest Hero", Auden finds all three heroic types represented in Tolkien's work. He suggests that Gandalf and Aragorn are ethical and aesthetic heroes respectively, for their characters "are expressions of the natural vocation of talent": "It is for Gandalf to plan the strategy of the War against Sauron because he is a very wise man; it is for Aragorn to lead the armies of Gondor because he is a great warrior and rightful heir to the throne." But Frodo, the religious hero, is neither very wise nor is he a great warrior, and what he has to do he does not (unlike Gandalf and Aragorn), particularly want to do. However, as Auden points out, "once he has chosen, Frodo is absolutely committed."<sup>20</sup> In most of his criticism, however, little is said, directly or indirectly, about the aesthetic or ethical heroes. For the most part, the customary way in which the typology is employed is to show how various heroes – whether epic or tragic or comic, whether romantic or erotic, whether found in a fairy-tale or a quest story – to show how such heroes as these display the various characteristics of the religious hero, either negatively or positively, by the nature of their choices, the extent and variety of their commitments, and the use or abuse of their freedom.

Auden's typology of heroism, then, is sophisticated enough to allow him to apply it to whatever literary manifestations of the hero should command his attention from time to time. He is enabled by it to recognize recurrent aspects

of literary heroism because of what his anthropology tells him is perennial in the nature of man. Yet the scheme and his use of it is flexible enough to permit a description of what is distinctive about the heroes of a particular age or period, thereby making possible a comparative study of heroism as an index to the preoccupations of an age since, as he has said in an oft-quoted statement, each age shares a common notion "of the hero, the kind of human being who most deserves to be celebrated, remembered and, if possible, imitated."<sup>21</sup>

Yet, for all its strengths I find one major weakness in Auden's typology of heroism. It is the weakness once more that Amos Wilder was alluding to in a general way when he stated that "Auden has gone out of his way in his critical writings to set a Kierkegaardian gulf between all aesthetic activity and the existential dimension of faith."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, just as faith and culture are opposed and a great gulf set between them, so too the religious hero must be set over and against all varieties of aesthetic and ethical heroism. In his essay on Don Quixote Auden enumerates the difficulties of rendering the saint or religious hero in literature. At the end of the essay he is forced to conclude that "in the last analysis, the saint cannot be presented aesthetically." For, there is one sin that a character in a book must necessarily commit, and that is "the sin of being at all times and under all circumstances interesting."<sup>23</sup> Although it does not matter whether or not Don Quixote the religious hero is recognized *as* religious hero by others, Auden claims that Cervantes for a good reason made Don Quixote recover his sanity at the end of the book. Otherwise, as Don Quixote's friends were prone to believe, the implication might be taken that "the Religious Hero is always also an aesthetic hero."<sup>24</sup> But, once he recovers his senses he has to die for he has become uninteresting and can no longer be the subject of a book.

In a similar way Auden affirms that in the Old Testament Abraham and Job are made "recognizable as heroes by being in the end rewarded by worldly success" and that again this is a concession to aesthetic heroism. In the Prophets and the New Testament, however, the religious hero becomes the suffering servant, despised and rejected of men, except that now his "individuality is invisible to the eyes of poetry and philosophy – by whose standards, indeed, he seems both weak and ignorant."<sup>25</sup>

I began with the suggestion that in Auden the act of criticism becomes itself an art. Yet perhaps we ought to be thankful that he did not apply to his own theological criticism of literature the same strictures which he applied to the art

which he was criticizing. For regardless of whether or not it is true that the religious hero cannot be rendered aesthetically (because he should certainly be interesting and perhaps recognizable too), we should still want, I think, to claim that Auden's own thinking and writing about the hero in literature has made the literary religious hero both more readily recognizable, and more interesting once he is recognized.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1968).
- 2 (New York: David McKay, 1952). Reprinted as "Søren Kierkegaard" in *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 168–81.
- 3 *The Enchafèd Flood or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 90 ff.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 6 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (London: Panther Books, 1969).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 10 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 13 *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. vii.
- 14 "The Ironic Hero: Some Reflections on Don Quixote", *Horizon* 20 (1949): 86.
- 15 *Enchafèd Flood*, p. 100.
- 16 *Intimate Journals*, p. 21.
- 17 "The Christian Tragic Hero", *The New York Times Book Review*, 16 December 1945, p. 21.
- 18 *Enchafèd Flood*, p. 138.
- 19 *Dyer's Hand*, p. 211.
- 20 "The Quest Hero", in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of The Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 55.
- 21 *Dyer's Hand*, p. 84.
- 22 Amos N. Wilder, *The New Voice: Religion, Literature, Hermeneutics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 22.
- 23 "Ironic Hero", p. 94.
- 24 *Enchafèd Flood*, p. 100.
- 25 *Intimate Journals*, p. 20.