



Desire to Transcend the Symbolic in W.H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone"

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Abstract

W. H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" presents a beautiful landscape which is enshrouded in heavenly luster, but this paradisiacal bliss does not last longer, and it vanishes quickly. The loss of paradise is symbolic of what Lacan calls 'the real' due to our entry into the symbolic world. In this poem, the narrator being spell bound in the symbolic, loses its contact with the real for which he toils to return. In the material/symbolic world humans mourn throughout their lives because they feel alienated from the real. This paper is an attempt to analyze this poem from Lacanian perspective of desire as to how human beings feel alienated in the world of symbols and expresses their desire to return to the real stage.

Keywords

Desire, Imaginary, Lack, Language, Real, Symbolic, Unconscious.

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Introduction

W. H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" begins with the depiction of a beautiful "limestone landscape" of "rounded slopes with their fragrance of thyme" which is lost due to the sway of granite wastes. Limestone landscape is independent while granite wastes are feudal and isolated. The poet being affected by the spell of the granite wastes loses its contact with the Edenic realm and moves into immoderate soils in pursuit of higher ambition and ideals. This childhood memory of the bygone days leaves a psychological scar in the memory of child, and he craves to return to it. Speaking from Lacanian perspectives the lost world symbolizes the real stage where child is one with the mother and environment. But when the child sees its image reflected in the mirror, he is alienated from his real self. In this stage a split occurs between the child and environment, and he enters the symbolic stage. In this stage humans are "homesick" to return to "this region of short distances and definite places" with "springs that spurt out everywhere with a chuckle". They desire to go back to that enchanted realm "where the beauty was not so external" but their efforts to possess the lost world yields in alienation. Being possessed by the magical domain of limestone they use the tool of language to express their unconscious desire and try to regain the lost world. Language uses symbols to convey meaning but it works on the principle of lack, hence lacks the ability to translate our emotions and feelings in full. It would not be out of place to say that these opinions quietly correspond with the Lacanian idea that how one gets swayed by the illusory image reflected in the mirror and enters the territory of symbols. And how in the symbolic domain one desires, by using nameable (language), to return to the unnameable (the real).

Literature Review

Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" has been widely interpreted and analyzed from different perspectives by different researchers.

Douglas Mao (2008) writes that Auden shows Wordsworthian tendency in his poem "In Praise of Limestone". Auden presents a beautiful landscape with high mountains and huge plains. Mao asserts that "limestone landscape is a locus whose genius is the middle way" (p. 244) as it suggests readers to avoid extremities. Poem suggests that one must remain moderate whether in good or evil as we are humans. We are subject to errors and imperfection, but we need to love even amidst the imperfections. Furthermore, Auden cherishes moderation to be the guiding principle for humans as moderation is the right way to live. Auden, like Wordsworth, Ruskin, Schiller, Pater, Morris and Wilde believes that beautiful environments are "a way to a better future" (p. 253).

E. S. Shaffer (1999) discusses that "In Praise of Limestone" presents Auden's homosexual tendency. Shaffer writes that Auden and Stokes challenged socially constructed views of sexuality. Auden, like Stokes wrote against heterosexuality and was "attracted to Stokes both as an author and a potential lover" (p.89). Moreover, Auden's sexual orientation is evident in these lines of the poem "this land is not the sweet home/ Where something was settled once and for all". It reflects that these sexual preferences cannot be settled once and for all.

Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (2003) looks at Auden's poem from the perspective of praise poetry. She writes that in literary modernity there is less focus on praise poetry. However, Auden, Rilke and Mandelstam have written several poems on the subject. Gottlieb compares

Auden with Mandelstam and Rilke about writing praise poetry. "In Praise of Limestone" is a poem that praises a landscape for which the speaker yearns and wants to be there in calm and soothing environment. Gottlieb further says that Auden praises poetry in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and gives message to the world that poetry can save the world from destruction (p. 58-60).

Discussion

W. H. Auden depicts a bewitching limestone landscape of "rounded slopes with their fragrance of thyme" (3). This land is symbolic of motherly love and care. Motherly tenderness and sympathy are associated with the childhood memories where child feels one with the mother and he is not differentiated from his environment. In this phase of life child feels himself in heaven where it has sense of completeness and blissfulness as Coleridge (1994) in "Kubla Khan" puts, "For he on honey-dew hath fed/ And drunk the milk of paradise". (p. 35-36). Auden calls this landscape as mother "what could be more like mother or fitter background for her son" which symbolizes, from Lacanian perspective, "the Real" where child is self-reliant and independent. Auden writes in the beginning of the poem.

*"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,
Each filling a private pool for its fish and carving
Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain
The butterfly and the lizard; examine this region
Of short distances and definite places:
What could be more like Mother or a fitter background
For her son". (3-12)*

In the above passage the yearning passion of the poet for the neonatal stage of childhood is revealed. The poet remembers his oneness with the mother when all his desires, feelings and demands were instantly fulfilled. Mother becomes the focus of attention and child thinks that mother can fulfil all its kernel desires and wishes. The images of "rounded slopes", a secret system of caves" and "springs" are symbolic of mother which Auden calls "like mother" and "a fitter background for her son". There are two interacting agencies, the mother and the son and there is no one else what Freud (1961) calls the "undifferentiated vesicle" (p.20). child sucks its mother's breasts and gets sexual gratification without lack or restraints and "for all his faults he is loved" (14). The child knows that her/his mother wants and loves him. In Lacanian psychoanalysis this is symbolic of "the Real" where child has a close bond with the mother, as Coleridge (1994) says in "To an Infant", "Thou closely clingest to thy mother's arms/ Nestling thy little face in that fond breast/ whose anxious heavings lull thee to thy rest" (p. 12-14), and lives in harmonious maternal habitat. Mother is the love object of the child, and he/she wants to remain in this state forever. This paradisiacal state does not last longer, and its loss is inevitable. Auden beautifully poeticize that this Edenic world of innocence and freedom does not last longer due to the spell of the "granite wastes" whose magic and spatial charm attracts the individuals. This Paradisiacal charm and splendor "dissolves in water" and the poet loses this world in the pursuit of higher ambitions and

ideals. The readers feel alienated being taken away by the hex of “granite wastes”. The readers are human beings, “the inconstant ones” who are always “homesick for” the enchanted realm of the “limestone landscape” and desire to go back to it. Humans mourn that they have lost a splendid land and entered another world. In this realm, Auden expresses his desire to find the vanished splendor and glory that “dissolves in water” but it results in nothing. As he says: “If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones/Are constantly homesick for, this is chiefly/ Because it dissolves in water” (1-3). This quotation from the text is laden with meaning from the point of view of Lacan’s “Mirror stage”. The phrase “dissolves in water” is symbolic of the mirror, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, which presents the image of the poet that is identical to the poet but mediated by the mirror. At the beginning of the poem “limestone landscape” is a garden of Adonis or what Lacan calls “the Real”. As the limestone dissolves in water, so the real dissolves with the spell of the image reflected in water. This image reflected on the surface of water attracts the attention of child who identifies himself with the image reflected in watery mirror. When the child sees his image reflected in the surface of mirror and responds to it with “a flutter of jubilant activity” (Lacan, 1966, p.1). Through mirror image child gets “caught up in the lure of spatial identification” (Lacan, 1966, p.3) that appears on the surface of water and considers this copy of himself to be real. Mirror stage brings division in child who strives to distinguish between his own sense of self and the reflected appearance which is external to it. Child thinks his own body to be fragmented and in parts while the image possesses completeness and fullness. This image with which child identifies itself, alienates it from its real self and the image takes the place of self. Due to misrecognition subject is alienated from its real being or alienated in its very being, what Lacan (1966) calls “lack of being” or “alienating identity” (p. 18). As Auden says:

Come! Cried the granite wastes

.....

*“I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing;
That is how I shall set you free. There is no love;
There are only the various envies, all of them sad.
They were right, my dear, all those voices were right
And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks,
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
Where something was settled once and for all”. (48, 58-64)*

Auden uses a variety of words and phrases such as “I am the solitude” (58), “there is no love” (59), and “not the sweet home” (63) to imply thoughts of solitude and alienation which result from the “Mirror stage”. These lines reveal how one is alienated from one’s real self and a gap or rupture [unconscious] is created, and one enters another territory which Lacan calls “the Symbolic” that “promises nothing” and opens the gates to perpetual sadness.

Desire is born because of symbolic stage in which one enters world of symbols where he/she expresses his/her desire to return to that neonatal stage through “voluble discourse” [language] which Lacan calls the big “Other”. The inevitable loss of this stage sets the development in motion and the entire development is motivated by the central loss of the mother. By interacting in the world of symbols the child learns to speak language and

becomes a speaking subject where he knows different styles of speaking on different events and through language, wants to get identity. By entering into the symbolic register, the child loses the blissful site, but the loss is compensated by the language. As Milton's Satan who loses the paradise but still thinks that "What though the field be lost/ All is not lost" (2005, p. 105-106). In the same strain child not only becomes a speaking subject but a desiring subject as well where child articulates its desire for the Real through language which is a substitute satisfaction. According to Lacan humans desire in common and through the desires of others individual desires are inflected and internalized. Although the child learns the language and is "adjusted to the local needs of the valleys" (32) but he feels that he has lost something splendid and glowing. Auden says:

*"A backward
 And dilapidated province, connected
 To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain
 Seedy appeal, is that all it is now? Not quite:
 It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself
 It does not neglect, but calls into question
 All the great powers assume". (64-70)*

This shows that child thinks retrospectively of that paradise and expresses his desire through language. The phrase "seedy appeal" is loaded with meaning from Lacanian point of view that this desire is sown like a seed in the child when he enters the symbolic stage, and constantly yearns to verbalize it through language but language works on the principle of lack that it lacks the ability to communicate human desire in its true sense. It is only a medium to articulate desire and to connect to the world of the Real. As Lacan (1990) tells in an interview to BBC: "I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there is no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth is held onto the real" (p.3). Auden seems to believe that the limestone landscape [the Real] is a "back ward and dilapidated province" but it "calls into question the great power(s)" of language which cannot satiate the desire of child for pre-oedipal stage, wholly and completely. The Real is like a golden age where child is one with the natural environment which is momentary and transitory. This nature's gold cannot stay for too much and too long and it has to vanish with the advent of symbolic order. As Robert Frost (1923) quite aptly says in his poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

*"Nature's first green is gold,
 Her hardest hue to hold.
 Her early leaf's a flower;
 But only so an hour.
 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
 So eden sank to grief,
 So dawn goes down today.
 Nothing gold can stay". (1-8).*

Auden calls this "bring[ing] down the house" where the place of bliss does not remain untouched by torment and distress and the idea of everlasting happiness soon subverts into loneliness and unhappiness. Subject uses signifiers to communicate his desire, but signifiers

do not provide a definite meaning rather one sign refers to another sign. As a result, subject gets lost in search of meaning and moves from one signifier to another. In the register of language, one learns to communicate his desire with the others. He learns the dialogues which befit every occasion and Auden calls it “common prayer, adjusted to the local needs of valleys”. In the semiotic world of symbols subject learns the semiotic signs of culture, family, and religion. Through language the poet expresses his desire for the “object petit a” (Lacan, 1973, p. 112), which according to Lois Tyson (2006) “is always a lost object that can never be found” (p. 34). Although the object is lost but it is acknowledged and loved by the subject in the symbolic realm. And it is language through which one comes to know about the desire of other. As Jacques Lacan (1966) says, “Unconscious is the discourse of other” (p.145) that through other’s desires people come to know about their own that are suppressed and thrown into the farthest corner of the unconscious. Sean Homer (2005) rightly asserts about the role of other in Lacanian psychoanalysis, “it was Hegel’s great insight, contends Lacan, to reveal how ‘each human being is in the being of the other’” (p.24). In Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone” subject in the symbolic domain learns that all other subjects of the world are desiring subjects who have lost their “object petit a” and want to gain the lost glory and “like to hope, in common”. Being unable to get back to the realm of “short distances and definite places” they become pimp, deal in fake jewelry or some other profession. They think about the land “where the beauty was not so external/ The light less public” (46-47) and life was all luxury and full of happiness. Through their entry into the world of symbols their life becomes a “mad camp” where all the subjects desire in common for the Edenic world of amplex and all-inclusiveness. As Homer (2005) says that language is Other through which we learn that all the subjects are desiring subjects. They express their desire for “das ding” (the thing) through language. Consequently, by gaining the knowledge of other desiring subjects we “internalize and inflect our own desires” (p. 70). It displays that our desires are inseparably connected with the desire of others. Language becomes the tool through which these desires of others “flow into us” (p. 70). That’s why Lacan posits that desire is “always shaped and moulded by language” (p. 70).

Although the desire of the subject is partially fulfilled through the medium of language but the unnameable stage [the Real] of childhood, as Auden puts, “calls into question all the great powers” of the earth which cannot fully satiate the desire. Sean Homer (2005) writes, “The symbolic order- is never complete. There is always something leftover; an excess or something that exceeds the symbolic” (p. 65). That is why Lacan puts that “unconscious is structured like language” because unconscious is governed by the rules of language, and it is language through which unconscious comes into being. Language expresses the unconscious desire for the “object petit a” through signs, metaphors, and metonymies. Lois Tyson (2006) puts the same opinion in these words “For Lacan argues that the operations of the unconscious resemble two very common processes of language that imply a kind of loss or lack: metaphor and metonymy” (p. 29). On lack of language and its betraying ability Auden says that a poet uses signs to articulate his desire through language as poetry deals with the usages of all its linguistic sources as intelligently as possible to state our emotions and feelings, but it cannot. As Auden puts: The poet/Admired for his earnest habit of calling/The sun the sun, his mind puzzle” (70-72). Poet uses metaphors, as Derrida (1974) says “The poet...is the man of metaphor” (p.49), and metonymies to articulate the desire but language

escapes any signification, and the meaning is always deferred which makes it impossible to verbalize the desire in totality. The notion of lack of language appears in many notable poems of Auden including “Lonely Betters”. In this poem W. H. Auden emphasizes the same truth that language is a lie, and we will remain lonely with the craft of language or lying. According to Auden, language which is a source of so much beauty and splendour, and it is language which makes us superior to non-speaking animals, but it is language through which promises are broken, misunderstandings arise, and people are made heartsick. Auden writes:

*“Let them leave language to their lonely betters
Who count some days and long for certain letters;
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep”. (13-16)*

With all its deficiencies and lacks language holds the truth “onto the real” and through this very medium, desire is articulated for the limestone landscape. Although the signification is never complete but the lovers of limestone landscape who cannot ask anything better than limestone always yearn to return to that blissful site. As Lucy McDiarmid (1990) puts: “I know there is something outside this poem, and I long for it. It is something I am homesick for, and something I try to imagine; it can only be described by my feelings of longing for it. It is a power I am disturbed, reproached, and loved by” (p. 137). So “the real” for which subject is “homesick” admits that his/her quest would end in despair, and he/she would not be able to get back to those “rounded slopes” and “secret system of caves” but still desires to have the lost glory and “faultless love” which is unimaginable in this stage and no human being can live up to it, and seems to assert:

*“Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape”. (91-94)*

Conclusion

A seminal idea that is obtained from the whole conglomeration of textual/critical ideas and their analysis of is that the psychological trauma of child is revealed through the nostalgic approach towards the real. Although the trauma is never fully resolved but in compensation to the loss of the real child becomes a speaking subject and learns language. The “faultless love” which child gets in the real where “he is loved for all his faults” is unimaginable to get, yet it is through memory of the childhood that the real is always present in the psyche of subject.

Notes

¹This and all other textual references to the edition W. H. Auden, *Auden: Collected Short Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1966). Indicated by line numbers in parenthesis unless otherwise indicated.

²The Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis is a preverbal stage where child is one with the mother and environment. In this stage there is fullness, completeness, and delight where both mother and child are like lovers. In this stage mother satisfies the infant’s needs of

nourishing, caring, and fostering. Mother becomes the focus of attention and child thinks that mother can fulfil all its kernel desires and wishes. For details see Sean Homers' *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005. p.81-94).

³Mirror stage is an essay by Lacan in which he describes that between the age of 6-18 months, child sees its image reflected in the mirror and he/she gets caught up in this image which he/she considers to be his/her actual self. Mirror stage is a transitional phase between the Real and the Symbolic. For details see, Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits* (Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1966. p. 1-6).

⁴ Symbolic stage refers to the territory of language where child learns to speak language and expresses his/her unconscious desire through the medium of language. Although symbols (language) lack the ability to translate one's emotions and feeling for the lost object in toto, but it is through this very medium the truth holds onto the real. For details see Sean Homers' *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005. p.33-50).

⁵ According to Lacan language is big Other because through language law, culture and norms of the society are funneled into the subject. Through language one expresses one's unconscious desire for the real and it is through language one learns about the desires of others. For details see Sean Homers' *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁶ As Wordsworth puts in *Prelude* that when a child enters the worldly matters and acquires knowledge of custom, law and statute, it loses contact with the blissful site. This leads to perpetual sadness and alienation.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very heaven! --Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

⁷ Object petit a is the lost object of the Real stage for which humans toil to return all their lives. In the real mother and child are in dyadic relation which is broken due to the entry into another domain; the symbolic. For details see Sean Homers' *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005. p.65-80).

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