

Healing “Our Own Wronged Flesh”: Rest and Flesh as Evidence of God’s Grace

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December 3, 2014

While the central subject in Auden's poem "Nones" is the corporate "we," who is every person together and each person individually, and not "the victim" whose death has just been realized, Auden does indirectly portray aspects of God's nature through his description of the human mind and body in this poem. In the midst of shock, confusion, pain, and denial, our bodies suggest one form of partial remedy: rest. Rest is portrayed as a means of temporarily silencing the mind, now tainted by participating in the act of murder, and a means of giving the flesh time to mend itself by working in accordance with its design. In Genesis, God chose to rest when he finished his feat of creating the universe, setting the precedent for the physical act of submission that our bodies demand of us daily. Auden emphasizes the importance of the physical flesh and rest in "Nones" because they are essential to our understanding of ourselves in relation to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

In the "Horae Canonicae" the poem "Nones" begins by announcing that the murder of the victim demanded by "the crowd" in "Sext" has been accomplished. The body whose death we demanded has been broken and can no longer function as a body normally does, the blood has ceased flowing and "is already / Dry on the grass" (Auden 231). The many that made up the crowd are now dispersing, and each person is left to grapple with the consequences of the murder, alone, without any assistance. As the initial shock of the event fades away, our minds begin to comprehend the idea that every act of our will is not innocent, but rather "the goal that all willful acts are sailing away to is murder" (Auden qtd. by Mendelson 343). This realization of the lack of innocence is a heavy and troubling thought to carry, but "we have time / To misrepresent, excuse, deny, / Mythify, use this event" (Auden 233) for our own supposed benefit. It was "[a] crowd that saw him die, not I" (Auden 232), we say in an attempt to distance ourselves even from guilt by association. But "[t]his mutilated flesh, our victim, / Explains too

nakedly, too well,” (Auden 232) for us to deceive even ourselves with our lies, so our bodies turn then to rest. Though our sleep may be filled with dark dreams, this physical rest is beneficial to us. For “while we are thus away, our own wronged flesh / May work undisturbed, restoring / The order we try to destroy” (Auden 234) because our bodies are deigned to heal and mend, processes generally expedited when the body is resting. We have yet to fully grasp what has transpired, what the death of “our victim” means, but we are not expected to know yet, for now we need only rest. The tone of the image Auden creates in “Nones” is somber, but hopeful because of the restorative work of the flesh.

The image of “[t]his mutilated flesh, our victim” (Auden 232) represents more than just the consequence of our murderous wills put to action; it is a poignant image of the fundamental humility of Christ and an example of the value God places in the physical body.

As Edward Mendelson notes in *Later Auden*, Auden “dedicated to the body some of his most profound poems.... And because he learned to value the body as sacred in itself, Auden learned to believe in it as the means and promise of salvation” (Mendelson 277). Auden does not explicitly name Jesus in this poem, but for Christian readers, or those with some knowledge of Christianity, the familiar image of Christ on the cross is brought to mind in this brief line of poetry. Auden’s description is more obtrusive than most depictions of the crucifixion simply by his choice of words. “Mutilated” goes beyond bloodied, bruised, or whipped to mean disfigured, perhaps unrecognizably so. The word “flesh” is also more gruesome than alternative words such as “body” or “person” because it brings to mind parts of the body which are generally unobserved: the muscles, the fat, the blood. Finally the use of the words “our victim” reaches out to readers and pulls them into a collective culpability. He is not God or the devil’s victim, not theirs alone, he is ours. We are the ones who shouted to convict him and the ones who physically

beat him and hung him on the cross. But the only reason this is possible is Christ's embodiment of utter submission to the will of God—a death was owed, so the Word became flesh to pay it in full. Auden explains the type of payment that was required in the following poem “Vespers”: “it must be human, it must be innocent” (Auden 237). God required perfectly innocent, physical, human flesh and blood from the sacrifice that atones for the sins of mankind. He did not require a metaphysical surrendering of souls, or thoughts, but a tangible submission of human flesh. Christian readers of “Nones” should understand that “[t]his mutilated flesh” is indeed “the means and promise of salvation” (Mendelson 277) soon to be realized in the context of Good Friday and fulfilled in the context of our everyday life.

Likely unaware or uncomprehending of the breadth of the promise of salvation that the marred flesh holds, we, in Auden's poem, revert back to what is familiar to us, believing “[i]t would be best to go home, if we have a home,” (Auden 233) rather than try to comprehend our act. Perhaps Mendelson's summation of Auden's “In Praise of Limestone” applies here in reference to what it means to return home: “It reminds us, when we indulge in Platonist fantasies of transcendence or Baconian fantasies of detachment, that our inescapable home is our own flesh” (295). If we let our flesh run as it naturally does, instead of subjecting it to the harassment of our will, then we will find some relief from our tormented thoughts. Mendelson also notes that Auden thought of the flesh as a sort of uniting entity because it is “common to us all” (306). The flesh is a safe place to return to because it reminds us that we are not alone, but part of a broader community of human beings. There is a real sense of comfort in commonality. This is of course reflected in the “canonical hours, as Auden interpreted them, [which] gave a universal framework to ordinary life” (Mendelson 309). By participating in the Church offices, people everywhere can simply submit to what has already been established and rely on prayers that have

been prayed for centuries, as a sort of act of submission. However, the canonical hours are nearly impossible to keep in practice because they do not allow for an extended amount of rest, which is necessary for our human bodies, but the principle behind them is notable: just as every person is responsible in the death of Christ, every person participates in the grace of his resurrection by honoring him with physical acts of worship. In this New Testament age, our bodies themselves are the temples (1 Corin. 16:19), sacred places of worship, sanctuaries for the weary of heart and mind.

In addition to being a temple, Auden illustrates that the body serves to remind humans that it is “[i]n any case good to rest” (Auden 233). Rest is a necessary process in maintaining the health of the flesh and the mind. God established rest as a sacred act when he voluntarily rested after speaking the universe into being (Gen. 2:2-3), because he values rest, not because he needs it. Furthermore, God never requires anything of us that he is not willing to do himself, so when he created human beings to inherently need rest to survive, he did so with purpose. Auden believed that “if you really wish to destroy a person and turn him into an automaton, the surest method is not physical torture, in the strict sense, but simply to keep him awake, i.e. in an existential relation to life without intermission” (Mendelson 345). Auden was writing during and after the two greatest wars of modern history, and he was well aware of how overwhelmingly tragic life can be. Even common rituals of working, or obtaining an education, can become tedious and disillusioning if we do not permit ourselves to rest as we should. As the bird in T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” notes: “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” We need reprieve from our circumstances, from the consequences of our actions, and even from the force of our own will. Sleep provides an acceptable escape from reality, and is, perhaps inadvertently, an

admission that we are not God. We sleep because he created us to need rest, because he knew we would absolutely destroy ourselves otherwise.

We also rest because our body does its best and most efficient healing when all our defenses against it are down. When we submit to our body and let it run without our willful control, without our worry and misguided thoughts manipulating its actions, our flesh works wonders. For “while we are thus away, our own wronged flesh / May work undisturbed, restoring / The order we try to destroy, the rhythm / We spoil out of spite” (Auden 234). Here “our own wronged flesh” is working in much the same way God works in our lives spiritually, after all, our flesh is a gift from him. Try as we might to ignore him, God is constantly at work in the world and in our individual lives. Like the flesh, he works for us even when we work against him; like the flesh, he works in mysterious, unseen ways; and like the flesh, his mending of us is best accomplished when we submit to our need of him, as the flesh submits to sleep, and allow him work without trying to mediate the process. The needs of our flesh also remind us that God cares for us physically, as well as spiritually. For reasons we may not ever fully comprehend in this life, God decided that humans living in a corporeal body for a time was a desirable method for expanding his Kingdom. Because he saw this as good, he takes excellent care to remind us that he considered everything when he created human flesh. As the author of 1 Corinthians notes, “God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” (12:18). He does nothing by accident: “valves close / And open exactly, glands secrete, / Vessels contract and expand / At the right moment, essential fluids / Flow to renew exhausted cells” (Auden 234) because he cares about the details of our bodies that even we are largely unaware of.

This account of the automatic healing of the flesh that takes place when we rest, in the context of the murder that took place just before the poem began, illustrates profound grace that

God bestows on his creation both through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the nature of our very existence. We forced our bodies, which as Auden once said in a lecture “in themselves can make no choices,” (qtd. in Mendelson 289) to be partner in the crucifixion of the perfect embodiment of human flesh, and instead of condemning us, God works through the preexisting system of our bodies to bring us to a place of rest so that we are not utterly consumed with guilt and denial and confusion. In this moment, God is working to heal us so that we will be able to receive the gift of salvation that is offered to us through faith in the resurrection of Christ, for we are still in a place of “[n]ot knowing quite what has happened, but awed / By death like all the creatures” (Auden 234). Christ’s physical death and resurrection are as necessary to our salvation as our own death and resurrection of self through baptism and acknowledgment of God as our Lord. In each case, the true and full significance of the death is beyond our ability to comprehend, and therefore must be accepted through faith.

Through the events in his poem “Nones,” Auden demonstrates the inherently sacred nature of human flesh and significant role rest plays in our body’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. For the Christian reader, the subtext of Christ’s humility in accepting the role of bodily sacrifice and death so that we are not eternally condemned keenly illustrates God’s grace. Additionally, the manner in which our bodies work to heal us, despite our willful misuse of it, demonstrates God’s unrelenting and prevenient grace towards us. Our sacred flesh is a gift from God, and he is the giver of good gifts.

Works Cited

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