

Roger Elkin, who has had over forty years' experience teaching English Literature primarily in Further Education, offers the following two close readings **for teachers and students**:

A Reading of W.H. Auden's *O What Is That Sound*

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley, drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming.

O what is that light I see flashing so clear
Over the distance brightly, brightly?
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,
As they step lightly.

O what are they doing with all that gear,
What are they doing this morning, this morning?
Only their usual manoeuvres, dear,
Or perhaps a warning.

O why have they left the road down there?
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?
Perhaps a change in their orders, dear,
Why are you kneeling?

O haven't they stopped for the doctor's care,
Haven't they reined their horses, their horse?
Why, they are none of them wounded, dear.
None of these forces.

O is it the parson they want, with white hair,
Is it the parson, is it, is it?
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,
Without a visit.

O it must be the farmer who lives so near.
It must be the farmer, so cunning, so cunning?
They have passed the farmyard already, dear,
And now they are running.

O where are you going? Stay with me here!
Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?
No, I promised to love you, dear,
But I must be leaving.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,
O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;
Their boots are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning.

Auden's poem is a fascinating imitation of the ballad form as developed by the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets who took it out of the ownership of ordinary folk, primarily agricultural and untutored and unlettered women, and "refined" it – another example of the way in which popular culture has been appropriated by the propertied classes. Extremely widespread, the ballad form originated in the oral tradition, and this, in parts, accounts for its major characteristics: recognizable verse structures; simple, almost spare expression; and regular metre and rhyme which help to give the poem its "song-like" nature. The favoured form was the ballad stanza, an ABCB quatrain with alternating four-stress and three-stress lines. The subject matter usually took the form of a simple narrative, often involving some climactic event of historical import or emotional crisis but usually viewed from a personal standpoint, and punctuated by acts of betrayal or violence, involving desertion, bloodshed and death.

Auden's poem, by and large, adheres to this pattern, though it lacks the worst excesses of violence of the true ballads. Though published as recently as 1934 it retains an "historical" feel: the use of "scarlet soldiers" (line 3) suggests the eighteenth century Jacobite uprisings as presented in Stevenson's **Kidnapped**. However, the lack of precise historical detail, the anonymity of place, time, speakers including gender give the poem a universal application, thus concentrating attention on the poem's message – i.e. the events are unimportant in themselves as a specific occasion; what matters is the exploration of the theme to a wider context. And the theme? If the second speaker is a hunted (Jacobite) rebel, or indeed any political dissenter in any historical period, for whom survival and freedom to support his cause are more important than the person to whom he has sworn fidelity, then the ballad makes an important political and personal comment. On the one hand, that even deep vows of love are helpless in resistance to military oppression and fanaticism; on the other, that military forces might initially thrill with their show of uniform, their precision in drill and manoeuvre, their music in marching, but essentially they are instruments of repression.

If there is equality between these as opposites, then love/marriage might be as repressive a force as militarism? That man/men are not to be trusted, either as political individuals, or as lovers/partners/husbands? That what is important is individual integrity, or loyalty to one's ideas/principles/self? That faced with a mass of unthinking, conditioned behaviour all the individual can do is opt for personal survival?

I wonder does Auden approve or not of the man's action, politically or personally? Or is his thesis, that there is no such thing as a selfless act? Certainly, the flight of the man is undertaken without consideration for his partner who is left to face the full weight of the invader, as the public world intrudes so violently on to that most sacred of private bastions, the household. In this connection what is significant is the idea of a faceless mass that moves with an almost motorlike precision, for apart from the reference to their "scarlet" Auden gives us little detail. What is obvious is the contemporaneity of Auden's message for a Europe that was slowly and relentlessly being overtaken by fascist and populist militarism. He was surely aware of the intrusion of state forces into the lives of civilians; and the fragility of human bonds.

Of similar interest is the way Auden adapts the spare verbal texture of the traditional ballad structure to create an economical narrative via a clear visual presentation of movement and landscape. The separate stanzas plot out the relentless march of the soldiers, each stanza becoming a stage in their mechanical advance, from "Down in the valley" "Over the distance" via the properties of the local notables – the doctor, parson and farmer – right to the threshold of the house from which the couple view and comment on the military progress. Of particular note is the mastery with which the ideas of stanza two, the flashing weaponry and the light steps, are transformed to become the horrible proximity of

Their boots are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning.

The action of the poem is terrifying in its relentless metric drive, with the stanza separations underlining rather than weakening the propulsive energy of both poem and message. The major factor in the creation of this is Auden's control of the stanzaic form. Each stanza but the last is built on the device of question and response. The cumulative cataloguing of this parallelism incrementally tightens the tension, until the final stanza with the deserted girl having all four lines without internal full end-stopping after he second line. Here the absence of the question helps to unleash the full force of the soldiers' brutality.

A further feature giving intensity is Auden's tactic of fixing his rhyme pattern, not on the more usual ABCB, but on the ABAB, pattern. At a surface level this is done to separate the identities of the two speakers, the first of which is always, and eventually, ironically referred to as "dear". Is its overuse a strategy to introduce a patronising element, thus preparing us for the eventual desertion? The fact that the A rhymes are "feminine" and the B rhymes "masculine" similarly reinforces the implicit gender divisions. What is more important is the way the rhyme pattern mimes out the stages in the apprehension of the woman initially, and via her eventually the man. In stanzas 1, 2, and 3 the pure rhymes – "ear"/ "dear"; "clear" / "dear"; "gear" / "dear" – underpin the casual way he insists that the action is "only". At heart, one imagines, he is really quite unnerved, and his responses mere bravado. In stanzas 4, 5 and 6 the half-rhymes – "there"/ "dear"; "care" / "dear"; "hair" / "dear" – anticipate the more hesitant response of "Perhaps" which gives way to a more earnest negative affirmation – "none of them wounded" "None of these forces" (stanza 6), and "No they are passing... Without a visit" (stanza 7). By this stage a perceptive reader will have concluded that the man is not entirely honest. Stanzas 7 and 8 return to pure rhyme – "near" / "dear"; "here" / "dear" – to emphasize the immediacy of the soldiers' presence; and in the final stanza, the switch to a new rhyme sound, but one simultaneously a half rhyme with the A rhymes – "door" / "floor" – mimics via the wrenching of the

anticipated vowel the finality of the violent intrusion. This is emphasized by Auden's strategy of repeating his B rhymes in the second line – "drumming" / "drumming" – and then using it only once in the fourth line – "coming". This helps enormously in imparting added descriptive depth: the repetition in stanza 1 imitates the rat-a-tat-tat of field drums; in stanza 2 the various flashes as sunlight catches the weapons; in stanza 4 the waves of soldiers changing direction in rank after rank; and in the final stanza the relentless invasion of the house, though oddly the lock is "broken" and the door "splintered" **before** they have turned through the gate! On other occasions, this repetition seems strained, thus while "is it, is it?" captures the girl's rising anxiety, and "deceiving, deceiving" her despair, the repetition in stanzas 3, 5 and 7 seem only to satisfy the requirements of the pattern Auden has initiated. Occasionally, a poet, even one as crafted as Auden, can fall victim of his own craft. However, there is no denying Auden's achievement. This ballad might seem "old-fashioned" but this is a calculated ploy through which its messages acquire a relevancy which, alas, is still only too valid.

Louis MacNeice's *Autobiography* – A Reading

On the surface, the poem, written in 1940 reads as a rather detached account of MacNeice's childhood biography. However, its simple, rather formal structure of eight rhyming couplets each separated by a refrain conceals a wealth of feeling that is in complete harmony with the subject matter, and which shifts in direction and grows in intensity as the poem develops. The poetic argument concerns MacNeice's loss of childhood innocence, warmth and security and his awareness of the isolation, coldness and insecurity of manhood. Thus, the refrain-line, "Come back early or never come" (though constant in metrical pulse) might in the hands of a skilled verse speaker range through a variety of emotions from regret, request, command, plea, prayer, even resignation, for he knows that his idyllic youth, his Eden innocence, will not ever be recaptured. There is hope, but simultaneously a recognition that this hope has little grounds for realisation. Indeed, this line has a yearning, incantatory quality that puts it on the level of a liturgical response, or prayer, despite MacNeice's own acknowledged agnosticism. The contrast between the refrain (variously inflected) and the metric pattern of the couplets underpins the shifts in emotion and understanding that the poem contains. This is further compounded by the depth of meaning beneath the surface of the almost emotionless expression, with its simple diction, lucid syntax, uncomplicated structure and spare writing. However, what gives the poem its conviction and its honesty is the use of symbolism, which, though rooted in MacNeice's personal life, has an almost universal application.

Autobiography

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.

Come back early or never come.

My father made the walls resound,
He wore his collar the wrong way round.

Come back early or never come.

My mother wore a yellow dress;
Gently, gently, gentleness.

Come back early or never come.

When I was five the black dreams came;
Nothing after was quite the same.

Come back early or never come.

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

Come back early or never come.

When I woke they did not care;
Nobody, nobody was there.

Come back early or never come.

When my silent terror cried,
Nobody, nobody replied.

Come back early or never come.

I got up; the chilly sun
Saw me walk away alone.

Come back early or never come.

In the first stanza the confident, comfortable metre emphasises MacNeice's childhood happiness. The world is seen through the eyes of a boy: the trees are always green, the sun shining, the earth abundant in its fulness and wealth. That we take it for granted is suggested by the rather offhand attitude. However, the past tense suggests that MacNeice has since discovered the harsher realities of the adult world; and that the youthful optimism of continued simplicity and promises for the future have been shattered. Implicit in the lines is the knowledge that now as an adult he recognises that trees are not green (though he may have seen and painted them that way) but a variety of greens, yellows, greys, purples, blues and that trees are not always sporting their youthful summer abundance in leaf. In poetry "green" is frequently used to symbolize youth, hope, fresh life.

Stanza two presents an economical portrait of MacNeice's father, and his reaction to his father's character and values. MacNeice's father, John Frederick MacNeice, was a Church of Ireland rector in a Northern Irish parish, and eventually became a bishop. As a child, Louis MacNeice was in considerable awe of his father, and in his posthumously published prose-autobiography **The Strings Are False** admits to being afraid of his father's "conspiracy with God". An energetic man, fired by an evangelical Puritanism and earnestness, John Frederick MacNeice carried his religious beliefs into every corner of his life:

Religion never left us, it was at home as much in the church,
it fluttered in the pages of a tear-off calendar in the bathroom
and it filled the kitchen with the smell of silver polish
when Annie was cleaning the communion plate.

Of particular importance is John Frederick's unusual political stance: a strong nationalist, he championed the cause of Home Rule for Ireland, even though most of the Northern Irish clergy were Unionist in politics. It is perhaps this feature, compounded with Louis MacNeice's later loss of Christian faith that informs the lines,

My father made the walls resound
He wore his collar the wrong way round.

The simple metre suggests an element of slight humour as well as underpinning the oddness of belief both religiously and politically. To a child the clergy's reverse collar must seem more than strange – almost supernatural – an apt symbol of the topsy-turvy world of adulthood with its apparent contradictions. Furthermore, the lines are suggestive of the booming echoing sermonizing rebounding off masonry, and mirror the rigid confinements of location in which Louis MacNeice spent his early life in Carrick Fergus, Co. Antrim.

In **The Strings Are False** he writes about a world where his childish self was afraid of the dark, the violence of sectarian voices, the imagery of the primitive religion he encountered in the nursery, the stone images of his father's church and the bleak tolling of its bell:

The human elements of this world need not be detailed;
guilt, hellfire, Good Friday, the doctor's cough, hurried
lamps in the night, melancholia, mongolism [his brother
was mentally retarded], violent sectarian voices. All this
sadness and conflict and attrition and frustration were set
in this one-acre near the smoky town within the sound...

of the tolling bell.

For comfort MacNeice turned to his mother. Stanza three, with its final line repetitions, captures the close intimacy of their relationship, while the security and warmth she symbolizes is conveyed in the mention of her “yellow dress”. Here the refrain line takes on an added note of poignancy which is intensified by stanza five and the replacement of the colours of youth, life and warmth (“green” and “yellow”) by the colour of death and the unknown (“black”). The understatement of “Nothing after was quite the same” masks a heartfelt cry from a lonely, isolated child suddenly put into confrontation with the removal to hospital, and death, of his mother. MacNeice’s sister writes more fully of this – but is her account any more eloquent?

In March 1913 she (his mother) had an operation which completely cured her former malady, but at the same time she quite suddenly developed an agitated melancholia. Louis and I saw her change almost overnight from a mother who had always been the mainstay of the household – serene and comforting, apparently the very essence of stability – into someone who was deeply unhappy, and no longer able to make decisions. Louis in particular, as the youngest, was greatly attached to his mother, and before her illness I remember him as being with her a great deal. She always remained gentle and loving, but as she became more and more sad and restless Louis, who was only five and a half, must have been completely bewildered and greatly disturbed.

His mother’s sudden departure for hospital, his need of her, his uncertainty of her return and his knowledge of her death are captured in the refrain. Stanzas five, six and seven portray MacNeice’s response to the death of his mother. The world has shown him that he could not trust in the permanence of things, and this fundamental distrust of human relationships and experience threw him back to a dependence on himself. He became lonely, isolated, reserved. His childhood needs seem not to have been answered. His confused state is expressed in the paradox of the “dark” lamp and the line “When my silent terror cried.” This economically and effectively conveys his introverted behaviour, as he is thrown back to the resources of self. The parallel structures of

Nobody, nobody was there
Nobody, nobody replied

coupled with the repeated refrain suggest the terror, pain and loneliness of the child.

MacNeice’s **The Strings Are False** helps to resolve some of the mystery of stanza five,

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

MacNeice’s father was plunged into despair by the death of his wife, and spent agonised, sleepless nights mourning for her. Louis MacNeice’s own nightmares were made worse by his own (vicarious) witnessing of his father’s nightmares:

I now slept in his room and found it even worse
than the nightmares. Because he was sleeping very badly,
he would toss and turn and groan through the night, so that,
if I was awake when he came up, I would be kept awake for hours
listening to him; but always pretended to be asleep. My great
objective now was really to be asleep before he arrived with
the lamp and his own gigantic shadow.

His “black” father (darkened by death, depression and his professional garb) becomes the dark lamp by the son’s bed, replacing the warmth and solidity of the mother in her yellow dress. The final stanza records MacNeice’s response to the world of uncertainty. His realisation that action and the will to continue can only come of self is expressed in the first half-line, “I got up”. This is a determined action, a positive response, almost an awakening (in terms of getting up out of bed, or starting a new day). The punctuation – the longer pause introduced by a

semicolon rather than comma – reinforces the action. The remaining line and a half reflect his belief that immediate human contact has been broken. He is observed walking “alone”. The position of this word at the end of the action, the verse and the poem is important. The warmth of his childhood has been replaced by a sun that is “chilly”. He has turned his back on a world from which he feels he has been rejected, and now prepares stoically to face a wider world. Significantly, MacNeice spent most of his life in England as a self-exiled Irishman.

One of the problems facing a creative artist is the need to retain an element of privacy while simultaneously communicating effectively in a public statement. Too much exposure of self may lead to vulnerability. When, as here, the source of inspiration is directly autobiographical and of obvious importance to the emotional sensibility and maturity of both the author and the reader, the creation of the poem demands quite unusual skills. The very urge/excitement to create and communicate may be painful. Too much self-pity may seem to be nothing more than sensational attention-seeking, an appeal for sympathy. This is particularly relevant in this poem in which the subject-matter focuses on childhood isolation and the collapse of deeply-held, intimate relationships. Even without recourse to close biographical knowledge the poem can communicate its themes, sensitively and urgently. This is a measure of MacNeice’s craftsmanship and artistry.

In the hands of an unskilled writer such circumstances may have led to a sentimental approach. There is no concerted appeal to emotion, but a recognition of the actuality of events. He does not ask for the reader’s sympathy. The process of detachment calls for a detached stance and tone. The sentences are short, uncomplicated and direct; the expression stark and spare. There are, for example, (outside the requirements for verbal grammatical complement) very few adjectives used to qualify nouns. To list them is to underpin the biographical/emotional detail of the poem: “wrong”, “yellow”, “black”, “silent”, “chilly”. This economy of expression is used to create an emotional landscape, the bleakness of which is intensified by the repeated refrain. Its aptness to the particular situation in the verse preceding and throughout emphasises the ambivalent nature of relationships, and the nostalgic but fearful yearning. It is within this line, and the feel of almost relentless power brought by accumulated repeatings that the emotional centre of the poem – frightening, menacing, needing – lies.