

The Politics of Affect in W. H. Auden's Elegy

W.H. Auden's 1930s, as a leader of the Auden Group and a poet of the Left, was literally a time of political and economic turbulence. The ever-shaking world of history, economy, and society, including the rise of Nazism, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), and the global economic crisis following the Great Depression in the United States, made Auden think about the political influence of poetry.

Apparently, Auden believes that works of art could influence the political changes of readers. Uniquely, however, he thinks that the political influence of poetry causes a change in the reader through a 'detouring' way rather than a direct way like propaganda in a totalitarian society. This idea can also be found in *the Poet's Tongue*, which he mentions himself.

(Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.)

For Auden, poetry does not work in the same way as propaganda, which directly teaches, demands, and asserts political change to people. Poetry plays a role in leading the reader to a certain point through the poetic beauty. In other words, the "autonomous" aesthetics of poetry change the reader's consciousness, which makes it possible to get politicality in a way that contributes to historical changes (Kim 15). It can be said that Auden paid attention to the possibility of political aesthetics with the 'detouring' energy of poetry.

Auden's poetry can be seen as paying attention to the politics of Affect in the poetry's aesthetic energy. The aesthetic energy created by poems does not physically and directly change real world. However, its aesthetic energy can reveal denial and rejection of reality by detouring social and political situations (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 18). Poetry leads people to imagine a better life beyond the limits of norms restricted by real society, and to expand the base of consciousness into a space that can liberate the current absurdity. In this space of liberation, aesthetic energy stimulates the readers' senses and perception, and makes them look at the surroundings anew. Aesthetic energy through literature is to make readers exercise and affect within their bodies, constantly generate and interact with new events, and seek small and large changes (Masumi 25). It can be seen that the aesthetic energy of poetry has an affection on the readers and detouringly changes their political perspective and behavior.

Then, how is Auden able to affect while maintaining the tension between

poetic beauty and politics? Jahan Ramazani traces his detouring way of political-aesthetic affection, analyzing Auden's *Elegy*. Ramazani says that Auden took a method of imitation that "imitates" the language of the dead who is the object of mourning (176). Auden "challenges" their authority by imitating the language of the mourning object through intentional poetic representation (178), but tries to convey public intent through poetic tension that emerges by "distinguishing" the dead and the poet himself (176). The tension between imitating and distinguishing the dead in the *Elegy* can be interpreted as Auden's own way of taking both the political perspective and the aesthetic energy of the poems.

Therefore, this presentation will analyze his ~~two~~ poems "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" and "~~In Memory of W.B. Yeats~~". Borrowing the dead's language, Auden represents mourning and poetic aesthetics with which the poet can achieve the politics of affect in a detouring way through poems' aesthetic energy. In the first body, focusing on "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," I will analyze the acquisition of aesthetic energy through poetic representation that imitates and distinguishes the language of the mourning object. ~~In the second body, focusing on "In Memory W.H. Yeats," I will analyze Auden's politics of affect in a detouring way for the poem's aesthetic energy to politically influence people. As the time of the dead has stopped in the elegy but the poetic beauty and dynamic has survived over time, the lasting aesthetic energy of the poems has affected on people. That would be the Auden's representation of the poetic possibility of a political revolution.~~

## 1. Aesthetic Energy in *Elegy*: Imitation of Language

Auden mourns the dead by imitating their language. Hearing the news of Sigmund Freud's death, Auden takes his voice as an object of imitation, placing British people in pain in the position of the patient whom Freud wanted to treat through psychological analysis. For Auden, Freud's psychology was a shocking event that makes him look at human consciousness, unconsciousness, and human relationships totally differently. This shock meets Auden's political orientation to make the world a better place. In his essay *Psychology and Art To-day*, he reveals what he and Freud have in common as a poet and a doctor. Just as psychoanalysis brings back the patient's past and re-analyzes the past as a factor influencing their present, a poet's poetic language also makes the readers "re-liv"e the "new situation" even living in the same world and makes them experience a changed self (11). And the task of psychology and art is not to directly teach them 'how to behave,' but rather to insist that their unconsciousness draws their "attention" to something unconsciousness' trying to tell them, increases their "knowledge of good and evil," and eventually "moral responsibility" for their lives (18). Auden's argument can be said to see the poet's task as a doctor who

performs a "psychoanalytic-like" function in diagnosing the "disease" of society and its members (Spears 7). Just as a psychoanalyst explores the unconsciousness and cures the patient's pain, the poet conducts the politics of affect that leads to discovering the causes of problems in society and its members' reality not only in the conscious realm but also in the unconscious realm. In "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," Auden represents his politics of affect through poetic imitation of a language that "similar" to Freud's psychoanalysis (Ramazani 192).

Psychoanalysis is not revealed on the surface of an individual's consciousness, but it explores the realm of unconsciousness that has affected or dominated consciousness, and leads the hidden one to be 'raised' into the realm of consciousness. And in this process, psychoanalysis allows individuals to 'take off' the deep hidden desires in their mind. The psychoanalytic characteristics 'lifting' and 'taking off' are represented in this poem, which makes it possible to find out who are mourned from the first to fourth stanzas. The poem aims to mourn the dead Freud. However, the speaker does not reveal the object of mourning until the third stanza is over. Finally in the fourth stanza, the object of mourning is mentioned for the first time, starting with the pronoun "his". Like a psychoanalyst, the speaker starts to ask the question, "of whom shall we speak?" (line 5). It may seem "somewhat arbitrary" to not specify the dead object while asking mourning "of whom" (Ramazani 194), but this question is the same as a psychoanalyst's first question toward its patient to examine and explore areas of consciousness being affected unconsciousness. Just as the first question finds down an space of the unconsciousness which is deep hidden on the surface of consciousness, after the question, the speaker lists the existence and role of the dead object "him."

(...) among us, those who were doing us some good./who knew it was never  
enough but/hope to improve a little by living.

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,

but his wish was denied him: he closed his eyes/upon that last picture, common to  
us all,/of problems like relatives gathered/puzzled and jealous about our dying  
(5-16).

The speaker starts to introduce Freud not as the father of psychoanalysis, but as an ordinary "this doctor" who only wants the patient's life to be a little better. The doctor realizes that the way he treats visible wounds is not "enough" to treat (mentally) sick patients. So he leads the patient to find traces of unconsciousness so that he can think about "whose unruliness" beyond the patient's physical and conscious causes. This representation narrowing down from a broad description of

an ordinary doctor doing good for patients to Freud famously known for the father of psychoanalysis is "similar" to the form of psychoanalyst questions narrowing down from a wide range of questions to specific questions (Ramazani 192). Poetic representation, which imitates a psychoanalyst' funnellike question that descends from top to bottom, can be seen as a psychoanalyst's medical behavior to touch the unconsciousness with the intended questions and stimulate what is hidden in their mind. Just as the desire discovered in the unconsciousness is a clue to treating patients' pain, Freud, who has become the father of psychoanalysis from an ordinary doctor, is a clue to solve social and public pain and problems. Auden honors the psychoanalyst Freud's contribution as a innovative discovery for curing society's pain, while revealing the object of mourning by imitating the form of a question to uncover unconsciousness.

Auden represents the existence of unconsciousness that remains like a trace in the patient's consciousness on the form of poetry. As shown in the quoted above, the poem is "prosy" without a specific rhyme (Warren 111). Prose rhymes destroy the traditional iambic pattern, causing anxiety to the reader. Especially in *Elegy*, the rhyming pattern of prose gives an irregular impression, such as the speaker's random at will in the public and pious place for mourning (111). Auden imitates the anxiety of Freud's patients suffering from unconscious factors in irregular prosy rhymes. Patients who are engulfed in anxiety cannot discover their memories and trauma on their own in the realm of unconsciousness beyond their consciousness. They only experience outward signs of the anxiety. In addition to irregular rhymes, enjambment further emphasizes patient anxiety stronger. Auden composes most of the lines in sentences with enjambed sentences. As can be seen in "anguish, // of" (4-5), "obedience, // but" (12-13), "recognition // turned" (20-21), "where // long" (36-37), and "humble, // able" (40-41), the frequent arrangement of enjambment between lines and lines, and between stanzas and stanzas imitates the traces of the unconscious memories remaining in consciousness and being dragged and delayed.

Since memories and trauma that have influenced the patients' conscious surface are hidden in the realm of the unconscious, the patients experience only the 'lingering' of the connected consciousness without completing anything. Freud studies the traces left on the surface, such as the form of poetry, and tries to diagnose the patients' painful present through this. The prosy rhyme and enjambment represent Auden's poetical imitation of Freud's language.

Auden honors Freud's greatness by replacing the language of Freud, who started as an ordinary doctor caring about patients, with the language of a hero and the father of psychoanalysis. At this time, he imitates Freud's psychoanalytic language by using the contrasting direction of the image of descending and the image of ascending.

Of course they called on God, but he went his way/**down** among the lost people like Dante, down/to the sinking fosses where the injured/lead the ugly life of the rejected,

and showed us what evil is, not, as we thought,/deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith./our dishonest mood of denial./the concupiscence of the oppressor. (53-60)

Freud, who started out as an ordinary doctor, becomes an "epic hero" comparable to "Dante" (Ramazani 1944). The people whom Freud wants to help have the "ugly lives" "rejected" from society (line 56). They have been considered 'mad' people who should be "punished" within social norms and customs, but in Freud's consulting room they could be cared for as "sick" people rather than mad (line 55). For this, Freud goes "down" under the patient's consciousness. By descending into the patients' "world under consciousness," Freud can act as a hero to discover the unconsciousness and help their trauma that have affected the patient's pain on surface (Ramazani 195). Like the epic hero Dante who explores the world of human life and the world of death, Freud also studies the world of human consciousness and unconsciousness. Dante's descent into hell and Freud's descent into unconsciousness are in contrast to the hero's rising image of overcoming hardships and reaching a place of success. However, this contrast rather highlights their heroism. In order to maximize their descending image, Auden correlates the first and last words of the line with "down" where Dante's name appears. The repetition of the 'd' sound, the first letter of down and Dante, gives the auditory effect of repeating the descending image of Dante and Freud three times. The cause of the patient's illness may be "lack of faith," "the dishonest mood of denial," or "the concupiscence of the oppressor" (line 58-60). Through his descent into unconsciousness, Freud is able to discover various causes of patients that were previously impossible to define, to take care of their pain, and to open up opportunities for a better life. Auden uses the image of descending into unconsciousness to represent Freud as a descending hero.

Freud's psychoanalysis, which has saved patients from the stigma of madness and embraced them in the name of disease like an epic hero, helps to liberate the patients' current pain and trauma. And Freud's concepts of psychoanalysis and unconsciousness extend beyond the doctor's office into daily life, and have a great influence more than "precious." (line 85). As Anne McCartney points out, with his condolences for Freud, Auden says that the influence of psychoanalysis will continue to "last" with seeking to understand modern people by exposing a deep-seated desire. (596). Auden represent in a tense change that Freud's influence will become routine and his achievements will be immortal. Auden changes the tense from the past tense to the present tense from line 67. Freud's heroic exploits make him no longer a finite "person," even if

he is already dead (line 67). His achievements are routine, like complete "weather," and eternal, in that he creates the opportunity for everyone outside the clinic to distinguish between their consciousness and unconsciousness, and to hear their unconscious "opinions" (line 68). The change to the present tense represents that we live "under" (whom) Freud's influence as the weather always exists in our lives (line 69). Along with the change of tense, Auden poetically represents and honors Freud and his achievements that his influence will continue to be close to people's lives even after Freud's death.