

Let Me Weigh the Counts: Auden's Horatian Syllabics

Richard Hillyer, The University of South Alabama

ABSTRACT

Syllabic verse in English has received little attention. This neglect seems especially acute in the case of W. H. Auden, who wrote a substantial amount of such verse seldom invoked as evidence of his oft-noted range and technical prowess. Casual references to Marianne Moore typically replace any deeper consideration. Much of Auden's syllabic output consists of poems patterned on three different quatrains accounting for sixty per cent of Horace's odes. Here, Auden produced quatrains equivalent in their number of syllables per line (sometimes established through systematic elision of adjacent vowels), rather than in their recreation or adaptation of Horace's quantitative prosody. Auden's Horatian syllabics also depart from their model, however, in their consistently matched line endings—akin to the masculine and feminine line endings familiar from the accentual-syllabic mainstream of pre-modern English verse, but without any accompaniment of rhyme. Auden's counterparts only rhyme insofar as they uphold some sort of recurrent pattern. On this dimension, Auden probably reacted against an innovation Robert Bridges felt he had achieved in neo-Miltonic syllabics advancing beyond their prototype by freeing not only every metrical foot in the line except the last, but that one as well. Auden knew of Bridges's prosodic experiments and had written under their influence when producing his very first syllabic poem, at the outset of his career. Thereafter, he rejected Bridges's approach both explicitly and implicitly, but still followed his lead in the broader sense of devoting great effort to making syllabics a viable kind of English verse.

Keywords: Auden, syllabics, line endings (masculine, feminine), elision, Horace, Bridges (Robert), Moore (Marianne)

In Pound's estimate, "one could almost trace the changes in British manner without wider reading than the series of attempts to give an English version of Horace" (136). Partly validating this generalization, George T. Wright notes several overlaps between Horace's work and Auden's (170-72). But Wright also equivocates as to whether these points of contact belong exclusively to "Auden's later poetry" or prove "always" present, as recurring "throughout his career" (171). Wright thus blurs the question of how the Roman poet became germane to an English one whose early and pronouncedly "British manner" yielded famously (or infamously) to a self-consciously more cosmopolitan profile—that of an Anglo-American long resident in Italy and Austria. "The Horatian tone which Auden believed was characteristic of his later work is already perceptible as far back as *Look Stranger!* and *Another Time*," Peter Porter emphasizes by contrast (133), tracing its origins to the second half of the 1930s. Beginning in the spring of 1939 and extending to the end of his life, Auden's Horatian syllabics bear out the proposition that he himself misremembered how much of his poetry at almost all stages of his career encompassed numerous "attempts to give an English version of Horace."

In form, these poems mimic three quatrains featuring prominently in Horace's odes: Alcaic, Fourth Asclepiadean, and Sapphic. Though they make no attempt to replicate Horace's quantitative prosody, Auden's imitations of this kind recreate line by line the syllable counts of the original forms: 11, 11, 9, 10; 12, 12, 7, 8; 11, 11, 11, 5. Auden nonetheless prided himself on his excellent ear for every feature of his native tongue, including its quantitative values. "As a choirboy, I had to learn, not only to

sight-read music, but also to enunciate words clearly,” he explains in *A Certain World*, “and to notice the difference between their metrical values when spoken and when sung” (73). In addition, Auden admired Robert Bridges’s experiments with quasi-classical prosody, based on principles established by William Johnston Stone. “So far as I know, Bridges was the first to write quantitative verse in English which ignores stress altogether,” Auden remarks in *A Certain World*, claiming of an “extract . . . written in hexameters” that he reprints: “no ear that listens for stresses will hear them as such” (375). For the bulk of his own quasi-classical poems, however, Auden wrote Horatian syllabics pursuing a different line of experimentation also pioneered by Bridges and likewise going against conventional expectations for stress in English poetry.

John Fuller characterizes *In Memory of Sigmund Freud* as “the first” of its kind, as a “poem . . . that Auden wrote in syllabic metre, under the influence of Marianne Moore” (294). “The Freud elegy, already begun in late October, may possibly have been syllabified after he dined with Marianne Moore and her mother on 13 November 1939,” Fuller elaborates: “His letter of the following day expresses his admiration for her work, admits to his earlier bafflement and asks some technical questions” (295). If “under the influence of Marianne Moore” denotes a “first” syllabic by Auden of any sort, however, that honor properly belongs to his untitled poem beginning “Which of you waking early and watching daybreak” (October 1929), reprinted in *The English Auden* (41-42). Here, too, Auden takes as his model the dodecasyllabic lines of Bridges’s intended magnum opus *The Testament of Beauty* (1927-29), according to Christopher Isherwood (77). Though Auden swiftly rejected “Which of you” as “pompous trash” (Mendelson 80), it still represents his earliest published attempt at syllabic versification. On the other hand, if “under the influence of Marianne Moore” signifies a mode of syllabic verse now embraced by Auden as well and specifically indebted to her, such a judgment fails to account for the primacy of his poem “They” as an Alcaic syllabic resembling *In Memory* but composed several months earlier (April 1939). The likelihood seems remote that Auden would have “syllabified” an originally different form of *In Memory*, not only “after he dined with Marianne Moore,” but also about half a year after he had produced the thirteen Alcaic quatrains of “They.” In addition, neither of these early Alcaic syllabics incorporates such hallmarks of Moore’s poetry as quotations and lines of sharply contrasting length. Above all, however, Moore’s apparently iconic status as the English language’s quintessential syllabic poet remains largely unmerited: she chopped and changed her poems so greatly that only some of them, often merely in transitional states, reveal counted syllables as the basis of their versification (Nitchie 42-73).

Another attempt to evoke the circumstances under which Auden wrote *In Memory* suggests that Fuller did not feel entirely satisfied with his investment in the de facto consensus attributing all things syllabic to “the influence of Marianne Moore”:

Some poems of 1936 and 1937 (“Casino”, April 1936; “Journey to Iceland”, July 1936; and “Schoolchildren”, May 1937) he printed from 1966 without capitals at the beginning of the lines, a practice normally indicating syllabics. If he had reprinted “Certainly our city. . .” (Spring 1936) I suspect that it would have received the same treatment. The looseness and odd enjambements of these poems are, however, related to the freedom of poems like “Spain” [April 1937], a freedom which is traceable back to the Odes of *The Orators*. Auden may well have been attempting something like the Marianne Moore

touch in these poems without the necessary strict counting of syllables, or he may have been using a classical model, perhaps via Hölderlin, whom he probably first read in March 1936. (295)

As Fuller's "normally" acknowledges, Auden did not consistently distinguish his syllabic poems by dropping capitals from the beginning of lines not also commencing sentences. As first printed, *In Memory* had capitals at the beginning of every line: this text features in Auden's *Selected Poems* (91-95). That edition also houses *Spain* (51-55), a poem officially banished by Auden as paradigmatic only of a "freedom" he came to distrust, at least in its own case. Moreover, Fuller's notion that "counting of syllables" might have any propriety when not "strict" seems dubious when various kinds of free verse can attain "freedom" through less convoluted means; this implicit defense of a neither-fish-nor-fowl poetic also clashes with his father's sensible proposal that "the reader's confident expectation of a regular mathematical pattern ought not, if initially offered, to be destroyed by the writer of syllabic verse" (Roy Fuller 48). Nonetheless, the relationship between "freedom" and disciplines either "necessary" or "strict" does appear newly important to Auden during the mid- to late-1930s. Wright goes so far as to term this interplay "parabolic even of the human situation: man must be free to choose his Necessity" (168).

But Wright's suggestive insight also depends on a looseness of categorization grouping as Alcaic not only *In Memory* but also non-syllabic poems that Auden wrote shortly beforehand (168). The extra Alcaics that Wright identifies overlap with those poems perceived by John Fuller as transitional between the "freedom" of *Spain* and *In Memory*'s "strict counting of syllables": "Casino," "Journey to Iceland," "Certainly our city," and "Schoolchildren." Wright's "variations of the same metrical scheme" encompass all four of those, plus *Spain* itself, "A Bride in the 30s" (November 1934), "Dover" (August 1937), and "Oxford" (December 1937), because "stress pattern, though varied much even within each poem, is most often 5-5-3-4 or 5-5-4-3" (168). Harvey S. Gross likewise minimizes the distance dividing *In Memory* from those non-syllabic poems Wright classifies as Alcaic. Generalizing from the Freud elegy that Auden in syllabic mode "writes a hybrid metre, grafting strong-stress rhythms to a syllabic base," Gross takes the poem's quatrains to combine an invariable syllable count of 11, 11, 9, 10 with an invariable stress count of 4, 4, 3, 4 (36). For the most part, however, any such distribution of stresses reflects the nature of the English language, as neither stress-timed exclusively nor syllable-timed exclusively. As Derek Attridge explains, "if stress-timing were the only rhythmic principle in English, or one that overrode all others, there would be no way of explaining the preference for an alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables: the number of nonstresses between stresses could vary freely without affecting rhythmic regularity" (73). Accentual-syllabic verse precisely comports with this "preference" by fixing the span within which any such "alternation" occurs; but accentual, syllabic, and free verse will accommodate stresses distanced from each other to a degree only variable within modest parameters. Accordingly, almost any line of English poetry spanning from nine to eleven syllables will tend to encompass between three and five stresses.

The most important resemblance between the Alcaic syllabic *In Memory* and some of the non-syllabic poems Wright groups with it takes a different form: Auden's imposition of matched line endings. Whereas "Schoolchildren" exhibits no regularity on this score, "Casino," "Certainly our city," and "Journey to Iceland" always feature feminine endings to the odd numbered lines and masculine endings to the even numbered lines. Holding true across a total of twenty-seven quatrains, such consistency cannot reflect the operation of chance. But this kind of uniformity also does not draw attention to itself: the differentiation of masculine and feminine line endings normally proves more conspicuous as accompanied by rhyme, which plays no part in the poems at issue; and some of Auden's matched lines conclude with words of three or more syllables whose primary stress falls earlier rather than later, thus blurring the distinction between a weak ending and a strong one.

The third quatrain of "Certainly our city" proves especially illuminating in these regards:

There was Nansen in the north, in the hot south Schweitzer, and the neat man
To their east who ordered Gorki to be electrified;
 There were Freud and Groddeck at their candid studies
 Of the mind and body of man. (*The English Auden* 165)

For the principle of matched line endings to operate here, the final "man" of the first line must not receive a stress, whereas that of the fourth line must. Avoidance of rime riche between two identical words also depends on this pronunciation. But any reader not disqualifying spondees as impossible in English might still place equal or almost equal emphasis on the two halves of "neat man." Moreover, whereas "studies" has a fixed pronunciation not dependent on metrical or rhetorical context (in and of itself, a trochee), "electrified" might serve as the equivalent of two iambs or as a word in which only the second syllable receives a stress, leaving uncertain its relation to the masculine line ending it theoretically matches.

Revealing in another way, "Casino" generates one of its feminine endings by stranding a definite article in an apparently arbitrary way:

and, as night takes up the cries of the feverish children,
the cravings of lions in dens, the loves of dons,
 gathers them all and remains the night, the
 great room is full of their prayers. (*Collected* 123)

If this were a syllabic poem, where every fourth line had to feature seven syllables ("prayers" must be monosyllabic to yield a masculine ending), "the / great" might be justified as contributing to that overall regularity. But the conclusion of the fourth quatrain ("sing towards their work") cannot amount to more than five syllables (123). Disqualified as a syllabic poem, "Casino" must be written in loosely accentual lines allowing unstressed syllables to fall at random, but only in a context where the counting of stressed ones shapes the line: a loosely four-beat line, such as "gathers them all and remains the night, the," would normally relegate the last word to the next line because it

falls after a line-completing final stress. Auden thus seems to have hesitated between imposing greater discipline on his loosely accentual quatrains and refusing to give up their considerable leeway.

With "They," Auden went to the opposite extreme of fixing the number of syllables in his lines while leaving their number of stresses variable; but he also continued to write a quatrain incorporating matched line endings. In this case, however, he juxtaposed first a pair of masculine line endings and then a pair of feminine ones, as in the opening quatrain:

Where do they come from? Those whom we so much dread,
as on our dearest location falls the chill
of their crooked wing and endangers
the melting friend, the aqueduct, the flower. (*Collected* 201)

But here two principles of regularity come into conflict, for the fourth of these lines only qualifies as decasyllabic if "flower" counts as one syllable, like "our" beforehand, which makes it a masculine ending. If elision occurs at the adjacent open vowels in "the aqueduct," thus subtracting one of four syllables, then this approach would not be consistent with Auden's system of counting elsewhere in the same poem: for instance, the third stanza's second line ("nurses no one, and we are awake and these") can only remain hendecasyllabic, as required, if "no one" and "we are" count as two syllables each (201).

In another instance, however, Auden's matched line endings offer an important guide to how he heard his own lines. The penultimate quatrain of "They" leads into the first five syllables of the last by observing how

The tawny and vigorous tiger can move
with style through the borough of murder; the ape
is really at home in the parish
of grimacing and licking: but we have

failed as their pupils. (202)

For the fourth of these lines to retain its feminine ending, "we" has to receive an emphasis that might otherwise have gone more to "have" or "but." All three of these monosyllables have significance in terms of the poem's meaning, in that any of them might legitimately appear in italics. In accentual-syllabic meters, the consistent alternation of stresses and non-stresses largely determines how readers will perceive words of one syllable capable of receiving a greater or less amount of emphasis in ordinary pronunciation. Auden's alternation of paired masculine and feminine line endings creates a temporary equivalent of this guiding principle by establishing "we have" as trochaic in its immediate context, rather than iambic, spondaic, or pyrrhic. But this contrast effect also combines with his syllable count to ensure that every fourth line embraces as a double constraint two hazards identified by Roy Fuller, thus minimizing the second and more arguable of them: "syllabics tend to impose too many merely

arbitrary and feminine line-endings" (57); "it seems to me curious that Miss Moore (and Auden following her) does not avoid writing in lines of an even number of syllables," for these "tend to the iambic" (54).

Like "They," *In Memory* features a clash between its two prosodic disciplines: syllable count and matched line endings. The transition from the nineteenth quatrain to the twentieth explains of Freud:

he quietly surrounds all our habits of growth
and extends, till the tired in even
the remotest miserable duchy

have felt the change in their bones and are cheered. (*Collected* 217)

For the last of these lines to be hendecasyllabic, "cheered" must qualify as two syllables. Though feasible in itself as an implied pronunciation (chee-ahd), the potentially analogous "tired" must scan as one syllable ("even" cannot slur down to "ev'n" without the loss of its feminine ending), and "quietly" must be two syllables rather than a possible three. Above all, however, "cheered" as two syllables cannot represent the equivalent of an iamb, and would have to strike readers as the equivalent of a spondee rather than a trochee to yield a masculine ending.

Though these features of the poem remain unchanged from its first appearance, the lone decasyllabic line quoted had originally read: "The remotest most miserable duchy" (*Selected* 93). Perhaps "-motest most miserable" subsequently struck Auden as excessively alliterative. Though the words either way prove instantly recognizable as the handiwork of the same poet referring to "the borough of murder" and "the ape / . . . in the parish," the later omission of "most" means that "miserable" counted as three syllables in the earlier version, whereas it runs to four in the final one. This change does not affect the line's feminine ending but does result in a redistribution of stresses as well. The initial version contradicts Gross's expectation that every fourth line in the Freud elegy's quatrains should house four stresses, for it most naturally scans as three anapests concluding with an additional unstressed syllable or as such a syllable preceding three amphibrachs. Counted as four syllables, "miserable" must have a stress on the first of them but could also receive one on the third, in which case it would satisfy Gross's expectation, with a quartet of stresses grouped as the equivalent of anapest, amphibrach, trochee, trochee.

Because "quietly" cannot be three syllables without disrupting the regularity of its hendecasyllabic line, the same line's "our" must be monosyllabic. But Auden did not consistently scan "our" this way, even within the one poem. *In Memory* declares that Freud prompted many responses in us,

but he would have us remember most of all
to be enthusiastic over the night,
not only for the sense of wonder
it alone has to offer, but also

because it needs our love. With large sad eyes
its delectable creatures look up and beg. (217)

The fifth of these lines requires that “our” be disyllabic. Perhaps this differentiation in implied pronunciation reflects a legitimate contrast in emphasis: “surrounds” serves to shrink and contain “our habits of growth,” whereas the yearning attributed to “the night” and the responsibility assigned to “us” create an effect of expansiveness: “it needs *our* love.” The earlier version had worded the equivalent point as “Because it needs our love: for with sad eyes” (*Selected* 94). Perhaps “for” following so closely upon and having the same sense as “Because” came to seem a flaw. Auden did not show any such concern over the more directly repetitive “but” and “but also,” however; and “large” added to “sad” risks importing “the delectable creatures” from Disney. Amid these changes, “our” nonetheless remains consistently disyllabic in the one context.

This same pronoun again figures by contrast as monosyllabic when *In Memory* numbers Freud among “those who were doing us some good, / who knew it was never enough but / hoped to improve a little by living,” on the grounds that

Such was this doctor: still at eighty he wished
to think of our life from whose unruliness
so many plausible young futures
with threats or flattery ask obedience. (215)

In the last of these lines, “flattery” could count as two syllables and “obedience” as four, or both could count as three. But though either scansion generates a decasyllabic line, only the second one secures an unambiguously feminine line ending. In this case, Auden’s two organizational principles work together in such a way as to clarify his intentions. The same point holds true of his elegy’s sixth stanza: “he / was taken away from his life interest,” Auden notes of Freud, “to go back to the earth in London, / an important Jew who died in exile” (216). Here, “he” has to carry a stress to match the line ending “interest,” which in turn has to count as three syllables rather than two to scan as a masculine line ending. Because no other perception of “interest” can make its line hendecasyllabic, readers attentive to Auden’s syllable count would attain that result even if he were not matching line endings. But whereas no ambiguity about syllable count introduces any doubt to a hendecasyllabic line that in full reads “turned elsewhere with their disappointments as he,” Auden’s matching of line endings does dictate that readers perceive that final pronoun as stressed; they might not do so otherwise.

Another line featuring no ambiguity as to syllable count nonetheless reveals an obvious error that apparently escaped Auden’s own attention. *In Memory*’s seventh and eighth quatrains explain that, with Freud dead,

Only Hate was happy, hoping to augment
his practice now, and his dingy clientele
who think they can be cured by killing
and covering the gardens with ashes.

They are still alive, but in a world he changed
simply by looking back with no false regrets;
all he did was to remember
like the old and be honest like children. (216)

The seventh of these lines upholds Auden's matching of line endings but falls one short of the required nine syllables. As first published, the elegy's wording had been identical with that of the version just quoted, with one revealing exception: "All that he did was to remember" (*Selected* 92). This difference thus seems to reflect not a conscious act of revision but an oversight that became canonical with the publication of Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957* (167). Except for being metrically defective, however, "all he did was to remember" arguably represents a better phrasing, as more economical in omitting an inessential relative pronoun similarly omitted in the previous quatrain's "[that] they can be cured." The understatement "all he did" gains greater power, too, by losing "that." By contrast, though "all he did was . . . remember" reads well as colloquial English, the superficially economical omission of "to" would remove an essential element of Auden's effective parallelism, for it ensures symmetry between verbs otherwise dissimilar in form: "remember," "be honest."

Sharing the same form as "They" and *In Memory*, "The Dark Years" (? October 1940) ties the arrival of "an Autumn cold" to this phenomenon:

as lesser lives retire on their savings, their
small deposits of starches and nuts, and soon
will be asleep or travelling
or dead. (*Collected* 222)

To be consistent with the rest of the poem, the final syllable in the first of these lines must be stressed, to yield a masculine ending matching that of "soon." Most readers encountering in any other context the words at issue, however, would naturally tend to stress neither "their" but the first syllable of "savings," the monosyllable "small," and the middle syllable of "deposits," yielding in effect a sequence of amphibrach, iamb, amphibrach. Auden's form seems to require "their" in both cases to receive a stress: emphasizing the one and not the other would be eccentric when they occur as paralleled in such close proximity. On this alternative pronunciation, "savings" cannot lose its stress but "small" might, yielding spondee, iamb, trochee, trochee, or spondee, amphibrach, amphibrach. Though the perceived meaning of the poem as a whole might influence some readers to stress "their" twice as implicitly italicized by the surrounding context, consistently matched line endings alone cannot force this result.

However counted, "will be asleep or travelling" can only have eight syllables at most, not the nine required in an Alcaic quatrain. The line following deviates from the norm as well, for the words "or dead" precede a sentence beginning "But this year the towns of our childhood." Both this apparently hendecasyllabic line and the apparently octosyllabic line before it become regular again if "or" changes location. Such a revision also yields an effective enjambment: "or / dead." Sure enough, the poem when first published (as "Autumn 1940," in *The Nation*) had read at this juncture: "Will be asleep or

traveling or / Dead; but this year the towns of our childhood" (563). Featuring different wordings and punctuation, the first version of this poem also diverges in other ways from a final version established, like *In Memory*, with the publication of Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems* (176-78). Though these additional variations never affect Auden's matched line endings, they do generate another defective line: "But the local train does not run any more" lost its first word as reprinted (223), thus becoming decasyllabic instead of hendecasyllabic. By contrast, the only difference between the first and final versions of the opening to Auden's fifteenth quatrain reflects his initial preference for capitalization at the beginning of every line, which neither improves nor impairs a sequence of words falling one syllable short: "and death is probable. Nevertheless" (223). The poem's antepenultimate line likewise only differs to this extent between the two versions and features another questionable syllable count: "give a resonant echo to the Word which was" (223). Though this scansion seems ill suited to the sense, however, the middle syllable of "resonant" can be slurred to yield a hendecasyllabic rather than dodecasyllabic line. In a similar case, but without damage to any correspondence of sense and sound, "and even our uneliminated decline" (revised from "And even the uneliminated decline") will read as appropriately hendecasyllabic if the same second word reduces to one syllable (222). Thus, the poem exists in no entirely satisfactory state; and its non-canonical first version exhibits the fewer flaws (at least as measured by regularity of form). This outcome seems a pity, as the poem features some vintage Auden, such as all of his readers, even those indifferent to his syllabics, have learned to love: "blizzards havoc the garden and the old / Folly becomes unsafe, the mill-wheels / rust, and the weirs fall slowly to pieces"; nearby are "swarming . . . discourteous villains / / whom Father's battered hat cannot wave away" (223). "There is much real feeling in this grim *mélange*," John Fuller judges, noting how its "syllabics contrive to be dignified and elegiac, even when absorbing jokes" (344). Though Auden from an early stage had become aware of his deficiencies as a proofreader of his own work, he never devised any satisfactory means of ensuring that his printed texts would be free of errors (Carpenter 116, 347, 419 n.1).

"The Dark Years" originated as an epilogue intended for *The Double Man*. Auden also wrote a prologue for this collection, another Alcaic syllabic resembling "They," *In Memory*, and "The Dark Years" in that its quatrains match a pair of masculine line endings with a pair of feminine ones. But whereas Auden retained those poems for his final collected edition, the prologue only survives in *The English Auden* as an untitled selection beginning "O season of repetition and return" (spring 1940). This poem nonetheless holds some interest as unique among his Horatian syllabics in securing both syllable count and matching of line endings at one point by splitting a word: the second quatrain's third line feeds into its fourth by referring to "the cell ma- / noeuvres and the molecular bustle" (457). Though this lineation creates the matched feminine line endings and the decasyllabic last line required by his choice of form, Auden either came to dislike such word splitting in a syllabic context or subsequently took pride in avoiding it, for his other Horatian syllabics do not resort to it, despite the sanction offered in some of Moore's work. As reprinted in *The English Auden*, this poem regains a regularity in its use of form when restoring a line changed by Eliot (in his capacity as director of poetry for Faber) so that "invisible twin" substituted for the three syllables originally concluding

the line "That is not a sorrow from the Double man" (458). Though Eliot had his reasons for this high-handed revision made behind Auden's back (John Fuller 319), it also reveals his lack of comprehension or respect for the poem's form: though the revision does not disrupt the masculine ending required at this juncture, it adds two extra syllables at variance with the hendecasyllabic line also required.

Perhaps Auden exacted elliptical revenge in his tribute "To T. S. Eliot on His Sixtieth Birthday" (May 1948). This poem takes the same form as "O season," except that its seemingly too long lines only meet their required syllable count through systematic elision. The opening sentence reads:

When things began to happen to our favorite spot,
a key missing, a library bust defaced,
then on the tennis-court one morning,
outrageous, the bloody corpse, and always,

blank day after day, the unheard-of drought, it was you
who, not speechless from shock but finding the right
language for thirst and fear, did much to
prevent a panic. (*Collected* 440)

Most of the elisions marked represent not implied pronunciations but an optional approach to syllable counting that Auden felt free to take up or not when writing syllabics. Thus, he did not expect readers to perform "day after" as if he had written *dafter*. Because "library" and "favorite" both count as trisyllabic rather than disyllabic, "outrageous" and "language" probably reduce to three syllables and two via systematic elision instead of an approach to pronunciation that (consistently maintained) would also have yielded "lib'ry" and "fav'rite."

Because the number of syllables in a word often lies open to question and Auden sometimes resorts to systematic elision, the labor of reconstructing his *modus operandi* in any putative syllabic can be considerable and involves much room for error as well as doubt. John Fuller mistakenly classifies Auden's "Ischia" (June 1948) as in a "syllabic form (13/12/7/8) . . . adapted from the form of the Freud elegy" (413) and "Ode to Gaea" (August 1954) as likewise exemplifying this same stanza (456). As chance would have it, the first five stanzas of "Ischia" all feature opening lines incorporating a single elision apiece: "There is a time to admit how much the sword decides"; "Changes of heart should also occasion song, like his"; "to see all penniless creatures as our siblings. Then"; "Dearest to each his birthplace; but to recall a green"; "is not my gladness today: I am presently moved" (*Collected* 416). Reinforcing the impression that these might be thirteen syllable lines, the fifth quatrain is the first where a second line might be suspected of featuring elision: "by sun-drenched Parthenope, a, my thanks are for you" (416). But any reader counting syllables and not anticipating the presence of systematic elision might simply conclude that this line is dodecasyllabic because of the implied pronunciation of "Parthenopea" as an unexceptionable y-glide. Not until the sixth quatrain, therefore, does Auden write an opening line that firmly contradicts Fuller's analysis of the poem's form: "from soiled productive cities. How well you correct"

(416). This dodecasyllabic line needs one extra syllable to conform with the pattern established by Fuller. Similar considerations apply in the case of "Ode to Gaea": any reader missing the elision required by the opening stanza's third line "nicest daughter of Chaos would" (perhaps perceiving this treatment of "Chaos" as a natural or feasible pronunciation) must pause at the third stanza's dodecasyllabic opening line: "and suddenly her desolations, salt as blood" (*Collected* 423). Given that this seemingly too short line affords no potentially extra syllables, the previous opening lines must be assessed accordingly: "From this new culture of the air we finally see"; "and what, in her eyes, is natural: it is the old" (423). Once both poems are recognized as featuring systematic elision, they equally stand forth as not "adapted from the form of the Freud elegy" but direct syllabic imitations of Horace's Fourth Asclepiadean quatrain. They also share matched line endings differing not only from those of "Casino," "Certainly our city," and "Journey to Iceland," but also from those of "They," *In Memory*, "O season," and "The Dark Years": feminine endings for every third line, masculine ones for every first, second, and fourth. "Ischia" and "Ode to Gaea" diverge as well, however: only the second has a rhyme scheme (aaxx).

Through "The Horatians" (April 1968), Auden produced a kind of Fourth Asclepiadean mirroring that of "Ischia" and "Ode to Gaea": the same syllable count by line, but without systematic elision, and with every third line having a masculine ending, all other line endings being feminine. Auden notes of the group he describes:

Some of you ~ have written po ~ems, usu ~ally
short ones, and some kept di ~aries, seldom published
till after your deaths, but most
make no memorable impact

except on your friends and dogs. Enthusi ~astic
Youth writes you ~ off as cold, who cannot be found on
barricades, and never shoot
either yourselves or your lovers. (*Collected* 580)

Had this poem been written with the systematic elision adopted in "Ischia" and "Ode to Gaea," it would paradoxically appear further removed from them than it is, with an opening stanza of 9, 11, 7, and 8 syllables followed by one of 11, 11, 7 and 8 syllables. Though John Fuller makes no equivalent point with respect to "The Horatians" or "Ode to Gaea," he suggests that the "form" of "Ischia" "seems peculiarly appropriate to the kind of local descriptive-meditative poem that this is" (413). Until such time as Auden's syllabics generally receive more appreciation, especially in terms of their craftsmanship, however, we cannot know much about the extent to which particular tones or themes correspond with specific expressive effects created by the presence or absence of rhyme, systematic elision, and matched line endings of one sort rather than another. But "Fairground" (June 1966), "River Profile" (July 1966), and "An Encounter" (July 1970) certainly vouch for Auden's capacity to generate utterly different poems within a single type of Horatian syllabic: Sapphic quatrains featuring systematic elision and exclusively feminine line endings.

"River Profile" begins with the cacophonous origins of its subject:

Out of a bellicose fore-time, thundering
head-on collisions of cloud and rock in an
up-thrust, crevasse-and-avalanche, troll country,
deadly to breathers,

it whelms into our picture below the melt-line. (*Collected* 605-06)

As the river changes over its course, so does the description of it:

Disemboguing from foothills, now in hushed meanders,
now in riffling braids, it vaunts across a senile
plain, well-entered, chateau-and-cider-press country,
its regal progress

gallanted for a while by quibbling poplars,
then by chimneys. (606)

Only "country" (a refrain furnishing the feminine ending to the third line in every quatrain save the last) proves a common element here in otherwise highly unlike passages from the same poem, which thus reads overall as a more thoughtful and subtle version of the project undertaken in Robert Southey's *Cataract of Lodore* (1820). Differing in turn from any portions of "River Profile," "Fairground" offers in lieu of description a psycho-social analysis of its subject's appeal, as in the sixth quatrain:

Fun for Youth who knows his libertine spirit
is not a copy of Father's, but has yet to
learn that the tissues which lend it stamina,
like Mum's, are bourge[]ois. (*Collected* 605)

By further contrast, "An Encounter" fleshes out an anecdote about Pope Leo I's success in warding off an impending attack on Rome by Attila the Hun, as when narrating how

Their parley was held out of earshot: we only
know ~ it was brief, that suddenly ~ Attila
wheeled his horse and galloped back to the encampment,
yelling out orders.

Next morning the site was vacant: they had vanished,
never to vex us again. What can Leo ~ have
actually said? He never told, and the poets
can only imagine

speeches for those who share a common cosmos. (*Collected* 648-49)

Notwithstanding the superb quatrain enjambment qualifying the apparently complete thought “poets / can only imagine”), with its corollary lack of illusion about the importance of “a common cosmos,” the assumption about cultural identity enshrined in “us” still seems glib, especially in a narrative context not successfully avoiding the clichés of potted history (“yelling out orders”). Moreover, Auden’s systematic elision appears to go missing in the second of the lines quoted. By analogy with “poets,” “know it” should perhaps have halved its two syllables; “suddenly Attila” likewise looks a candidate for syllabic reduction on the same principle as “only imagine.” The third ~ inserted above underscores the ostensibly anomalous character of the line at issue, for it registers a further consistency in Auden’s systematic elision: the same sound can only be elided once, or in one direction. Regarding the apparent irregularity of an unpublished haiku that probably represents its author’s swan song (“He still loves life / But O O O O how he wishes / The good Lord would take him”), Chester Kallman “explained that Auden’s practice was to elide two adjacent vowels, so that O O O O would count as two syllables and not four,” yielding a total of seventeen, though not the standard distribution of them as 5, 7, 5 (Carpenter 450, 450 n.1). Similarly, “Le_o have” reduces from three syllables to two, not to one syllable (“Le_o_have”). Likewise, the earlier phrase “Le_o ~ he_ answered” supplies three rather than two of the five syllables required by the quatrain ending to which it belongs (648). The one line from “An Encounter” thus reads as if it belongs in a Sapphic syllabic with exclusively feminine line endings but no systematic elision, such as “The Garrison” (May 1969).

The later Auden’s increasing reliance on exclusively feminine line endings for his Horatian syllabics maintains a career long investment in matched line endings while also revealing a marked preference for one kind in particular. Whereas Roy Fuller refers to “the problem of the ubiquitous feminine ending,” Auden treats this phenomenon as more and more welcome (60). In the case of his Alcaic syllabic “Moon Landing” (August 1969), his emergent preference might also function as a sly metrical conceit, for the poem begins by noting how

It’s natural the Boys should whoop it up for
so huge a phallic triumph, an adventure
it would not have occurred to women
to think worth while, made possible only

because we like huddling in gangs and knowing
the exact time: yes, our sex may in fairness
hurrah the deed, although the motives
that primed it were somewhat less than *menschlich*. (Collected 632)

Translating as *human* or *humane*, the last of these words aptly foregrounds “*men*” while also maintaining the poem’s exclusively feminine line endings. Of course, these are associated with women only by analogy, itself weak, on the basis that unstressed line endings are less strong than stressed ones, and thus occupy the same category as the supposedly weaker sex. But the conventional terminology has long been what it remains, however sexist; and Auden works both with and against it. On the one hand, his poem

illustrates how exclusively feminine line endings can function as a source of strength; on the other, it achieves that power by invoking a stereotypical concept of women, but for the purposes of symbolically undermining a masculine will to power. Auden's recuperation of feminine line endings as other than weak does not coincide with articulating a feminist outlook, however: he primarily scoffs at male arrogance, valuing female otherness only as a corollary to that agenda.

In "Ode to Terminus" (May 1968), Auden makes his line endings expressive of his theme by reserving until the very end an exception to the rule. This Alcaic syllabic celebrates the "God of walls, doors and reticence," by drawing a contrast: "blessed is the City that thanks you / for giving us games and grammar and metres," whereas "abhorred in the Heav'ns are all / self-proclaimed poets, who, to wow an / audience, utter some resonant lie" (*Collected* 609). The poem thus concludes with an appropriately big bang: "lie" has the last word as the sole masculine line ending. The sixty-three prior, feminine line endings sometimes do more, however, than just set up this dramatic crescendo. Anyone reading the phrase "all / self-proclaimed poets" will naturally pronounce it as the equivalent of two amphibrachs. But an enjambment divides "all" from the rest of its word group, so its exact place in the unfolding syntax remains momentarily unresolved. In any other metrical context, it might therefore invite the sort of stress it would receive if, say, Auden were writing about *all flamboyant poets*. But with sixty-two feminine line endings preceding it, the word in question will seem an unstressed syllable to any alert reader, who can therefore enjoy the suspense created by the enjambment without experiencing metrical uncertainty on top of mild syntactical uncertainty. Unusually, but helpfully, Auden also flags the monosyllabic pronunciation of a word otherwise ambiguous: "Heav'ns."

In his Alcaic syllabic "Epistle to a Godson" (April 1969), Auden shows a different kind of ingenuity when articulating an aesthetic ideal. Maintaining a norm of feminine line endings throughout, the eighteenth quatrain enjambes into the nineteenth via this claim:

to give a stunning

display of concinnity and elegance
is the least we can do, and its dominant
mood should be that of a Carnival. (*Collected* 626)

Here, Auden evokes the "mood . . . of a Carnival" with a concluding pair of lines whose twenty syllables offer a suitably jolly cadence: the equivalent of an anapestic heptameter "catalectic," as defined by Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum, in having "a syllable less than the line requires" (187). Detecting a much briefer outburst of anapests in Moore's poem "The Jerboa" and deeming it "inappropriate," Roy Fuller rules: "As twelve-tone music must avoid the old concord, so—with, as I think, more sense—syllabics must in general avoid regular stress, certainly any stress pattern that calls attention to itself" (56). Whether or not the sheer brazenness of Auden's recourse to "regular stress" would have redeemed it by this criterion, it proves so overt that it even generates an internal module of nearly rhymed anapestic dimeter: "is the least we can do, [/]

and its dominant [/] mood.” Though Auden perhaps mocks himself when thus stepping forth as Philip Spender's conga-line godfather, Orlan Fox notes his “deep sense of carnival” (173).

Auden's contingent recourse to anapaestic heptameter in the midst of a syllabic poem underscores an important point about syllabic verse in English. According to his essay-collection *The Dyer's Hand*,

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* [Racine, *Phèdre* 2.629] reminds us of *The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold.* (297)

Though Auden often expressed a crude bias against Gallic culture, he does not evince it here, where he seems rather to emphasize how alexandrines inevitably get lost in translation, even when read in their original form, for Anglophone speakers who cannot “share a common cosmos” with Francophone ones, despite their best efforts. But such a judgment might also be taken as spelling doom for any attempt to write syllabic verse in English: if Anglophone readers cannot help imposing stresses on syllabic lines written in a largely atonic language such as French, how will they avoid doing so in relation to comparable lines as written in their own tongue? Any such question nonetheless ignores the corollary of Auden's point: for Francophone speakers, Byron's poem will seem to have been written in alexandrines. Because Anglophone poets and readers cannot help being competent in the same way, they equally perceive their own language as one where stress proves paramount. Auden could not even try to write syllabic verse in English that would read the same way as an alexandrine processed by Francophone speakers; he could only distribute his lines' unavoidably audible stresses in a manner either familiar or unfamiliar from prior exposure to the accentual-syllabic norms of post-Chaucerian English verse.

Otherwise, the constant in all of Auden's Horatian syllabics remained his commitment to matched line endings. His practice in this regard lacks precedent unless his dissatisfaction with “Which of you” and its model caused him to renounce a significant degree of freedom that Bridges had claimed as an innovatory feature of his own syllabic verse. The dodecasyllabic lines of Bridges's *Testament* developed from his study of Milton's prosody, in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* especially. Though few readers have been convinced by Bridges's account of Milton's versification, not least because he analyzes that poet's lines as both syllabic and organized in metrical feet, his findings stimulated the prosodic experiments he made during the final stage of his life. He conceived of himself as producing

strictly syllabic verse on the model left by Milton in *Samson Agonistes*; except that his system, which depended on exclusion of extra-metrical syllables (that is, syllables which did not admit of resolution by “elision” into a disyllabic scheme) from all places but the last, still admitted them in that place, thereby forbidding inversion of the last foot. It is

natural to conclude that, had he pursued his inventions, his next step would have been to get rid of this anomaly. (227-28, italics reversed)

Thus, Bridges himself took the “next step” that Milton’s death or timidity left untaken, replacing his fixed “last foot” with one as free as any before it to incorporate “inversion.” Auden, in turn, undid this “next step” when producing matched line endings tantamount in each case to a fixed “last foot” concluding each line, while maintaining overall a more flexible conception of lineation than Bridges had achieved. But Auden did not thereby aspire to recreate Milton’s prosody, however interpreted. Rather, he looked both forward and back with syllabic quatrains announcing his identity as (inter alia) a Horace for the twentieth century.

WORKS CITED

- Attridge, Derek. *The Rhythms of English Poetry*. English Language Series 14. London: Longman, 1982.
- Auden, W. H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Random, 1962.
- . *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957*. New York: Random, 1966.
- . *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*. 1970. New York: Viking, 1974.
- . *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Random, 1976.
- . *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 1977. London: Faber, 1988.
- . *Selected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 1979. London: Faber, 1981.
- Bridges, Robert. *The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges*. Enlarged ed. 1931. Oxford: Clarendon, 1945.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *W. H. Auden: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton, 1981.
- Fox, Orlan. “Friday Nights.” Spender. 173-81.
- Fuller, John. *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*. 1998. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
- Fuller, Roy. *Owls and Artificers: Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. 1971. Le Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974.
- Gross, Harvey S. *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry: A Study of Prosody from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1965.
- Isherwood, Christopher. “Some Notes on the Early Poetry.” Spender. 74-77.
- Mendelson, Edward. *Early Auden*. New York: Macmillan, 1975. *The Nation* Dec. 7 1940.
- Nitchie, George W. *Marianne Moore: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1969.
- Porter, Peter. “Auden’s English Language and Style.” *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*. Ed. Stan Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 123-36.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. 1961. London: Faber, 1963.
- Shapiro, Karl, & Beum, Robert. *A Prosody Handbook*. New York: Harper, 1965.
- Spender, Stephen, ed. *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- Wright, George T. *W. H. Auden*. Rev. ed. Twayne’s United States Authors Series 144. Boston: Twayne, 1981.