Two New Letters by Auden on Anglo-Saxon Metre and *The Age of Anxiety*

Jane Toswell
Alan Ward

In 1952, Alan Ward, then a young lecturer at Wadham College, Oxford, was preparing a series of lectures on the history of alliterative verse in English and thought of concluding with a lecture on Auden, with specific reference to *The Age of Anxiety*. He wrote to Auden about his use of Anglo-Saxon metres, asking about the extent to which that use was deliberate.[1] Auden replied generously, as the following letters show. The lecture was never completed and these letters have remained in Ward's Auden file since then, and almost overlooked. A chance conversation with Jane Toswell reminded him of their existence. Toswell had been studying Auden's own training in Anglo-Saxon as a student at Oxford, and was wondering whether Auden's Anglo-Saxonism incorporated not only sources and themes but also metre and prosody.[2] This paper, which begins with the exchange of letters between Ward and Auden, and some commentary on them, moves in that direction. The original letter from Ward to Auden has not survived, but a longhand draft of the follow-up letter does and is reproduced here. The content of the original letter can be inferred from Auden's reply.

The page numbers given in Auden's letters are to the first edition of *The Age of Anxiety* as published in London in 1948 and New York in 1947.[3] References to the *Collected Poems* of 1991 and edited by Edward Mendelson[4] are given in square brackets. Typographical errors (including spacing have been corrected, though Auden's idiosyncratic usage is retained where it has been recognized.

Aug 30
Via Santa Lucia 14
Forio d'Ischia
Prov. di Napoli

Dear Mr. Ward,

Thank you for your letter of Aug 25 inquiring about the metre of *The Age of Anxiety*.

1 I made some attempts to obey the quantity rules of O.E. but abandoned them; as in all quantitative experiments in modern English so many vowels become long by position that, without an obviously artifi[ci]al diction, you cannot get enough Lifts of the Accented-Short-unaccented-short type.

2 To compensate for this relaxation, I took from the romance tradition syllabic counting. In the first two parts of the poem, for instance, the number of syllables in the whole line is 9, so that the caesura always

divides asymmetrically. There is one 2:7 line, I believe, but most are 5:4, 4:5, 3:6, 6:3 etc. Contiguous vowels and vowels through *h* elide. In the more lyrical sections, I have allowed myself more freedom, and, as I expect you will have seen, in many places I have imitated or modified Icelandic meters. I have tried also to follow O.E. practice in avoiding a dactylic rhythm and in ending sentences in the mid-line.

3 The alliteration conforms, I hope, to O.E. rules.

I hope this answers your questions. If you want to know anything more, my address after Sept 14 is 235 Seventh Avenue, New York City II.

yours sincerely
W. H. Auden

22 December 1952 (from handwritten transcript

. . . I'm particularly interested to know how much you followed OE metrical rules' simply because they offered a discipline, and how much you followed them because they seemed relevant in ModE and suited what you wished to say: with particular reference to:

a your attempt to avoid an iambic rhythm.

b your tendency to end sentences in mid-line.

c alliteration. For instance, with regard to the normal OE practice (which you follow of allowing ST-, SP- to alliterate only with themselves and not (e.g. SK-, or S-, do you feel this justified by anything in the sound of the language now? Similarly, when alliterating H- with a vowel, is this expediency or obedience to the ear? Sometimes you alliterate on other consonant-groups beside ST, SP (rather like the ME [Middle English] poets : are there any groups which you feel (ought to be the same category as ST and SP (i.e. 'might' to alliterate regularly as a group?

It has struck me that there is something that may be called 'half-alliteration'; e.g. STONE and TANNED sound to me as if they alliterate almost as much as, say, STONE and SAND. I'd very much like to know whether you feel the same. STONE and STAND certainly seem to alliterate more notably still.

d the position of the alliteration falling regularly on the first stress of the second half-line, and not double there. I should very much like to know also if you ever consciously used (or avoided , 'crossed alliteration,' (ab/ab or 'linking alliteration' (ax/ab bx/etc where the alliteration sound(s of one line are as it were anticipated by the initial sound(s of the last main stress in the previous line.

My lectures are not yet complete by any means, but I hope you will not mind my talking about *The Age of Anxiety* to make a comparison with OE verse and show the potentialities that 'rum ram ruf' still hold.

Dec 28

235 Seventh Avenue
New York City II
New York
U.S.A.

Dear Mr Ward,

Thank you for your letter of Dec 22. In answer to your first question, I originally started out with the intention of writing a poem of forty or fifty lines, but, once I began, the metre seemed to offer so many possibilities that I changed my mind and wrote a long poem.

There are lines in which the second alliteration is not exact, but I believe or hope that the first and third are always correct, eg

st. s. st. x

Occasionally the same alliteration is used in consecutive lines, but I don't think there is a case of linked alliteration. Cross alliteration is only used in some of the lyrical bits, eg p 61 (Lights are moving [p. 487] and p 68 (These ancient harbors [p. 493].

Quite a lot of The Seven Stages is written in Ljoðuháttr, and the lyric on p 39 (Deep in my dark the dream shines [p. 470] is in Kviðuháttr. P 104 (Hushed is the lake of hawks [p. 519] is an attempt at a Drápa.

As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, one of the values of the O.E. metre is that it naturally accepts the spondee in a way that our normal 'french' metric does not. On the whole, I suspect that it is a metre which is only suitable to rather sombre subjects, but I may be wrong.

with best wishes for the success of your lectures
yours sincerely,
W. H. Auden

The exchange of letters is interesting on several levels. First, Auden's kindness in responding to very technical questions is well worth noting. Although he was a prolific commentator on the ideas and inspirations for his poetry, Auden rarely spoke — publicly or privately — about the more technical aspects of his art, though it is clear from his lifelong habit of revision and critical response to his own works that prosodic and stylistic issues were of striking importance to the poet. These letters in the first place provide a rare sidelight on the artist's technical mastery and his concern for the details of his metrical procedure. Second, they are very much the commentary on his art of a working poet, a craftsman. They

suggest a fairly sophisticated understanding of Old English and other medieval metres and point to the willingness of the professional to discuss with an intelligent interlocutor the details of his method of approaching his subject.[5] Third, Auden replied to Ward's first letter within four days of receipt, and did the same a few months later when a follow-up letter asked for clarification on some details. Fourth, although the follow-up reply does not address most of the extremely technical questions that Ward raises in his second letter, which may suggest that Auden's knowledge of the very fine details of Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre was scanty, Auden does provide detailed extra information on crossed alliteration and on his use of Icelandic metres. The poet's own account of his metrical usage suggests that his adaptation of medieval structures was both more complex and less "instinctive" or "imitative" than has previously been acknowledged. The second letter points out that, although Auden had intended to write a poem of some forty or fifty lines "the metre seemed to offer so many possibilities that I changed my mind and wrote a long poem." Finally, the poet very usefully concludes with the observation that the Old English metre—despite the technical advantage of accepting the spondee more naturally than the "normal French' metric" used in twentieth-century English— seems to him "only suitable to rather sombre subjects." One might almost conclude that the choice of metre, and the possibilities that resulted from the development of that metre, drove the choice of subject and the development of the material. Given that this was Auden's last long poem conceived as a whole piece, it seems appropriate that for it he returned to, and greatly elaborated, ideas and metrical usages which had intrigued him at the beginning of his career.

Metrical analysts have long since concluded that Auden wrote syllabic metre of high quality, but the way in which he combined Anglo-Saxon alliterative practice with syllabic metre in this poem has hitherto gone unrecognized. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that Christine Brooke-Rose, in her article on Auden's metre in this text, criticized Auden for his inadequate use of the Old English metrical types.[6] Like many others, she mistakenly concluded that he was following Anglo-Saxon practice closely and attempting to replicate the alliterative pure stress metre of a millennium earlier. However, she does suggest, at the end of her paper, that Auden's practice was influenced by syllabic verse. These letters confirm those suspicions. They also give credence both to John Fuller's identifications[7] of some Old Norse metres in the poem (though he finds "Hushed is the lake of hawks" to be *dróttkvaet* when Auden was attempting a *drápa* , and to Paul Szarmach's argument that "Anthem" was a preliminary draft for *The Age of Anxiety*.[8]

Our concern here is twofold: briefly to consider Auden's own background and interest in matters medieval (and particularly medieval and metrical , first as a student of English and the ways in which that did or did not provide him with metrical models and second as a practicing poet; and to examine his specific practice in *The Age of Anxiety* in light of his own account, in these letters, of its creation.

A. Auden's Medievalism

The details of Auden's undergraduate career are relatively well known.[9] He arrived at Christ Church, Oxford in the fall of 1925 to read science, but during the summer of 1926 obtained permission to switch to the School of English Language and Literature and sat his Finals in 1928. Nevill Coghill, newly-appointed at Exeter College, became his principal tutor; according to Coghill's own account, Auden was a brilliant but erratic student, filled with insight when his attention was caught but entirely unprepared to slog through what he considered the less interesting items in the curriculum. He did develop something of an interest in medieval studies, as he has so famously been quoted as stating, partly inspired by the lectures of J.R.R. Tolkien and partly intrigued by the difficulty and strangeness of this material — especially since it was material he saw as his own heritage. His first name, Wystan, derived from the Anglo-Saxon martyr, the royal child-saint murdered in the seventh century. His surname he described as Anglo-Icelandic, and he perceived himself as profoundly Scandinavian in origin, believing that "Auden" was synonymous with "Odin" — a point which has interesting implications for Auden's sense of himself as a poet. From childhood stories, he already knew the Icelandic sagas and other medieval tales.[10] Old and Middle English texts he was obliged to learn for his Finals, taken as a group at the end of his second year in the English School, in 1928.

His biographers and friends find Auden's Oxford result, a Third Class degree, somewhat difficult to explain. During his time at the university, he focused less on his studies than on meeting friends, writing poetry, founding and co-editing a literary magazine, playing the piano, and arguing about intellectual matters. It is possible that there was little time for careful preparation of examination material. Other reasons that have been proposed include incompatible examiners, a crisis of confidence, the over-exhaustion resulting from stressful late preparation, enthusiastic but unfocused tutoring from Nevill Coghill, and the different sensibility an artist (in this case a poet brings to bear on the study of English than does a scholar or critic. No doubt some combination of these reasons provides a partial explanation. In addition, the last point moves in a direction that may serve us here, since Auden's own version of the

explanation in later years was an apparently careless combination of laziness with the poetic sensibility. Whether the laziness was truth or a polite fiction may remain in doubt, but there is substantial evidence from unimpeachable sources — Auden's own poems and criticism — for the argument of poetic sensibility. Incidentally, no one has yet noted that, since he changed courses of study after his first year but nonetheless completed his Finals after three years at Oxford, Auden may well have suffered from not having written the first-year Honour Moderations exams and from not having enough time to learn the curriculum for the Finals, given that its base was, and is, the preliminary materials taken in first year.

Auden's understanding of Old and Middle English was imperfect, though wholly adequate for his own purposes as a poet. It perhaps parallels his understanding of German, of Swedish, of Russian, of Old Norse, and of Icelandic, from all of which languages he prepared or co-prepared translations, but none of which he understood well.[11] In fact, Auden seems to have considered translation from an imperfectly-understood language to have provided a new kind of poetic exercise, even a poetic creation. While teaching at Ann Arbor, Michigan, for example, he assigned students the translation of poems in German, French, and Latin, advising them to work word-for-word with a bilingual dictionary in order to grasp the sense, and then to develop their poetic translations.[12] With his deep interest in etymology as a study in itself he allied a belief that detailed study of the unfamiliar, word for word, could inspire a poetic recreation or translation. The sheer "foreign-ness" of the material provided an edge, perhaps, or gave the poet the exhilarating sense of being on the verge of losing control of the text. Auden clearly enjoyed such exercises, since he set himself stringent criteria for the structure of his poems and insisted on honesty and austerity in the text. He also told the students that to do these exercises well, they would have to depend on their wits; he clearly trusted his own wits implicitly when engaged in this kind of poetic recreation. From this point of view, *The Age of Anxiety* was for Auden a fascinating exploration of the metrical possibilities of mixing Anglo-Saxon alliterative techniques with romance syllabic metre, intermingling occasional Icelandic metres for particular lyrical effects.

There is no question that Auden was himself profoundly interested in the technical aspects of poetry. In North America, he is on record as having attended graduate seminars in Old English on several occasions, and his principal interest appears to have been metrical. Thus, for example, Larry McKill (now at the University of Alberta reports that in

a graduate seminar at SUNY (Stony Brook in 1969, Auden attended one class, during which Robert Creed expounded a complex theory of Old English metrics. Auden, not intimidated by the subject matter, was, in McKill's words, "extremely skeptical of a system so elaborate that a working poet couldn't possibly have all those forms in his head."[13] Creed carried on and published his theory, and it must be said that metrists tend to agree with Auden's assessment of its utility in practice, though Auden was more succinct.

B. Auden's Metrical Practice and the Metre of *The Age of Anxiety*

One of the poet's more difficult texts, from a number of points of view, is *The Age of Anxiety*. Published in 1947, the poem, subtitled "A Baroque Eclogue," was carefully presented with a faux-Baroque typeface and layout; it was a poetic bestseller, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948, and inspired a Leonard Bernstein symphony, which in turn inspired a Jerome Robbins ballet. It has not been as popular with literary critics. Those discussing this poem have reached detailed conclusions about the meaning of the poem but have tended to shy away from the form by describing it as a "development of Auden's four-stress alliterative verse associated with the Old and Middle English line."[14] George Wright goes farther in the direction of not reaching conclusions by suggesting that, in addition to the four-stress alliterative line which was one of his favourite verse forms, Auden varied it "with a wealth of other often remarkable forms" (132 .[15] The lack of specificity in this statement leaves much scope for further investigation. John Blair suggests that, although Auden's early imitations of Old and Middle English verse forms, and especially of Langland, seemed to be strained mannerisms, when reused in *The Age of Anxiety*, they "have a startling poetic evocativeness" (17 .[16] The poem's metrical indebtedness to Anglo-Saxon techniques has clearly been recognized, though details are imperfectly understood, but the Icelandic metres which appear throughout the poem for lyrical effect and the use throughout of syllabic metre has not been observed.

Paul Szarmach has considered "Anthem," a preliminary piece for "The Age of Anxiety," first published by Edward Mendelson in the *Collected Poems* in 1976 but clearly written when Auden was working out the ideas and presentation of the longer poem. Szarmach notes in his careful analysis of the poem as an "imitation" of "Caedmon's Hymn" that, in several lines, Auden appears to be producing a modern recreation of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. Szarmach proposes that

> Auden is a similar alliterative poet in his insistence on an alliteration that defines a line and otherwise makes demands on standard syntax and sense, but he is not Cædmonian — or

> Anglo-Saxon for that matter — in the looseness of his lines (335 .

Thus, for Szarmach, Auden's indebtedness to Anglo-Saxon metre in this poem is limited to the alliteration and its linkage to syntax, rather than involving the patterns of stress that would indicate a metrical, rather than purely alliterative, imitation. Auden uses Anglo-Saxon alliteration, then, but otherwise writes modern verse. Nicholas Howe goes a little further in his assessment, proposing that Auden's "importance to the afterlife of Old English poetry was to use it as a model of technique rather than as subject or, more accurately, merely as subject."[17] In general, commentators on Auden's poetry have focused on his extensive use of alliteration, and perhaps on the slightly shorter and heavier line, the four-stress alliterative line, which he often used.

However, Auden's use of medieval metres appears to have been more complex than generally acknowledged. Auden's own account of his procedure in these letters suggests that he took from Old English, Old Icelandic, and medieval romance metres for his practice in this poem — and his account of his practice is certainly that of a craftsman elucidating the technical aspects of his work, even to establishing exactly where the nine-syllable lines of the first two sections of the poem broke at the caesura. More evidence than that provided in these letters is also available, in that Carpenter records that Auden's secretary, Alan Ansen, "read through the draft and pointed out errors in the syllabification of the verse."[18] *The Age of Anxiety* was clearly a poem in which syllabification mattered. Davenport-Hines' account is less explicit, in that he states: "One of Ansen's tasks was to check the metrical stresses in 'The Age of Anxiety.'"[19] Christine Brooke-Rose, in her analysis of the metre of the text, takes a playful approach, pretending that the poem is an example of Old British alliterative metre representing a continuous tradition begun ten centuries earlier and just rediscovered in the year 2185. The serious purpose of the paper is to investigate the many features of Old English verse technique found in *The Age of Anxiety*. It is a tribute to Brooke-Rose's acuity as a critic that she identifies the use of single and double alliteration, the almost total lack of alliteration on the fourth stress in the verse, and the observation of the rules of grammatical precedence in that alliteration principally marks nouns and adjectives, then participles and adverbs with meaning. However, she does assume that Auden is attempting to replicate Old English verse forms, and she carefully demonstrates the ways in which his verse does not succeed in that apparent attempt. She points out his failures with the complex Old English types in some detail and notes that the greatest problem is "the license taken . . . with unaccented syllables."[20] In conclusion, she suggests that the Anglo-Saxon metres had died out, and Auden's poem must be a "brave attempt at rebellion

against such new-fangled devices" as syllabic and end-rhymed metre.[21] The analysis is detailed and fascinating, but based on the false premise that Auden was trying to reproduce fully and in every respect the complex metre of Anglo-Saxon verse, with its five types of verse, specific rules for alliteration based on which type is in use, and specific rules for unstressed syllables in each type. He was not, but on the other hand Brooke-Rose, lacking the evidence of the short initial version of the poem "Anthem" and Auden's own comments, makes an extremely reasonable assumption based on Auden's clear debt to Anglo-Saxon metre.

That Auden occasionally used syllabic metre has indeed been mentioned by various metrists. Shapiro and Beum list Auden as one of several twentieth-century poets who "have written syllabic verse of high quality," but go on to suggest that good syllabic verse in English is stanzaic, with the pattern of syllables in each line of each stanza corresponding.[22] Paul Fussell notes that "syllabism is not a natural measuring system in a language so Germanic and thus so accentual as English," despite occasional successes. Nonetheless, Fussell points out in the next paragraph, "when syllabic meter does produce engaging effects, they will often be found the result of a lurking system of stresses which the poet has not been able to wish away."[23] In the case of *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden takes advantage of the lurking system of stresses to combine alliterative effects with a syllabic metre. In fact, Auden finds an innovative way to combine syllabic verse, depending simply on counting the number of syllables in the line, with an accentual element. Stephen Adams points out that "syllabic verse of this sort calls on many of the same formal perceptions as well-wrought free verse."[24] The metre of *The Age of Anxiety*, then, involves what Adams calls 'prose rhythms' which break against traditional English two-syllable patterns, but also involves the traditional alliterating head-stave of Anglo-Saxon metrics along with one or two alliterating words in the first half of the line.

Here, then, is Auden's poetic sensibility creating a text imitative of medieval metres but not readily identifiable for these features to the eye and ear of the critic.[25] Auden points out, for example, that the syllabic count in the first two sections of the poems is nine, which is certainly the case. The nine-syllable line remains the central metrical structure of the whole poem, though it appears with the greatest consistency in the first two parts of the poem.[26] The third and fourth sections of the poem are the most metrically adventurous, although after each lyric in the third part the poem returns to the nine-syllable form. Part Five has a set of other lyrical forms, but the section ends with a substantial speech in nine-syllable lines, while the Epilogue makes only passing references to this form, in that it follows a similar structure to the preceding part. The

poem ends, however, with a longer line of eleven syllables for the final soliloquy of Malin.

In some ways, Auden's response to Ward is too modest. Linked alliteration, which involves either direct repetition of the alliteration or the carrying through from a non-alliterating stressed word in one line to the alliteration of the next line, occurs with some consistency throughout the poem (e.g., on *s* in Emble's speech on p. 459 . Auden also states that there is only one line in which the first half contains only two syllables (the proportion Auden labels 2:7 in his letter . In fact, there are two such lines in Part One, and two more in Part Two. In every case, to mark the unusual structure, double alliteration occurs: "Quick, quiet, unquestionable as death" (458 , "Knees numb; the enormous disappointment" (461 ; and in Part Two, "Just judge, the Generalized Other" (474 , and the rather obvious "No. No. I shall not apologize" (475 . Auden also does not mention in his letter that, when the radio or juke box play, the metre changes to reflect the jingly, short syntactic structures. The alliteration continues, but the line length shifts to fit the sing-song world of both the radio and the juke box. Incidentally, only the radio interrupts in Part One (four times, of which the last one is incorporated into the discussion and subsumed by the debate , and only the juke box interrupts in Part Two (three times, the second of which conforms to the nine-syllable line .

Auden notes in his letter that the count of nine syllables in fairly standard. In fact, there are remarkably few exceptions to the nine-syllable rule in the first two-thirds of the poem, and Auden demonstrates an extraordinary technical ability to play within a nine-syllable line with at least single alliteration — often double[27] — and a mid-line caesura moving about for variety and emphasis. He notes that vowels and vowels through *h* elide, but the first twelve lines of the poem have no elision at all, which establishes very firmly the metrical structure. Lines split between two speakers still count up to nine syllables, and at the end of Part One, when Malin asks a question, the six syllables before the answers are completed when he resumes — after a single nine-syllable line from each of his interlocutors — with three syllables after the responses (463 . Auden played with elision through *h* in such lines as: "Prayed for the plants. They have perished now; their" (482 or "These hills may be hollow; I've a horror of dwarfs" (488 , both, incidentally, by Rosetta. Her usage might even suggest that her elision of *h* reflects a lower-class background.

Auden makes it clear in his letters that he also used Icelandic metres in the poem, particularly in Part Three: The Seven Stages. John Fuller points out two instances of skaldic metre in the poem, and Auden points to three, disagreeing unknowingly with Fuller on which Scandinavian verse-form is in use. However, Auden here radically understates the case

for Icelandic verse-forms in the poem and does not even specify just how many Icelandic forms he used. For example, he describes as "an attempt at a drápa" the eight-line poem "Hushed is the lake of hawks" (519 , the love duet near the beginning of Part Five: The Masque which — despite its self-deprecatory introduction — was Auden's emotional high point in the poem. Fuller describes the same poem as dróttkvaett.[28] During the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, Auden cites this poem in its entirety as an example of dróttkvaett and explains the formal rules for this skaldic poem in some detail:

It is a stanza of four couplets; each line has three stresses and ends on an unaccented syllable. The first line of each couplet has two alliterations, and an assonance; the second is related to the first by alliteration and also contains an internal rhyme. Lastly, the ordinary names for things should be replaced by kennings.[29]

Auden's knowledge is detailed and accurate; it is hardly surprising that near the end of his life he collaborated on a translation of Old Norse poetic texts.[30] However, since not every line of the poem ends with an unaccented syllable, nor does the poem have a refrain, probably Auden might have best described it as a variation of the dróttkvaett.[31]

Skaldic verse, with its extremely precise rules and restrictions for both metre and diction, is probably also the inspiration for the very focused and intense lyrics found at intervals through Parts Three, Five, and Six in the poem, and once near the beginning of Part Two. Auden describes Rosetta's song "Deep in my dark the dream shines" (470 as kviðuhattr, a point with which Fuller concurs.[32] It might better be described as an adaptation of that Norse form, since it consists of 4 four-line stanzas with seven-syllable lines, each with caesura and double alliteration. The two-stress alliterated lines of "Lights are moving" (487 , "Stranger, this still" (501 , "Plumed and potent" (522 are clearly skaldic in inspiration, and they follow the density of Old Norse verse in omitting articles and auxiliaries, in wrenching syntax, and especially in utilizing elliptical and ambiguous language in which word-play is critical. Word-play is also central to the complex stanza form Auden seems to have developed for Part Four: The Dirge. This section consists of four stanzas of seventeen lines, the central sections of which are in nine-syllable lines, but the opening two lines and the bob of two lines as the end of each stanza are much shorter. The stanzas also tend to begin with repetition ("sob" in the first stanza and end with synonymy ("dad" and "father" in the first stanza . The lines seem to be a yet more complex form of the ljoðuháttr stanza which Auden describes as central to Part Three: The Seven Stages. Most of that section of the poem is written in alliterative long lines alternating with shorter lines of a tighter alliterative structure, Auden's version of the ljoðuháttr; the form in Old Norse tended to be

used for magical purposes, and the quest in this part of the poem is the search for understanding.

In short, the metrical structure of *The Age of Anxiety* is extremely complex, though its ground base is the nine-syllable line taken from medieval romance forms. Rising about the ground base is a pattern of alliteration derived explicitly from Anglo-Saxon verse, though a constantly-varying rhythm surges with the shifting of the caesura from occurrence after the third, fourth, fifth, and even sixth syllable in the line (and very occasionally, after the second . Each line generally has at least three stresses, four being the norm, but the pattern of stresses is far removed from the normal prose rhythms of free verse, which explains why critics have mistakenly perceived the rhythms of Anglo-Saxon or Middle English metrics in the text. The pattern holds with only brief interludes in the prologue, one formal departure in Part Two, a long section in other metres in Part Three, and sporadic reappearances through the rest of the poem. However, exceptions to the pattern at first glance appear to be the whole of Part Four, large sections of Part Five, and all of Part Six except the ending, which reverts to the syllabic metre but with the added weight of two extra syllables in the line so that poem closes with a meditative long-line soliloquy. The details of the different metres used through the central and critical sections of the poem have escaped serious study since they too are based on an alliterative Germanic metre, and those who noticed the alliteration may have failed to notice that the rest of the metrical structure had also changed. However, it is clear that, for the important emotional and philosophical moments of this poem, Auden used Icelandic metres, very carefully and accurately replicating them in modern English — in fact, so accurately that they looked Anglo-Saxon in origin. Technically, at least in the metrical sense, the poem is a *tour de force*.

Critical reaction to *The Age of Anxiety* has been very mixed. When the poem was first published, John Bayley described it as Auden's "greatest achievement to date." Later on, Bayley quoted a passage of description from *The Age of Anxiety* and then said: "It does not lead anywhere — (indeed it is difficult to see where anything in *The Age of Anxiety* can be said to lead — but it conveys a sense of the occasion at once and with vivid accuracy."[33] Bayley's second assessment seems mild beside the attacks of Randall Jarrell. Anthony Hecht, in his extensive and reasoned assessment of Auden's *oeuvre*, starts with a careful analysis of Jarrell's change of heart about Auden, describes the poem as "one of the large major works," and concludes with the judicious, though parenthetical, statement that "*The Age of Anxiety* does not fit easily into what preceded or what followed it, with which it seems stylistically at odds — a kind of daring, and not wholly successful, experiment."[34] This was the last of

Auden's long poems; critics addressing the complexity of its structure and ideas may perhaps be able to draw less uncertain conclusions if they understand more clearly the hidden delights of the verse form. Similarly, G. S. Fraser comments, with respect principally to "The Sea and the Mirror,"

> On the other hand, Auden is steadily increasing his mastery over the actual craft of verse. There is almost no form, no metre at which he is not capable of having a pretty competent try. His most interesting metrical innovation in "The Sea and the Mirror" is the borrowing of syllabic metre from Miss Marianne Moore.[35]

The innovation of "The Sea and the Mirror" carried on into *The Age of Anxiety* such that, in Auden's next major poem, it became the central metrical structure. This fact was obscured by the Anglo-Saxon alliterative structure and the frequent use of Icelandic metres, but it remains central to analysis of the text.

Critics who specialize in post-medieval areas often do not recognize the ways in which individual authors can be profoundly influenced by medieval texts, because that shaping influence cannot be readily charted or easily defined.[36] They can recognize the outlines, but not the details, and perhaps they cannot recognize the depths.[37] Sometimes they can make generalizations or draw conclusions that might be correct with respect to the modern poet but do not correspond well with the medieval texts. For example, Monroe K. Spears, in an otherwise fine analysis of Auden's interpretation of the Old English poem "The Wanderer," a poem that has been variously titled "The Wanderer," or "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle" (from the first line , suggests that "[t]here is also in Auden's poetry a kind of ambiguity that is wholly foreign to Old English poetry."[38] Ambiguity is central to Old English poetry, and interpretation of the early medieval poem founders on such questions as whether it is a profoundly Christian interpretation of a pilgrimage motif using imagery of the sea as a metaphor for life, or whether it is a thoroughly pessimistic and even realistic representation of the difficulties of life and the ways in which the early medieval individual had to turn to gnomic statements and stoic doctrines in order to arrive at any hint of hope for the future. While Auden's poem is certainly ambiguous, that ambiguity reflects Old English poetic themes rather than being a departure from them. In fact, matters medieval can influence writers in extremely complex ways that have to be teased out and examined in different ways for different authors. Auden's indebtedness for themes and ideas, and his word choice and alliterative usages, have now at least had their preliminary explorations. Perhaps more careful nuances to his use of this material can now be established.

T. A. Shippey has recently pointed out the many ways in which Anglo-Saxon materials have not entered into the popular consciousness.[39] Though Auden would never wish to claim the kind of vulgar popularity now available, in Shippey's argument, to the Vikings, to King Arthur, and even to Lady Godiva, he certainly used Anglo-Saxon poetic techniques and images.[40] Study of the ways in which he was indebted to his own interest in early medieval studies may perhaps allow knowledge not only of Auden but also of Anglo-Saxon matters to become more widespread. Of that, Auden would certainly approve.

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NOTES

1. The letters are copyright of the Estate of W. H. Auden. We are very grateful to Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor, for his advice and in particular for his generous permission to publish these letters.
2. See M. J. Toswell, "Auden and Anglo-Saxon," *Medieval English Studies Newsletter* (The Centre for Medieval English Studies, Tokyo 37 (December 1997 : pp. 21-28.
3. W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (New York: Random House, 1947 . Auden's own page references differ slightly from this edition and probably are to the London Faber edition of 1948.
4. Edward Mendelson, ed. *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1991 .
5. An earlier version of this paper was delivered by Toswell at the Fifteenth International Conference on Medievalism sponsored by *Studies in Medievalism*, held at Hope College, 29-30 September 2000. Afterwards, William Calin suggested that Auden's understanding of metre might well derive from the lectures (and perhaps tutorials} of C. S. Lewis, a point well worth pursuing -- especially given Auden's own quotation from Lewis in these letters.
6. "Notes on the Metre of Auden's 'The Age of Anxiety,'" *Essays in Criticism* 13 (1963 : 253-64.
7. See his revised *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998 pp. 369-387, at pp. 376 and 384.
8. See Paul Szarmach, "*Anthem*: Auden's 'Caedmon's Hymn"' in *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman* eds Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998 : 329-340.
9. See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981 , chapter 4 "Oxford," pp. 42-84. Richard Davenport-Hines' more recent biography, *Auden* (London: Heinemann, 1995 , describes the Oxford years pp. 51-86, noting on p. 58 that Auden preferred not to care about the class-mark of his degree.
10. See, for the most accepting view, Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979 , pp. 9-10.
11. See Toswell (1997 for detailed references, and also Lincoln Kirstein, "Auden: Glossographer, Ortheopist, Verbrarian" *W. H. Auden Society Newsletter* 9 (August 1992 , published at http://www.audensociety.org. Kirstein describes Auden's interest in language, giving detailed examples of his "idiosyncratic harvesting." Auden did speak German, though not, perhaps, fluently.
12. For the details of this procedure see, among other accounts, Robert L. Chapman, "Auden in Ann Arbor," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 17.4 (Fall 1978 : 507-20.
13. Larry McKill, email to Toswell, 22 August 2000.
14. Szarmach, "*Anthem*: Auden's 'Caedmon's Hymn,'" p. 330.
15. George T. Wright, *W. H. Auden* rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1981 , p. 132. Wright is on the right track, though nebulously.

16. John G. Blair, *The Poetic Art of W. H. Auden* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1965 , p. 17.
17. Nicholas Howe, "Praise and Lament: The Afterlife of Old English Poetry in Auden, Hill, and Gunn," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998 , pp. 293-310, at p. 296.
18. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden*, p. 347.
19. Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, p. 238.
20. Brooke-Rose, "Notes," p. 258.
21. Brooke-Rose, "Notes," p. 264.
22. Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum, *A Prosody Handbook* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965 , pp. 56-9 at p. 56.
23. Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1979 , p. 7.
24. Stephen Adams, *Poetic Designs: An Introduction to Meters, Verse Forms, and Figures of Speech* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1997 , p. 65. Adams also notes here that syllabic metre is more effective when the lines have an odd number of syllables, since this prevents them from falling into standard accentual patterns.
25. A useful parallel is the work of Molly Peacock, a practicing poet of great talent whose recent book on how to read poetry starts with the argument that the line is the music of the poem and that a poem which works is one in which "two arts, the art of storytelling with its own music and the art of music itself, are working on your ear as the sentence *wraps around* the line," resulting in a "mysterious, elastic wholeness." See her *How to Read a Poem. . .and Start a Poetry Circle* (Penguin: Riverhead Books, 1999 , p. 22.
26. Auden's thinking about English metres was very much influenced by George Saintsbury, according to Carpenter. On p. 55 of his biography, Carpenter notes that Auden already knew Saintsbury before coming up to Oxford, and on p. 419 he suggests that "[i]f the *O.E.D.* was now the Bible to his poetry, his prayer-book was George Saintsbury's study of English prosody." Auden was apparently boasting that he had now written a poem in every known metre and was searching farther afield (in the early 1960s . Saintsbury, although he provides only a very brief paragraph on Icelandic metres (under the rubric of Scandinavian metres , does carefully elucidate the syllabic structures used in English medieval romance: see George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody* 3 vols. 2nd ed. (London, 1923 , vol. 1, "The Metrical Romances," pp. 89-99.
27. Anglo-Saxon metrists define single alliteration as that agreement of initial consonants (including a distinction between s and st and sp or vowels which occurs when one stressed word before the caesura alliterates with the stressed word occurring first after the caesura. In Anglo-Saxon metre, either the first or the second stress in the first half-line may be involved in the alliteration. If both stresses in the first half-line alliterate with the first stressed word after the caesura, this is double alliteration.
28. Fuller, *Commentary*, p. 384.
29. W. H. Auden, "The World of the Sagas," in *Secondary Worlds. The T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968 , pp. 67-68.
30. See W. H. Auden, Paul Beekman Taylor, trans. *The Elder Edda* (1969 , now rev. ed. as *Norse Poems* (London: Athlone Press, 1981 . Auden's interest in Iceland is also reflected by the trip he took there not long after leaving Oxford, which resulted in W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937 .
31. Good explanations of the verse forms of Norse poetry are difficult to come by in English; the standard text is Winfred Philipp Lehmann, *The Development of Germanic Verse Form* (Austin, Texas: U of Texas P, 1956 ; for these metres see especially pp. 125 and 193. A recent summary can be found in Orrin W. Robinson, *Old English and its Closest Relatives* (London: Routledge, 1992 , pp. 125-131. Part of the difficulty is that different scholars use different terms for the same stanza forms.
32. Fuller, *Commentary*, p. 376.

33. John Bayley, "W. H. Auden," an excerpt from his *The Romantic Image* (1957 , but interestingly the one made readily available to Auden scholars in *Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Monroe K. Spears (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964 , pp. 60-80, at p. 76.
34. Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993 . The first quotation is p. 40, the detailed assessment and final — though parenthetical — conclusion is p. 294.
35. G. S. Fraser, "The Career of W. H. Auden," in *Auden: A Collection*, ed. Spears, pp. 81-104 at p. 92. See also his *Metre, Rhyme and Free Verse* (London: Methuen, 1970 , pp. 54-5, which makes the same point.
36. Patrick Deane, personal communication, 1997.
37. For example, an enduring misapprehension about the metre of *The Age of Anxiety* connects it with Langland's *Piers Plowman,* a Middle English alliterative poem, perhaps because the lines can be longer than Anglo-Saxon lines generally are. The origin of the association with Langland is difficult to determine, though such different figures as A. L. Rowse and Barbara Everett espoused it, and it has been repeated by most modern critics, even including Szarmach in the article cited here. See A. L. Rowse, *The Poet Auden: A Personal Memoir* (London: Methuen, 1987 , p. 87, and Barbara Everett, *Auden* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964 , pp. 90-91. More recently, Alan Jacobs has rightly pointed out the awkwardness of pursuing Auden's claim to Langland with his statement: "But pity the critic who would try to establish a meaningful connection between Auden's work and *Piers Plowman*," W*hat Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry*. (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1998 , p. 35. Having made this good point, and commented in the endnote that Auden's self-identification with Langland may have been purely a desire to be a populist poet, Jacobs loses the ground he has claimed by noting that "Auden uses a similar form [to Langland] in *The Age of Anxiety*, his most allegorical work," p. 139.
38. Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (New York: Oxford UP, 1963; new preface, 1968 , p. 14.
39. T. A. Shippey, "The undeveloped image: Anglo-Saxon in popular consciousness from Turner to Tolkien," in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* eds. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000 , pp. 215-236.
40. The reference to Lady Godiva derives not from Shippey's article, which argues that English identity was in the nineteenth century subsumed under a more general British and imperial identity, but from Daniel Donoghue, "Lady Godiva," pp. 194-214 in the same collection.