May 31, 2014

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The Poetics of Existential Nihilism: Philosophical Inquiries into the Devaluation of Existence in the Poetry of W.H. Auden

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Auden’s poetry communicates the angst and negation of life through the projection of individuals whose existence is typified by agonizing ugliness and the banality of living in devastating doubt, pain, drug, disease and death. His poetry signifies the spirit of the age as it conveys, in interesting and intriguing ways, the inanities of a civilization in a context where “Hunger allows no choice / To the citizen or the police” and “Faces along the bar / Cling to their average day:” with “Children afraid of the night” and people “Who have never been happy or good” (“September 1, 1939”). Auden’s existential negation and devaluation of the worth of life is characteristic of his early poetry, written at a time when he thought that revolution could be a solution to the multiple problems facing Europe. As he grew older, his poetry moved away not just from the philosophy of revolution but also from the dominant negative views of existence to a more sombre and confessional tone which preached prayer and universal love. Existential nihilism can therefore be accounted for in Auden’s poetry in terms of the fear, insecurity, and doubt as well as the excruciating pain, helpless suffering and miserable death that his personas experience. Peter McLaren notes that “We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering dispossession and contempt for human dignity and
the sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain ubiquitous features of our time” (Critical pedagogy, 1). The general feeling of negation towards life or the perceived meaningless existence therefore results from the inability of humanity during this period to come to terms with the realities in their atmosphere.

Many of Auden’s early poems show that every attempt to form an imaginative structure out of his thoughts and experiences of the age leads him inexorably to the topic or the question of human suffering – that instinctive horror of contemplating the quandary of existence in the 1930s. The recognition of this consistent pattern and focus contradicts Anthony Thwaite’s postulations in Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984 that Auden’s poetry does not have a clear focus and does not tackle the practical and realistic problems of the society, which according to Thwaite is what modern critics like to find in a work. This paper argues, through the analyses of poems which reveal Auden’s concern for the plight and trauma of people in society, that Auden’s poetry signifies contemporary reality in transfixing and intriguing ways. His poetry is sociable and unrestricted, and seems to be inextricably guided by a daring necessity to address common realities. This argument is much in line with that of Wendell Stacy Johnson who sees in Auden’s poetry a consistent devotion to “public purpose”. Johnson reveals his admiration for the poet’s greatness with unperturbed assurance and notes that “the integrity of his [Auden’s] written works derives from its being at once the expression of a consistently recognizable mind but also to its being devoted consistently to public purpose” (W. H. Auden). Each poem inhabits its own freshly and beautifully created universe and conveys a variety of unique experience and stylistic patterns. As Monroe Spear in W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island posits, “Auden's poetry can offer the reader entertainment, instruction, intellectual excitement, and a prodigal variety of aesthetic pleasures, all in a generous abundance that is unique
in our time” (v). Within the context of this paper, these varying “aesthetic pleasures” and “intellectual excitement” has connections to a social, cultural, religious and political function that relates to how the poet perceives and defines the encounter between the individuals and the larger societal structures.

The ideal vision of life motivated and stirred by the Industrial Revolution was destroyed by the socio-political upheaval of World War I (with its alarming death) and the economic depression which left people wondering about the possibilities of attaining this vision. G. H. Bantock quotes D. H. Lawrence’s comment that: “It was in 1915 that the old world ended. In the winter of 1915-16 the spirit of the old London collapsed; ...perished from being the heart of the world, and became a vortex of broken passions, lost hopes, fears and horrors” (“The Social”, 22). Civilisation was thus bound to embrace changes in many facets of life. Humanity therefore found itself caught up in a network of philosophical postulations that that resulted in a universe in which “the new anchorages have proved illusory and the old ones have become submerged. It is a situation which brings us back to nihilism; lacking a past or a future, there is only a void” (Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions*, 28-9).

Although the concept of nihilism has resisted every attempt to be systematized and defined in clear and concise terms, it generally holds that the world, especially in relation to human existence, is without objective meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth, or essential value. In the modern era, thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger promoted nihilism. Much of their contribution led to what is referred to as existential or social nihilism which is manifested in terms of the sense of isolation, futility, angst and the hopelessness of existence. Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* says a nihilist is “...a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist” (Nietzsche, 12). The judgment of the world as it ought not to
be is further reflected in Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* where he perceives the absurd as the contrast between human expectations and the reality that they face. The absurd is an incongruity that cannot be resolved, and any attempt to reconcile this contradiction is a move towards escapism. This is a signal to the world of horror, anarchy and confusion in which humanity lives instead of a peaceful and harmonious world controlled by a God who created it. Existential nihilism is a consequence of frustration, despair and anguish with the state of human life. Existential nihilism creates the vision of modern man dehumanized and estranged by the enigmatic realities of life in an industrial society in which social and political structures continually baffle him thereby resulting in narcissistic resentment and the thought that suicide is the best course of action. This nihilistic debilitation is frequently connected with dispositions of despair, random destructiveness, and longing for nothingness. Labang observes that a nihilistic world is

... a universe in which there is neither up nor down, right nor wrong, true nor false because there is no longer any point of reference. It is a universe in which the centre cannot hold any longer because there are no sustaining beliefs. (“Nihilism”, 179)

David Storey summarizes the chaos in such a nihilistic universe to be “about a crisis in human freedom and willing after the collapse of the cosmos, the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature in which humans have a proper place” (“Nihilism, Nature”, 7). This anarchic and horrific presentation of existence is succinctly conveyed in the poetry of Auden. While nihilistic and existential concepts are relevant to the understanding of social nihilism in Auden’s poetry, Structuralist theories are equally important.

Although Structuralism is not “a cohesive theory” (Harle, 9) because of the desire by its founding theorists and apologists to invent the language, definitions and
terminology that suit their perspective (Stephen, 359), it is possible to clearly distinguish the standpoint from which the theory will be applied. Structuralism considers a text as a system which is constituted of linguistic conventions which can be situated among other texts. Informed largely by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, language, to the Structuralist, is a system of signs and signification which are understandable only in relation to each other and to the larger system. This is why Eagleton says Structuralism is the attempt to see and analyze everything in terms of linguistics (97). In this light, Scholes says “Every literary unit from the individual sentence to the whole order of words can be seen in relations to the concept of system” (Structuralism, 10). Structuralist analyses examine underlying structures, and shows how the patterns in the text can be used to develop links with other texts or the system from which the text emerged as well as make conclusions about the individual text. The Structuralist’s duty according to Dolores Palomo is to study the “orderly transformational operations by which the system continues to function as a coherent process” (“Scholes, Barthes”, 194). From the perspective of systems and links, the poetic texts analyzed in this paper are what Robert Scholes calls “a system within the larger system of human culture” (Structuralism in Literature, 10) and so the link with Descartes philosophical perceptions, Camus’s existential concepts and other nihilist ideologies can easily be analyzed through structuralism. The poetic texts and the philosophical concepts form a larger culture of language and discourse about dilemma of human existence. The understanding of the links in and between these texts will also be done through Propp’s syntagmatic structuralism (The Morphology, xi-xii), which is developed from Saussure’s idea. The syntagmatic model hold that “Words and elements of language gain some of their meaning from their position and relationship to other parts of a linear sequence, such as a sentence or narrative” (12). From this perspective, therefore, the analyses will examine Auden’s word order and choice to
see how they reveal layers of meaning that relate to the existential conundrum that the personas in the poem experience. Implications of the repetition of words, the rhyme pattern, and the associations between different words will also be examined.

A signal of the senselessness of existence manifested through profound feeling of insecurity is captured in “September 1, 1939”. The voice that opens the poem gives the impression of a reporter accounting for the wide spread fear and uncertainty that make life not worth living. The speaker says he is “Uncertain and afraid” because people have given up hope and “Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth, / Obsessing our private lives” (English Auden, 67). In the privacy of their homes, the lives of people are characterized by intense fear and uncertainty because of the hope on pacifism and appeasement was beginning to wane. People cannot lead a meaningful existence because their lives have been possessed by fear. Even the season “September night” is said to be offended by the “odour of death”. This image is suggestive of the looming catastrophe that is about to befall humanity as will be manifested in the Second World War. This image is sustained and made more meaningful by the images of night and darkness. The personification of “September night” creates an ominous feeling and a sense of impending doom. The image of the night in itself evokes an uncanny feeling of fear and insecurity so when it is associated with death and offensiveness, Auden succeeds to convey the intensity of fear, doubt and insecurity in the lives and the atmosphere in which the personas exist.

Besides the element of fear and doubt, Auden makes reference to the hypocritical speeches of politicians and dictators and ends up saying that humanity must suffer especially from mismanagement and grief orchestrated by such hypocritical behaviour. The dictatorial habit of politicians and the lies-telling in modern leadership are partly responsible for the political disorder that brings about the
suffering of humanity. Auden comes across as one of the best representative of the political turmoil as Geoffrey Thurley notes in *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century*. Thurley portrays Auden as the only poet who gives a clear sample picture of his period. He says “it seems to me fair to observe that none of Auden’s contemporaries, either European or American succeeded in evoking the nature of civic disorder and political barbarism as well as he did” (62). The poet is concerned with people taking the responsibility for the bad state of affairs. Apart from hypocritical leadership, Auden discloses that selfishness is another driving evil that has brought society and humanity to its present state. The error that has been groomed in the soul of every human being is the selfish desire to be “loved alone” (*English Auden*, 68). This, in the opinion of the poet, is a desire that cannot be achieved “Craves what they cannot have” (*English Auden*, 68) especially at a time like the 30s. Nobody bothers about the idea of universal love which could yield happiness to all people. Auden does not refer only to jealousy or selfishness in love between men and women but to the general human tendency to be selfish. It is this attitude that has caused defenceless people “under the night” to be beleaguered by “negation and despair” (*English Auden*, 68).

Another poem in which Auden captures the atmosphere of fear, and insecurity in twentieth century existence is “O What is that Sound”. The poem conveys the agonizing and anxious state of mind of two lovers as they express fear of approaching militia. Christopher Pollnitz notes that in this poem, Auden transforms the pastoral context to a modern scene of betrayal where “the girl a victim of menace and violence” and the poems becomes “a parable of terror in the modern totalitarian state” (“Auden's Styles”, 79). The thoughts are presented by two voices which talk about soldiers coming for dissidents. The first two lines of each stanza are questions and the last two appear to be responses to the question. Thus, the first voice is overwhelmed by fear and inquires about the drumming in the
valley. The second voice says it’s the sound of approaching soldiers with weaponry which produces light as the sun flashes on them: “Only their usual manoeuvres, dear./ Or perhaps a warning.” (Auden, 55).

The fear in the dissident increases as the poem builds up in ominous eccentricity. The first voice wonders: “O why have they left the road down there, / Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?” (Auden, 55). As they watch through the window from inside their residence, the first voice suddenly realizes that there has been a change in the pattern of movement of the soldiers. The soldier’s change of direction increases the fear in the speaker as he wonders why they are “wheeling”. The nursery-rhyme and the childlike questioning which is however juxtaposed with the calm, reassuring responses of the second voice create increasing tension and fear as the poem develops. There is the conscious repetition of phrases and this has a strong effect in terms of the musicality and also in its conveyance of the sense of fear as the soldiers get closer. Beside the repetition of “this morning, this morning” which makes for music, there is also the “drumming, drumming” which suggests continuity, and “wheeling, wheeling” which suggest the approaching soldiers. The repetition of ‘is it? is it?’ sounds more insistent, while “deceiving, deceiving” is more plaintive. The repetition generally conveys the anxiety, fear and insecurity that surround the personas. The first voice expresses increasing eagerness to know where the matching soldiers are heading. After asking whether they have not stopped at the doctor’s house, he asks if they are at the parson but he is told that they have already passed his gate. When he inquires whether they have not stopped at the cunning farmer’s gate, he is told that the soldiers have passed the gate and “now they are running”. This increases the fear in the first voice and he has to leave the house.

The suffering of humanity is also conveyed in “Musée des Beaux Arts”. The first three lines are very categorical about the idea of human suffering: “About suffering they
were never wrong / The Old Masters; how well, they understood / Its’ human position, how it takes place” (Auden, 49). The syntax and the words that are used in the poem are tools necessary for understanding the idea of suffering. The word “suffering” at the beginning of the poem is a position of priority and emphasis on the subject of suffering which cuts across. Also, emphasis is placed on the “Old Masters” because of their mastery of the concept of suffering. The masters appear in the first line of the poem through an anaphoric reference “they” and this easily establishes a rapport about the masters and their understanding of the notion of suffering. The visual effects of capital letters and the semi colon reinforce this “respect” for the Old Masters.

There is the use of the word ‘it’, and through this word suffering is made to become commonplace: “how well they understand ‘its’ human position / ... how ‘it’ takes place...”. The cataphoric reference “they” point to the fact that even though suffering is commonplace, the old masters know the different ways through which suffering find expression or is manifested among human beings. This idea of “commonplace” suffering is immediately reinforced by the lines which say “while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along”. Actions here are kept on the same plane by the coordinating conjunction “or”. In this way, emphasis on any one action is literally impossible. When the poet says “They never forget / That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner", he makes the reader to understand that while martyrdom is taking place in a corner, others are more concerned with trade. Auden is not only preparing the reader for Icarus’ suffering which takes place in a corner, but is also separating the reader for this martyrdom which must remain in isolation. Indeed, it is the tragedy of human suffering in isolation that makes explicit the even greater tragedy of hypocrisy and lack of communication and fellowship in 20\textsuperscript{th} century civilization.
Auden’s obsession with the suffering that human beings endure till death because of the absence of love and companionship also finds expression in “Miss Gee”. Auden expresses the pain and suffering through disease or sickness. In this long quatrain poem, Auden illustrates the damaging effects of suffering resulting from illness and the carelessness of modern man. It begins in a rather narrative way with the poet opting to tell us about this ladies experience: “Let me tell you a little story / About Miss Edith Gee; / She lived in Clevedon Terrace / At number 83” (Auden, 158 – 9). The poet-narrator seems to know every detail as he describes the woman who has been struggling with a disease and her religious obligations. Auden evokes sympathy for this lady by giving the reader a complete view of the simplistic life and ending with a rather existential nihilistic questions which comes from the lady herself: “‘Does anyone care / that I live on Clevedon Terrace / on one hundred pounds a year?’” (Auden 159). The statement is a declaration of the worthlessness of her life which results from the fact that humanity does not care. Her posture “looking up at the starlight” suggests that her question is not only directed to the reader who has been listening/reading details about her. It is also addressed to the being that is believed to inhabit or live above the starlight that she gazes – God. From this perspective, the poem becomes an expression of the modernist existential argument that God has abandoned man in the face of increasing suffering, and resonates with other such poems as Hardy’s “Hap” and “God’s Funeral”. One develops a feeling of pity for the woman as she walks alone through the streets while fighting her illness until it finally kill her.

The consequence of indifference to the plight of fellow human beings comes out clearly in the case of Miss Gee. The poem is an example of what Victoria Arena in *WH Auden’s Poetry: Mythos, Theory and Practice* describes as the “abysmally unethical detachment from the suffering of others” (273) as the indifference of people (including the
Doctor) to her life and disease results in her death. She has been dying gradually of a “hidden assassin” and because nobody cares, she doesn’t tell anyone until the disease reaches a critical point: “‘O, doctor, I've a pain inside me, /And I don't feel very well.’” (Auden 160). Her cry of pain to Doctor Thomas is late. She has carried this deadly disease for too long and is only complaining now that the pain has grown to unbearable extremes. Doctor Thomas’s comment reveals both his hypocritical pity for Miss Gee and the fact that her disease has reached an irremediable point “‘Why didn’t you come before?’” (Auden, 160). Doctor Thomas’ question is a clear example of the hypocrisy of modern human beings. The question that comes to the reader’s mind is: given the general neglect that Miss Gee receives from society, even from the church where she knits for the bazaar, if she had come earlier would Doctor Thomas or anyone have showed concern?

Knowledge of Miss Gee’s condition has an effect on the Doctor as seen in his wife’s remark: “His wife she rang for the servant, / Said, ‘Don’t be so morbid, dear’; / He said: ‘I saw Miss Gee this evening / And she's a goner, I fear.’” (Auden, 160-1). The Doctor’s conversation with his wife shows that they both know Miss Gee pretty well. They could even be one of the loving couples “dear” that were indifferent to her existence and presence in the church. In this case, the effect of her illness on the Doctor would be from a feeling of guilt that he could have done something for this poor lady. But to assuage the guilt, he shifts the blame to Miss Gee by saying she should have come earlier.

Davey Smith considers the poem to be part of Auden’s fascination “with psychology, and particularly with psychosomatic disease” which were evident in his own family (1137). Smith’s opinion concurs with Auden’s idea in his 1964 essay. Auden writes “On the whole the members of my father’s family were phlegmatic, earnest, rather slow, inclined to be miserly, and endowed with excellent health, my mother’s were quick, short-tempered, generous, and liable to physical ill health, hysteria and neuroticism” (Forewords and
Smith’s commentary therefore suggests that the poem has some biographical undertones as not only Auden’s father was a medical professional but his family members suffered psychosomatic experiences. This is confirmed by Auden’s clinical explanation of the cause of the disease that kills Miss Gee, thought he says: “‘Nobody knows what the cause is,’” (Auden, 160-1). Auden comes out quite clearly on the hypocritical attitude of some medical practitioners. While he maintains that no one knows the cause of cancer, he points out almost sarcastically that some people claim that they know. The Doctor’s gloomy outlook as he speaks to his wife about Miss Gee’s fragile health could be part of the hypocritical behaviour of medical practitioners, which takes the form of mockery in the behaviour of the medical student.

Miss Gee suffers from cancer and ends up dying as a result of this illness. Her body is taken to the hospital to be used for further experiments. The cancer growth reduces Miss Gee to a “wreck” and while she lays died in the hospital the medical students seem to mock her even in her death “The students began to laugh” (Auden, 161). The surgeon, Dr Rose, acknowledges that the “sarcoma” had grown into a state that has never been seen before. Miss Gee is taken to the anatomy laboratory to be used as specimen by a group of Oxford scholars. In this poem, Auden makes a statement about the human condition. Beyond being the narrative of a little old woman who died from cancer, Auden uses the poem to show how human suffering is caused by disease and much too by the absence of care from those in the society.

The inanities and banalities of life lived entirely on bizarre platforms also constitute the subject of poetic discourse for Auden because he was alarmed by the state in which humanity in his age had degenerated. A profound negation of life through the expression of its worthlessness is communicated in “Cocaine Lil and Morphine Sue” (Auden, 20) which captures the existential conundrum of Lil’s life of drug. In this poem, Auden shows through the experiences of
Lil and Sue that the struggle to give meaning to life by seeking comfort in drugs leads rather to a more tragic life and death. The title of the poem gives a hint to the understanding of the kind of individuals that inhabit the world of the poem. They are described using the different types of drug they abuse; while Lil lives on cocaine, Sue takes morphine. Auden deliberately plays with the idea of cocaine making the word overwhelmingly present and associated with everything in Lil’s life. The poet begins be inquiring whether the read has ever heard about Lil and her life of drug. In this way, he draws the attention of the reader into the poem and gives him a chance to experience Lil’s existential condition in full. Everything about Lil is linked to cocaine; the town where she lives is a “cocaine town” and her residence is located on a “cocaine hill”. Lil’s hair, head, dress and make-up are described only in terms of cocaine. Also, her pets form part of the cocaine world in which she lives; she has a “cocaine dog and a cocaine cat” which fight every night with a “cocaine rat”. This involvement of everything around Lil in her cocaine life is conveyed through the regular rhyme scheme. The rhyme follows the aa bb cc dd pattern. For example, in the first stanza “Lil” in line one rhymes with “hill” in line two, while “cat” in line three rhyme with “rat” in line four. This suggests that Lil, the hill, the cat and the rat constitute a unique experience and are part of the life of drugs.

After revealing that everything around Lil is part of the life of cocaine, Auden goes on to narrate Lil’s experience one cold night in a party. It is here that she meets a good number of other friends like Hophead Meg, Dopy Slim and Morphine Sue who are also drug addicts. The party is apparently the place where addicts meet to promote their life of addiction because it is here that Lil engages in even more severe use of drug: “the way she sniffed was sure a fright”. When she returns to her home at “about half past three”, Lil sniffs another dose of cocaine and it kills her. The refrain on her tombstone expresses the worthlessness of her life lived
entirely in drug; “she died as she lived, sniffing cocaine” (Auden, 20). Auden is interested not only in the story of Lil, but in the emptiness that characterised her life as she lives basically on cocaine and dies of it. Auden’s Lil calls to mind Eliot’s own Lil in the Waste Land poem “A Game of Chess” and establishes an intersexual connection between the two poems. Both ladies are involved in drug as a means of soothing the trauma of life, even though for different reasons.

While 20th century humanity is generally at the mercy of different forms of suffering, Auden thinks that war also plays a part in promoting fear and insecurity as well as suffering. In Sonnet XIV in Sonnets from China, Auden reflects the lives of people who suffer and do nothing else. This poem talks about the effects of pain on the sufferer. The pain is more severe because it is accompanied by isolation and the experience of having one’s world reduced to nothing but pain. These are soldiers who have undergone the experience of war and their vision of the world is limited to the “treatment metal instruments are giving”. Suffering is the only thing that these soldiers now know. The poet uses the third person narrative point of view to communicate the experience of the soldiers thereby giving it more validity. The ideas come from someone else reporting what he observes. The neutrality of the third person narrator makes the experience realistic and authentic.

They are and suffer; that is all they do
A bandage hid the place where each is living,
His knowledge of the world restricted to
A treatment metal instruments are giving.
(Auden, 191)

Part of their suffering is caused by the injuries incurred during war. This is implied in the image of “bandage” which is said to “hide the place where each is living”. The shift from the plural pronoun “They” to the singular pronoun “His” indicates a move from all the soldiers to a particular soldier, but also the fact that each of them now live in a separate world where they try to cope with the pain of their
injuries. This is made more evident when the speaker says: “They lie apart like epochs from each other / (Truth in their sense is how much they can bear; / It is not talk like ours but groans they smother), / From us remote as plants: we stand elsewhere” (Auden, 191). They are separated from each other because they have individual suffering to deal with. Suffering and pain narrow the patient’s world and isolate patients who “lie apart like epochs from each other” and for whom “truth” is “how much they can bear” their pain and suffering. Just as their knowledge of the world is limited so too is their knowledge of truth. This stanza gives a clearer vision of the effects of ungenial and distancing treatment by physicians, as well as the impenetrable abyss between the sick (or injured) and the healthy. Truth is calculated only in terms of the pain they are undergoing and how much of the pain they can endure. The pain has intensity that makes it different from ordinary pain that people can have because it comes with “groans” and they are said to be suffocating “smother” from the pain. The poet in a typical sonnet tradition seeks to provide a calm-down to the tension created in the first eight lines by the sense of pain and suffering that the wounded soldiers are going through.

In contrast with the first two stanzas that focus on the suffering "they", the final two stanzas focus on the healthy "we" and in a way emphasizes that gap between the injured and the healthy. The difference between the octave and the sextet, which also helps develop the distance between the painful experience of the characters in the poem and the “we” who read or speak about them can be read in the rhyme pattern. The first two stanzas are rhymed quatrains with an abab pattern. In the first stanza, “do” and “to” in the first and third lines, rhyme, just like “living” and “giving” in the second and fourth lines. In the second stanza, there is “other” / “smother” in the first and third lines and “bear” / “where” in the third and fourth lines. This rhyming quatrain changes in the sextet to unrhymed tercets. This is an example of what Jean-Paul Forster means when he says in these sonnets “the
overall rhyme pattern harmonious, so that the form lends itself to expressing intense feelings” (47). The variance in rhyme pattern shows the distance and difference in the condition of the sick and the health as well as how difficult it is to imagine pain when one does not have it. He creates “antithetical possibilities” (Forster, 47) as the omniscient poet-speaker tries to establish a position between the injured and pain enduring soldiers and himself (and the reader).

The painful experience of the soldiers in Auden’s sonnet is reminiscent of the suffering and horror of war painted by Wilfred Owen in his poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”. Both poets share the same sentiments about the horror, pain and suffering that war inflicts on the soldiers as well as on humanity. Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” is a magnificent, and terrible description of a gas attack suffered by a group of soldiers in World War One. One of the soldiers in this group is unable to put on his helmet, and suffers horribly. Through the shifting rhythms, dramatic description, and rich imagistic pattern, Owen seeks to convince the reader that the horror of war far outweighs the patriotic clichés of those who glamorize war. Owen presents the calm before the storm of the gas attack, then uses alliteration and onomatopoeia together with powerful figurative and literal images to produce a pitiful sense of despair and suffering. These images include: “Bent double like old beggars”, “knock-kneed”, “coughing like hags” and “cursed” through “sludge”. All these are compressed into just the first two lines of the poem. The third line places the speaker of the poem with this trudging group of soldiers. In the line “Men marched asleep”, the four beats imitate the falling rhythm of these exhausted men. The images of “blood-shod”, “blind” and “lame” suggest several levels of destabilization and deterioration, and the oxymoron in “ecstasy of fumbling” describes the uncontrolled panic and the “yelling... stumbling... drowning... guttering... choking”. The image of “white eyes writhing” in this “hanging face” testifies to the overwhelming truth of this experience and emphasizes the
nightmare in which the soldiers, particularly the one caught off guard by the gas attack, are going through. Having experience the suffering of the soldiers in the imagistic world of the poem, it is easy to agree with Owen that the old Latin proverb - dulce et decorum est - is indeed a detestable lie which yields nothing but pain and suffering.

The subject of war and suffering is also evident in Sonnet XVI where the poet suggests that suffering is a global experience and things like crime, homelessness and distress will continue to be part of the human experience.

Our global story is not yet completed
Crime, daring, commerce, chatter will go on,
But, as narrators find their memory gone,
Homeless, distressed, these know themselves defeated. (Auden, 192)

The soldiers have different experiences of the situation of existence. Their experiences come in the form of different horrors and wishes. This causes a number of them to see the present as gloomy as stated in Sonnet XVIII. Their present existence is scornful because of “its gloom and its noise”. Their future is a “ritual maze” perceived in dreams as they lie in their huts at night, and this makes the soldiers “sigh for an ancient South” (Auden 193) each time they wake up. The present is typified by pessimism that has a freezing effect on the characters and so they get out of bed in the morning dejected. The fact that they sight means they are overburdened by the degree of suffering and this is further illustrated in the image of dreams they have at night in their huts. Even before these dreams are encountered, their evenings announce the “day’s oppression” (191). The lives of the individuals move from one form of suffering to another as the hours of the day go by. In the day they groan from the wounds and bandages, in the evening a sense of oppression haunts them and at night they dream of the labyrinth called existence and so wake up with sights.

In the attempt to show how modern man annihilates existence in the 20th century, Auden delves into the
philosophy of the French Philosopher René Descartes and negates what Descartes considers to be proof that human beings exist. In his philosophical inquiry into what is knowledge Descartes in his famous work, *Meditations on First Philosophy* proceeds from a position of doubt and develops what is referred to as the “Cogito Argument”. In the Second Meditation entitled “The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body” the Meditator makes a firm decision to continue his search for certainty and to discard as false anything that is open to the slightest doubt. Starting from analogous dimension, he cites the example of Archimedes’ famous saying that he could shift the entire earth if given one immovable point, and then develops his own argument that he hopes to achieve great things if he can be certain of just one thing that exist. From the premise of the first meditation, he supposes that whatever he sees does not exist, that his memory is faulty, that he has no senses and no body, and that extension, movement and place are mistaken notions. The possibility therefore is that the only certain thing remaining is that there is no certainty. The most relevant part of Descartes argument as it relates to the point in focus is the argument in which the philosopher believes that he has clearly established the existence of the self as a thinking thing or a mind. He writes

> I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is
necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Med. 2, AT 7:25. qtd. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)

The Meditator establishes that the physical world does not exist, which might also imply his non-existence. Yet, he thinks that to have these doubts, he must exist. For an evil manipulator to mislead him in all these insidious ways, he must exist in order to be misled. There must be an “I” that can doubt, or be deceived. From the perspective of postmodern reflexivity, Descartes negation of everything implies the negation of his own very existence. To negate the existence of everything except his own existence is to say that all truth is wrong except the truth about his own existence. Also, any individual who utters Descartes pronouncement of existence expressed in “I Am” logically exist. Therefore, in spite of the vast panorama of doubt and uncertainty that typifies modern existence people can still assert their own existence.

But when the sense of doubt is so overwhelming that people cannot assert even their own existence, then extreme existential nihilism has set in. Auden seems to say that this is the state that modern man has arrived. Like Descartes, modern man doubts everything. But Descartes had the courage of not doubting his own existence; even if everything else did not exist, he felt that he existed. This is doubt that is superseded by selfhood and a will to affirm ones being. Modern man’s doubt is so intense that he cannot even affirm his own being; he has forgotten how to like Descartes say “I am”. This means that modern man annihilates everything and ends up annihilating even himself. In “Another Time”, Auden project extreme existential nihilism through the miserable lives of people who live in time but cannot affirm that being because they desire to get lost in history. He writes:

So many try to say Not Now,
So many have forgotten how
To say I Am, and would be
Lost, if they could, in history. (Auden, 276)
The poem captures the lives of fugitives who are struggling to escape from the scene of war, and have lost the sense of self and of time. They are compared to “numberless flower that cannot number” and animals that cannot retain information. This simile fully brings out the state of the fugitives as individuals who have no notion of the past or the future “it is today in which we live”. All that they know is today they are living, but even “today” which they recognize is reduced to a “Now” which they fail to understand. Extreme negation of being sets in when the speaker says “So many have forgotten how / To say I Am”. As mentioned earlier, to say “I Am” in Descartes opinion means “I exist” and this is an affirmation of being in a cycle of doubt about everything else. The issue of doubt is evident from the beginning of the poem when the persona in a simile draws parallels between the condition of the “us” in the poem and the flowers and beast. They doubt about yesterday and about tomorrow, and only seem to understand today, yet today is not certain. Profound existential doubt, doubt that is deeper than the one Descartes perceived comes up in the inability to avow their own existence.

But does the failure to say “I Am” suggest that the people are nonexistent? If we follow from Descartes argument that the existence of the self is manifested in a thinking thing or a mind, then we can say that the fugitives exist. The fact that the speaker can associate their condition to that of some external realities and the fact that the many who cannot say “I Am” desire to get lost in the scheme of time means they think. Auden is careful enough not to say that all of humanity fails to aver it existence. It is the multitude, those consisting of or amounting to a large and indefinite number of the people. The suggestion evoked in the adjectival phrase “So many” is that a greater part of humanity in the twentieth century is plunged into the depth of intense existential despair that they cannot reason beyond their immediate condition. The repetition of this phrase not
only in the second stanza but in the last stanza, which talk about how these people die, is a signal and an insistence on the fact that a vast portion of humanity cannot recognize the basic values of its existence. Consequent on this, the persona says:

    No wonder then so many die of grief,
    So many are so lonely as they die;
    No one has yet believed or liked a lie,
    Another time has other lives to live. (Auden, 277)

As a result of the sedating despair that has corrupted their memory and they have forgotten that as human beings they should affirm their being, the people are gradually dying in anguish. To the speaker who identifies himself with these fugitives, there is no doubt about the way the people die. Since they cannot remember their past and cannot link-up with their future; since they cannot recognize their present state and has forgotten how to establish their own existence, they are bound to die in grief and loneliness.

The inability of the characters to affirm their existence is a show of the lack of will to choose which according to existentialists is important in defining who and what the individual becomes. The insistence on choice is a core principle in existential thinking as it borders on the issue of existence and essence. Jean Paul Sartre considers this to be the first principle of existentialism. Walter Kaufman documents Sartre’s 1946 Lecture in which the atheistic philosopher writes:

    What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is
simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. (qtd. in *Existentialism*, 290-91)

Sartre and other atheistic existentialist believe that it is in the exercise of living (existing) that people make decisions that determine what they are. The fact that Auden’s personas have forgotten the core value of existence, that is, the willingness to make decisions/choices about their lives shows that they do not value existence. However, the inability to make these choices is a consequence of the painful condition in which the find themselves. These personas are good hypothetical examples of what it means to live and make choices that bring essence to living. The very thought that they live and think of being lost in the scheme of time is evidence (from Descarte’s philosophical position) that they exist. The question is; how do people who know nothing but pain and death and who have no ability to exercise their will make choices to bring essence to their lives. The decisions that man takes in a bid to determine his existence has an effect on not only him but the entire world. He chooses the course of life that makes him and in so doing affirms certain values which affect the world around him.

It is evident from the foregoing analyses that Auden’s early poetry captures the existential condition of individuals for whom life does not mean much because they oscillate from one form of suffering to the other. According to Labang, Auden wrote some of these poems at a critical crossroad in his life when the poet saw himself as “an interpreter of his society, not its scourge and prophet” (Qtd. in Labang “Distance and Exilic Melancholia”). Through the commentary of an observed scared of impending doom “September 1, 1939” and “O What is that Sound”, Auden makes a concrete statement about the role of the poet as an
observer and about how an atmosphere of intense fear and insecurity can render existence worthless. The projection of individuals trapped in a life of drug and disease, and eventually a miserable death “Cocaine Lil and Morphine Sue” and “Miss Gee”, Auden shows that 20th century existence is one that affords little or no comfort. The experiences of the ladies in these poems and the way they die reveal a great deal about existence as perceived by Auden. The question is: of what purpose is life if it is lived entirely in drugs, disease and despondent death. Auden’s most profound negation of life comes across in “Another Time” in which the suffering individuals lack the will to avow their being. Their suffering like that of the soldiers in Sonnets from China is so agonizing that they have forgotten how to give meaning to life.

Auden’s obsessive projection of individuals framed in a vortex of different existential dilemmas gives credence to the idea that living in this age is not a worthwhile experience. His poetry shows how poetic discourse can become a wilful manifestation of the ennui and the angst that testify to the spirit of assault from outside (society) and the destructive temptations from within the modernist individual. Auden’s travels, reading and knowledge of his society and time provided the inspiration for his writing. As Warren Beach observes “He [Auden] has been very much aware of the main contemporary currants of thought in political theory, science and psychology, the fine arts and literature, philosophy and religion” (The Making, 244). The incongruity between the chaotic nature of the universe and the intense feeling of aloneness and selfhood is at the source of the gnawing insecurity and fear, and inexplicable suffering and death that typifies the lives of individuals in 20th century civilization. Through the segmentation and identification of experiences of different characters in time and space, and through the use of complex linguistic combinations, bizarre images and varying structural patterns, Auden poetically and culturally defines the reality of the 1930s and also conveys the
panorama of immense terror, anxiety, angst and suffering that constituted life during this period.

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