

The Idea of Truth Explored by W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of truth in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden, highlighting how their historical contexts and personal experiences influenced their literary approaches. Both poets harnessed myth as a crucial element in their works, albeit with divergent objectives: Yeats used myth to establish a personal cosmology and anchor his worldview, while Auden employed it to foster a sense of connectivity and shared experience among people. The paper delves into Yeats's inclination towards mysticism, which led him to craft his own system of symbols and traditions when he found existing ones inadequate. Conversely, Auden embraced the universality of truth through collective living and the shared truths of humanity, reflecting his belief in the power of communal experiences. By comparing Yeats's mystical individualism with Auden's communal realism, the paper highlights their unique yet complementary approaches to the role of myth and the pursuit of truth in poetry. Yeats's use of myth as a means of personal revelation contrasts with Auden's view of myth as a bridge to collective understanding. This study reveals how each poet's exploration of truth through myth reflects broader themes in their work and provides insight into the diverse ways poetry can engage with and express complex human beliefs and experiences.

Keywords: Truth in Poetry, Myth, Poetic exploration, Collective experience, Mysticism

Introduction:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun,
Now may I wither into the truth (W. B. Yeats).

No one thing weaves humankind into one single thread, but its relentless search for the truth. Since the day man saw the first light of the sun, he has engaged in this never-ending, ever-evolving pursuit. Some looked for it and saw it through the lenses of philosophy, some through myths. But no one saw it the same.

Discussion:

W. B. Yeats, throughout his life and in his poetry, translated his idea of truth. His search began in the very early days of his life. Born in a protestant family, he felt distant from that tradition. He could not also connect with Roman Catholicism, for he did not share their faith. Separated from both historical traditions of his land, Yeats embarked on a journey to find his own. Repulsed by the excess materialism and science of his time, he found a pull towards mysticism. It was through this lens that he sought to understand the world. For him, reincarnation and the journey of the soul, the passage of time and the guiding hand of faith were all explained and understood using occultism. William Blake, who had emphasized the significance of visionary imagination, too, had a lasting influence on Yeats's psyche. Following the footsteps of Blake, he reveled in the power of vision to help people see and empathize deeply. Of this, Harold Bloom noted, "Yeats knew himself to be the heir of a great tradition in poetry, of the visionaries who have sought to make a more human man, to resolve all the Sunderings of consciousness through the agency of the imagination."

Through his poetry, Yeats endeavoured to find a class of forgotten wisdom, for he was aware of the perils of abstract reasoning separated from imagination and the real world. He vehemently rejected realistic, imitative art. He held that only art that appreciated and rejoiced the pan-psychic power of creation, myth and symbol could unveil the deeper truths and inherent meanings underlying daily encounters. Yeats' lifelong study and beliefs exhibit his profound interest in the divine and how it communicates with humanity. He hoped that the images he conceived in his works would induce trance-like states of mystical consciousness in the reader and profound penetration into the world around them. Yeats, the visionary he was, continued to evolve his poetic style and thought until the time of his death. He toiled heroically to blend his visionary, escapist aspect with a steadfast look at life when the times were bleak. In the following words, he summed it up:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:

- (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

His later works, such as *The Second Coming* and *Among the School Children*, embodied it all. *The Second Coming*, written just after World War 1, is perhaps one of the most well-known poems by Yeats. In this poem, Yeats tells his truth. He evokes sharp images and makes the reader ponder over even the deepest secrets of reality. Through the symbol of the gyre, Yeats puts forth a cyclic sense of life. He uses this to strengthen the importance of these cycles of life, which are cosmic and elude human control. The symbol of the gyre evokes images and dialectical of life and death, sorrow and joy, peace and violence, hope and despair. It gives the reader a complete vision of his approach to life from his poetic maturity. The gyre also highlights the changing nature and how the current world is spinning into chaos, but at the same time, it is freeing itself from the bondage of past traditions and customs. It again shows Yeats's idea of truth, how truth is all-encompassing, how it is full of contraries.

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these Contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell (Blake).

When Yeats uses the symbol of Spiritus Mundi, he nods to his spiritual beliefs. He defined the symbol as universal memory. Through this, he again shares his notion of truth as something that is omnipresent, yet one does not know it but one has to ask for it. It is one instance where Yeats shows how the divine communicates with humanity. In his other poem, *Among the School Children*, he again expounds his understanding. It tells of old age and union with the Divine Mind through Love. It also highlights the role that memories and reminiscences play in attaining this mystical unity. It would not be wrong to say that the reason why Yeats had clung to spirituality and mysticism so hard, was for he had found a centre that his soul craved. Accordingly, he permeated the same into his poetry.

W. H. Auden, too, accompanied Yeats on the path of discovering his idea of truth. Where Yeats jumped headfirst into the ocean with much vigour, Auden sat back with peaceful contemplation. According to him, the contemporary world saw itself in post-mythic, post-religious modernity, and his poetic eye did agree. He sat meditatively, looking deep into the world's eye to figure out the problem of his age. In his work, *Yeats as an Example*, 1948, he wrote:

Yeats, like us, was faced with the modern problem, *i.e.*, of living in a society in which men are no longer supported by tradition without being aware of it, and in which, therefore, every individual who wishes to bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations, emotions, and ideas entering his consciousness, from without and within, is forced to do so presuppositions himself what in previous ages had been done for him by

family, custom, church, and state, namely the choice of principles and presuppositions in terms of which he can make sense of his experience (Auden).

It was in Auden's time only that the world started waking up to rationalists like Bernard Russell. It was the time when clear and rational thinking started gaining importance over romantic ruminations and Auden was the one who embraced it with open arms. He did not fight with the truth of his world but sought to embrace it wholeheartedly. It is reflected in his poetry, too. Auden's truth was collective. His poetry spoke of plural voices; it spoke of togetherness. He writes of his idea of truth in poetry as:

A poet must never make a statement simply because it sounds poetically exciting; he must also believe it to be true. This does not mean, of course, that one can only appreciate a poet whose beliefs happen to coincide with one's own. It does mean, whoever, that one must be convinced that the poet really believes what he says, however odd the belief may seem to oneself.

What the poet has to convey is not 'self-expression', but a view of a reality common to all, seen from a unique perspective, which it is his duty as well as his pleasure to share with others. To small truths as well as great, St. Augustine's words apply.

The truth is neither mine nor his nor another's but belongs to us all whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly, not to account in private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it (Auden).

One often sees the word 'we' in Auden's poetry highlighting his interest and belief in the collective. In his poem *Archaeology*, he depicts history not as an account of events and actions but as a collective of lives and experiences. It shows how myths and spiritual beliefs of one's ancestors are still present in one's life and still shape one's existence. The line, "Only in rites / can we renounce our oddities / and be truly entired" (Auden), emphasises the value of the 'we' and points out that only by acts and social customs can one gain a sense of fulfilment. Further, into the poem, Auden explores the concept of the past and myths. Auden held that mythology's real purpose lies in why they were conceived and not how they were received. He states that to get both history and our spiritual beliefs, one needs to see the timelessness of human emotions and the human desire to make sense of one's life and the world around them. For Auden, humans create myths to connect with the community around them, and the case that this inclination endures across history is why myths have always been so significant in their lives. He asserts that by exploring them, one might learn how the past informs one's daily life. It also would give a better understanding of how 'we' fit into history. Since, to Auden, art was a shared activity; consequently, the interest in myths and symbols highlighted a search for a kind of collective unity. In his other work, *In the Memory of W. B. Yeats*, which perhaps is his best known, he further presents his notions and understandings. Besides mourning for Yeats, Auden talks of the role of a poet, poetry, temporality, war and delusion. Perhaps one of the reasons why this poem is so read is because it has universality and relevance. Auden time and again had pointed out that poetry can adequately depict the world and unite people experiencing the same problems, fears and anxieties. In this elegy, he does the same. According to Auden, every poet, every individual thinks of his path as the only path to truth. To him, the truth is that they all are discovered and shared. He believes in the multiplicity of the subjectiveness of the experience. He encourages to observe with empathy- rather than argue with a contrary point of view.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, one can say that both Yeats and Auden had their ideas of truth. They had some similarities and some differences. They both used myths, Yeats for centring his sense of the world, and Auden for the connectivity it gave. They both accepted the universality of truth, Yeats in the form of mysticism and Auden in the form of collective living and experiences. Yeats could not find his truth in the existing traditions, so he created his own. On the other hand, Auden found his with the collective truths of others.

After exploring them both, it would not be wrong to say that for Yeats and Auden, primarily, their idea of truth was not to replace one truth or belief with another but to expand the mind to accommodate all kinds of truths and beliefs.

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