Iconicity, the Phonemic Unconscious, and the Music of Poetry

ERIC POWELL

———————————

(Rhythm is what is expected by one word of another.)[1]

All one is, is a body. So it is that which speaks first.[2]

In his 1956 essay 'The Music of Poetry' (an alternate title, or subtitle, might have been 'Prolegomena to Any Future Prosody'), John Hollander, after a *tour de force* sketch of the history of study of English prosody, threw down the gauntlet concerning loose metaphorical talk about the music of poetic language.[3] Noting

---

[1] 'Writing', in W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings*, 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986 [1977]), p. 308. Mendelson emphasizes the importance of this overlooked little essay written in 1932 for a book Naomi Mitchison was editing*, An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents*, arguing that 'Auden used this unpromising setting to publish a manifesto of his private ideology', *Early Auden* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), pp. 15-19.

[2] Robert Creeley, 'Reflections on Whitman in Age', in *On Earth: Last Poems and an Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 64.

[3] I am indebted to John Wilkinson and Richard Strier for graciously reading several drafts of this paper and offering many valuable suggestions and criticisms. My thanks are due as well to the participants at the Poetry and Poetics workshop at the University of Chicago, who were kind enough to read and discuss this paper with me; in particular, I thank Patrick Morrissey and Andrew Peart, who were coordinating the workshop at the time, and both of whom gave me valuable suggestions. I am grateful to Chris Taylor, who led a very helpful article writing workshop in which this paper was included, and to my friends and colleagues Ingrid Becker,

that the major prosodic systems that had been developed—from Joshua Steele to Sidney Lanier—were really performative systems masquerading as descriptive systems, Hollander suggests that a *truly* descriptive system of prosody is precisely what is lacking in poetics. Only through such a system, he says, 'can we avoid the worst kind of self-deception. And only then can we decide whether in fact we are dealing with "the music of poetry" as a mystery to be worshiped or as a puzzle with a real solution to be unraveled.'[4] Being inclined neither toward mysteries nor toward worship, I believe that a real solution should be attempted. I hope to offer one important element of that solution here. Reuven Tsur has given us an excellent starting point by distinguishing what he calls the Poetic Mode of speech perception from normal speech perception.[5] The idea here is that we literally *hear poetry differently* than we do other forms of language, making the sounds that constitute language a central part of the experience of poetry, whether simply heard, or read aloud, or subvocalized. This distinction points toward the fact that we have a complex perceptual and cognitive relationship with poetic language, and I hope to bring some clarity to this relationship in what follows, particularly through mobilizing two key notions: cross-modal phonemic iconicity and the phonemic unconscious. I will clarify these notions in due course, but perhaps should say here that cross-modal phonemic iconicity is a much more precise cognitive-semiotic term for what has in the past been called sound symbolism, or phonosymbolism. The basic notion is that phonemes have various potentialities to form context-dependent sound-meaning associations across sensory modalities (that is, beyond onomatopoeia).

[4] John Hollander, 'The Music of Poetry', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (December 1956), p. 244.
[5] Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), p. vii.

Hollander destroys without creating (although it is creative destruction).[6] The only bit of help he offers is to suggest that 'structural linguistics, Formalist metrical studies and even information theory' may provide the means to a real descriptive prosodic system, but cautions against 'the invasion of the field by sound engineers with oscilloscopes, and perhaps pleasant memories of having read a poem once.'[7] It is a judicious caution; but it is not a caution which excuses critics and theorists of poetry from ignoring developments in the fields of linguistics, semiotics, and phonology. This is precisely what has happened since Hollander's essay: too much in thrall to post-structuralist theories of language, critics and literary theorists have largely passed over important developments in the very fields that precipitated the linguistic turn in the twentieth century. I believe that some of these developments can offer important tools to help us to understand and analyze the music of poetry.

Work in linguistics, semiotics, and poetics in the last few decades has established the importance of iconicity in language generally and in poetry in particular.[8] This work reconsiders the Saussurean *idée reçue*, which reigned for so long in linguistics

---

[6] '…I shall not attempt to offer a new method of scansion, decked out with new terms and symbols drawn from music, and selective redefinitions of older ones. Neither will it be my intention to demonstrate stylistic similarities between the chromaticism of Gesualdo's madrigals, the texture of Crashaw's verse, and the *chiaroscuro* of Caravaggio. Rather, I shall critically examine something of the history of music's identification with prosody in verse, and attempt to describe the limits of usefulness of any further comparisons between the two that we might choose to make', Hollander, op. cit., p. 233.

[7] Ibid. Hollander was very perceptive in his predictions as to where the potential lay.

[8] See, for example, *Phonosymbolism and Poetic Language*, ed. by Patrizia Violi, *Semiotic and Cognitive Studies*, Volume VII, series editors Umberto Eco and Patrizia Violi (Belgium: Brepols, 2000). Ivan Fónagy has devoted much of his considerable body of work to understanding iconicity in language. The importance of iconicity is being explored at many levels in verse. Marina Tarlinskaja and others are studying the iconicity of metrical forms, arguing that 'different metrical forms have specific semantic and stylistic gravitations in the English verse tradition', Marina Tarlinskaja, 'Meter and Meaning: Semantic Associations of the English 'Dolnik' Verse Form', *Style*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 1989), p. 256. 'Not only do specific meters 'select' particular semantic categories, but also particular semantic categories 'choose' specific verse forms' (Lotman p. 106; cf. Jakobson, *Selected* p. 477). This is true, for example of the length of lines, which is metaphorically associated with a particular size of the objects described, and with the importance of the theme. The synesthetic associations of short lines with small objects and light subjects are particularly strong (Lotman). In terms of semiotics, this kind of link between verse form and meaning is iconic, based on objective similarity: the contents imitate some features of the form', p. 239.

(and still does in literary criticism), that the signifier is arbitrary, and instead suggests that sound is more than just the non-semantic substrate of language.[9] Through a reading of Auden's early lyric 'Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids wrinkled, first dazzle known,' attending first to the phonotext—the phonemic structure of the poem—I stress the structural importance of sound in the poem, while highlighting the limitations of hermeneutics in adequately dealing with sound-structure. In conclusion, I offer what I think to be important elements of a theory of poetic thinking, rooted in what I call the phonemic unconscious. To begin to develop a theory of the phonemic unconscious, I draw upon psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's notion of the skin ego, formed through what he calls the sound-bath of early childhood, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language and later notion of the flesh of the world.[10]

---

[9] The debate about motivation in language is another of the many footnotes to Plato. In the *Cratylus* dialogue the two sides are dialectically advanced to their seeming aporia. I won't rehash the history of the debate after this; it has already been done by those properly qualified to do it. The reader can consult Roman Jakobson and Linda R. Waugh's *The Sound Shape of Language* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, third edition, 2002), for the best synopsis. The most thorough account, and critique, of 'Cratylism' can be found in Gérard Genette's *Mimologics,* trans. by Thaïs E. Morgan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). I don't have the space here to fully address my points of agreement and disagreement with Genette. As a symptom, however, of what I find most problematic, C. S. Peirce is mentioned only twice in a text of over 400 pages. My concern here is to present the recent research that has brought the question of motivation back into prominence for linguists and semioticians and, I think, should bring it back into prominence for literary criticism and theory. In the *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure reduces motivation in language to onomatopoeia and reduces onomatopoeia nearly to insignificance. Both of these claims have now, I think, been sufficiently proven false. Saussure's point was that there was really no relation between sound and sense in language (sound being purely differential), except for the rare cases of onomatopoeia. In fact, onomatopoeia is much more extensive a feature of language than Saussure thought, as Linda R. Waugh has shown in 'Against Arbitrariness: Imitation and Motivation Revived', in *Phonosymbolism and Poetic Language*, op. cit., p. 29. Perhaps the most thorough and provocative recent study of these issues in relation to poetry is Reuven Tsur's *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, op. cit.

[10] Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. by Chris Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

1

At issue here is the relation between sound and sense, material and meaning, in poetry. "'Tis not enough no harshness give offense,' Pope classically prescribed, 'The sound must seem an echo to the sense.'[11] Those skeptical of any final relation between sound and sense in language would be quick to point to the word 'seem' in Pope's apothegm. But what is the nature of this seeming? If sound and sense are ultimately unrelated, how is it possible for them to seem as if they are? 'Appearances too,' J.S. Mill has pointed out, 'must have a cause, and that which can cause anything, even an illusion, must be a reality.'[12] I ask the reader to participate in an experiment.

Pretend you are Adam, in the Garden of Eden, in the process of naming all the animals in the world. God has placed before you at the moment two animals: a hippopotamus and a flamingo. Two words immediately jump into your innocent mind: *bouba* and *kiki*. Now, which of the animals will you name *bouba* and which will you name *kiki*? I can say, with ninety-five percent certainty, that you gave the name *bouba* to the hippo and the word *kiki to* the flamingo. I can say that because the study has already been done by Vilayanur Ramachandran and E. M. Hubbard.[13] Summarizing their research, Felix Ahlner and Jordan Zlatev write that 'when both adults and children...are given two fictive words like *bouba* and *kiki* and asked to decide which one denotes a roundish and which a pointy figure, they agree up to 95% that *bouba* suits best the roundish one,' noting that such studies have 'been replicated a number of times.'[14] How can this fact be accounted for?

---

[11] Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, in *Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen and Harry Hayden Clark (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 13. It is a Platonic notion. In the discussion of music and poetry in the *Republic*, Socrates repeats several times that the music must follow the words: 'And again, the music and the rhythm must follow the speech [Kai mên tên ge harmonian kai rhuthmon akolouthein dei tôi logôi]', *Republic,* translated by Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), pp. 246-47 (398d).

[12] John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties', in *Dissertations and Discussion,* 2nd edition, (1867 [1833]), p. 63.

[13] 'Synaesthesia – a window into perception, thought and language', *Journal of Consciousness Studies,* No. 8 (2001), pp. 3-34.

[14] Felix Ahlner and Jordan Zlatev, 'Cross-modal iconicity: A cognitive semiotic approach to sound symbolism', *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2010), p. 299.

For semioticians and linguists, C. S. Peirce's tripartite analysis of signs has largely displaced Saussurean semiology as a more subtle and accurate account of the semantic and functional aspects of signs. The once axiomatic 'arbitrariness' of the sign, which Barthes pointed out would have been better termed 'unmotivated', has been reconsidered as iconic and indexical relations between signs and their objects have been discovered to be far more extensive than was previously known.[15] The debate is, in the broadest terms, about the signifying capacities of the sounds of language, both lexical and sub-lexical. Linguist Linda R. Waugh, who has written extensively on this problem, follows the insights of Roman Jakobson in noting that 'the function of sound is, first, to establish differences between words and, second, to create a myriad of form-meaning identity associations across words.'[16] The first of these functions presents language as a system of distinctive features that allow for words to be differentiated and acquire meaning through conventions of use; the second function, however, is motivated—the signifying relation here is, in Peirce's terms, iconic. Peirce presented various definitions of the icon, one of his three types of signs; I offer the one I find to be the least difficult: 'An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line.'[17] Onomatopoeia is the most famous example of linguistic iconicity, but is only one type.

---

[15] Saussure advanced the 'arbitrariness' thesis in the posthumously collected lecture notes published as *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. by Roy Harris (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2007 [1986]). See Roland Barthes' discussion of arbitrariness and unmotivatedness in *Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994 [1973]). Peirce distinguishes three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble in some fashion that which they signify; indexes have a causal relation to that which they signify, as in a weathervane signifying the direction of the wind; symbols have a purely conventional relation to that which they signify.

[16] 'Against Arbitrariness: Imitation and Motivation Revived', op. cit., p. 37.

[17] *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by James Hoopes (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 239.

I take the term 'phonemic iconicity' from David S. Miall, who argues that 'phoneme distributions' in a text 'systematically embody contrasts of meaning.'[18] Phonemic, not phonetic, because we are dealing not with a particular auditory instantiation of sounds, but with their abstract pattern (much like a musical score), independent of individual speakers and idiolects. Abstract here does not mean disembodied, however; phonemes, even as abstract entities of sound patterning, imply the human body from which alone they come. The method I follow in this paper, which I will introduce shortly, is 'an heuristic act of abstraction which is precisely designed to avoid reducing poems to abstraction, either by freezing them into formal structures, or by reducing them to (good or bad) ideas.'[19] The following analysis, then, aims to be not a performative account of the prosodic value of phonemes, but a purely descriptive one.

From Ahlner and Zlatev, I take the designation 'cross-modal' as a better descriptor of what is often referred to as 'sound symbolism'. Cross-modal because the sounds of language are expressive across sensory modalities. The argument for cross-modal iconicity is that, if the sounds of language are found to be meaningful not just in terms of auditory mimesis (onomatopoeia), but also in terms of 'similarities *across* modalities,' then 'the number of non-arbitrary signs in the languages of the world would increase dramatically.'[20] My interest in this possibility is multi-faceted: 1) I think that it can increase our power in analyzing poems; 2) it would ground claims that sub- and trans-lexical units of sound are expressive and thus refocus attention on the currently neglected *melos* of poetry;[21] 3) it could

---

[18] David S. Miall, 'Sounds of contrast: An empirical approach to phonemic iconicity', *Poetics* 29 (2001), p. 57. Miall uses statistical methods to determine the relation between 'tone' and 'mood' and phonemic distributions, following the pioneering research of Iván Fónagy. See 'Communication in Poetry', *Word*, Vol. 17 (1961). His account of phonemic iconicity is also heavily influenced by the work of Reuven Tsur.

[19] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 149. McGann is describing the method of Galvano della Volpe, but the description applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to my method of phonemic analysis.

[20] Ibid., p. 306.

[21] I use Aristotle's term *melos* in the broad sense of the musicality, or melodic aspect, of verse. Northrop Frye takes up the terms *melos* and *opsis* in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957). Ezra Pound's notion of the melopoeic is also

potentially ground quasi-mystical and magisterial critical terms like 'tone' and 'voice' and 'mood'; 4) it allows us to approach language not merely as the arbitrary coding of the world, but also as a material artifact that is *produced* by the human body through life and labor.[22] I cannot address here all of these potential benefits offered by the notion of cross-modal iconicity, and a full account should relate the phonemic aspect of prosody to others such as rhythm, rhyme and meter; my focus for now will be on the importance of phonemic iconicity to prosodic thinking and in clarifying what is meant, or rather what should be meant, by the 'music' of poetry.

Empirical studies have established the existence and the importance of cross-modal phonemic iconicity, but the problem of the semiotic ground of the relation between sound and sense still needs to be resolved.[23] Göran Sonesson's dis-tinction between primary and secondary iconicity is crucial here: with primary iconicity, the similarity between sign and object is enough to establish a semiotic relation; with secondary iconicity, however, 'the knowledge about the existence of a sign function

---

relevant here. By 'trans-lexical' units I hope to designate the fact that sound patterning in verse is expressive at levels beyond individual instances of phonemic iconicity; that in analysis of the total structure of the phonotext, certain themes or motifs transcending the lexical level can be located, and that these themes are also expressive.

[22] Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 112: 'When denotation (here, designation and signification taken together) is assumed to be part of connotation, one is wholly within [the] signifying regime of the sign. Not much attention is paid to *indexes*, in other words, the territorial states of things constituting the designatable. Not much attention is paid to *icons*, that is, operations of reterritorialization constituting the signifiable. Thus the sign has already attained a high degree of relative deterritorialization; it is thought of as a *symbol* in a constant movement of referral from sign to sign.' As they point out, this stance of 'the primacy of the signifier over language guarantees the primacy of language over all of the strata even more effectively than the simple expansion of the sign in all directions', ibid., p. 65. Part of my goal, then, in bringing out the importance of iconicity in poetry is to challenge the 'imperialism of language'.

[23] I use the term 'ground' with the signification given it by Göran Sonesson: 'those properties of the two things entering into the sign function, by means of which they get connected, that is, both some properties of the thing serving as expression and some properties of the thing serving as content. The ground is a part of the sign having the function to pick out the relevant elements of expression and content.' 'From mimicry to mime by way of mimesis: Reflections on a general theory of iconicity', *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2010), p. 28.

between two things is one of the reasons for the perception of an iconic ground.'[24] That is, in the case of secondary iconicity, the symbolic aspect of the sign is mixed with the iconic aspect.[25] If someone were to look at Picasso's painting 'The Poet' without knowing the title they might see only abstraction: line, figure, color. But suppose they were then to see the title on the exhibition label: suddenly they will discern in what was formerly mere abstraction the figure of a man—smoking a pipe, holding a rolled up manuscript, and so on. This is secondary iconicity: the resemblance, or correspondence, between content and expression is not sufficient in itself to establish a semiotic relationship, but only occurs through the knowledge that there is a semiotic relationship. A very common example of this, that everyone has no doubt experienced, is looking for images in the clouds with someone else: you often don't see a resemblance until it is pointed out to you.

The distinction between primary and secondary iconicity is important to any discussion of the role of sound in poetry because it allows us to analyze more adequately and subtly the interpenetration of sound and sense. Phonemic iconicity in poetry is, it would seem, primarily secondary iconicity, acquiring expressive power through interplay with the other semantic levels of the text.[26] The phoneme

---

[24] Göran Sonesson, 'The ecological foundations of iconicity', *Semiotics Around the World: Synthesis in Diversity. Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of the IASS, Berkeley, June 12-18, 1994*, ed. by Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), p. 741. Sonesson is a part of what is called the 'phenomenological school' of semiotics; the foundations, as he says, of his conception of iconicity derive from 'the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, as developed by, among others, Aron Gurwitsch, Alfred Schütz, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.' 'From mimicry to mime by way of mimesis: Reflections on a general theory of iconicity', op. cit., p. 19. It is worth noting that even Gérard Genette—the strongest critic of linguistic 'Cratylism' (or 'mimology')—admits 'the existence of a seat (or a pocket) of mimology' in the case of what is here called phonemic iconicity. See *Mimologics*, op. cit., pp. 327-330.

[25] It is important to remember that Peirce's types are ideal. Most signs, he points out, are not pure, but mixed: iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects can be present simultaneously in one sign. Cf. Frederik Stjernfelt, 'On operational and optimal iconicity in Peirce's diagrammatology', *Semiotica*, Vol. 186, No. 1 (Walter de Gruyter, 2011), p. 396.

[26] Reuven Tsur comes to this same basic conclusion in his own terms, without the clarifying concepts of Sonesson. See *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, op. cit. Sonesson is careful to note that 'primary and secondary iconicity should not be taken to be an all or none affair: just as a sign may contain iconic, indexical, and symbolic properties at the same time, it may very well mix primary and secondary iconicity', 'From mimicry to mime', op. cit., p. 45.

/s/ and other sibilants, for example, always have the potential to express, as Tsur puts it, a 'hushing quality', but this iconic potential will only be activated in certain semiotic contexts. Here is an example from John Keats's *Lamia*:

> 'Lamia!' he cried—and no soft-toned reply.
> The many heard, and the loud revelry
> Grew hush; the stately music no more breathes;
> The myrtle sicken'd in a thousand wreaths.
> By faint degrees, voice, lute, and pleasure ceased;
> A deadly silence step by step increased,
> Until it seem'd a horrid presence there,
> And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.
> 'Lamia!' he shriek'd; and nothing but the shriek
> With its sad echo did the silence break.[27]

These lines are, I think, a remarkable example of the iconic power of sibilants. After the perfect enjambment 'the loud revelry / Grew hush' the proliferation of sibilants activates prosodically the narrative situation. Note, too, that the repetition of the /i/ in 'breathes', 'wreaths', 'degrees', 'ceased', and 'increased' creates a winnowing effect as all the other sounds and movements of the raucous banquet fade away, focusing our attention on Lamia's silence and preparing for the remarkable dramatic effect of Lycius' shriek and its echo, which is already performed in the repetition of 'shriek'. Again, we can experience the iconic potential of sound in poetry because we are attuned to sound when experiencing a poem in a way that is fundamentally different than our experience of everyday language.[28]

The notion of secondary iconicity skirts the reductive nature/culture dichotomy that has made past debates about 'sound symbolism' and 'arbitrariness' so fraught and ideologically suspect. On the one hand, it avoids the extravagant claims made

---

[27] *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Cox (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), p. 428.

[28] Tsur, op. cit. Iconicity is often present whether or not it ever comes fully into conscious awareness: just as one can be in a room in which the color scheme is pleasing and harmonious, and feel pleased and harmonious because of this fact without consciously registering the colors, one can read lines like those quoted from *Lamia* without consciously registering the iconicity of the sibilants. But this doesn't mean that it isn't functioning.

in the past for sound symbolism, but on the other hand, it allows for a much more fine-tuned and demystified way of talking about the expressive and generative power of sound in poetry. There are, after all, material and somatic differences between phonemes—a bi-labial is produced and consumed differently than a fricative, a *bouba* is not a *kiki* any more than a hippopotamus is a flamingo—and these differences, while making significance possible, also constitute the iconic ground for cross-modal similarities to be experienced at various levels of the text.

2

W. H. Auden's early lyrics, it has often been noted, are remarkable and original primarily because of what he has done to the English language in them. Wittgenstein famously said that a private language is impossible, but one feels that Auden has come very close to creating one in his early lyrics. The mechanics of Auden's language have been fairly thoroughly analyzed by others.[29] One of the most prominent features is ellipsis of many common parts of speech: articles, demonstrative adjectives, subject pronouns, conjunctives, relative pronouns, auxiliary verbs; really everything that can be excised without reducing the whole to utter nonsense. My main purpose, however, will be to consider Auden's language at another level: the phoneme. I use an example that, precisely because it is extreme, can serve rather well as an exemplar of Auden's early style.

Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids wrinkled, first dazzle known,

---

[29] See, for example, Peter Porter, 'Auden's English: language and style', in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Porter notes 'the sense that Auden is taking a scalpel to language itself', p. 126. Cf. Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), pp. xix-xx. Randall Jarrell offers a succinct, if boring, numbered list of the characteristics of Auden's language in 'Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry', in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. by Brad Leithauser (New York: Perennial, 1999), pp. 196-97. Auden perhaps had Jarrell's piece in mind when, after praising Empson's depth of feeling for poetry, he condemned 'those boring articles in the *Southern Review*' (where Jarrell's essay first appeared), in Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, op. cit., p. 3. In a conversation not long after this, Auden said 'Randall Jarrell is really just trying to flout Papa. And the simple mistakes of fact!', p. 19.

> World-wonder hardened as bigness, years, brought knowledge, you:
> Presence a rich mould augured for roots urged—but gone,
> The soul is tetanous; gun-barrel burnishing
> In summer grass, mind lies to tarnish, untouched, undoing,
> Though body stir to sweat, or, squat as idol, brood,
> Infuriate the fire with bellows, blank till sleep
> And two-faced dream—'I want', voiced treble as once
> Crudely through flowers till dunghill cockcrow, crack at East.
> Eyes, unwashed jewels, the glass floor slipping, feel, know Day,
> Life stripped to girders, monochrome. Deceit of instinct,
> Features, figure, form irrelevant, dismissed
> Ought passes through points fair plotted and you conform,
> Seen yes or no, too just for weeping argument.[30]

The poem, on first reading, seems to epitomize Christopher Isherwood's ludic accounting of Auden's early work:

> When Auden was younger, he was very lazy. He hated polishing and making corrections. If I didn't like a poem, he threw it away and wrote another. If I liked one line, he would keep it and work it into a new poem. In this way, whole poems were constructed which were simply anthologies of my favourite lines, entirely regardless of grammar or sense. This is the simple explanation of much of Auden's celebrated obscurity.[31]

But the poem is much more carefully constructed than that, even if much of it seems quite obscure. Before proceeding to introduce my method, I should perhaps justify bestowing so much loving attention on an admittedly minor poem. A minor poem, yes, but a major poem in terms of Auden's development and, therefore, in the development of verse in English in the twentieth century. 'Bones wrenched,' though ultimately perhaps parergon, yet marks, by Auden's own judgment, his

---

[30] *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings*, op. cit., p. 21.

[31] Christopher Isherwood, 'Some Notes on the Early Poetry', in *W. H. Auden*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 9. Cf. Humphrey Carpenter's discussion of this in *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), pp. 61-62, and Stephen Spender, 'W. H. Auden and His Poetry', in *Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 29, who claims that 'the earlier poems are often made up largely of scraps of still earlier ones of which he has preserved the best lines...a mosaic held together by the consistency of an atmosphere, a rhythm, or an idea common to all its parts.'

transition from imitative juvenilia to his own mature early style.[32] No doubt, 'Bones wrenched' still bears heavily the influence of Hopkins, but as Isherwood said, 'by this time, Auden's literary digestive powers were stronger; he made a virtue of imitation,' a judgment that I believe applies to the poem under consideration.[33] It was the only poem from the small volume printed by Stephen Spender in 1928 that Auden thought worthy of inclusion in *Poems* 1930. Moreover, it is the first poem to fully show the distinctive features of the 'Auden style' that would come to exert such a pervasive gravitational force over poetry in English in the twentieth century.[34]

Now, the method that I wish to introduce here—an 'heuristic act of abstraction' meant to arrive, ultimately, at singularity—consists of isolating and considering synchronically the phonemic themes (or motifs, if you like), bracketing for the moment both the meaning of the poem and the intentions of the author. There are seven distinct phonemic themes, each of which is rooted in sub- and trans-lexical repetition of certain phonemes (see Figure 1). These phonemic themes, though sub- and trans-lexical, can be crystallized into lexical series: 1) in yellow, consisting of the open back vowel /o/, the nasal /n/, and the liquid /l/: 'bones', 'dazzle known', 'feel, know', 'no'; 2) in blue, consisting of the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/, the fricatives /s/, /ʃ/, and /ʒ/, and the liquids /r/ and /l/: 'wrenched', 'knowledge',

---

[32] Auden went through brief but intense mimetic sessions with E. A. Robinson, Hardy, Housman, Dickinson, Eliot, Bridges, and Hopkins. See Isherwood, op. cit., p. 11. Carpenter, op. cit., pp. 34-84. W. H. Auden, *Juvenilia: Poems, 1922-1928*, ed. by Katherine Bucknell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. xix-lii. Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden*, op. cit., pp. xix-xx and 27-30.

[33] Isherwood, ibid.

[34] I want to insist upon the inadequacies of a progressivist literary history of influence, or generational rebellion, or a single-minded search for novelty. This kind of focus has led to readings of 'Bones wrenched' as a mere juvenile stepping stone in the progress of a major poet, showing the importance of Hopkins's sprung rhythm and alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse in this progression, but otherwise insignificant. (See, for example, William Logan, 'Auden's dirty laundry', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 16, Issue 2 (1991). John Fuller only refers to the poem as 'a hopelessly clotted unrhymed sonnet in sprung-rhythm, imitating Hopkins', *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, op. cit. Mendelson doesn't condescend to discuss the poem at all in *Early Auden*.) This story is ideological, but not entirely false; it is reductive, however, appropriate for literary biography but insufficient if we want to understand the poem on its own terms or to approach the poem as a cultural artifact.

'presence a rich', 'roots urged', 'untouched', 'eyes, unwashed jewels', 'features', 'too just'; 3) in lavender, consisting of the approximant /w/ with various vowels: 'weak whimper', 'world wonder', 'squat', 'with', 'want', 'once', 'flowers', 'unwashed', 'weeping'; 4) in bold, centered in the open back vowels /ɒ/ and /ɑ/: 'hardened', 'brought knowledge', 'augured', 'gone', 'tarnish', 'body', 'squat', 'want', 'cockcrow', 'unwashed', 'monochrome', 'ought', 'plotted', 'argument'; 5) in green, the closed back vowel /u/: 'you', 'roots', 'undoing', 'to', 'brood', 'two-faced', 'crudely through', 'jewels', 'to', 'through', 'you', 'too'; 6) in turquoise, consisting of the labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/, the liquid /r/, and the open-mid back vowel /ɔ/: 'for', 'or', 'voiced', 'floor', 'form', 'conform', 'or', 'for'; and 7) in orange, consisting of the diphthong /aɪ/ and the liquids /r/ and /l/: 'mind lies', 'as idol', 'fire', 'I', 'eyes', 'life stripped'. The consideration of these themes in isolation from their diachronic development in the event of reading the poem can offer insights into the sound-structure of the text that could not be gleaned otherwise; I believe that such insights can then lead to a more thorough reading of the poem as a whole in the event of its diachronic unfolding, while simultaneously revealing the limits of traditional hermeneutics. Before even approaching the poem semantically, then, several things can be deduced from these themes.

```
bonz      rɛntʃt,    wik      wɪmpər,    lɪdz      rɪŋkəld,       fərst      dæzəl      non,
1' 2 3 4' | 5 6 3 7 8 7 | 9 10 11 | 9 12 13 1 14 5 | 15 12 7' 4' | 5 12 16 11 14 15 7' | 17 14 5 4 7 | 7' 18 4' 14 15 | 3 2 3
     wərld- wəndər        hɑrdənd      æz      bɪgnəs,      jɪrz,      brɒt      nɑlədʒ,      ju:
9 14 5 15 7'-9 14 3 7' 14 5 | 19 20 5 7' 14 3 7' | 18 4' | 1' 12 11' 3 14 4 | 21 12 5 4' | 1' 5 22 7 | 3 20 15 14 7' 8' | 21 23
     prɛzəns    ə      rɪtʃ      mold      ɒgərd      fər      ruts      ərdʒd—      bət      gɒn,
1 5 6 4' 14 3 4 | 14 | 5 12 7 8 | 13 2 15 7' | 22 11' 14 5 7' | 17 24 5 | 5 23 7 4 | 14 5 7' 8' 7' | 1' 14 7 | 11' 22 3
     ðə    sol    ɪz      tɛtənəs;        gən- bærəl        bərnɪʃɪŋ
25' 14 | 4 2 15 | 12 4' | 7 6 7 14 3 14 4 | 11' 14 3-1' 18 5 14 15 | 1' 14 5 3 12 8 12 16
     ɪn    səmər    græs,    maɪnd    laɪz    tu      tɑrnɪʃ,      əntətʃt,      ənduɪŋ,
12 3 | 4 14 13 14 5 | 11' 5 18 4 | 13 26 21 7' | 15 26 21 4' | 7 23 | 7 20 5 3 12 8 | 14 3 7 14 7 8 7 | 14 3 7' 23 12 16
     ðo    bɑdi    stər    tu    swɛt,    ɔr,    skwɑt    æz    aɪdəl,    brud,
25' 2 | 1' 20 7' 10 | 4 7 14 5 | 7 23 | 4 9 6 7 | 24 5 | 4 11 9 20 7 | 18 4' | 26 21 7' 14 15 | 1' 5 23 7'
     ɪnfjʊriet      ðə      faɪər      wɪθ      bɛloz,      blæŋk      tɪl      slip
12 3 17 21 27 5 10 28 7 | 25' 14 | 17 26 21 14 5 | 9 12 25 | 1' 6 15 24' | 1' 15 18 16 11 | 7 12 15 | 4 15 10 1
     ænd      tu- fest      drim—      aɪ      wɑnt,      vɔjst      trɛbəl      æz      wəns
18 3 7' | 7 23-17 28 4 7 | 7' 5 10 13 | 26 21 | 9 20 3 7 | 17' 24 21 4 7 | 7 5 6 1' 14 15 | 18 4' | 9 14 3 4
     krudli      θru      flawərz      tɪl      dənhɪl      kɑkkro,      kræk      æt      ist.
```

11 5 23 7' 15 10 | 25 5 23 | 17 15 26 9 14 5 4' | 7 12 15 | 7' 14 16 19 12 15 | 11 20 11 11 5 2 | 11 5 18 11 | 18 7 | 10 4 7

aɪz,   ənwɑʃt   dʒuəlz,   ðə   glæs   flɔr   slɪpɪŋ,   fil,   no   de,

26 21 4' | 14 3 9 20 8 7 | 7' 8' 23 14 15 4' | 25' 14 | 11' 15 18 4 | 17 15 24 5 | 4 15 12 1 12 16 | 17 9 15 | 3 2 | 7' 28

laɪf   strɪpt   tu   gərdərz,   mɑnəkrom.   dəsit   əv   ɪnstɪŋkt,

15 26 21 17 | 4 7 5 12 1 7 | 7 23 | 11' 14 5 7' 14 5 4' | 13 20 3 14 11 5 2 13 | 7' 14 4 10 7 | 14 17' | 12 3 4 7 12 16 11 7

fɪtʃərz,   fɪgjər,   fɔrm   ɪrɛləvənt,   dɪsmɪst

17 10 7 8 14 5 4' | 17 12 11' 21 14 5 | 17 24 5 13 | 12 5 6 15 14 17' 14 3 7 | 7' 12 4 13 12 4 7

ɒt   pæsəz   θru   pɔjnts   fɛr   plɑtəd   ænd   ju   kənfɔrm,

22 7 | 1 18 4 14 4' | 25 5 23 | 1 24 21 3 7 4 | 17 6 5 | 1 15 20 7 14 7' | 18 3 7' | 21 23 | 11 14 3 17 24 5 13

sin   jɛs   ɔr   no,   tu   dʒəst   fər   wipɪŋ   ɑrgjəmənt.

4 10 3 | 21 6 4 | 24 5 | 3 2 | 7 23 | 7' 8' 14 4 7 | 17 24 5 | 9 10 1 12 16 | 20 5 11' 21 14 13 14 3 7

1' 2 3 4' | 5 6 3 7 8 7 | 9 10 11 | 9 12 13 1 14 5 | 15 12 7' 4' | 5 12 16 11 14 15 7' | 17 14 5 4 7 | 7' 18 4' 14 15 | 3 2 3

9 14 5 15 7'-9 14 3 7' 14 5 | 19 20 5 7' 14 3 7' | 18 4' | 1' 12 11' 3 14 4 | 21 12 5 4' | 1' 5 22 7 | 3 20 15 14 7' 8' | 21 23

1 5 6 4' 14 3 4 | 14 | 5 12 7 8 | 13 2 15 7' | 22 11' 14 5 7' | 17 24 5 | 5 23 7 4 | 14 5 7' 8' 7' | 1' 14 7 | 11' 22 3

25' 14 | 4 2 15 | 12 4' | 7 6 7 14 3 14 4 | 11' 14 3-1' 18 5 14 15 | 1' 14 5 3 12 8 12 16

12 3 | 4 14 13 14 5 | 11' 5 18 4 | 13 26 21 7' | 15 26 21 4' | 7 23 | 7 20 5 3 12 8 | 14 3 7 14 7 8 7 | 14 3 7' 23 12 16

25' 2 | 1' 20 7' 10 | 4 7 14 5 | 7 23 | 4 9 6 7 | 24 5 | 4 11 9 20 7 | 18 4' | 26 21 7' 14 15 | 1' 5 23 7'

12 3 17 21 27 5 10 28 7 | 25' 14 | 17 26 21 14 5 | 9 12 25 | 1' 6 15 2 4' | 1' 15 18 16 11 | 7 12 15 | 4 15 10 1

18 3 7' | 7 23-17 28 4 7 | 7' 5 10 13 | 26 21 | 9 20 3 7 | 17' 24 21 4 7 | 7 5 6 1' 14 15 | 18 4' | 9 14 3 4

11 5 23 7' 15 10 | 25 5 23 | 17 15 26 9 14 5 4' | 7 12 15 | 7' 14 16 19 12 15 | 11 20 11 11 5 2 | 11 5 18 11 | 18 7 | 10 4 7

26 21 4' | 14 3 9 20 8 7 | 7' 8' 23 14 15 4' | 25' 14 | 11' 15 18 4 | 17 15 24 5 | 4 15 12 1 12 16 | 17 9 15 | 3 2 | 7' 28

15 26 21 17 | 4 7 5 12 1 7 | 7 23 | 11' 14 5 7' 14 5 4' | 13 20 3 14 11 5 2 13 | 7' 14 4 10 7 | 14 17' | 12 3 4 7 12 16 11 7

17 10 7 8 14 5 4' | 17 12 11' 21 14 5 | 17 24 5 13 | 12 5 6 15 14 17' 14 3 7 | 7' 12 4 13 12 4 7

22 7 | 1 18 4 14 4' | 25 5 23 | 1 24 21 3 7 4 | 17 6 5 | 1 15 20 7 14 7' | 18 3 7' | 21 23 | 11 14 3 17 24 5 13

4 10 3 | 21 6 4 | 24 5 | 3 2 | 7 23 | 7' 8' 14 4 7 | 17 24 5 | 9 10 1 12 16 | 20 5 11' 21 14 13 14 3 7

Figure 1: *Phonemic translation and analysis of 'Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids wrinkled, first dazzle known'.*[35]

The most striking of which is that the line 'Eyes, unwashed jewels, the glass floor slipping, feel, know Day,' contains all of the themes delineated above. 'Eyes, unwashed jewels,' by itself contains, or concentrates, five of the themes. This line, then, and particularly the syntagm 'Eyes, unwashed jewels,' is the phonemic matrix, to adopt and adapt a term from Michael Riffaterre, out of which the sound structure of the poem is built—it is the matrix of the phonotext.[36] The echo of *King Lear* in

---

these lines has been noticed, of course. Cordelia said to her greedy sisters: 'The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes / Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are'.[37] Noting the allusion, however, hardly explains why this line is the phonemic matrix of the poem—a fact certainly calling out for explanation. Moreover, the allusion itself is unclear, the two metaphors in Shakespeare being condensed into one tangled figure by Auden—if, that is, the syntax is read such that 'unwashed jewels' is a gloss on 'Eyes'. I will return to this in the course of my reading of the poem; it will become clear that treating the line as a textual allusion is inadequate and that accounting for the structural centrality of this line to the phonotext requires us to rethink the role of sound in poetry.

Another conspicuous feature of the phonotext of the poem is the predominance of back vowels (in the first, fourth, fifth, and sixth themes), and the correlative paucity of front vowels (only the seventh theme). Vowels are the most melodic of phonemes and hence must occupy a privileged position in the analysis of the music of verse.[38] Simon Jarvis, who has come closest to the lines of thought I am pursuing here, offers a means of clarifying my position. In a remarkable reading of some lines from Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, Jarvis notes 'four identical vowel sounds in identical stress-positions,' the rhymes 'Sight/Light' and 'Skies/Dies.' Jarvis argues that

> the presence of a quadruple assonance, in such a heavily metrically marked position, sheds an influence over the whole verse paragraph. Later on, that is, when this vowel sound recurs in other rhymes, we are likely involuntarily to recall this pedal point which has been set at the start of the verse paragraph: when we have Sight/Light, and Skies/Dies, we are at once likely unconsciously to recall

---

sentence, into a longer, complex, and nonliteral periphrasis.' It is worth noting as well that Riffaterre claims that the 'text functions something like a neurosis: as the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body.' I take the term 'phonotext' from Simon Jarvis, 'Why rhyme pleases', *Thinking Verse*, Vol. I (2011).

[37] William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968 [1948]), p. 1143, lines 271-72.

[38] Tsur points out that 'the sequence vowels, liquids, and nasals, voiced fricatives, voiced stops, voiceless fricatives, voiceless stops, constitute a scale of decreasing periodicity or sonority, in this order', op. cit., p. 32.

the beginning of this passage. In these circumstances established by vowel-music, a series of thematic associations can begin to establish themselves. We are given a miniature rhyming dictionary for this rhyme which establishes a set of semantic connections: Sky, Skies, Sight and Light establish a temporary link between this vowel sound and the idea of lightness or brightness.[39]

In juxtaposition to this, let me offer the beginning of Robert Browning's 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' for consideration:

> There's heaven above, and night by night
> I look right through its gorgeous roof;
> No suns and moons though e'er so bright
> Avail to stop me; splendour-proof
> I keep the broods of stars aloof:[40]

Night, night, right, bright—but there is no lightness or brightness in these lines. In fact, what is remarkable about the vowel music here is the repetition of the /u/ in *through, roof, moons, proof, brood, aloof.* Now, the /a/ of Pope's rhymes (one half of the diphthong /aɪ/) is the most open of vowels (it's why you say 'ah' at the doctor's), while the /u/ is the furthest back closed vowel. Each repetition of the /u/ falls on the ictus, three of them further emphasized by masculine rhyme. As Tsur points out, there is a 'structural relationship between back vowels, darkness, mystic obscurity, and hatred or struggle,' cross-modal associations that have been established in many studies and attested to by many linguists.[41] As Jarvis is careful to note, he is not claiming—nor am I claiming—'that there could somehow be a natural palette of vowel-sounds, each bearing its appropriate thematic or semantic

---

[39] Simon Jarvis, 'Why rhyme pleases', op. cit., pp. 35-36.

[40] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* (London, Melbourne and Toronto: Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, [no publication date]), p. 543.

[41] Tsur, op. cit., p. 24. Cf. Jakobson and Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, third edition, 2002), pp. 183-85. See also Waugh, 'Against Arbitrariness: Imitation and Motivation Revived', op. cit., p. 29, where she notes that there is a 'nearly universal correlation between the inherently higher-pitched front vowels like English ([i], [I], [e], [ɛ]) and smallness and brightness (vs. the lower-pitched back vowels like [u], [ʊ], [o], [ɔ], commonly associated with bigness and darkness). Such relations form part of the lexical fabric of English.'

coloration. There is no such natural correspondence.'[42] At this point, however, he turns to evocative, but hardly explanatory, metaphors, suggesting that 'there can, instead, be what one might call clouds or mists of such associations, clouds whose force is not necessary or natural but is rather a kind of prosodic weather formation gathering in the poet's peculiar handling of verbal music' (ibid.). The distinction between primary and secondary iconicity solves this difficulty. The material qualities of phonemes, while not semantically determinative, do provide limitations on expressive potentialities. They are not free-floating signifiers. The iconic potential for cross-modal associations with phonemes is always there, but it must be actualized in relation to the other semantic levels of the text. The title of Browning's poem has already prepared us for a tone of mystic obscurity and spiritual struggle, allowing for the expressive power of the /u/ to be activated, which in turn actualizes in the music of the verse a tone that is at first only abstract.

Another brief example of phonemic iconicity can be considered for clarity's sake. The following lines are from Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale':

> O for a beaker full of the warm South!
> Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
> With beaded bubbles winking at the brim...[43]

The density of the bi-labials /p/ and /b/ reinforces the image of the bubbles in the wine through cross-modal iconicity. This kind of harmony between sound and sense must play a key role in what critics have referred to as the 'inevitability' of great verse. I'm sure that the same meaning, at least in the sense of paraphrasable content, could be expressed in other words, without the bi-labials; but this meaning would be impoverished in comparison to the rich, cross-modal meaning of the lines as written.[44] Note that this is *not* onomatopoeia; the cross-modal potential of bi-labials, as in the example of the 'word' *bouba*, to connote roundness (a sound evoking

---

[42] 'Why rhyme pleases', op. cit., p. 36.

[43] *Keats's Poetry and Prose,* op. cit., p. 458.

[44] Skeptics will often appeal to the fact that the same meaning can be expressed in different words to disavow the expressive power of phonemes. I find this to be a very narrow and inadequate notion of 'meaning.' Part of my project is to develop a larger sense of meaning in verse without losing analytical bite. I return to this in the final section.

a shape, the auditory modality crossing over to the visual) is activated in inter-reaction with the image and the semantics of the passage. This particular iconic potential resides peculiarly in bi-labials, however. Again let me stress that I am not claiming that bi-labials always and everywhere 'mean' roundness, just as the /u/ does not always and everywhere contribute a sense of darkness and/or struggle. They are simply iconic potentials rooted in the distinctive materiality of the phonemes, potentials that are perceived only when a ground is established in the text. There is nothing 'natural' about it, any more than it is 'natural' to notice that the leaves of a willow tree blowing in the wind on a sunny day can be said to resemble shivering in the sun, or that fallen leaves blowing in the wind can be said to resemble ghosts fleeing an enchanter.[45]

3

It is clear when seeing Auden's poem on the page that it is a sonnet. But it is equally clear that it is not a standard sonnet because of the length of the lines. Before even reading the poem then, an expectation has been created, a tradition invoked, but with a visual *caveat lector*. This warning is borne out by the Hopkinsian and Anglo-Saxon influenced prosody. There is, then, a tension between visual form and line, a tension which is historical as well as formal—the lyric form *par excellence* of the Renaissance is filled with a new wine.

The absence of a subject in the first line creates ambiguity, a dissonance of several simultaneously resonating possibilities of interpretation, which are only resolved at the end of the line, where the 'first dazzle' makes clear that it is a synecdochically condensed account of birth. The absence of the subject, then, suggests the fragmentary nature of the infant's being—there is no 'I' yet, just undetached baby parts. The subsequent lines proceed with a telescoped view of ontogenetic

---

[45] Cf. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 16, where he points out that with icons 'there are one-to-one correspondences between expression and content. Therefore, they are usually arbitrary and yet contain elements of *motivation*....even though they are not natural.'

development (although this is always also an account of phylogeny in Auden),[46] the loss of the novelty and wonder exchanged for the hardness of knowledge and the formation of the ego. 'World-wonder' picks up the theme introduced in the first line with 'weak whimper', suggesting a displacement: the passivity of the infant gives way to an engagement with the world, spurred by and accompanied with wonder, which immediately desiccates into knowledge and self-identity. The third line is loaded with connotative richness, a richness rooted in the words 'mould' and 'augured', words that are oddly bifurcated—earthy and spiritual, chthonic and ouranian, material and formal. Reading the *OED*'s entries on 'mould' gives the impression that it is one of the most confused words in the English language, a lexicographer's nightmare:

> earth, *esp.* loose, broken or friable earth; surface soil; the upper soil of cultivated land; garden soil; *esp.* such soil when rich in organic matter and particularly suitable for cultivation; topsoil; rotting earth considered as the material of the human body; the human body or its substance, *esp.* as opposed to the soul or spirit; the decayed remains of a human body; the ground considered as a place of burial; the earth of a grave; a grave; the top or dome of the head; a fontanelle on an infant's head; the result of moulding; an imparted form; the distinctive nature of a person or thing, esp. as indicative of origin; constitution, character; material that can be shaped or moulded easily; something which has been

---

[46] Randall Jarrell has pointed out that the early poems adopt the Freudian notion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. *Randall Jarrell on W. H. Auden*, ed. by Stephen Burt with Hannah Brooks-Motl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 27. Jarrell also notes the repeated focus on birth and subsequent Lucretian isolation in the early poems: 'Some of his most beautiful poems express the terrifying and pathetic isolation of the growing organism, unwillingly alone from the moment it is thrust from the womb', p. 93. See also Bucknell, op. cit., p. 209, where she notes that in the early sequence 'The sprinkler on the lawn', in which 'Bones wrenched' first appeared, the following quatrain 'is written out separately on the facing page, p. 6, as if it were a note to (b) ('Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids wrinkled, first dazzle known') rather than part of the poem;' 'Amoeba in the running water / Lives afresh in son and daughter / 'The sword above the valley' / Said the Worm to the Penny.' Cf. Mendelson, *Early Auden*, op. cit., pp. 7-8, who notes that for the young Auden 'any consciousness is by necessity an isolated consciousness. Birth initiates an absolute separation of self and world, and the unattainable goal of the fragmented life is recovered unity of being.' Cf. also Rod Mengham, 'Auden, psychology and society', *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, op. cit., p. 165: 'From the start of his career as a writer, Auden became used to thinking about psychological models in relation to the customs and rituals of an entire society, rather than exclusively with reference to the personal history of the individual.'

moulded or fashioned; the body of a living creature, esp. considered as something that has been shaped; a hollow form or matrix into which fluid material is poured or plastic material is pressed and allowed to cool or harden so as to form an object of a particular shape; a modelled or incised surface from which an impression can be taken; something which gives shape, form, or character to something else; an established pattern; an object of imitation; a model or example; a woolly, furry, or staining growth now recognized as consisting of fungus...[47]

The fact that there is a connection between the wrenched bones of the infant—the skull is wrenched into shape—and the mould of the skull is just surplus value. Birth puts the finishing touches on the human mould, leaving it to then mould the world through experience. To augur is to 'prognosticate from signs or omens; to divine, forebode, anticipate,' but it is also homophonous with a tool for digging holes.[48] Experience, then, is both a field of signs and omens from which the future is anticipated, but also a field urgent with historical meaning in which one must dig for the roots of the present.

Consideration of the second phonemic motif (/t/, /d/, /s/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /r/ and /l/), which is the most prominent of the motifs in the first five lines, distills another duality: that of inside/outside. 'Bones wrenched', 'knowledge', 'presence a rich', 'roots urged': the first two are forces acting from outside on the passive child, the second two suggest the activation of inner forces that must engage with the 'outside' world. These are the forces of the psyche. But this development is just as quickly displaced as well, the psyche hardens just as the body must, becoming 'tetanous'. What is left is the phallus become as mechanical as a gun, leaving the mind to tarnish

---

[47] Incidentally, Auden's unabashed love of the *OED* suggests that he was well aware of the semantic multiplicity of the word. See, for example, Humphrey Carpenter's account of Auden's 'fondness for obscure words. In his conversation as in his poetry he used a vocabulary drawn from scientific, psychological and philosophical terminology, and from his discoveries among the pages of the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, op. cit., p. 66. See as well Auden's comment to Alan Ansen: 'My two ambitions are to get into a history of English prosody and into the *OED*—have them cite me for new words not yet received. It's a shame I can't write lines backward as they could in inflected Icelandic', Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, ed. Nichola Jenkins (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1990), p. 22.

[48] When one searches Google Books for the word 'augured' it shows up, with that spelling, as an adjective to describe a hole made by an auger as much as in the standard usage given in the *OED*.

like the derelict industry dotting Auden's lapsarian landscapes. The possibility of a standard sonnet rhyme scheme—both suggested but held in abeyance by the off-rhyme of 'known' and 'gone'—has flown as well with the gun-barrel intruding into Arcadia. (I can't help but break out of analysis here to note: the fact that none of the themes are present in the fourth line ['The soul is tetanous; gun-barrel burnishing'] reinforces my impression before analysis that this is a bad line—the music seems off, the rhythm clunky, which makes the schoolboyish conceit begun at the end of the line seem even more inappropriate and ineffective.)

The appearance of the seventh motif (/aɪ/, /r/, and /l/) with 'mind lies' in the fifth line is somewhat jarring because not only has there been no 'I' thus far in the poem, there hasn't even been an /aɪ/! This brings into stark relief the absence of a traditional lyric 'I' in this poem—indeed, the only 'I' in the poem comes as the weak whimper 'I want' in line eight. This displacement of the lyric 'I', then, causes us to reconsider the 'you' at the end of the second line, which, it seems to me, is not an addressee, not hailing us as readers, but the 'I' of the poem, as if the poem is speaking itself to the 'I' rather than the 'I' speaking to no one (which, we all know, really means speaking to those overhearing in the adjacent prison cell or the bushes or somewhere), or the 'I' speaking to an interlocutor. This is not speech we are overhearing, but poetry speaking, which doesn't mean that this is not a lyric poem, but rather that the notion of lyric poetry inherited from Mill is insufficient—it shows itself, at the very least, to be historically circumscribed.[49]

Lines five through nine complete a shift from the condensed account of ontogenetic development to a scene of unfulfilled desire—desire affecting the body, leaving the mind derelict and 'blank till sleep / and two-faced dream'. The body 'squat as idol' evokes Milton's unforgettable simile of Satan tempting Eve: 'Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve,' inspiring the venom of 'Vain hopes, vain aims,

---

[49] Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties', op. cit. Because the lyric genre has been historically imbricated with the notion of musicality, one of the potential upshots of a fully developed theory of the music of verse would be its utility in further developing a theory of the lyric.

inordinate desires, / Blown up with high conceits engendering pride.'[50] The duality of innocence and fallenness of the 'two-faced dream' in Auden, however, is not that of Christianity, but of Freud—unconscious wish-fulfillment, the 'I want' recapitulating the third theme that began with the 'weak whimper' of birth.[51] The 'treble' of the voicing strengthens the sense of regression to infantile desire. Indeed, I don't believe it's too outrageous to suggest that the waking from the dream in line nine should be read as a reinterpretation of the birth in the first line. As Georgia O'Keefe has shown us, flowers can be iconic of the womb and its external embellishments, and both lines end with the appearance of light. To understand the powerful iconicity of the stops at the end of the line—'dunghill cockcrow, crack at East'—let me compare them to a very similar effect achieved in another poem, Randall Jarrell's 'The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner.'

> From my mother's sleep, I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.[52]

The prosodic modulation in the fourth line with the repetition of the harsh, percussive /k/ in 'woke to black flak' performs the rude awakening phonemically,

---

[50] *Paradise Lost*, IV, lines 800-809, in *The Poetical Works of John Milton* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1911), p. 118.

[51] 'The great achievement of Auden is to use analyzable material creatively as a language of dream symbols and psychological fantasies directly related to the facts of our lives, in which he can depict our own history to us...he consciously invents dreams and depicts actuality in the language of unconscious fantasies. In this way he has transformed the poetic role from that of the poet withdrawn into a world of wishful fantasies into that of the poet interpreting and creating dreams, writing a commentary on his epoch in a language of dream-fantasies and symbols', Stephen Spender, 'W. H. Auden and His Poetry', op. cit., p. 34. Cf. Mendelson, *Early Auden*, op. cit., p. 29, '[m]ost of the poems Auden wrote during his first years at Oxford describe variations on a single theme: life is a constant state of isolation and stagnated desire—interrupted by moments of sexual satisfaction or disappointment—which the young poet unprotestingly accepts.'

[52] From *Randall Jarrell: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 144.

while suggesting through onomatopoeia the firing guns of the 'nightmare fighters'.[53] The contrast with the softer consonants of the preceding three lines is striking. The young soldier wakes to the reality of war only to die: the dreams of his life he has indulged until this moment are replaced with the nightmare of reality. The stops in Auden's line function in a very similar fashion, suggesting the jolt of waking. Has a gun been fired? Perhaps. 'Dunghill' resonates at several levels: in addition to the immediate denotation, the *OED* offers the following: 'A heap or repository of filth or rubbish; often applied depreciatively to the earth, and to the human body. Also the lowest or most degraded situation.' 'Applied opprobriously to a person of evil life, or of base station.' These connotations take on added weight given the context of homosexual desire in the poem. Finally, and most slyly on Auden's part, is the following: 'With reference to the *dunghill cock*...a man who is not 'game', a coward or spiritless fellow.'

Having arrived at the ninth line, our formal expectations have again been upset by the displacement of the volta by one line. This makes the appearance of the first full-stopped line more dramatic: ''I want', voiced treble as once / Crudely through flowers till dunghill cockcrow, crack at East. / Eyes, unwashed jewels, the glass floor slipping, feel, know Day, / Life stripped to girders, monochrome.' The release of a tension that has been gradually building, the liminal floating between the end of a powerful dream and the return to consciousness—these are the event of this heavy line break: 'East. / Eyes'.

And we've now arrived back at the matrix of the phonotext: 'Eyes, unwashed jewels'. As suggested before, the remarkable thing about attending to the phonotext is that it shows that this is much more than a textual allusion. When these lines of *King Lear* are analyzed phonemically, it becomes clear that all of the phonemic motifs in Auden's poem are contained in them (Fig. 2).

---

[53] For the harshness and aggressiveness of the /k/ see Iván Fónagy's groundbreaking essay, 'Communication in Poetry', op. cit., p. 195: 'The phonemes /l/, /m/, and /n/ are definitely more frequent in tender-toned poems, whereas /k/, /t/ and /r/ predominate in those with aggressive tone. For some reason precisely these sounds seem to be the most significantly correlated with aggression—either positively or negatively.' 'The tense articulation of angry speech is imitated by an unusually high number of tense ('hard') consonants, *t, k, r*', 'Languages of Iconicity', op. cit., p. 59.

ðə   dʒuəlz   əv   awər   fɑðər   wɪθ   wɑʃt   aɪz
25' 14 | 7' 8' 23 14 15 4' | 14 17' | 26 9 14 5 | 17 20 25' 14 5 | 9 12 25 | 9 20 8 7 | 26 21 4'

kɔrdɛliə   livz   ju: aɪ   no   ju   wət   ju   ɑr
11 24 5 7' 6 15 10 14 | 15 10 17' 4' | 21 23 | 26 21 | 3 2 | 21 23 | 9 14 7 | 21 23 | 20 5

7' 8' 23 14 15 4' | 14 17' | 26 9 14 5 | 17 20 25' 14 5 | 9 12 25 | **14 3 9 20 8 7** | 26 21 4'
11 24 5 7' 6 15 10 14 | 15 10 17' 4' | 21 23 | 26 21 | 3 2 | 21 23 | 9 14 7 | 21 23 | **20 5**

Figure 2: *Phonemic analysis of lines from* King Lear, *with themes from Auden.*

John Fuller's surmise that 'the allusion perhaps suggests a younger sibling's unenlightened exile from misjudging parents,' may be correct, but it seems deficient to me.[54] I want to suggest that this might not be a conscious allusion at all. There is, it seems to me, no way to parse this cleanly as an allusion: there are two sisters and two eyes—but what does that mean? Attempts to solve this as an Eliotic puzzle—which may be productive of interesting thoughts—ultimately create more fissures than sutures.[55] Considered at the level of the phoneme the syntagm 'Eyes, unwashed jewels' is performing a very different function than it is as allusion (if allusion it be)—it is the sound matrix from which the phonemic structure of the poem as a whole is derived. I will return to the phonemic matrix for further speculation, but for now let me continue to follow the development of the poem.

We are immediately teleported back from Elizabethan England to early twentieth century industrial England by the appearance of a glass floor ('the glass floor slipping, feel, know Day, / Life stripped to girders, monochrome'). The glass floor is an index of modernity, as in the spectacle of 'a glass factory at Liverpool,' in the *fin-de-siècle*, which 'has glass journal-boxes for all its machinery, a glass floor, glass shingles on the roof, and a chimney one hundred and five feet high, built wholly of

---

[54] John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 5.

[55] Auden praised Eliot for being 'without doubt the greatest selector of quotations in English. He knows exactly what passages will provide the greatest stimulus for further reading', but would go on to say: 'I don't see much point in doing that sort of thing for Shakespeare', *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, op. cit., p. 44.

glass bricks, each a foot square.'[56] A sense of vertigo is evoked by the slipping on the glass floor and the groping imperative to feel, to reestablish knowledge; 'Day' is probably, as someone has suggested, Cecil Day-Lewis, whom Auden was vacationing with in Appletreewick in the summer of 1927 when the poem was written, but the pun stands and, after the crack at East, a new day is there to be known.[57]

To make matters more complicated, there is another possible Shakespearean echo here. In *Richard III*, the Duke of Clarence, just before his death, has a prophetic nightmare in which he drowns and has a vision of 'a thousand fearful wracks' at the bottom of the sea:

> Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
> Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
> All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
> Some lay in dead men's skulls, and in those holes
> Where eyes did once inhabit there were crept,
> As 'twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting gems,
> That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep
> And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.[58]

Here there is the same image of jewels as eyes, but the jewels in Clarence's dream are hardly 'unwashed.' The 'glass floor' of Auden's line could perhaps be a reference to the ocean floor, but this seems a stretch. There is, however, the further connection of a sudden awakening in both texts, as well as the 'two-faced dream' which both awake from. Finally, Auden's '[l]ife stripped to girders' in line eleven resonates with the imagery of sunken ships (girders are used in the construction of

---

[56] *The Living Age*, Sixth Series, Volume IX, January, February, March (Boston: Littell and Co., 1896), pp. 189-190.

[57] See *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, op. cit., p. 5. *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, op. cit., pp. 70-73. Were they perhaps sharing a bed?

[58] *Richard III,* in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, op. cit., 235. Clarence's speech brought to mind Matthew 6:19-21: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: / but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: / for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Interestingly the immediately following passage is about the eyes: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. / But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness, how great *is* that darkness!" *King James Version*

ships as well) and of the bones of the dead. There is, then, much more reason to consider these lines from *Richard III* as a conscious allusion on Auden's part. But one is still stuck with that odd word "unwashed" and with the lines from *King Lear* that it evokes, and the further problem of how to reconcile these three texts in a way that makes sense. When analyzed phonemically in search of the themes in the Auden poem, the lines from *Richard III* yield the themes, but they are spaced out—a weak presence, unlike the concentrated form in which they are found in the two lines analyzed from *King Lear*. Whether or not one thinks that these are fully self-conscious allusions on Auden's part, however, it is a fact that they are functioning at a more structural level.

There's a remarkable hollowing out that occurs in the final lines, the blood draining slowly out of the poem. The life 'stripped to girders, monochrome' engages with both the glass floor (which reveals the inner structure of a building) and with the bones with which the poem wrenches into motion. The richly tactile lines in the middle of the poem (summer grass, sweat, brood, fire) give way to the barest of structures as 'Features, figure, form' become 'irrelevant' and are 'dismissed.' Even the girders, which at least have mass and three-dimensionality, are hollowed out, leaving only the barest of geometrical figures: lines connecting points. This is an odd—and characteristically Auden-esque—figural expression of resignation before unrequited desire.

'Deceit of instinct' is essential to the poem and to Auden's thinking in this period: it brings into relief the 'hidden conflict' between social norms (the 'ought') and the instinctual needs of the individual, a consistent theme in the early works.[59] The syntax, tortuous throughout the poem, is particularly difficult in these final lines, making the sense difficult to untangle. In the version of the poem contained in Katherine Bucknell's edition of *Juvenilia*, there is a comma after 'dismissed,' which is not the case in Mendelson's *The English Auden*.[60] This brings some clarity, but the

---

[59] See Rod Mengham, op. cit., p. 167. Auden was not yet acquainted with the work of Homer Lane when he wrote this poem, but it is clear he was disposed already toward Lane's ideas of the inherent moral goodness of instinctual drives. As Mengham writes, 'Lane regarded the conflict between the claims of the instincts and the demands of society as completely unnecessary.'

[60] Bucknell, op. cit., p. 205.

lack of articles and conjunctions makes it difficult to decide whether the syntactical units are meant to be read paratactically or hypotactically. In other words, it is unclear where causality is to be attributed: is it because of the deceit of instinct that the features, figure, and form become irrelevant and are dismissed? Or are these simply two events being narrated in juxtaposition to each other? What is being 'seen' and who is doing the seeing? And who or what is 'just'? If, as it seems likely to me, it is the 'fair plotted' points of ought, that is, the rigid social norms of morality, that are 'too just for weeping argument', are we meant to take this at face value? Or is it ironic?

In the first version of the poem the last line read 'Before which argument my buts are impudent' (ibid., p. 209). The aesthetic superiority of the revision aside, the semantics of the original conclusion are more straight-forward. Without attempting to resolve all these difficulties, I do want to suggest that there is a notable parallelism between the beginning of the poem and the end. Both show molding forces acting on the human being: in the beginning the body is subjected to the world; in the end the mind is forced to conform as well. In this light, the most important fact about the revision is the removal of the possessive pronoun 'my', creating the absence of a clear subject at the conclusion just as there was at the beginning. This is significant to the macroform of the phonotext as well, because it preserves the integrity of a tripartite movement in which the middle section of the poem (lines 5-11) constitutes a modulation correlative with the thematic shift to the scene of unfulfilled desire. This modulation is seen most clearly in the presence of the seventh motif (which highlighted the problem of the lyric 'I'), which is concentrated in the middle of the poem—the scene of fully embodied desire. It fades out with 'Eyes, unwashed jewels,' and with 'Life stripped to girders' not to return. If Auden had retained the original conclusion, however, the pronoun 'my' would have represented a return of this motif in the final line, undermining the integrity of the tripartite structure. Likewise, the introduction of the word 'just' reinforces a return to the tonal structure of the beginning by strongly reasserting the second motif, while raising the question of the justice of society's sexual mores.

There is one more—and rather remarkable—thing to note about the phonotext of the poem. In her excellent book *Lyric Poetry*, Mutlu Konuk-Blasing notes in her discussion of Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly' that the

> poem would lend evidence to Saussure's argument that phonemes of sacred names are encrypted in funerary poems. The phonemes of a name, analyzed, recombined in various ways, and distributed throughout the text, make for an order independent of the formal orders of rhyme and other sound schemes such as assonance or consonance, which do not imply that a word or a name is being imitated. Pound's title gives us both the name and the significant consonantal cluster of Pound's initials, ELP—**E.P. Ode Pour L**'Electio**n d**e son S**ep**ulchre—that are also distributed through Pen**elop**e and the unnamed **Elp**enor, the one 'with a name to come.'[61]

Just so, the sounds of Wystan Hugh Auden are distributed throughout 'Bones wrenched': the /w/ in the third theme, at times including the /ɪ/: '**w**eak **whi**mper', '**w**orld **w**onder', 's**qu**at', '**wi**th', '**w**ant', '**o**nce', 'flo**w**ers', 'un**w**ashed', '**w**eeping'; the /u/ in the fifth theme, sometimes including the /j/: '**you**', '**roo**ts', 'und**o**ing', 't**o**', 'br**oo**d', '**two**-faced', 'cr**u**dely thr**ough**', 'j**ew**els', 't**o**', 'thr**ough**', '**you**', 't**oo**'; the /ɒ/ of the fourth theme, often coupled with the /d/ or the /t/, the /ə/ and /n/: 'har**den**e**d**', 'br**ought** k**now**le**d**ge', '**au**gure**d**', 'g**o**n**e**', 'tar**n**ish', 'b**o**d**y**', 'squ**at**', 'w**ant**', '**co**ckcrow', 'u**n**w**a**she**d**', '**ought**', 'pl**otted**', 'argum**ent**'. This inscription and dispersal of the name culminates in the enjambment between lines twelve and thirteen: 'dism**issed / Ought**', the enjambment holding the beat of the silent second syllable of Wystan and the /ju/ of Hugh that would grant some agency, some *is* to this impersonal, mechanical *ought*.[62] Perhaps, then, the omission of the comma between 'dismissed' and 'ought' noted above was not accidental—or not entirely so. But here hermeneutics break down, as in the case of the phonemic matrix, leaving only the silence of this enjambment—the abyss of the phonemic unconscious.

---

[61] Mutlu Konuk-Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 43, n. 26.
[62] I am indebted to John Wilkinson and his acute ear for first bringing this to my attention.

Let me return briefly to the question of hermeneutics in relation to the method of phonemic analysis. Not all of the phonemic themes identified above find themselves swept up into my reading of the poem: this might seem to be a weakness. It is nonetheless the case, however, that the act of analysis identifying the themes has transformed my sense of the poem, deepened my *feel for it*. Even when it doesn't pay clearly identifiable hermeneutic dividends, I nonetheless believe that I could not have arrived at the reading presented here without having performed the phonemic analysis. Here the problem presents itself of how to write about aspects of verse that are resistant to interpretation, that don't contribute to a close reading. I felt in writing this paper the coercive power of the seeming necessity to incorporate every feature of the phonotext into my reading, but in the end I resisted this force. I could make other observations about the phonotext: the fact, for example, that the first and the sixth themes have a chiasmic structure. I find this to be incredibly interesting, but I have no interpretation to offer, I can't recuperate it into my reading. Must such things, then, be repressed? It seems so—at least until we find an alternative, or a supplement to, hermeneutics. Finally, the analysis revealed a deep structural fact about the poem that could not have been discovered any other way—that is, what I have called the phonemic matrix of the poem. The phonemic matrix, finally, points to the structuring power, indeed, the formal power, of the phonemic unconscious.

To wrap this up by zooming out a bit, I will make a few more general observations about the music of Auden's early verse. Historically, as Hollander shows, there has been much confusion about how to apply musical terms to prosodical analysis. How can we use the terms melody, rhythm, and meter with any degree of specificity when all of them seem to depend, at least in accentual languages, upon pitch? Here I want to venture the claim that phonemic analysis such as I've done can provide some clarity by allowing for an analytical separation of melody from rhythm and meter. Melody, then, would not depend—as it has in so many prosodic systems—on speech-pitch, but rather on the scale offered by Tsur: 'the sequence vowels, liquids, and nasals, voiced fricatives, voiced stops, voiceless fricatives, voiceless stops, constitute a scale of decreasing periodicity or sonority, in this order. The feature [± PERIODIC] is responsible for the opposition

TONES ~ NOISES, which is analogous, in a sense to the opposition HARMONIOUS ~ NOT HARMONIOUS, or SOFT ~ HARD.'[63] This scale can then be applied to a poem to determine its particular melodic character. The expressive contrasts possible through the cross-modal iconicity of vowels would then play a significant role in the determination of the melodic, and, hence, tonal, character of a given poem. Pitch and accent, then, though not irrelevant to melody, would be the proper sphere of rhythmical and metrical analysis.

The remarkably mutilated language of early Auden doesn't seem, especially in relation to the lyric tradition in English poetry, to be particularly melodic—a prosody that, as Randall Jarrell pointed out, 'is easy to condemn...as an eccentric limitation of language.'[64] Jarrell goes on to argue, however, that it is in fact 'a creative extension' (ibid.). The distinctiveness of Auden's music is, in part at least, a result of the fact that the phonemic motifs are achieved not through epanalepsis but through repetition of sounds in sub- and trans-lexical units. This allows him 'to achieve even greater variegation of motifs and figures without melodic character'; to 'be freer and less constrained in rhythm' and 'freer from repetition of motifs and spinning out of thoughts in the manner of a melody.'[65] Those are the words that a young Arnold Schönberg wrote in 1909 about the new musical language he was creating. They capture quite well, I think, the new linguistic music that a young W. H. Auden was creating about twenty years later.[66]

4

---

[63] Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, op. cit., p. 32. Hollander notes that Sidney Lanier, for example, forced 'a muddy identification of speech-pitch with melody', 'The Music of Poetry', op. cit., p. 239.

[64] Randall Jarrell, op. cit., p. 197.

[65] 'Letter to Busoni, August 24, 1909', in *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life*, ed. by Joseph Auner (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 75-76.

[66] I am not making an analogical argument about modernism in music and poetry, but rather want to suggest that the two can provide models of thought that can be mutually elucidating.

In conclusion I will take some steps toward theorizing the notion of the phonemic unconscious, and attempt to show, via the notion of the phonemic matrix, how the phonemic unconscious is essential to the unique kind of thinking that occurs through the music of poetry. Reuven Tsur has shown that between speech sounds and non-speech sounds, which are distinguished and differently 'processed' in the brain, there is a third mode of hearing, which he calls the 'Poetic Mode' of speech perception, 'in which some rich precategorical sensory information is subliminally perceived, which is the source of the 'mysterious' intuitions concerning speech sounds.'[67] Speech perception is very categorical, subsuming the auditory richness of sound to the sense to be gleaned from it; in the poetic mode of listening, however, more of this auditory richness enters into consciousness. Everyday language is predominantly pragmatic in nature, as Ludwig Wittgenstein ingeniously showed us; it is 'intervolved in a definite environment,' of projects and concerns.[68] Consider his example of going to the grocery store and asking the clerk for five red apples. Does the clerk stop to think about 'the meaning of the word 'five'?' Of course not, Wittgenstein concludes, 'no such thing was in question here, only how the world 'five' is used.'[69] When considering how to approach an understanding of everyday language, he concluded, '[o]ne has to *look at* its use and learn from that.'[70] The point

---

[67] Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, op. cit., p. vii. Hence, the problems presented by the phonotext cannot be skirted by appealing to an absence of perception on the part of the reader.

[68] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), p. 82. In making a distinction between everyday language and poetic language, I do not mean to denigrate everyday language, or to deny its richness. At the very least, however, poetry is language that has been 'cut up'. (See Simon Jarvis, 'For a Poetics of Verse', *PMLA*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (2010), pp. 931-35.) It is language, to use Heidegger's term, that is unready-to-hand—broken—and hence forces us to pay attention to it in a different way than we do other language.

[69] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 3.

[70] Ibid., p. 109. Wittgenstein's insights have produced a whole tradition of linguistic thought and research; see Jerome Bruner, *Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993); cf. Michael Tomasello, 'The usage-based theory of language acquisition', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Child Language*, ed. by Edith L. Bavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

of considering the different mode of perception when listening to or reading poetry is to focus on how poems 'undertake temporarily to negate conceptual/instrumental thought, enabling present construction of new concepts and the new social dispensations that may spring from them.'[71] Poetry is not a part of everyday, absorbed, utilitarian engagement with the world. And it is precisely because literature represents a departure from this everydayness that it has radical potential: our 'ordinary conceptual capacities' fail us in aesthetic encounters.[72] This is not to say that we don't make use of our normal cognitive capacities in reading literature, but reducing literary works to these capacities alone is to do violence to the literature and to foreclose *a priori* upon the possibility of a distinctly poetic mode of thinking. Poetic thinking is, in part, distinctive because of a heightened perception of the music of language, both in composition and re-composition (through reading, whether aloud or subvocalized, or hearing). This is not simply a result of historically contingent practices of reading, but rather is a phenomenal structure of attention to language that is peculiar to poetry.

This brings me back to the problem of intentionality which was bracketed for the purposes of analysis. I am tempted to say, as Newton once did, *hypotheses non fingo* and leave it at that. I'm not sure really how important the question is to poetics. But if I had to hazard an explanation, Simon Jarvis's suggestion that 'prosodic thinking operates right at the threshold of intentionality,' making 'the difficulty of deciding whether its effects are nugatory or real...in fact constitutive of the field of prosodic thinking, both in its composition and in the recomposition which takes place every time even a silent performance of verse is undertaken,' seems not a bad place to start.[73] To return a final time to the phonemic matrix of Auden's poem:

---

[71] Robert Kaufman, 'Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter 2001), p. 372.

[72] Immanuel Kant*, Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987 [1790]), p. 196. Poetry was the highest of the arts for Kant because it 'expands the mind: for it sets the imagination free, and offers us, from among the unlimited variety of possible forms that harmonize with a given concept...that form which links the exhibition of the concept with a wealth of thought to which no linguistic expression is completely adequate'.

[73] Jarvis, 'Why rhyme pleases', op. cit., pp. 37-38.

rather than a clue to send us off to read *King Lear*, to listen to Cordelia's speech and solve a semantic literary puzzle, the matrix would seem to be a much more quotidian thing—a tune stuck in Auden's head, an *Ohrwurm* at the threshold of intentionality. But a tune that provided, in part, a scaffolding for thought in the poem. However quotidian, the *Ohrwurm* seems to me not so simple a phenomenon. I would like to characterize this matrix, I hope not too ambitiously, as an irruption of the phonemic unconscious, a 'phonemic disturbance' that remembers *to us*, 'the history that we are.'[74] Freud noted that obsessional neuroses 'give the impression, even to the patients themselves, of being all-powerful visitants from another world, immortal beings mingling in the whirlpool of mortal things. In these symptoms,' he goes on, 'lies the clearest indication of a special sphere of mental activity cut off from all the rest,' that is, the unconscious.[75] A tune stuck in one's head also has this quality of an unbidden guest in the mind. And, of course, this description of neuroses as 'all-powerful visitants from another world' cannot but evoke in this context the notion of poetic inspiration—whether in the figuration of the Muses, or of the Socratic daemon, or of a fading flame. As Shelley put it in his *Defence of Poetry*: 'A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: the power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.'[76] Auden himself points to this feeling of language as a separate agency in the epigraph quoted at the head of the essay: '(Rhythm is what is expected by one word of another.)'[77] Such

---

[74] Mutlu Konuk-Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, op. cit., p. 90. History is meant here in both ontogenetic and phylogenetic senses. My thinking here is very close to that of Konuk-Blasing, and I am in her debt. Konuk-Blasing's theory of lyric, however, is predicated on a strict division between the symbolic system and the phonemic-literal system. It will become clear where my account differs in what follows.

[75] Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Joan Riviere (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1943), p. 246.

[76] In *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, Vol. VII (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), p. 135.

[77] *The English Auden,* op. cit., p. 308.

accounts of poetic inspiration—and many other poets could be cited—as well as phenomena like the *Ohrwurm* (the term itself is apt, as it suggests an outside agency within one's head), point to the operation of the phonemic unconscious. To clarify this notion further, I appeal to the work of Didier Anzieu and his theory of the skin ego.[78]

The Skin Ego, Anzieu's major work, is animated by a question that is very interesting in light of my concerns: 'what if thought were as much an affair of the skin as of the brain?' (p. 9). He comes to answer the question in the affirmative, concluding that 'the Skin Ego underlies the very possibility of thought' (p. 41). Drawing on W. R. Bion's account of the passage from non-thinking to thinking, or from beta to alpha elements, requiring a container for psychical space, Anzieu claims that this function is served by the skin, at first mutually shared with the mother. This is of particular importance to my notion of poetic thinking, because Anzieu advances an account of the formation of the Skin Ego through sound, in particular the voice of the mother (or primary caretaker), which he calls the 'audio-phonic skin' (p. 158). Rooted in simple facts of infantile development, Anzieu's story of psychological development differs pointedly from the influential Lacanian model of the mirror stage.[79] 'At five weeks,' Anzieu notes, 'the baby can distinguish its mother's voice from others, though it still cannot differentiate between its mother's face and those of others' (p. 163). The voice, then, is the beginning of ego formation.

---

[78] 'The Skin Ego is an intermediate structure of the psychical apparatus: intermediate chronologically between the mother and the infant, and intermediate structurally between the mutual inclusion of psyches in the state of primitive fusion and the differentiation of psychical agencies corresponding to the second Freudian topography', *The Skin Ego*, op. cit., p. 4.

[79] 'There is an internal conflict in psychoanalytic thinking between an empiricist, pragmatic, psychogenetic orientation (more common among the British and Americans), in which the psychical organization is seen as resulting from unconscious childhood experiences (particularly of object-relations), and a structuralist orientation (dominant in France in recent decades) which denies that the structure is a product of experience, affirming on the contrary that there is no experience that is not organized by a pre-existent structure. I refuse to take sides in this argument', *The Skin Ego*, ibid., p. 41. Despite Anzieu's refusal, I feel that his account is not entirely compatible with the Lacanian model of the mirror-stage.

> Before the look and smile of the mother who feeds and cares for him reflect back to the child an image of himself which is visually perceptible to him, and which he interiorizes to reinforce his Self and develop the rudiments of his Ego, the bath of melody (the mother's voice, her singing, the music she causes him to hear) have made a first sound mirror available to him. He makes use of it first in his crying (to which the mother's voice responds soothingly), then in his babbling and lastly in his early games of phonemic articulation (p. 168).

The production and consumption of sound is the first labor of life in which the infant finds itself reflected to itself: 'mental capacities operate first on acoustic material' (p. 164). This sound mirror, then, can be said to be the earliest instantiation of 'the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form,'[80] a matrix that is localized in the skin. The sound mirror is the root of the distinctions between self and other, inside and outside. Anzieu takes his cue from Freud's notion that the ego 'is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface,' as well as his account of the infant's cry as the earliest form of communication.[81] Anzieu's intervention, however, is to suggest that sound plays an even more formative role than Freud suggested in the development of the bodily ego through what he terms the 'sound-bath'.

> ...the Self forms as a sound envelope through the experience of a bath of sounds (concomitant with the experience of nursing). This sound-bath prefigures the Skin Ego with its double face, one half turned towards the outer world, the other towards the inner, since the sound envelope is composed of sounds emitted either by the baby or by the environment. The combination of these sounds therefore produces (a) a common space-volume permitting bilateral exchange (whilst feeding and elimination involve a one-way flow); (b) a first (spatio-auditory) image of one's own body; and (c) a bond of actual fused reality with

---

[80] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1949]), p. 76. It is worth observing here as well that, as Umberto Eco points out, the mirror image proper is an absolute icon, that is, 'an image having *all* the properties of its denotatum', *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, op. cit., p. 210.

[81] Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIX (1923), p. 26. Cf. Biven, 'The Role of Skin in Normal and Abnormal Development', op. cit., p. 206. Sigmund Freud, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. I (1950 [1895]), p. 331.

the mother (without which the imaginary fusion with her would not be possible later).[82]

The fact that one can be completely immersed in sound is unique to the sensory modality of hearing: it is not true of vision, for example, or of olfaction. Sound is not just heard, but felt, and this fact, as Anzieu argues, makes sound a crucial and formative factor in the development of the bodily ego.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty also invokes the notion of the sound bath of early childhood, and Anzieu's claim that 'the child identifies with the mother on the basis of phenomenological corporality' further sanctions supplementing his account with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, which is rooted in his phenomenology of the body.[83] In a lecture series given at the University of Paris in 1949-50, which has been translated as *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, Merleau-Ponty quotes Henri Delacroix who claimed that the 'child bathes in language.'[84] This period is that of a proliferation of phonemes in the form of babble, which Merleau-Ponty calls 'the ancestor of language.'[85] He notes that at first 'children achieve vocal utterances of an extraordinary richness,' but, as they progressively learn the particular language of their environment, this richness is reduced to the phonemic

---

[82] *The Skin Ego*, op. cit., p. 167.

[83] Didier Anzieu, 'The Sound Image of the Self', *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, Issue 6, (1979), p. 29. Accessed online, *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing*, www.pep-web.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/document.php?id=irp.006.0023a&type=hitlist&num=3&query=zone1%2Cparagraphszone2%2Cparagraphs|author%2Canzieu%2C+didier|viewperiod%2Cweek|sort%2Cauthor%2Ca#hit1. This essay is an earlier version of chapter 11 of *The Skin Ego*. Accessed 12.12.2015

[84] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. by Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 12. The translation is from 'lecture notes taken down by students' that 'were periodically gathered together and submitted to Merleau-Ponty for his approval' and then published in the *Bulletin du Groupe d'études de psychologie de l'Université de Paris*. In the Foreword, James M. Edie cautions the reader: 'Clearly, a lot was said in these courses which has not been taken down. The strict outline of Merleau-Ponty's thought is emphasized, while the exuberant flora and fauna of his imagination, the deliberately ambiguous, intense, allusive character of his own prose style has been excised', p. xii. It is nonetheless the case that the lectures offer the core of Merleau-Ponty's thinking about language acquisition, drawing on his earlier thinking about language in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[85] Ibid., p. 11. Merleau-Ponty, like Anzieu, notes that the first identification with others occurs through hearing and not vision, p. 14.

system of that language.[86] Between the early period of sound proliferation, in which the child is immersed in the sound bath of language and is also proliferating sound through babbling, and entry into the phonemic system through which signification emerges, there is a kind of latency period. The child then, seemingly all at once, begins to speak.[87] Now, it might seem that this is, as Lacan would have it, an irreversible entry into the symbolic order. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the superstructure of language as a system of phonemic oppositions is built upon, and always retains, a deeper basal level in the body and the world. This is what, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is called the '*gestural meaning*' of language, 'which is immanent in speech.'[88] This phenomenological account of the corporeal basis of language runs counter to all representational theories of language:

> What we have said earlier about the 'representation of movement' must be repeated concerning the verbal image: I do not need to visualize external space and my own body in order to move one within the other. It is enough that they exist for me, and that they form a certain field of action spread around me. In the same way I do not need to visualize the word in order to know and pronounce it. It is enough that I possess its articulatory and acoustic style as one of the modulations, one of the possible uses of my body. I reach back for the word as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment (p. 180).

But this view of language is also incompatible with the Saussurean account of linguistic signs as purely conventional.

> If we consider only the conceptual and delimiting meaning of words, it is true that the verbal form—with the exception of endings—appears arbitrary. But it would no longer appear so if we took into account the emotional content of the

---

[86] Ibid., p. 15. Cf. Anzieu, op. cit., p. 163: 'Between three and six months, the baby is constantly babbling. He plays with the sounds he makes, which are, first of all, 'cluckings, clickings and cawings' (Ombredane). He then sets about progressively differentiating and deliberately producing and consolidating, from the wide range of phonemes available, those constituting what will come to be his mother tongue.'

[87] Ibid., p. 51: 'Between the period when the child does not understand and the instant when he does understand, there is a discontinuity that is impossible to overlook.'

[88] *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., p. 179.

word, which we have called above its 'gestural' sense, which is all-important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of 'singing' the world, and that their function is to represent things not, as the naïve onomatopoeic theory had it, by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence... Strictly speaking, therefore, there are no conventional signs, standing as the simple notation of a thought pure and clear in itself, there are only words into which the history of a whole language is compressed, and which effect communication with no absolute guarantee, dogged as they are by incredible linguistic hazards (pp. 187-88).

Merleau-Ponty didn't have the Peircean notion of cross-modal iconicity at his disposal, but the idea of phonemes as a means of singing the world gestures in this direction. Iconicity draws on the gestural sense that Merleau-Ponty refers to, taking its power not merely from resemblances, but from the emotional coloring of sounds. The compression—or one could say, drawing from a different metaphorical register, the *sedimentation*—of history into language is an important notion, and one that deserves further attention from scholars working in historical poetics.[89] Phonemic disruptions in the poetic text not only reveal the materiality of language, but also bear the weight of history, both onto- and phylo-genetic.

Merleau-Ponty would toward the end of his life come to refer to the flesh of the world. The flesh became a powerful metaphor for being-in-the-world, as it is a powerful metaphor for Anzieu in characterizing the intermediate nature of the Ego. Merleau-Ponty introduced the notion of the flesh in the context of the visible, but it is worth noting that in his attempts to characterize it he relies upon musical and tactile terms—the flesh, that is, is best conceived cross-modally. The visible

is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a

---

[89] J. H. Prynne has made very interesting speculations in this direction. See, for example, 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', *Chicago Review*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2010), pp. 126-57.

momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility. Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.[90]

The slippage between perceptual modalities is surely not accidental: it is a lived feature of the flesh, the multiplicity of the textural tissue that is 'this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself,' an integral feature of corporality (p. 139). Insofar as poetry is not just a particular piece of the Sensible, but an assemblage of 'sounds [that] salvage a fraction of the genuine experience, of reality,'[91] it is particularly rich in the cross-modalities of the flesh. For the infant whose world is as yet unarticulated into different sensory modalities, the skin is a site of multiplicity, not just a symbolic matrix but a field rich with iconic possibilities, a mould opening auguries and potentialities. The music of poetry is the flesh of poetry, the liminality of the phonemic unconscious through which thought and affect pass into the poem.

Finally, I want to return briefly to C. S. Peirce and the theory of iconicity. It is important to note that for Peirce icons 'have more to do with the living character of truth than have either Symbols or Indices...Icons are specially requisite for reasoning.'[92] This is because icons, unlike symbols or indexes, allow for synthesis; the material excess of objects allows for the opening of new possibilities for thought through the recognition of iconic relations. Like Merleau-Ponty's flesh, an icon is itself a sign of 'a possibility, a latency'.[93] Or, to borrow for my purposes here what

---

[90] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 132-33.

[91] Fónagy, 'Communication in Poetry', op. cit., p. 213.

[92] *Peirce on Signs*, op. cit., p. 252.

[93] As Webb Keane puts it, 'the properties of a material thing exist even if never taken as iconic elements of a sign'; but he points out that 'the reverse is also the case. An icon can resemble an object that doesn't exist—a map, say, of a fantastic land, or a cloud that looks like a unicorn. Since all objects have qualities, *any* given object potentially resembles *something*. This means any object can suggest possible future uses or interpretations.' Webb Keane, 'Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things', in *Materiality*, ed. by Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 189. Cf. Frederick Stjernfelt, 'On operational and optimal iconicity in Peirce's diagrammatology', op. cit., p. 397: 'The icon is not

I find to be the most singular and beautiful line of the Auden poem, it could be said that it is iconicity that allows presence to be 'a rich mould augured for roots urged'. Also as with Merleau-Ponty, semiosis for Peirce is not solely the activity of brains processing data within the confines of the skull. He writes, remarkably, the following:

> Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world; and one can no more deny that it is really there, than that the colors, the shapes, etc. of objects are really there. Consistently adhere to that unwarrantable denial, and you will be driven to some form of idealistic nominalism akin to Fichte's. Not only is thought in the organic world, but it develops there.[94]

Thought exists, that is, in the relations of things, not just in minds; man is not the measure, but just another part of the flesh of all things. Just as thought exists and develops in the natural world, I argue that it exists and develops in verse as well— that is to say, verse forms, metres, the sedimented sound shapes of words, *themselves* bear thought. I hope to have offered compelling evidence that the distinctiveness of poetic thinking has much to do with the way that poetry consists of thinking through the music of language—singing the world, as Merleau-Ponty puts it—and, further, that the music of poetry is not an adornment to the meaning, not a mere echo of the sense, but is essential to the kind of thinking that poetry makes possible.

---

only the only kind of sign directly presenting some of the qualities of its object; it is also the only sign by the contemplation of which more can be learned than lies in the directions for the construction of the sign. This definition immediately separates the icon from any psychologism: it does not matter whether sign and object for a first (or second) glance seem or are experienced as similar; the decisive test for iconicity lies in whether it is possible to manipulate or develop the sign so that new information as to its object appears. Icons are thus signs with implicit information that may be made explicit.'

[94] *Peirce on Signs,* op. cit.