

Auden and Shamlou's Subversive Discourses on Martyrdom and Militarism: A New Historicist study

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Abstract

With Stephen Greenblatt as its main proponent, and Michel Foucault as its main source of inspiration, new historicism emphasizes the historicity of literary texts as well as the textuality of history. It has always been remarked by the new historicists that history is a complex phenomenon, incorporating interacting discourses, and that literary texts are woven through with social forces. In this interaction, the new historicist critics often look for ways literary texts act subversively to divulge the lost or the repressed discourses. Taking off from such remarks, the researchers seek to show how the poems of Auden and Shamlou—the former being an English poet, and the latter an Iranian poet—are interrelated with the complex network of social discourses. As it happens, in their inter-textual relationship with these discourses, not only do these texts not recreate or support them, but they also construct an opposing discourse. In fact, since a number of Shamlou and Auden's poems have been situated in wartime, they refer the readers the subversive discourses about war.

Key Words: Discourse, Episteme, Ideology, Orations, Subversion, Vision of Agape.

Although there said to be a long held assumption that "a poet's work is significant to the extent that it identifies with ... the socio-cultural collective of a 'nation'" and that "from the 1930s onwards, Anglo-American poetic modernism became steadily more nationalistic ..." (Jenkins, 39-40), almost none of W. H. Auden's (1907-73) poems displays the poet's feeling of love and pride in his British nationality. Even those poems which have been written in America do not seem to signal any favour for the American nation. However, what can be observed in most of his poems is "an in between of voices and forms that would refuse identification with a single ... culture or nation" (ibid, 43). So, Auden's poems seem to be empty of nationalistic gestures, an emptiness that would help readers clear their mind of associating Auden with any cultures or nations.

In fact, Auden's disapproval of being branded as a nationalist poet is, at least in part, due to his dissatisfaction with nationalistic sentiments, regarding them not as collective feelings to be proud of, but as ideological means by which the misery of nations have been brought about. To Auden, this is the idea of nationalism, and separation of countries, which serves as an ideological motto in the hands of those who want to start wars against other nations for their own private benefits. In an essay titled "Auden in America" (2006), Nicholas Jenkins concludes that Auden's "New Year Letter"—which is a verse letter written in 1940—is an "assault on nationalist sentiments, 'The patrias of civility', 'England', 'La France', 'Das Reich', whose fiction of national separateness were the catalysts for wars engineered for private profit under the guise of patriotism" (44). Thus, as Jenkins maintains, in "New Year Letter", Auden attempts to draw the readers' attention to the dangers of having nationalistic sentiments—presenting it as a medium which makes people indifferent to other nations, and prepares the ground for the authorities' invasion of other states. In "September 1, 1939", a poem written in the date of Hitler's invasion to Poland, Auden speaks caustically of German nationalism; introduces it as: "the whole offence / From Luther until now / that has driven a culture mad" (SP, 86). Thus, Auden regards German nationalism in particular, and nationalism as a collective feeling in general, as a means causing calamities. To Auden, then, nationalism is no sacred thing; instead, it is an error that defies universal love. In fact, in the sixth stanza of "September 1, 1939", Auden regards the start of the war and the destructions that it has brought about, as the result of this error:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone. (*ibid*, 88)

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Hence, as these lines suggest, Auden appears to regard nationalism not as a good feeling to be swollen with pride, but as an error, breeding in the flesh and blood of people, and being contrary to what Auden calls, in his collection of essays and lectures *The Dyer's Hand and other Essays* (1948), the 'Vision of Agape'—this being the universal love or the love of others.

In this attempt to defy nationalism, introducing it as an 'error' serving as one of the "historical evils" (*Dyer's Hand*, 110) in the hands of the authorities to reach their ill aims, like war, Auden also seems to challenge the ideological ardour and fervour for militarism and nationalism in wartime. In other words, Auden wants to challenge what Charles E. Bressler calls, in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (2007), the old ideological belief in militarism, nationalism, and patriotism—this being the "honourable ... sweet and decorous ..." or "a notable cause for self sacrifice, even to the point of death" (231). In fact, Auden has, at least in a way, a subversive aim of emptying the readers' mind of patriotic values—since, to Auden, these values have long cajoled people into going to wars against other nations and have "sent a lot of young guys off to die for nothing" (Wilbur, 10). Therefore, not only does Auden not approve of exulting patriotic actions in most of his poems, he shows his dislike of these collective ideologies. As Rachel Wetzsteon claims in *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources* (2007), to die because of "patriotism was not to Auden's liking" (82). So, whereas the dominant 'episteme'—this being a Foucauldian term meaning the dominant spirit and ideology of the time—in war time seemed to advertise and dignify militarism, and patriotism as 'honourable' and 'sweet', Auden appears to be shaping another discourse opposite to the dominant one, refusing to regard them as noble.

To make this new oration, or discourse, which is the opposite of the dominant one, suffuse in the readers' minds and beliefs, certain number of Auden's poems seem to contrast "the actual horrors of the war" with "the naively patriotic public reports" of the very war. In other words, Auden attempts at shattering "the lofty, romanticized visions of war with his jarring descriptions of its horror" (Bressler, 232). Shortly put, Auden wants to persuade the readers, that it is not an honour to fight in a war which its result is nothing but disaster. To Auden, in other words, "nationality is condemnable" for it is "a superfluous, petty concern when compared to the 'thick green light' and 'hanging faces' of the war front" (ibid, 231). Therefore, by presenting the hideous elements of war, and the miseries that the militants have to face in war front Auden seems to be viewing that patriotic feeling is not worth when weigh against the revulsions of the war front. Differently put, in Auden's opinion, nationalistic sentiments which people have for their countries is not going to bring the militants and the patriots nobility and honour; on the contrary, the final outcome of having these collective ideologies would be the victimization and despair of generations.

Indeed, "The Shield of Achilles" (1952) appears to be an apt instance in which Auden sounds to be shifting the readers' mind to the desolating consequences of fighting for one's own country because of the collective ideologies like patriotism, and militarism. In an essay titled "Believe It or Not, I Have Got Better: Auden after 1940" (2000), Michael Hennessy notes that in "The Shield of Achilles" Auden "sees the victims of collective ideologies in a 'ragged urchin' loitering in a 'weed choked field'" (572). Therefore, to Auden, those who accept to be recruited into the army are not going to be praised as heroes; conversely, they are going to be like 'ragged urchins' in an undignified hostile situation. Moreover, these undignified 'ragged urchins' are not meant to do heroic actions; what they are supposed to do is to act like 'loiterers' just passing the time for the moment they get their commanders' signs; these 'loiterers' are like: "A million eyes, a million boots in line, / Without expression, waiting for a sign" (*SP*, 198). Thus, in wartime, this collective ideology would turn people into dumb waiters who just serve the wills of the authorities, without expressing their own desires.

In fact, Even when they are called into action, these 'ragged urchins' are not going to witness heroic achievements. They will see, instead, "Quite another scene / That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third" (ibid, 199). Hence, in such crisis, the patriotic militants appears to be turned into objects, not heroes, with signs becoming their impetus for wars against other people; and the heroic actions sounds to be changed into mean deeds of—what Auden points out in "September 1, 1939"—a "Low, dishonest decade" (*SP*, 86). Therefore, It appears that the presence of patriotic spirit and nationalistic sentiment for such a 'Low, dishonest decade' signifies the absence of 'love of others' and 'subjective will'. In fact, not only is dignity not waiting for the patriotic spirit, but they are also going to lose their pride and even morality; they are the ones who have "... lost their pride / And died as men before their bodies died" (ibid, 199). Hence, this is an undignified loss of pride, and death of spirituality, even if not bodily, which can be said to be awaiting the patriotic militant.

In fact, even if the death is not the death of spirituality or pride, but martyrdom for one's country, Auden does not grant it a dignified position since it is a death for a 'dishonest decade', a death 'for nothing'. Auden's poem "Paid on Both Sides" (1928) gives the impression that it is in part an assault on those who like the patriotic character in this long poem, John Nower, think that death for one's country is eloquent. As John Lucas singles out in "Auden's Politics: Power, Authority and the Individual" (2006), this poem is Auden's "mockery of those certainties voiced by John Nower in his speech about not betraying the dead—'can we be deaf to the simple eloquence of [their graves] inscription' ". Lucas goes on further to say that Auden wants to remind the readers that "None of these voices is reliable"(154). Indeed, it seems that in this poem Auden wants to invite the readers, at least, to consider this matter that 'what if none of these voices about the dignified nature of patriotic actions was right?'; or 'what if the dead of a nation—those being killed for their countries—are not to be dignified but betrayed?'. In fact, Auden himself can trust none of these voices and he asks the readers not to trust them as well, because as he asserts in the "Shield of Achilles", we are not living in a decade "where promises were kept / Or one could weep because another wept" (*SP*, 199). By contrast, we are living in an indifferent world, where a man's suffering does not mean anything to others—whether this suffering is a personal suffering or a patriotic one for the sake of others' peace. In such an indifferent world even martyrdom is not regarded as something sacred and dignified; on the contrary, as Auden notes in "Musee' des Beaus Art" (1938), it is just a "dreadful" duty that "must run its course" (*ibid*, 79). To put the whole thing in a nutshell, Auden regards sentiments like patriotism and nationalism as the ones—to borrow a Shakespearean term—full of "sound and fury, signifying nothing".

Actually, very much like Auden, Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000) is a poet who remains defied to give fictional accounts of militarism; quite conversely, he is a poet who brings into light the actualities of war and militarism. Shamlou is a poet whose ideology about militarism differs in a number of ways from the ideologies spread by the authorities, or from the ones shown by the media. In other words, most of Shamlou's poems—those which are related to the issue of militarism—stand in marked contrast to the authoritative discourses about militarism, and therefore, these poems shed light on kinds of discourses that mount up challenges to the already accepted ones. To him, as he himself notes in the explanation part of his *Collected Poems* (2010), being recruited to the army evokes in him nothing but

the memory of a soldier tortured and treated with disdain by a soldier like himself; the memory of a doomed young soldier that the cruel social orders deprived him of his youthful happiness; the memory of a powerless soldier who was tied up and lain on a bench, with a soldier on his ankle and another soldier on his neck so that he could not show any nationalistic feelings when talked of his country...; the memory of an innocent young soldier who yelled out in pain, and yet was heard by no one—because the trumpets and drums in the army did not let any other voice to be noticed. (1083)

So, possessing an ideology different from the one spread and advertised by the authorities or the media, Shamlou wants to make this ideology explicit in his poems to prove that there might be other ideologies about militarism to be heard—ideologies which have not been given the chance to be expressed.

In fact, whereas the dominant discourse in wartime is used in a way that it tries to convey gratified impressions of militarism, Shamlou's war poems form a kind of discourse about militarism that questions the authenticity of such claims, and regards them as nothing but a means to cajole people into going to wars. In other words, unaffected by the media, Shamlou is a poet who rejects to advertise militarism in his poems; instead, he forms an opposing ideology that introduces militarism not as an appreciative deed but an action which will bring about the misery of those who have accepted to be an army member. In this opposing ideology that Shamlou's poems excavate, Shamlou tries to refer the readers to the sufferings and possible regrets which await the militants. As he versifies it in "In a battle with darkness" (1363?), battlefields are places in which:

Formalities are on the pick of its perfection
Right good for people who adore them
So that like the smoky wick of a contemptible candle
Cut it with a pair of cutters. (*CP*, 875)

Thus, working as an opposing discourse to the dominant one, this poem by Shamlou remains defied to give romantic accounts of militarism, and to talk people into fighting for their countries.

However, in his effort to spread another ideology about militarism—this being an ideology that eschews the exaltation of militarism—Shamlou tries to dig out what he believes to be the realities of war—the actualities which sound to be covert beneath the romanticized version of war, displayed by the media.

In other words, Shamlou appears to be a poet who tries to yield insight into the untold nature of war not expressed in the dominant discourse of wartime. In Shamlou's idea, then, one who accepts to be recruited to the army should be well aware of the fact that militarism is not romantic at all; on the contrary, it is an action which will result in the desperation of the militants.

It is actually in his attempt to attract the readers' attention to the miseries of militant that not only does Shamlou talk about the hardship these militant will face in wartime, but he also speaks about their dishonoured deaths. In fact, he seeks to contrast what he regards the undignified deaths with the romanticized version of deaths that are advertised to be viewed through rose-tinted glasses. As he puts it in his poem "I'm Not Wet Behind the Ears" (1363): in wartime "... they appointed a time that we and our brothers kill each other and / This / was the shortest way to reach heaven!", but, he continues:

Keep in mind
That the only achievement of war
was
our non-blessed table cloth with nothing on but some bread crum
Remember
That the only achievement of war
Was a valueless torn rag to cover just our privy parts with(CP, 883)

Hence, speaking of the indecorous result of dying for one's own country in wartime, Shamlou tries to condemn the rhetorical discourses dominant in war-time—this being the lofty descriptions which are shaped discursively to persuade people to be combatants and die for their country. In Shamlou's view, as the above quoted poem signifies in part, it was with the fictional discourses that the authorities:

... put bull yokes on our neck
Fastened ploughshares on us
Sat on the shoulders of us
And ploughed a borderless burying ground
Which still brings bitter tears
To the eyes of remaining friends. (ibid)

Therefore, Shamlou looks to be a poet who not only cannot accept the authenticity of the romanticized discourses about militarism and death for one's own nation, but he also lambastes them as being motivated to coax people into going to wars. In Shamlou's opinion, these discourses are the ones that exalt the nobility of joining the fight, hiding the fact that the price of that path would be the lives of countless soldiers.

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