



W. H. Auden's syllabic poetics within the framework of world literature

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Abstract

Whereas W. H. Auden experimented with syllabic verse persistently in the latter half of his career and wrote a large quantity of poems in syllabic meter, the importance of his syllabic poetics is not generally understood and the few studies that discuss Auden's syllabic verse in some depth tend to focus on its technical inventiveness and are confined in an Anglocentric or Eurocentric context. Inspired and enriched by the prosody of world poetry, Auden's syllabic verse has much wider moral implications than any national or cultural perspective can contain. Moreover, the way Auden treated the relationship between the local and the universal in his syllabic verse shows its affinity with Goethe's view of world literature.

Keywords W. H. Auden · Syllabic verse · Freedom and order · World literature · Goethe

Introduction

In January 1939, a few months after their return from war-time China, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood left England for America. For Auden, that move marked the end of his explicitly political phase and the most critical turning point in his development as a poet. From the end of the 1930s to the time of his death, Auden produced an extensive body of syllabic verse, the prosodic principle of which is different, on the one hand, from that of traditional metrical verse he wrote in his early career and, on the other hand, from that of free verse, a trademark of modern American poetry.

So far, the variety and richness of Auden's syllabic verse has received little scholarly discussion. The few studies that discuss Auden's syllabic verse in some depth tend to focus on its technical inventiveness and are confined in an Anglocentric or Eurocentric context (Arana 2009; Hillyer 2020). The fact that most of the major

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poems of later Auden were written in syllabic verse rather than in the readily available free verse indicates that Auden may have had deeper thoughts about the implications of syllabic meter than his critics recognize. Considering his undifferentiated treatment of meters and forms of both western and oriental origins and the universalistic moral concern reflected in his formal interests and experiments, it would also be meaningful to discuss Auden's syllabic poetics within the framework of world literature.

Since the mid-1990s, there have been abundant theoretical discussions about world literature, a concept that can be traced back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Although the German term *Weltliteratur* was not invented by Goethe, it cannot be denied, as John Pizer remarks, that "it is Goethe to whom credit must be given for creating the paradigm that became a significant, widely debated element in critical and pedagogical literary discourse" (2012, p. 3). The reanimated scholarly discussion on world literature over the last thirty years center on a number of key questions that are pertinent to my discussion of Auden's syllabic poetics in the following pages. First of all, there is an emphasis on the totality of world literature, whether in the form of Pascale Casanova's "world literary space" (2004, p. 3) or in Franco Moretti's theoretical model based primarily on Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory. Moreover, the inequality in the circulation of works of literature within the literary world-system is highlighted, especially in a postcolonial context, and Eurocentrism or Anglocentrism seems to be a continuing presence. Second, there has always been a tension between the local and the universal in discussions about world literature. Goethe's view on the dialectical relationship between the local and the universal has received a fair amount of critical attention (Birus 1999; Pizer 2012) and is highly relevant here. Third, the question of translation looms large in debates on world literature. On the one hand, there is a common assumption that translation is necessary and important for communication across languages, cultures and time periods, although it is also acknowledged that, in the act of mediation, literary translation "is always a transformation potentially leading to 'deformation.'" (Birus 2018, p. 259). On the other hand, the translatability assumption is called into question by Emily Apter (2013), whose deconstructionist stance draws attention to incommensurability and untranslatability.

By understanding Auden's syllabic poetics against a backdrop of theoretical discussions of world literature, especially against Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur*, I try to argue that Auden's praxis of syllabic verse taps into world poetic resources in an attempt to convey the necessary balance between freedom and order both in poetry and in the world to audiences across linguistic, cultural, gender, racial and class boundaries, but with an emphasis on the importance of retaining local characteristics, which are more often than not untranslatable.

Auden as a universalist

Notwithstanding his "white Anglo-Saxon Protestant background," W. H. Auden was universalist in temperament. As recalled by John Bicknell Auden, his middle brother, Auden "was from his youth singularly devoid of prejudices about class,

religion and race" (Spender 1973, p. 29). The broad interests of their parents, their father's heterogeneous collection of books, and the frequent excursions to the hills on holidays had a great influence on the Auden brothers. "In Wystan's case," wrote John Auden, "this developed into a Goethe-like interest in the inter-relationship of different aspects of knowledge" (Spender 1973, p. 26). Indeed, Goethe came to be an image of what Auden hoped to achieve in the last decades of his life. "I should like," he wrote in the 1960s, "to become, if possible, / a minor atlantic Goethe" (Auden 1976, p. 522).

As early as 1932, when he was 25 years old, Auden expressed for the first time the idea of viewing the world in a systematic and relational way. In "Writing," a long essay aimed at young readers and their parents, Auden wrote:

Life is one whole thing made up of smaller whole things which themselves are made up of smaller whole things and so on. The largest thing we can talk about is the universe, the smallest the negative electrons of the atom which run round its central positive nucleus, already a group. So too for us, nucleus and cell, cell and tissue or organ, organs or tissues and the human individual, individual and family, family and neighbours, neighbours and nation, nation and world, always groups linked up into larger groups, each group unique, an individual thing, different from every other thing, but without meaning except in its connection with other things. The whole cannot exist without the part, nor the part without the whole. (Auden 1996, p. 13)

In this orderly world picture, the uniqueness of each part and its connection with other parts are equally important; besides, the whole system and its parts are interdependent. In 1940 Auden wrote an essay entitled "A Note on order," in which he emphasized once more the interrelation of every field of intellectual and social activity within a society. "Aesthetics, ethics, economics, science, though each a peculiar field," wrote Auden, "are not unrelated, and unless this relation is recognized, errors appear in their own peculiar results" (Auden 2002, p. 102).

Auden was also universalistic in his moral vision. The central concerns of Auden, according to Edward Mendelson, were "the life of the unique individual person in relation to his neighbors, and the special tasks and problems of the present moment of his own life and of the world around him" (Mendelson 2007, p. xv). In *The Prolific and the devourer*, a long, unfinished prose book written in early 1939, Auden claimed that "Jesus based love on the most primitive instinct of all, self-preservation." "At the last supper," he continued, "he took eating, the most elementary and solitary act of all, the primary act of self-love, the only thing that not only man but all living creatures must do irrespective of species, sex, race or belief, and made it the symbol of universal love" (Auden 2002, p. 431). Time and time again, Auden stressed the interconnectedness between one's neighbor and oneself in his work. For instance, at the end of his long poem *New Year Letter* (1940) Auden wrote: "O every day in sleep and labour / Our life and death are with our neighbour" (Auden 1976, p. 193).

Apart from an enormous interest in non-literary pursuits, Auden shared with Goethe an intense curiosity about literature of non-European traditions. In his

journal *Kunst und Altertum*, Goethe wrote: “Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one” (as cited in Damrosch 2003, p. 7). It is not rare in the history of English literature, or any national literature for that matter, that translation of foreign literature becomes a revitalizing force in the periods of uncertainty. In his review of *The translations of Ezra Pound*, Auden recognized the contributions of Pound’s translations in early twentieth century, yet another period of uncertainty, in which English poetry “seemed to have arrived at an impasse” (Auden 2008, p. 388). To be more specific, it was a period in which “the Romantic conception of poetry and of the self was ceasing to seem adequate, and the prosodic convention based on the iamb and the anapaest had been brought to a pitch of virtuosity by Tennyson and Swinburne beyond which no development seemed possible.” Pound’s translations are a showcase for world literature: Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, Egyptian, French, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Latin and Provençal. Auden commented on the merits of Pound’s translations in terms of their contribution to English poetry. For example, the importance of Pound’s translations of Cavalcanti lies, according to Auden, in “their rhythmical novelty,” with Pound’s efforts to reproduce “in English the cadence of the Italian hendecasyllabic in general, and of Cavalcanti’s in particular” (Auden 2008, pp. 388–389). The influence of Pound’s Chinese translations, on the other hand, has been due to “their revelation of a new kind of poetic sensibility” rather than to their form (Auden 2008, p. 390).

Auden understood that, in an age of rupture, when steady growth seems unlikely, the artists tend to regard the immediate past as “an obstacle to discovering their authentic voice.” “When this happens,” Auden continued, “they almost always turn for help to works of an earlier age or of another culture. T. S. Eliot, for example, has told us that he found the clues he needed in the blank verse of the later Elizabethan dramatists, like Webster and Tourneur, and in the French *Symbolistes*, like Laforgue. Others of the same generation turned to Chinese and Japanese poetry” (Auden 2015, p. 211). In other words, Auden perceived twentieth-century English literature—in this case, English poetry—to be deeply involved with world literature.

Auden himself is noted, among other things, for his great technical skill and for his mastery of forms and meters both ancient and modern, East and West. To some prosodists, Auden’s poetry “presents a prosodist’s feast, not unlike that offered a musical analyst by the ingenuity and wealth of Bach’s fugues and canons” (Gross & McDowell 1996, p. 240). Auden’s experiments with heterogeneous meters and forms in English make a valuable contribution, as Pound does, to twentieth-century English poetry and has enormous influences on postwar American poets (Wasley 2011).

Freedom and order in Auden’s formal experiments

Auden’s emphasis on form and technique ran through his entire career. At the age of 21, Auden told Stephen Spender that “the subject of a poem was only the peg on which to hang the poetry” and that his aim “was not to express a feeling, but to concentrate on the best arrangement that could be derived from the occasion” (Spender

1964, p. 51). A female friend of Auden's recalled after his death that Auden had explained to her how form releases rather than restricts the imagination and how important it is for a poet to experiment with many different forms (Gardiner 1976, p. 16). In a 1956 lecture that he gave as professor of poetry at Oxford, Auden raised four questions as Arnoldian Touchstones by which to test a literary critic. One of the questions goes: "Do you like, and by like I really mean like, not approve of on principle [...] complicated verse forms of great technical difficulty, such as Englynys, Drott-Kvaetts, Sestinas, even if their content is trivial?" (Auden 1962, p. 47). In 1964 Auden wrote about his "dream reader," who "keeps a look out for curious prosodic fauna like bacchics and choriambes," and he confessed that "one of [his] minor pleasures in life is trying to make George Saintsbury [author of the three-volume *History of English Prosody*] turn in his grave" (Auden 2015, p. 77). In his later years Auden liked to boast to friends that he had now written a poem in every known meter and he was always searching for new forms (Carpenter 1981, p. 419).

Some critics believed that Auden overemphasized formal matters at the cost of other more important aspects of poetry. Late in 1930, T. S. Eliot expressed his concern about "Auden's ethical principles and convictions, not about his technical ability" (Carpenter 1981, p. 137). F. W. Bateson, commenting on Auden's last collection of poetry, said with regret that "the greatest English poet since Keats" was "so little interested in a poem's meaning" (Bateson 1975, p. 387). Other critics argued that Auden's virtuosity in forms and meters constitutes a hindrance, rather than a boost, to his development as a poet. In a famous essay, entitled "What's become of Wystan?" (1960), Philip Larkin lamented that "Auden no longer touches our imaginations." While acknowledging the merits of Auden's poetry, Larkin did not understand Auden's view of poetry as a game and thought that Auden was becoming increasingly unserious (Larkin 1960, p. 419).

What has escaped the attention of many critics is that in his career, which lasted half a century, Auden's exploration in the formal aspect of poetry follows a distinct pattern. A central concern of his formal experiments is striking a balance between freedom and order, not only in a formal but also in a moral sense.

Auden's theory of poetry is based on analogy. A poet, as a member of the human community, loves to see the perfect balance between freedom and order in real life and he or she would like that ideal reflected in his or her poetry. In this sense, there can be an analogy between a poem and the real world. As Auden wrote in 1950, "Every poem [...] is an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisaal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony." (Auden 2008, p. 233). "A good poem exhibits the kind of marriage between freedom and authority, far from tyranny as it is from anarchy, which one would like to see exhibited in personal and political life," wrote Auden in 1955 (Auden 2008, p. 526). He emphasized that the harmony or marriage presented in good poems is "an analogy not an imitation," as it is possible only as a verbal construct (Auden 2008, p. 233).

In the 1920s, for a short period, Auden was captivated by the high modernism of T. S. Eliot and wrote a few free-verse poems in the style of *The Waste Land*,

before he realized that imitating Eliot was a dead end.¹ In the early 1930s, under the auspices of Thomas Hardy, Auden returned to the English tradition, writing Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, blank verse, and Hardy-esque stanzas. On a June evening in 1933, Auden had the vision of *agape*, in which he learned what “love one’s neighbor as oneself” meant (Auden 1973, pp. 69–70). From then on, he wrote more consciously in traditional forms, especially popular forms such as the sonnet and the ballad. The use of traditional forms indicates that Auden had begun to attach importance to the communicative function of poetry and to a poet’s responsibility to his audience. Following the three long poems of the 1940s, Auden composed a large quantity of syllabic verse. His first poem in syllabic meter appeared in April 1939 and the last piece he wrote in his life is also in that form. As a matter of fact, almost all the important poems in his later years, including “*Bucolics*” and “*Horae Canonicae*,” are written in syllabic verse.

Auden’s enormous interest in syllabic verse was a natural consequence of his continuous and ever-deepening reflections on the relationship between freedom and order. Whether in the 1930s or after, Auden never ignored the relationship between poetry and the real world. In an important lecture he delivered in 1950, Auden said, “For a long time now, I’ve been interested in the possibilities of syllabic meter as one way of achieving a balance between freedom and order. That is to say, I wanted to get away from a conventional pattern of iambics and trochaics, and, at the same time, not to lose the sense of pattern” (Auden 2008, p. 649). According to Auden’s theory of poetry as analogy, a balance between freedom and order is much more than a matter of aesthetic satisfaction.

Auden’s interest in syllabic verse was kindled by Marianne Moore. In a review (published in 1959) of Moore’s poetry, Auden summarized how Moore’s prosody was different from the traditional prosody of English poetry, of which Yeats was a representative. Yeats’ elevated style of poetic speech, with strong line-end pauses, makes a sharp contrast with Moore’s poetry, which “must be uttered in a conversational tone with only the slightest line-end pauses.” “What distinguishes it from conversation is,” Auden continued, “not so much rhythm or tone as the articulation of the thoughts expressed, the sequence of ideas, and it takes time and frequent re-reading to appreciate these as fully as they deserve” (Auden 2010, p. 227). The colloquial style that Auden appreciated is, of course, not unique to Moore’s syllabic verse; as a matter of fact, it is a distinguishing characteristic of modern free verse. Why, then, did Auden favor syllabic verse over free verse, the dominant form of modern poetry, especially prevalent in the US, where the later Auden lived and worked?

First of all, without the aid of meters, free verse is more difficult to write. In an interview in 1972, Auden said that “very few people can manage free verse—you need an infallible ear, like D. H. Lawrence, to determine where the lines should end” (Newman 1977, p. 253). A decade earlier, he wrote that, if free verse “is in

¹ “Like Tennyson, he was a hugely idiosyncratic poet,” Auden wrote of Eliot in his final years, “and one sensed that if one took him as a poetic model, one could only write Eliot-and-water” (Carpenter 1981, p. 58).

any way competently written, the ear immediately hears where one line ends and another begins, for each line represents either a speech unit or a thought unit" (Auden 1962, p. 296). As there is no positive principle for free verse and what an individual poet can depend on is his or her talent and acuteness, there can be no objective criteria by which to judge a poem in free verse. In Auden's judgment, the majority of free-verse poems are bad. He gave a vivid description of the enormous difficulty and the usual outcome of writing free verse:

The poet who writes "free" verse is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry and darning for himself. In a few exceptional cases, this manly independence produces something original and impressive, but more often the result is squalor—dirty sheets on the unmade bed and empty bottles on the unswept floor. (Auden 1962, p. 22)

Second, free verse is not, for Auden, an appropriate medium for expressing the moral values that he deems important. As modernist poetics advocates the avoidance of monotony, it favors free verse and downgrades regular verse, which, to modernist poets, triggers all kinds of negative associations: being outdated and remote from the contemporary world, and imposing a set of extraneous rules on language. Ezra Pound encouraged novice poets to create new rhythms in order to express new emotions because, in his opinion, set rhythms can only repeat set emotions. Pound believed that the writing of free verse manifests the principle of freedom and that, compared with regular verse, free verse is better able to exhibit a poet's individuality (Pound 1913). At a time when free verse and the poetics it represents prevailed, Auden was aware of its latent problems. He understood that the principle of freedom does not apply to all aspects of life and that there are undeniably important things in the world that cannot be deconstructed by free-verse poetics.

As the modernist poetics descended from romantic theories of organic form, its contempt for the repetitive rhythmic patterns in regular meters is only to be expected. Auden brought to his audience's attention a distinction between meaningful repetition and mechanical repetition in poetry. He was of the opinion that a poem is more like a natural organism because, for one thing, it is rhythmical:

Rhythm is to time what symmetry is to space. Seen from a certain distance, the features of a human face seem symmetrically arranged, so that a face with a nose a foot long or a left eye situated two inches away from the nose would appear monstrous. Close up, however, the exact symmetry disappears: the size and position of the features vary slightly from face to face and, indeed, if a face could exist in which the symmetry were mathematically perfect, it would look, not like a face, but like a lifeless mask. So with rhythm. A poem may be described as being written in iambic pentameters, but if every foot in every line were identical, the poem would sound intolerable to the ear. (Auden 1962, p. 68)

What sets Auden apart from the other modern poets is his recognition of one of the fundamental, yet often ignored or misconceived, features of regular verse. As

Mendelson has pointed out, Auden “consistently associated nature with the idea of repetition, and the conscious mind with uniqueness and novelty” (Mendelson 1981, p. 174). The mature Auden no longer evaded monotony. On the one hand, he was conscious of the merits and demerits of traditional metrics, and on the other hand, he identified the inherent problems of free-verse poetics. Auden hoped to retain the merits of both regular verse and free verse and at the same time avoid their respective limitations. In other words, Auden hoped to find a form which takes account of both the formality of traditional metrical verse and the flexibility of free verse and which is neither completely closed nor fully open. That form is supposed to give recognition to the idea of repetition, on which all life depends for existence, and reflect the balance of freedom and order in the poet’s mind. Syllabic verse meets Auden’s requirements, both technically and morally speaking.

The sources of Auden’s syllabic verse

Syllabic verse is not an invention of the twentieth century. In classical verse, besides certain patterns of long and short syllables, the number of syllables in a line is usually fixed. In iambic trimeter, for instance, each of the three feet contains two iambs and thus each line has 12 syllables. The alexandrine is a notable example of the traditional syllabic verse in France. In English poetry, there had been attempts by famous poets—notably in the early modern period and in the early twentieth century—to transplant classical quantitative meters into English verse, which proved ill-fated, as an ear accustomed to English would automatically begin to look for accents. As Auden wrote of the alexandrine: “whatever we may know intellectually about French prosody, our ear cannot help hearing most alexandrines as anapaestic verse which, in English poetry, we associate with light verse. Try as one may to forget it, *Je le vois, je lui parle; et mon coeur ... Je m’égare* reminds us of *The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold*” (Auden 1962, p. 297).

Auden doubted whether accurate imitations of classical poetic forms are possible in English, but he knew “from experience how stimulating a study [of] their forms can be in suggesting to one forms which suit English, but which one would not have thought of had one not studied Greek and Latin prosody” (Auden 2015, p. 486). Unlike Moore’s syllabic verse with its unconventional stanza forms, the most conspicuous feature of Auden’s syllabic verse is the regular shape of its lines. The two earliest examples of Auden’s syllabic verse, “Where do they come from?” and “In memory of Sigmund Freud” (both written in 1939), are modeled on the Alcaics favored by the Roman poet Horace. Auden retained the original stanza form (four lines consisting of eleven, eleven, nine, and ten syllables) but discarded the quantitative meter completely:

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
When grief has been made so public, and exposed
To the critique of a whole epoch
The frailty of our conscience and anguish,
Of whom shall we speak? For every day they die

Among us, those who were doing us some good,
 And knew it was never enough but
 Hoped to improve a little by living.
 ("In memory of Sigmund Freud," stanzas 1 and 2)

Apart from Alcaics, Auden had imitated a number of other classical meters, such as hexameters, hendecasyllabics, Sapphics, and limping iambics.

Although Auden's syllabic verse was originally modeled on classical prosody, he found that the concept of syllabic verse so comprehensive and far-reaching that it might even include traditional poetry of the Far East. In 1963, Auden started to translate Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings* with a collaborator. The haikus in it fascinated him and soon enough he started to write his own haikus in English. The meter of the Japanese haiku (having three lines containing five, seven, and five syllables respectively) can be copied accurately into English, as manifested by the following one by Auden: "In moments of joy / all of us wished we possessed / a tail we could wag" (Auden 1976, p. 641).

As the strict haiku form tends to be too restrictive for English, Auden made some alterations to the rule: as long as the total number of the syllables in the three lines is seventeen, the poem counts as a haiku. For example: "None of us are as young / as we were. So what? / Friendship never ages" (Auden 1976, p. 665). By removing the limitation on the number of syllables in each line, the haiku became highly flexible as a form. "Et in Arcadia Ego," which Auden wrote in 1964, consists of a dozen haiku stanzas and makes up a coherent whole, both grammatically and semantically. Auden had also tried his hand at tanka, another traditional Japanese verse form, which has five lines containing five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively.

Among Auden's poems based on oriental models, there is one which, strictly speaking, is not syllabic verse but which is closely related to the syllabic principle. In 1964 Auden sent a friend a copy of a poem and explained its form: "I was reading a book on Chinese poetry, in which I discovered that though Chinese is mostly monosyllabic, it is not entirely so, and Chinese poetry is organised not by syllable but by word count. Since the theme seemed rather 'Confucian,' I thought it might be fun to write in English on the same principle. As you will see, the counting is in 7s and 5s (standard Chinese practice)" (Carpenter 1981, p. 420). The poem mentioned in that letter is "For Friends Only," one of the twelve pieces in the sequence "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," which describes the guest-room in Auden's house at Kirchstetten, Austria and is dedicated to Auden's friends John and Thekla Clark:

Ours yet not ours, being set apart
 As a shrine to friendship,
 Empty and silent most of the year,
 This room awaits from you
 What you alone, as visitor, can bring,
 A weekend of personal life. (Auden 1976, p. 532)

Unlike all the syllabic verse that Auden wrote, which has a fixed number of syllables in each line or stanza, the meter of “For Friends Only” is based on a fixed number of words in each line and stanza: the first, third and fifth lines in each stanza have seven words, and the second, fourth and sixth lines have five.

The end product of the prosodic regularization of Chinese poetry, an ongoing process that began from the Qi Dynasty (the late 5th century), is the highly regulated heptasyllabic and pentasyllabic verse of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) (Luo 2011, p. 269). The most common forms of classical Chinese poetry are eight heptasyllabic lines (heptasyllabic regulated verse 七言律诗) or eight pentasyllabic lines (pentasyllabic regulated verse 五言律诗). Also popular are pentasyllabic quatrains 五言绝句 and heptasyllabic quatrains 七言绝句. An entire poem composed with alternate heptasyllabic and pentasyllabic lines, as Auden understands, has yet to be found in the history of Chinese poetry, although such a pattern occurs very occasionally in poems with quite loose prosodic rules.²

As the “book on Chinese poetry” Auden mentioned in his letter has not been identified, we cannot say with absolute certainty whether Auden’s misapprehension is due to the wrong information about Chinese poetry provided in the book or due to his own misinterpretation of the principles of classical Chinese poetry introduced correctly in that book. Like Pound and many other modernist poets, whose knowledge of Chinese literature was based on second-hand and, more often than not, unreliable sources, Auden’s understanding of Chinese poetry was not without mistakes. Nevertheless, that did not prevent him from utilizing the resources of an alien culture for his own purposes.

For Auden, traditional Chinese poetry, as well as Japanese haiku, is part of world literature that, according to Damrosch, is “received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition and the present needs of its own writers” (2003, p. 283). Unlike Pound and some other American modernist poets, who championed the Japanese haiku for its capability to highlight images in a very limited space, Auden found in that compact form a sense of order that he had been seeking through his experiments with all kinds of verse forms and a link with the more familiar western version of syllabic verse. From the outset, classical Chinese poetry had been associated closely with modern free-verse poetics so much so that many twentieth-century readers of Chinese poetry in translation thought that Chinese poetry was originally composed in free verse. The fact that classical Chinese poetry has not only rhymes but also meters seems to have been ignored by Pound and his followers. Likewise, the syllabic regularity of Chinese and Japanese poetry mattered little to them. To Auden, however, it mattered a great deal.

Auden’s syllabic verse also includes quite a few pieces that are not imitations of any traditional verse forms of western or oriental origins; both the syllabic patterns and the stanza forms in these poems are Auden’s own invention. The much

² For instance, only the first four lines of Li Bo’s “A song on visiting heaven’s crone mountain in a dream: On parting” 梦游天姥吟留别—a poem in the tradition of the Songs of Chu, also known as the Songs of the South 楚辞, the prosody of which is much freer than that of regulated verse—are in alternate 5s and 7s.

anthologized “In praise of limestone,” written in 1948, consists of four stanzas of various lengths, with alternating lines of thirteen and eleven syllables:

If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly
Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes
With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath,
A secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs
That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle
(ll. 1-6)

Mendelson points out that the subject of this poem is “the ordinary human body, with its own rounded slopes and secret system of caves and conduits” (Mendelson 2004, 56). According to Mendelson, it is deeply significant for Auden to write about the human body in syllabic verse: “Syllabic metre became Auden’s favoured medium for writing about the human body. The shared meanings signified by the regular metre correspond to the bodily rhythms which everyone has in common and which cannot be imagined as belonging only to a lost past” (57). In other words, what Auden sought in syllabic verse is a principle that provides order and necessity, however minimal, as a counterbalance to chaos and freedom, a principle that is applicable to all human beings and human groups all across the world, regardless of such categories as culture, history, gender, ethnicity and class.

The local and the universal in Auden’s syllabic verse

The globalizing enterprise of Auden’s syllabic verse does not divest his poems of their local characteristics; on the contrary, they inhabit concrete geographical, historical, or cultural spaces and are written in modern colloquial English. So it seems that there is a tension between the localism in the verbal properties and the universalism in the formal properties of his syllabic verse.

In his response to *The Kenyon Review* symposium on his poem “A change of air” (1961), Auden expressed a view of poetry that seems contradictory to his universalism:

Whatever else it may or may not be, I want every poem I write to be a hymn in praise of the English language: hence my fascination with certain speech-rhythms which can only occur in an uninflected language rich in monosyllables, my fondness for peculiar words with no equivalents in other tongues, and my deliberate avoidance of that kind of visual imagery which has no basis in verbal experience and can therefore be translated without loss.
(Auden 2015, p. 77)

In short, what Auden wished to write is poetry as Robert Frost famously defined it, that is, untranslatable speech, “with a poetic uniqueness of expression so that,

if a reader should try to translate a passage into French, say, or Italian or German, he will find that this cannot be done without loss of rhythmical values and precise shades of meaning” (Auden 2015, p. 77).

In varying degrees, the same can be said about any national poetry, so to speak. However, the fact that Auden consciously sought to underscore the untranslatability of his poetry merits further investigation. This issue can best be dealt with, I believe, within the framework of world literature, and “A change of air” serves as a convenient starting point, as it is one of the intersectional points where Auden and Goethe meet.

As revealed by Auden’s notes, “A change of air” was prompted by a “real historical event” (Auden 2015, p. 75). Early in 1961, Auden collaborated with Elizabeth Mayer on their translation of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* (*Italian Journey*) and in the poem he then wrote, “Goethe’s experiences in Italy are transformed into a parable of Auden’s experiences after he had left Italy forever” (Mendelson 1999, p. 448). That transformation is achieved by means of parabolization. Auden was careful enough to select images that are “concrete enough” to hold the reader’s interest, but which are meanwhile “devoid of any too-specific historical or geographical associations” (Auden 2015, p. 76):

Although its chaffinches, maybe, have learned
The dialect of another river basin,
A fault transformed the local building stone,
It has a priest, a postmistress, an usher,
Its children know they are not to beg from strangers.
(stanza 3)

In the third stanza, for instance, the landscape and its dwellers, with a particular emphasis on the local, are more than types or archetypes. It is in the last stanza that Auden retained one specific historical appellation associated with Goethe: “A letter from the Grand Duke to his cousin, / Remarking, among more important gossip, / That you seem less amusing than you were” (ll. 33–35).

The Grand Duke of Weimar did write a letter, although not to his cousin, complaining that Goethe had become less communicative after his return from Italy. Auden decided to retain this single historical element because he believed that, “since no reader of mine was likely to know a real Grand Duke personally, he would do as a parabolic figure standing for Society, Literary Critics, etc.” (Auden 2015, p. 76). What Auden strove to do in “A change of air,” then, was to make sure that the reader does not take it to be relevant only to Goethe or to the poet who writes it and that the reader is not “distracted from its personal relevance to himself” (Auden 2015, p. 75). In this way, the local in a poem can be translated into something equally meaningful to each individual reader, thus transcending their original historical or cultural spaces.

In terms of the formal aspects of “A change of air,” however, it is impossible to copy its rhythms in another language and at the same time preserve its subtle nuances of meaning. Although not written in strict syllabic meter, “A change of air” deviates “extravagantly” from the norm of iambic pentameter (Mendelson 1999, p. 449). The poem’s instable meter, together with its speech-rhythms,

manifests itself as a unique linguistic artifact, impermeable to easy reproduction in a foreign language.

About one and a half centuries before Auden wrote these notes, Goethe envisioned a concept of world literature that similarly worked on the tension between the local and the universal in literature. In 1823, Goethe told Eckermann that all his poems are occasional poems, in the sense that the richness of the world and the variety of life provide a poet with particular occasions for poems. Poems are suggested by “real life,” or a poet’s personal experiences, and thus have “a firm foundation” in the particularities. It is in the hands of a poet, however, that “[a] particular case becomes universal and poetic” (Goethe 1875, p. 18).

As Fritz Strich has commented on Goethe’s idea of world literature, while Goethe assigned to world literature the central task of fostering “the growth of a common humanity in its most perfect and universal form,” that does not mean that “national differences should be effaced in favour of uniformity and unanimity of all thought and feeling” (Strich 1949, pp. 12–13). In other words, according to Goethe, world literature should not be “a colourless unity”; on the contrary, it should retain the “special characteristics” of national literatures (Strich 1949, p. 52).

In his discussion of Goethe’s conversation with Eckermann on January 31, 1827, in which Goethe famously announced the coming of the epoch of world literature after a discussion of a Chinese novel he had read, David Damrosch points out that Goethe not only recognizes the commonalities between European and Chinese literature, but perceives the distinctive characteristics of the latter (Damrosch 2003, pp. 10–14). In Goethe’s conception of world literature, cultural differences are always important. Goethe was fully aware of the dialectical relationship between the local and the universal. For him, it is through the lens of nationality and individuality that the universal or “the eternally human” (Strich 1949, p. 12) can be glimpsed; he saw no value in “poems snatched out of the air” (Goethe 1875, p. 18).

Essentially, Auden is in agreement with Goethe on the relationship between the local and the universal in poetry. In an essay on Robert Frost, Auden identifies two questions “about which all men, whether they read poetry or not, seek clarification”:

1. Who am I? What is the difference between man and all other creatures? What relations are possible between them? What is man’s status in the universe? What are the conditions of his existence which he must accept as his fate which no wishing can alter?
2. Whom ought I to become? What are the characteristics of the hero, the authentic man whom everybody should admire and try to become? Vice versa, what are the characteristics of the churl, the unauthentic man whom everybody should try to avoid becoming?

“We all seek answers to these questions which shall be universally valid under all circumstances,” Auden continues, “but the experiences to which we put them are

always local both in time and place. What any poet has to say about man's status in nature, for example, depends in part upon the landscape and climate he happens to live in and in part upon the reactions to it of his personal temperament. A poet brought up in the tropics cannot have the same vision as a poet brought up in Hertfordshire and, if they inhabit the same landscape, the chirpy social endomorph will give a different picture of it from that of the melancholic withdrawn ectomorph" (Auden 1962, pp. 344–345).

In Auden's syllabic verse, the syllabic meter serves as an analogy to the unalterable conditions of human existence, which are universal under all circumstances, whereas the verbal properties—imagery, syntax, texture, tone, wording, etc. — invariably dwell in the local. In a letter to Count Stolberg, Goethe wrote, "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality" (Goethe 1986, p. 227). With the replacement of "locality" for "nationality," this would be an apt comment on Auden's syllabic poetics.

Conclusion

Auden's syllabic poetics is as universalistic as his Christian belief; indeed, it can be argued that the universalism of his syllabic poetics originated from his understanding of universal love and the coexistence and interdependence of one's neighbor and oneself. Despite all varieties of difference in race, gender, skin color, intelligence, class, or ideology, all humanity has something in common: "As creatures we are all equally slaves to natural necessity; we are not free to vote how much food, sleep, light and air we need to keep in good health; we all need a certain quantity, and we all need the same quantity" (Auden 1962, p. 88). Such an understanding of the natural necessity of human life is neatly incorporated into Auden's theology: "as a creature composed of matter, as a biological organism, every man, in common with everything else in the universe, is related by necessity to the God who created that universe and saw that it was good, for the laws of nature to which [...] he must conform are of divine origin" (Auden 2008, p. 579). By analogy, therefore, the syllabic meter serves as the minimum laws of prosody applicable to various traditions of world poetry. By conceiving English poetry, classical poetry, and oriental poetry as submitting to the same set of prosodic rules, Auden implied that it is possible to think of English poetry as on an equal footing with other varieties of world poetry. On the other hand, Auden accentuated the intrinsic uniqueness of English poetry. This does not mean that he thought English poetry is superior to poetry written in other languages. Rather, he suggested that each variety of world poetry is and should be unique and that its uniqueness will be compromised if translated into another language.

In reading and borrowing from world poetry, Auden's chief purpose was not to find something new or surprising from an alien and exotic culture, by means of which to revitalize the tradition of English poetry that had gone stale. He was more concerned about commonalities that transcend culture and history and about how to underline those commonalities in his poetics. Inspired and enriched by the prosody of world poetry, Auden's syllabic poetics does not proclaim that it is as radically

new as the modernist free-verse poetics. It is exactly because of this that it does not grow old when its moment of newness passes. Auden's syllabic poetics indicates how profoundly he has thought about allowing maximum freedom in poetry and, analogically, in a world of ever-deepening democracy and multiculturalism while preserving a minimum yet absolutely necessary sense of orderliness.

In 1952 Erich Auerbach lamented the standardization of human life and the loss of variety in literatures around the world. "All human activity," he wrote, "is being concentrated into European-American or into Russian-Bolshevik patterns; no matter how great they seem to us, the differences between the two patterns are comparatively minimal when they are both contrasted with the basic patterns underlying the Islamic, Indian or Chinese traditions" (Auerbach 1952, pp. 126–127). Auden wrote from the very center of the European-American tradition and sported Englishness in his poetry, but it would be mistaken to label him an Anglocentrist or a Eurocentrist. His championship of linguistic uniqueness is not equal to a support for cultural superiority. On the contrary, viewed in his universalism, it implies a respect for legitimate difference and for the value of particular human lives.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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