

Daniel Benyousky

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Blurred by the “old moonlight of romance”: The Critique of Sublimated Love in John

Keats and W.H. Auden’s Poetry

In the final stanza of W.H. Auden’s poem “In Sickness and in Health,” the speaker encourages his lover to refrain from “blurring with old moonlight of romance / The landscape of our blemishes” (105-106). Auden goes to considerable pains throughout the poem to pierce this “old moonlight of romance” that blurs the vision of lovers to their solipsistic tendencies. Indeed, this inward focus leads to a sublimated vision of love, one that Auden endeavors to critique. Auden’s use of the phrase “old moonlight of romance” is a direct allusion<sup>1</sup> to John Keats’s poem *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a poem in which Keats also levies a critique on sublimated visions of love that are blurred by the mists of “old romance” (41). In light of these critiques of sublimated love, an important concern then arises whether or not these poets propose their own viable alternative vision of love. I contend that Keats, though coming very close to finding an alternative solution to his critique of sublimated love, ultimately falls short. I argue that Auden, on the other hand, successfully proposes a tenable alternative vision of love to the “old moonlight of romance” that he critiques.

My use of the terms sublimated love and solipsism first beg some definition. Love for both poets is centrally depicted in bodily and sensual terms in the form of romantic love with a specific lover. Furthermore, romantic love is closely related to divine love, whether in reaction to what others commonly perceived to be divine love, in the case of Keats, or in the acceptance of divine love, as occurs with Auden. Inherent in the critique of sublimated love for both poets therefore is the consideration of how one rightly seeks both romantic and divine love. Both poets are critiquing those that perceive themselves to be pursuing a higher order of love, but in

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<sup>1</sup> There are many other smaller allusions to Keats in the poem that I include in my article-length paper.

reality are chasing a disordered love. A solipsistic or narcissistic focus inward is the result of the sublimated love that both poets are critiquing.

Keats views sublimated love as humanity's forsaking of the present bodily and earthly reality in order to focus on achieving a future heavenly bliss. He considers this sublimated love a disingenuous avoidance of and a protection from the immediate suffering that humans necessarily experience, that either ends in solipsism or escapism. In the poem *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats critiques the Christian Church for promoting this sublimated love. Auden, on the other hand, critiques sublimated love as an individual's concealment of their offenses toward another, particularly toward their lovers, out of a narcissism that venerates reason in a warped fashion. Auden viewed this love as solipsistic, though unlike Keats, Auden is not critiquing Christianity, but maintaining that all humanity is guilty of such narcissism. The poem "In Sickness and in Health" demonstrates this view, where moving beyond this selfish, sublimated love requires a love beyond, though including, the senses, through an orientation toward the Christian God.

Auden and Keats have rarely been considered in conjunction with each other within scholarship. Robert Pack, in his essay "The Idea in the Mirror: Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness," examines Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and Auden's "Shield of Achilles," where he argues that Keats and Auden, seek to move from "the danger of despair to a modified and redirected version of hope" (64). It is a fruitful study, though Pack's emphasis is on the poet's consciousness of their art, not sublimated love. Alan Jacobs wrote an essay titled "Beyond Romanticism: Auden's Choice of Tradition," yet Jacobs has very little to say about Keats. Given this dearth of scholarship on the two poets together, it will be profitable to consider how they pursue similar critiques of solipsistic visions of love, yet which lead them to different conclusions. I argue that Auden's trajectory is ultimately more sustainable, as Keats's appears to employ the very solipsistic thinking that he is criticizing in his poem.

Robert Ryan provides a magisterial study of the context surrounding Keats's critiques of divine love to Christianity in *Keats: The Religious Sense*. He states that the Church in Keats's time

was, “A religious organization intellectually becalmed, spiritually desiccated, and aesthetically impoverished, whose official spokesmen were worldly, self-serving chaplains to the status quo in a repressive society” (21). Moreover, Ryan discusses that the Eucharist, the profound, mysterious, and beautiful heart of the Anglican service, was rarely taken in Keats’s time (20). It therefore becomes less surprising that Keats was “formulating an alternative system of religion,” in the vein of natural religion, or religion that was based on reason, rather than revelation (23). Keats’s “alternative system” is nowhere more conspicuous than in his letter to George and Georgiana in early 1819. He first critiques what he perceives as the Christian view of sublimated divine love, “The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is ‘a vale of tears’ from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe straitened notion!” (qtd. in Wolfson 250) Rather than focusing on the present, mixed with both joy and sorrow, Keats believes that Christianity promotes a repression of the reality of this world in exchange for a false hope of redemption in the next. Keats then elaborates on his adaptation of the “vale of tears,” his famous “vale of Soul-making,” which he believes to be “a grander system of salvation than the chrysteain [sic] religion,” where suffering forms the human soul, “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?” (qtd. in Wolfson 251)

Keats enacts his “grander system” in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a poem in which he also critiques the “old romance” of sublimated love. Keats began writing the ironic romance in early 1819. Keats’s hero in the poem, Porphyro, successfully awakens his lover, Madeline, from her life in a dream world focused on the outmoded Christian vision of the “vale of tears.” Porphyro realizes his ambition by sensual means; by the feast he prepares for her in her bedroom, by playing music on his lute, and by sexually consummating their relationship. The poem ends with the two lovers escaping the shadowy world of “old romance.”

The priest, called the Beadsman in the narrative, as well as Madeline’s family, exemplify the staid Christian vision in the poem. The old Beadsman is praying his rosary in the opening

stanza, and the imagery that Keats uses portrays the Beadsman, the representative of the Christian Church in the poem, as possessing little or no awareness of sensation and imagination. His hands are, “Numb” as he prays the rosary, demonstrating his lack of feel as he “told” his rosary, indicating his prayer as a monologic one-way communication, not a dialogue with God (5). Moreover, as he returns to the castle from his prayer, he is like the dead among the living, “already had his deathbell rung; / The joys of all his life were said and sung: / His was harsh penance on St. Agnes’ Eve” (22-24).

The festivities at the castle on the eve of St. Agnes’s feast day, depicted as “triumphs gay / Of old romance,” are critiqued by Keats as “visions of delight” and therefore from the beginning of the poem are depicted as an escape from reality (40-41; 47). The revelers’ instructions to Madeline not to “look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire,” are ironic, recalling to mind his comments on the “vale of tears,” as Keats is imbuing his poem’s world of “old romance” with his critical view of the Christian vision of heaven (53-54). However, the poet is clear to present Madeline as not completely deluded, as “her maiden eyes divine” demonstrate that she possess a latent divinity, despite being “Hoodwink’d with faery fancy” (57, 70).

As Madeline is lost in this hazy world of “old romance,” Porphyro is demonstrably not. When he arrives at the castle, he is distinctly outside of what we have seen Auden call the “old moonlight of romance,” as Porphyro is, “Buttress’d from moonlight” and therefore is not led astray by this blurring light (77). Keats further employs a wonderful double image of the castle as Porphyro enters, comparing it first to Porphyro’s heart as an inverted metaphor of his storming his enemies’ stronghold, calling his heart “Love’s fev’rous citadel” that is prepared to resist any attack (82). In addition to likening the castle to Porphyro’s love, Keats persists with his critique of Christianity’s neglect of earthly reality by characterizing the castle as “that mansion foul” (89).

Madeline’s enmeshment in the world of “old romance” is further portrayed in her bedroom, where as she sleeps “legion’d fairies pac’d the coverlet, / And pale enchantment held

her sleepy-eyed” (168-169). The dusky moonlight of romance is furthermore shining its light upon Madeline as she gazes out of the window, “Full on this casement shone the wintry moon / And threw warm gules on Madeline’s fair breast” (217-218). Keats is clearly using these images to portray the light of the moon as obfuscating. The moonlight of “old romance” upon “Madeline’s fair breast,” thereby impeding the natural desire of her heart toward bodily love, distracts her with misguided visions of heaven.

Madeline’s circumstances therefore present Porphyro with the opportunity to awaken her from the world of “old romance.” Like Milton’s Satan, Porphyro comes “Stol’n to this paradise” to disrupt her illusions (244). He comes out of hiding and moves toward the sleeping Madeline’s bed, “where the faded moon / Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set / A table” (139, 253-255). Porphyro sets his sensual feast on this spiritual feast day of St. Agnes, where he hopes to awaken Madeline from her misguided focus on the “vale of tears” by overwhelming her senses to bodily, earthly realities. With this sensual feast, Porphyro begins to directly address Madeline with the language of love and worship, “And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake! / Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite” (276-277). Porphyro’s plan works after he plays “La belle dame sans mercy” on his lute (292). Madeline soon begins to identify the reality that Porphyro has long wanted her to see, “And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear / How chang’d thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!” She decides that she does not want to remain in this dream world any longer, “Oh leave me not in this eternal woe” (315).

Much has been made of the scene of sexual consummation between Porphyro and Madeline. Jeffrey Cox provides an even-handed approach to the scene, as he argues that by offering Madeline sex, Porphyro is attempting to guide Madeline toward a rejection of the Christian escape to transcendence, to “endorse a romance of reality” (64). The lovers enact a “Solution sweet,” which conveys both their sexual union, as well as the poem’s resolution to the “old romance” (322). Cox captures this thought well by observing that “Porphyro offers her the one thing her dream lover cannot: sex, embodied love” (64). Through their “embodied love,”

Keats feel he achieves a movement beyond the deluded Beadsman-like escapism from the earthly realities that traditional religion like Christianity emphasized.

Yet the poem ends with a puzzling escapism of its own, “Let us away, my love, with happy speed” (347). The lovers become “like phantoms” in their escape from their faery world (361). Indeed, “they are gone: ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm” (370-371). What is intended to be a triumphant fleeing from a corrupt world of escapism becomes a sad and solipsistic escape itself. Rather than pursue a renewal of their own world, the lovers, having acclimated themselves to the senses, escape this world. Their romantic love turns solipsistic, where in the final stanza they leave Madeline’s family to remain in torment in their dreams, desert Angela, so integral in helping the lovers, who then dies, and abandon the Beadsman in a fashion similar to the way God does humanity in Keats’s account. This is a problematic end to Keats’s critique of sublimated love in the poem.

Auden’s critique of sublimated visions of love in his poem “In Sickness and in Health” also explicitly censures the “old moonlight of romance,” yet ends up seeking the very “system of salvation,” Christianity, that Keats criticizes. The speaker does not awaken his lover to the reality of the present bodily, earthly existence through sensual pleasure like Keats does in his poem. Rather, Auden uses the body to demonstrate the disorder that can and does occur when a lover becomes lost in the idealism of love and the needs of their own body within that idealism, at which point the lover neglects to consider the body of their beloved. Moreover, Auden asserts in the poem that the only way to dispel the “old moonlight of romance” is for a lover to become aware of his or her selfishness, through forgiveness of their lover, and, through a repentant turning toward the Christian God, who is addressed as “Love” personified in the poem (94).

A love poem written for Chester Kallman in 1940, the poem begins with human love in a disordered state; however, love acts to creatively reorder the body. Auden maneuvers from disembodied “fingering lips” at the beginning of the poem that eventually forms a “crowd / Of poaching hands and mouths,” parts of the body which do not possess a definite and cohesive

body, to the fully configured bodies in the lines, “Till the performance of those offices / Our bodies, Thine opaque enigmas, do, / Configure Thy transparent justice too” near the end of the poem (30-31, 86-88). Auden does not protest the importance of bodily love or demur at the significance of the present earthly reality. Indeed, Auden foregrounds the human body in the poem, calling for is an ordered perspective on this “embodied love.”

The poet is additionally claiming from the beginning of the poem the importance of suffering involved in romantic love. Yet the poet cautions against merely feeling a self-centered “Sorrow,” a self-serving sort of sadness. Without seeking the “forgiveness” of the partner, the lover’s gesture deteriorates into a languishing “noise / At drunken feasts” serving “glittering generalities,” thereby focusing on the abstract idea of love, or in a more damaging sense, a self-absorbed notion of love, not the particular body and being of the lover. Forgiveness therefore allows pain or sorrow to be transformed into love. Moreover, suffering promotes an ordered love for the speaker. Instead of eliminating the “Black / Dog,” an image of death, from the lovers’ realm, the speaker instructs his lover (and his own heart) not to, “Think lightly to contrive his overthrow” (13). The speaker continues, “No, promise nothing, nothing, till you know / The kingdom offered by the love-lorn eyes / A land of condors, sick cattle, and dead flies” (14-16). Therefore, acknowledging the depth to which this death dwells in the human landscape combats the “old moonlight of romance.”

Furthermore, the speaker considers the distorted psychology humans possess, “How warped the mirrors where our worlds are made” (21). This image of the internal mirror, the self, leads the speaker to encourage his lover to soberly consider the warped nature of humanity’s mirror, an allusion to the doctrine of Original Sin, which states that humanity was born in a sinful state requiring external redemption. These internal mirrors roughly correspond to the imagination for Auden, and provide an interesting departure from Keats’s notion of the imagination. The difference for Auden is that the imagination is already corrupted. An awareness

of this corruption and that human “Sensations” cannot save the imagination is vital for Auden. Ultimately, some external force is required for redemption.

Auden further suggests that left to a life of “Sensations,” lovers would desire safety above the difficult sacrifices of the self that are necessary in loving another person, where, “We are the deaf immured within a loud / And foreign language of revolt,” and furthermore “a crowd / Of poaching hands and mouths who out of fear / Have learned a safer life than we can bear” (29-32). The disembodied “crowd” fails to form a coherent body due to its narcissistic focus. Stephen Schuler is helpful in pointing out Auden’s own definition of the term crowd from “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” as one that is self-seeking in nature: “a crowd loves neither itself nor anything other than itself” (qtd. in Schuler 156). This incoherent body further attests to the disorder humanity’s “warped” mirrors causes.

Auden continues critiquing sublimated love, as the speaker directly addresses his lover, “Beloved, we are always in the wrong,” where lovers handle “so clumsily our stupid lives, / Suffering too little or too long, / Too careful even in our selfish lives (57, 58-60). It is at this point that Auden’s poem again shifts dramatically from *St. Agnes*. Whereas Keats rejected an external transcendent power because of his perception that escapist Christianity was unable to tolerate the negative capability inherent in life, Auden remains convinced that the only way to maintain this tension is to rely on the external transcendent power of the Christian God. The poet achieves this in the poem through the chaos of the “decorative manias,” out of which “comes a voice / Which utters an absurd command—Rejoice” (63-64). Obeying this “absurd command,” which demonstrates a clear Kierkegaardian influence, leads a shift in voice, to the voice of God, indicated by italics in the stanza, where he levies questions in a register reminiscent of the book of Job: “*Who showed the whirlwind how to be an arm*” (70).

It is at this moment in the poem that the disordered love considered to this point might transform into an ordered love. It introduces Auden’s alternative to the sublimated love of the “old moonlight of romance.” In his questioning, God affirms that it is only through his



command that he creates “*A living corpus out of odds and ends*” and shows these bodies the harmony necessary, “*To dance into a segregated charm*” (66; 69). The voice continues to emphasize that lovers are dependent for the ordering of their bodies on the God who “*gardened from the wilderness of space / The sensual properties of one dear face*” (71-72). And recognizing this creation and ordering of the human body indicates that the lovers may now be prepared to have their love ordered as well.

God’s command to “Rejoice” serves as a beautiful mirror of ordered love. This is reflected by Auden’s diction, as he cleverly utilizes the term “Rejoice” as a mirror between the speaker and God, where the last word by the speaker in stanza eight, the first word by God in stanza nine, and the first word in stanza ten are all “Rejoice” (65, 66, 73). The speaker’s response acts as a movement toward God and demonstrates how Auden’s critique of sublimated love offers a feasible, outward focused alternative, combining the sensual and the spiritual, the present and the future. This love seeks a harmonic dialogue while moving away from monologic disorder, a dialogue in concert not only with the human lover, but with divine love as well.

Auden binds the poem together, along with his critique of sublimated love through the means of forgiveness, sacrifice, and a response to God, appropriately enough, with a ring. The wedding ring serves as a profound emblematic, yet material significance, as the speaker entreats his lover to heed the prudence of his logic, while simultaneously seeking the voice that uttered the “absurd command” to, “Describe round our chaotic malice now, / The arbitrary circle of a vow” (79-80). From this point forward in the poem, the speaker alternates between addressing his lover and God. Instead of the former binary structure, their speech has a more resilient triangular configuration. This sturdy triangular structure helps the lovers avoid sublimated love, where “reason may not force us to commit / That sin of the high-minded, sublimation, / Which damns the soul by praising it” (81-83).

The speaker seeks to achieve this desire by nimbly providing images of what he hopes the lovers’ affection will not become, “That this round O of faithfulness we swear, / May never wither to an empty nought” or “petrify into a square,” or allow, “Mere habits of affection freeze

our thought / In their inert society” (97-98; 99; 100-101). In one final call to refrain from sublimated love, the speaker begins the appeal, “Lest, blurring with old moonlight of romance / The landscape of our blemishes, we try / To set up shop on Goodwin Sands” (105-107). Rather than allow the “old moonlight of romance” to shipwreck the lovers on “Goodwin Sands,” a large sand bank off the coast of Kent that has shipwrecked many vessels, the speaker seeks instead to “love soberly,” while yet remaining in the tension of uncertainty (108). To this end he prays, “to us / Remain nocturnal and mysterious” (109-110). Auden here achieves a remarkable Keatsian negative capability without forcing the Christian God out of the equation, by abiding in the mystery of God, while yet affirming and ascribing to the dogmas of the Christian Church.

As Keats critiques sublimated love, he desires uncertainty. Not only does this uncertainty accurately illustrate the human condition for Keats, but he believes it allows for more expansive freedoms that many eschew. He is particularly critical of the English Christianity of his day, which he regards as escapist in nature. This form of Christian escapism does not allow for the uncertainty that Keats seeks. Yet, oddly enough, the lovers at the end of *The Eve of St. Agnes* attempt an escape of their own, one that says nothing of the hardship lovers inflict upon one another, and one that ultimately fails to achieve any sort of viable transcendence. These are significant omissions by Keats. Auden, in contrast, foregrounds the need to be aware of this solipsism in order to transcend it. In his poem “In Sickness and in Health” he demonstrates in his critique of sublimated love, through some fascinating parallels to Keats, that Keats’s vision of Christianity in his writings, though complex, is only of a fraction of the Church. Auden establishes that dogma and uncertainty can coexist. Auden’s view permits a consideration of human suffering, so crucial to Keats, but also one that forms a sturdy triangular structure between lovers and God. I contend that Auden is therefore more successful with his disenchantment of the “old moonlight of romance,” which he affirms in his essay “Writing,” “Poetry is not magic. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate” (27).