Narrative of Distance and Exilic Melancholia in W.H. Auden's "Refugee Blues"

Oscar C. Labang, Kencholia Teacher Training College

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Oscar C. Labang, PhD
Assistant Professor
American Institute of Cameroon

Abstract
The paper is a textual inquiry into how Auden uses poetic and linguistic strategies in “Refugee Blues” to convey the reality of distancing and the profundity of the feelings of melancholy, wretchedness and rejection that typifies the existential condition of exilic people in general and Jews in particular. Using a Structuralist lens and Psychological theories of distance, the analyzes illustrates that the poem is an exemplar poetic discourse about the gnawing reality of an exile’s expectations and the actuality of living in a world where he is unwelcomed and completely cut off from any meaningful connection to that which he calls country (home). The analysis uses text-internal clues as functional elements that reveal the various levels of distance in the text and how they contribute to the intense feeling of melancholia of the exiles in the poem.

Keywords: Exile, Distance, Melancholia, Auden, Modernist Poetry
Wystan Hugh Auden, one of twentieth century’s greatest poets, has been and continues to be the subject of critical analysis for scholars all over the world. While he ranks with modernist contemporaries like Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, his ability to capture the realities of his world in a more common but transfixing manner marks a major point of difference from his contemporaries. As Edward Mendelson points out, Auden’s poetry reflects “all the disordered conditions of his time, all its variety of language and event” and the poet’s focus changed as time went on from “erotic and political tasks in his early poems, [to] ethical and religious ones later”\(^1\).

“Refugee Blues” is one of the poems in which Auden takes up the ethical task as a poet; it is an exemplar poetic discourse about the gnawing reality of an exile’s expectations and actuality of living in a world where he is unwelcomed and completely cut off from any meaningful connection to that which he calls country (home). It is one of the poems Auden wrote at the time when he was “an interpreter of his society, not its scourge and prophet”\(^2\), and the society in the context of this poem is the new American society to which he had just immigrated. Finally, it is one of those poems that capture what Auden meant when he said as a poet he is after “a style which shall combine the drab sober truthfulness of prose with a poetic uniqueness of expression...”\(^3\)

The paper is a textual inquiry into how Auden uses poetic and linguistic strategies in “Refugee Blues” to convey the profundity of the feelings of melancholy, wretchedness and rejection that typifies the existential conditions of exilic people in general and Jews in particular. The analysis uses text-internal clues as functional elements that reveal the various levels of distance in

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\(^1\) Edward Mendelson in the Preface to his *Selected Poems of Auden*

\(^2\) Edward Mendelson in the Preface to his *Selected Poems of Auden*

the text and how they contribute to the intense feeling of melancholia of the exiles in the poem. The analysis of text-internal clues can be done more appropriately through the use of Structuralist theoretical guides because Structuralism allows the critic to identify the smallest units of meaningful in a work and studies how they function in various combinations to create meaning. Thus, the question that a Structuralist analysis of “Refuge Blues” asks is – what linguistic conventions or units of meaning does Auden employ in the poem? How does the combination of words help to convey the dichotomy between citizens and exiles? How does this dichotomy reveal the plight of the exile who exists on the margin of society? Using structuralism, the paper will “dissect” or go “below the surface” (Barthes, 85) of the poem to investigate “the elements of structure, the relations among them, and the process of transformation which occurs within the structure” (Smithson 147).

The appearance of themes of exile, isolation, and melancholy in the poetry of Auden is an expression of a phenomenon common to modern civilization as well as the poet’s own “chronic sensitivity to his own isolation and exile” (Taylor, “Auden’s Icelandic Myth of Exile”). Auden’s recourse to the theme of exile which he too suffered for some time can be understood in terms of Levi-Strauss’ linguistic structuralism. The entire poem therefore is a language structure that reveals Auden’s “unconscious thought processes” because according to Strauss, “much of linguistic behavior lies on the level of unconscious thought” (“Language”, 55). In the context of modern(ist) civilization within which Auden is classified, exile is a common theme. Sadik M. Gohar is of the opinion that modern civilization is typified by a “history of catastrophes” which has caused “spiritual dislocation and ontological disappointment”, and has made “the tradition of exile an epitome of modern civilisation”
Auden’s “Refugee Blues” is therefore a poetic discourse on one of the defining themes of his age.

The text-internal agency or the voice behind the poetical text comes across as a refugee narrating his experience of being an exile in a geo-political space – city – that places socio-psychological barriers to his ability to live a meaningful life. In the solitude of his wretched existence, the voice of the exile utters a lament that resounds with pity, pain, and fear. Evidently, the voice is addressing two listeners: the external listener - the reader who reads the text at any given time and in any given culture, and the internal interlocutor who is part of the plural referents. The internal listener is a passive participant; he does not utter a single word in the entire conversation but shares in the experience of the narrator. Composed in the tradition of the blues song, the poem is Auden’s exploration of a social issue that was relevant in his time and continues to be central to human experience in the age of globalization.

Within the matrix of global thinking and diasporic phenomenon, the refugee persona in the poem comes alive, true, and relevant. The refugee persona thus becomes a prototype of the kind of imaginative character Auden describes when he says:

All characters who are products of the mythopoeic imagination are instantaneously recognizable by the fact that their existence is not defined by their social and historical context; transfer them to another society or another age and their characters and behavior will remain unchanged. In consequence, once they have been created, they cease to be their author's characters and become the reader's; he can continue their story for himself.  
(The Dyer’s Hand, 407)

A character is mythopoeic because the character can occupy any special/temporal space depending on the reader’s experience and
interaction with such a character in the imaginative sphere. Auden’s perspective is plausible because as the external listener to the refugee’s lament in the poem, today’s readers can comfortably transfer the experience to contemporary societies and find similar laments by undocumented immigrants around the world. As Suvendrini Perera notes, the poem “evokes an all too familiar scene of recent years: people in rickety, overcrowded boats from Haiti to Burma, held at bay by invisible lines in the sea” (8). The character may not be a Jew but the experience of exile, the wretchedness, rejection, suspicion and depression may take different forms but will be similar.

Auden’s “Refugee Blues” is a lyrical poem – “a subjective and reflective type of discourse in which a speaker presents or describes an emotion, or discusses a philosophical problem” (Manfred Jahn, Par. 3.2). From Jahn’s definition, it is plausible to consider the narrative in “Refugee Blues” as the description of a deep emotional subject – the different levels of distance and the degree of depression it causes to the exilic characters in the poem. As Theodore Adorno observes “the meaning of a poem is not merely the expression of individual experiences and stirring of emotions” (“Two Essays”, 25). On the philosophical side, the poem raises serious questions about the problematic of exilic existence in the 1930s and 40s. The questions which the poem raises are also conspicuously relevant in contemporary society because of the increasing fluidity of national boundaries and the increasing contact of cultures. Commenting on the content of the lyric poem, Adorno notes that it is “essentially social in nature” (26). However, “the social interpretation of lyric poetry … cannot lead directly to the so-called ‘social viewpoint’ or social interest of the work or held by its author” (26). The fundamental interpretation of lyrics in the light of social reality should be intended to “discover how the entirety of a society, as a unity containing contradictions, appears in the work” ( ). It is through
such a view that a work remains true to its society and at the same
time transcends the society. The examination of Auden’s lyrical
poem “Refugee Blues” in the light of the reality of the exilic
condition of Jewish experience in the 30s and 40s, and as an
expression of ongoing realities in contemporary diasporic
experience situates this paper within the context of Adorno’s
dialectics of the relationship between a lyric and society.

The lyricism of the poem is suggested in the very title
“Refugee Blues”, which underscores the centrality of distance,
exile and melancholy. This is because, on the one hand, the blues
is based on high emotions and on the other hand the blues is
thematically usually framed around suffering or celebration
(James Held, 139). Held’s short paper “Ironic Harmony: Blues
Convention and Auden’s “Refugee Blues”” discusses the blues
convention as exemplified in this poem in interesting ways. As
Held observes, the poem is a result of Auden’s own exile condition
after he took a home in New York in 1939 and came into contact
with many Jewish refugees who were displaced from Europe
because of the upheavals (139). The tarerot stanzas and the AAB
rhyme pattern combine with the last-line refrain “my dear” to
create both the emotional intensity and the aesthetic conventions
of the blues. The poetic voice is that of a Jewish refugee, who
testifies to the ugliness of his life as an exile. The twelve stanzas
each underline a different aspect of the life of a refugee with equal
emotional intensity. Summarily the movement of thought through
the poem is thus: the Jews are homeless exiles; they have no
identity because they do not have passport or the passports have
expired; the host country cannot give them a job because of the
fear that they will steal the Americans possibility of work. All that
the refugee remembers is the voice of a dictator Hitler promising
death to them. Auden conveys the emotionality of this message via
strongly imagistic patterns like the old yew which suggests
rejuvenation and hope but also suggests the impossibility of
attainment. The fish and birds suggest freedom and ease which are also not attainable. The image of “thunder rumbling” calls to mind the upheaval in Europe and the Nazi prosecution that forced the Jews to move to the New York metropolis.

A major technique that Auden employs in this poem is that of distance. One level of distance that is perceived in the poem is psychological distance which Trope and Liberman define as “the perception of when an event occurs, where it occurs, to whom it occurs, and whether it occurs” (442). Psychological distance uses the self as a reference point “in the here and now” and measures the “different ways in which an object might be removed from that point - in time, in space, in social distance, and in hypotheticality” (Trope and Liberman, 442). Distance is used to capture the plight of individuals who live on the frontiers of citizenship because they are defined not by their humanity but by their histories. They exist in the in-between space of desperation from where they function as objects of representational discourses because of their cultural and political identities.

The refugee persona establishes a time distance between the reality of having a home in the past and the inability of having one in the present. He says “Once we had a country and we thought it fair, / Look in the atlas and you'll find it there: / We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now” (Auden 64). This psychological time distance is marked both by the positioning and use of the time indicator in the stanza – “Once”. The phrase is given a position of priority at the beginning of the verse, as the word order in this line interchanges the position of the subject pronoun “we” and the adverb “Once”. This places emphasis on the time aspect of the verse instead of the subject “we”. Also, the adverbial function of “Once” makes it to be indicative of “some indefinite time in the past” and “degree of relationship” (Miriam Webster’s Dictionary). The refugee speaker cannot establish a fix time during which they owned a home and were present there. He
knows that his home country is a reality because it is found on the map. The irony however is that they “cannot go there now”. The last line of the stanza uses another adverb of time to convey the distance between the past and the present. The past expressed in the phrase “once” – the first word of the stanza - and the phrase “now” – the last word of the stanza. By placing the past at the beginning and present at the end, the poet communicates the psychological distance and juxtaposes the speaker’s present condition as an exilic character and his past condition in his country. His past condition is presented as better than his present condition because they consider it to be “fair”. In this instance, “now” serves more as a definition of the condition at the present moment. Now or under the present circumstances, they cannot go back to their country though they think it was good.

Another level of distance that Auden creates in the poem is social distance. Emory S. Bogardus, in “Measurement of Personal-Group Relations” notes that “[i]n social distance studies the center of attention is on the feeling reactions of persons toward other persons and toward groups of people” (306). Social distance according to Nedim Karakayali can therefore be affective, in which case it shows the degree of sympathy the members of a group feel for another group. It can also be normative, and in this case it shows how generally accepted traditions define who belongs and who doesn’t. The last level of social distance is “interactive” because it shows that the degree of interaction between groups reveal the level of acceptance. One perceptible form of social distance in the poem is normative social distance which refers to the conscious and widely accepted norms about who should be considered as an "insider" and who is an "outsider". Normative social distance is conceived as a non-subjective, structural aspect of social relations. In other words, it defines and specifies the distinctions between "we" and "they". Such distinctions are evoked in the stanza which says: “…they offered
me a chair; Asked me politely to return next year: / But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?” (Auden 64). The committee which asks the refugee to come back next year for another visa renewal application consideration is part of the accepted and openly expressed norms intended to keep foreigners out of mainstream social life. Oscar Labang observes that:

The committee is suggestive of a refugee committee that has the responsibility to cater for the wellbeing of these disposed and detached human beings. Contrary to providing solutions to the problems of the refugees, the committee simply postpones the problems by asking them to come next year even when they do not have the hope of surviving “to-day”. (171)

Although the committee is conscious that the exiles have no other alternative as expressed in “where shall we go to-day”, it is also conscious of the social norms that require that exiles should be permanently excluded. The politeness of the committee chair is a calculated move meant to give refugees a false sense of social justice. The false politeness of the Committee can be juxtaposed with the arrogance or openness of the speaker at the public meeting in the stanza in which the persona narrates yet another bitter experience:

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me. (Auden 64)

The normative aspect social distance comes out clearly in terms of the classification of the people. Normative referents include: “them”, and “they” used by the speaker at the meeting to refer to the refugees and “he” used by the exilic character to refer to the speaker. Through such references, the speaker names, positions
and distinguishes the refugees from himself and the people he is addressing. The third person plural pronoun “they” is used to classify the exiles as a group and positions them outside the normal frame of society. The intension of the speaker at the meeting is to destroy any sense of interactive social distance - that is the frequency and intensity of interactions between the two groups. The speaker knows that the more exiles interact with members of his group, the closer they would become socially. This is why he names and positions the exiles in negative terminology, a means of showing how different they are from the rest of the society. As Beth Ellen Roberts notes, Auden is very much concerned with portraying Jews as a prosecuted group: “Throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s, Auden's poetry and prose demonstrate a one-dimensional understanding of Jews as victims of persecution, as an oppressed race”. The idea raised in this stanza is similar to the argument that some American perpetrate against immigrants in American society today in the face of declining economic conditions. Some individuals argue that the increasing loss of jobs by Americans can be accounted for by the fact that Latinos and other immigrants are taking up the jobs. The “daily bread” which the speaker in the poem talks about is a metaphor for the jobs and other social benefits which will be given to exiles if they are accepted as part of the society.

The consequence of social distancing, that is naming and position is fear and frustration. When the persona says “he was talking of you and me” (Auden 64), he acknowledges their second-class position in the society and underscores the profound state of depression in which they exist. Thus, distancing the exiles from the mainstream society, either indirectly like the Committee that rejects their residence applications or directly as the speaker in the public meeting, permanently creates a dismal social context for them. The depressing social conditions of the exiles are seemingly
not enough punishment that is why the next collective reference to them shifts from negative treatment to death. The persona says:  

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, “They must die”:  
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind. (Auden 64)

The condition of the exiles grows worse because public authorities or leaders have taken up the rhetoric of the common people. There is a shift from the speaker’s comment that “they will steal our daily bread” (Auden 64) to that of the ruler, Hitler, that “They must die” (Auden 64). Labang is of the opinion that “[i]n the detached and precarious existence of the Jewish refugees, fear and tension dominate as they hear Hitler’s voice thundering over Europe promising death to them” (Labang 172). This declaration and the fact that the exiles are conscious that it refers to them creates an even more melancholic feeling. From the consciousness of rejection and naming to the consciousness of death, Auden shows that the existential conundrum of exilic people keeps getting worse.

To underline their misery and gloom, the poet creates physical or geographical distance which gives the persona a clearer sense of his situation as an exile. Thus, another form of distance that exacerbates the melancholia of the exiles is physical or geographical distance and this is evident in locational periphery. The persona’s focus shifts from his relationship or lack of it with the people in the city to his interaction with other creatures in the distant location. Locational periphery is used to describe places which are physically distant from the heart of the city. Unable to find affection in the people of the city and unable to get into any meaningful interaction with them because he is constantly being suspected, the person decides to wonder away from the cityscape to other locations on the margin of the city. His fate is examined in relation to lower creatures like fish and birds. He compares their
condition as exiles to that of other lower creatures and notes that these creatures live a more noble and blissful life than they do. The persona comes to this realization by distancing himself from the commercial metropolitan world either by walking to nature or by visiting the harbor: “Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay./Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:/Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away” (Auden 64). “They” in this instance no longer refers to the persona and other refugees; it refers to the fish. The fish seemingly enjoys a degree of freedom which the persona does not. The distance between the free swimming fish and the depressed wondering exile is so short that the persona cannot fully comprehend why lesser creatures like fish can be free while the more rational and superior creature as him isn’t free. The word “only” modifies the phrase “ten feet” by shortening the physical distance thereby giving the persona and the fish closer proximity. By so doing, he intensifies the persona’s feeling of entrapment as well as his feeling that the free is free.

Similar freedom is enjoyed by the birds in the wood that he walks through. There is a change of peripheral location and the persona encounters yet another situation that awakens him to the profoundness of misery in exile. This time, the persona is not only conscious of the freedom of the birds which “sang at their ease” (Auden 64) in the trees but he is even more conscious of the fact that human beings are responsible for the flight of other human beings. The ‘race’ of the fish and the ‘race’ of the birds are different from “the human race” because the other races do not have politicians: “saw the birds in the trees/ They had no politicians” (Auden 64). In the opinion of the poet-persona, therefore, political leadership is at the centre of human misery especially that of exiles. The harbor and the forest which the persona decides to visit are the locational peripheries. The poet does not give geographical details to prove it but it is understandable that a harbor cannot be located in the heart of a
city. Also, the wood is suggestive of a location that is far moved from the developed industrial centers. Words like “went” and “walked” are action verbs that suggest movement from one location to another, and points to the persona’s attempt to distance himself from those who traumatize him with derogatory remarks. This act of moving away from the horror of city life to nature evokes more of a romantic philosophy as that which is expressed in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge where we find individuals that breakaway from the hassle-and-bustle of city life in the hope of finding peace and comfort in the countryside. Part of the reason for which Romantic poets adopt this tendency is because of the inhumanity of people in capitalist metropolis and political leadership as the persona in the poem suggests.

While the poem makes explicit reference to the situation of immigrant Jews, the experience for exiles remains the same over time. The fate of immigrants was at the centre of the debate on immigration reform in the 2012 US Presidential race between Mit Romnay and incumbent President Barack Obama. While Obama had a less stringent and more humane position in the handling of undocumented exiles, Romney apparently wanted a more exclusive and maltreatment approach suggested in his philosophy of “self-deportation”. In the second presidential debate, Romney noted that

Self-deportation says let people make their own choices… if they find that -- that they can get the benefits here that they want and they can’t -- they can’t find the job that they want they will make a decision to go place where they have better opportunity4.

His intension was clarified by Obama amidst the heated argument: “His (Romney) main strategy during the Republican primary was

4 The complete version of the debate is available at http://abcnews.go.com under the title “Presidential Debate Full Transcript”
to say we are going to encourage self-deportation, making life so miserable on folks that they would leave”\(^5\). The philosophy of Romney is that of social distancing, to which the persona in Auden’s poem has been subjected. The poet therefore is right to think that the miserable condition of the exiles is the work of political leadership. Man’s bestiality to fellow man is at the core of human suffering around the world both in the pre-Second World War society of the poem and the nuclear world of today.

The centre versus periphery binarism is an excellent way of understanding the idea of distance. In this poem, the persona and the other exiles represent the periphery or margin while the speaker at the public meeting or the members of the Committee represents the centre. This centrality of this concept is found in postcolonial criticism but diasporic experiences can be useful to the understanding of this concept because peoples of different culture backgrounds come into contact and try in different ways to include or exclude others from the opposing culture. The exclusion of other peoples is a form of distancing and this can either be done by the dominant culture (centre) or the inferior culture (periphery). Alfonso de Toro observes that:

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\text{the periphery is understood as the periphery itself, just as the centre defines itself. The periphery is not always produced as a result of the centre, but, as a result of its deliberate imposition of the periphery, the opposite occurs for the centre. The periphery naturally detaches itself from the attitude of the centre, and the centre from the attitude of the periphery. (11)}
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Although Toro’s argument is cogent in some cases, it is worth noting that the tendency to exclude or denigrate is associated more with the power ‘source’. This is the reason for which those who

\(^5\) Ibid.
hold power define and determine the existence and existential condition of those without power. Thus, the creation of the periphery is not entirely a “deliberate imposition of the periphery”; rather it is the definition of those who do not belong – those who do not have power. Toro rightly notes this when he says the centre is the “producer of the ruling discourse” because “whoever has power imposes the discourse” (11). The lack of such power and consequently the inability to determine their existence makes the Jewish exiles in the poem subject to the dictates of the committee. Even if the Jews were to acquire some power and influence, as diasporic characters, they would still always be considered the periphery. As Kevin Hickey points out in the Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies “the colonized subject who travels to the colonizing centre for education or work no matter how much metropolitan culture he or she may acquire and internalize, will remain in terms of power and political status on the periphery” (86). In their present condition, the exiles in the poem are not only peripheral characters; they are the periphery in and of the periphery. While the population of the city can clearly be categorized into the centre (rich) and periphery (poor), the Jewish exiles do not fit into these categories. The opening lines of “Refugee Blues” establishes this distinction clearly:

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us. (Auden 64)

The distinction of centre and periphery find expression in this stanza in terms of those who live in “mansions” and those who live in “holes”. The people live in the same city but the wealthy live in more luxurious houses described in the affluent term “mansion” while the poor live in more miserable houses described in the denigration term “holes”. In this binarism, the Jewish exiles are a third undefined term because they belong neither to the mansions
nor to the holes, and this is the source of deepening despair. Thus, “Yet” in the poem is an expression of regret and frustration that they (Jews) cannot find a place even with the have-nots of the society in which they find themselves. This lack of home or of a place is reechoed towards the end of the poem in the immigrants dream: “Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors, / A thousand windows and a thousand doors: /Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours” (Auden 64). The dream is a projection of the innate psychological turmoil of the persona.

The expressive form of the poem, that is the “syntactic and rhythmical formal features” (Jahn) all work towards revealing the idea of distance and melancholy. Repetition serves as a cohesive strategy that keeps the poems structure intact and makes the plight of the exiles almost always in the mind of the reader. The theme of melancholy maintains strong centrality throughout the poem as the persona continually repeats the last line of each stanza. In the twelve last lines repeated only one is positive in the conveyance of the predicament of the exiles – “But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive” (Auden 64). The affirmation of their aliveness in the fourth of twelve stanzas signals the continuous struggle that the persona will encounter. Repetitions such as “Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us” (Auden 64); “We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now” (Auden 64); “But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day? (Auden 64)”, and “Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours” are important in the understanding of the idea of distance and the melancholic lives of the exiles. These lines suggests what Hong Zeng describes as a ‘longing for a lost centre” characterized by a profound sense of disjointedness (The Semiotics of Exile, 2). The absence of a place for them and the fact that they cannot go back to the place that once belonged to them show that they have been distanced from both their original home and the city where they now live. This distancing brings to mind
the idea of living in camps - they belong to the extermination camps that were erected in Germany as part of the Nazi philosophy under Hitler. As Boris Bergen notes “Central to Hitler's view of the world were the twin goals of expanding Germany’s territory and purifying the so-called Aryan race” and the Jews became the main target in the campaign. The idea of place and distance is also evoked in the repeated lines “But where shall we go to-day” (Auden 64) and “Not one of them was ours” (Auden 64). They cannot affiliate to any part of society because they have no place to go; they do not own any houses and cannot integrate in the society because they are regarded as impure and are socially or politically undesirable.

The notion of time passage or the changing seasons is also instrumental in determining the dilemma of the exiles. The mention of time markers such as “spring”, “dead”, “alive”, “next year” and “to-day” serve as pointers to how time affects the existential dilemmas of the persona. The blossoming of an “old yew” in the churchyard is associated to the persona’s passport, which unfortunately cannot blossom too. The persona observes that the rejuvenation of this plant is a cyclical phenomenon that he notices “every spring”. His only regret is that passports, which are supposed to guarantee their own liveliness, cannot rejuvenate. This is partly because the members of the committee keep refusing to renew his passport. It is thus depressing to see change going on around him while his fate does not change. The rejuvenation of the old yew creates the impression in his mind that there are possibilities of a new life at the beginning of each year (spring) but this possibility is shattered through social distancing - the committee tells him to come the next year. Interestingly but intriguingly, his life is tied to this passport “If you’ve got no passport you’re officially dead” (Auden 64). Life and death are the polarities on which the cyclical pattern of existence circulates. People can belong to only one of these polar ends but because of
his status as an exile, the persona is caught between both extremes in a kind of life-in-death, and death-in-life situation. In the records of the city, he is dead because he does not have an updated or renewed passport, but the persona knows that they are still alive. In this life-in-death and death-in-life context, the exiles cannot think beyond their immediate situation; they are concerned with the “to-day” of life because the thought of a tomorrow is unimaginable especially as the voice of Hitler can be heard “rumbling in the sky/… saying, “They must die”” (Auden 64). These time markers therefore do not only determine the existential choices of the exiles; they also control the various distances in their lives.

As mentioned earlier, “Refugee Blues” is one of the poem in which Auden is concerned with the ethical conditions of people in society. His earlier anxieties as a poet had shifted from the political tone to more mellow ethical and religious preoccupations. In these later poems Auden affirms in more concrete ways his argument that “poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil” (O’Neill, 105). “Refugee Blues” is therefore an expression of Auden’s concern for the plight of Jewish exiles and the deplorable conditions in which they were subjected in Europe and North America. Many scholars have established the fact that “… Auden never doubted his love for the Jewish people”, and that “during and after World War II he devoted a significant amount of time and prose to attempting to puzzle out the causes of anti-Semitism” (Roberts). Evidently, “Refugee Blues” is one of such writings in which he dedicates attention to the plight of the Jews. Poetry to him as he rightly says is “a magical means for inducing desirable emotions and repelling undesirable emotions in oneself and others” (Complete Works, 345).

In this poem, Auden magically and artistically evokes an emotion that is desirable to him – the desire to project the dilemma
of Jews and bring the realities of their world as exiles to exposure. Besides projecting his desired emotion, Auden also uses this poem as “a game of knowledge” through which he brings the anti-Semitism of Europe and American in the late 1930s to consciousness (Complete Works, 345). Auden captures the various dimensions from which an exile experiences or encounters exile. He shows through the experience and narrative of the persona that exile is,

a signifier not only of living outside one’s place of origin but also of the inner condition caused by such a physical absence. At the same time, exile may also connote the exclusively spiritual, intellectual or even existential condition of someone who is alienated from the surrounding community. (Gohar, 229)

Through the poem, Auden signifies contemporary reality by capturing the physical exile of the Jewish persona in terms of his movement from Europe to America; the spiritual exile in terms of the loss of intimate connection with home; and the existential exile in terms of the acute feeling of alienation, rejection and aloneness that the persona encounters in his new society.

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