REINHOLD NIEBUHR, CHRISTIAN REALISM
AND THE POETRY OF W. H. AUDEN
By Šárka Tůmová

This thesis examines the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on W.H. Auden's work in the post-war period. The central hypothesis of the author is that Niebuhr's concept of Christianity, history and politics had a substantial impact on Auden's 1940s and later thought. In her work, Šárka Tůmová tries to delineate the contours of this influence.

The grade I propose is 1 (výborně). I cannot but commend the author for her decision to cover a topic of such complexity at this level of study. To assess Auden's absorption of Niebuhr's ideas requires insight into relevant areas of philosophy, history, politics and literature. I appreciate the candidate's breadth of knowledge and ability to correlate these areas in a logical and coherent text.

However, I also have some reservations and suggestions for improvement. Having reread the text, I still feel that the author has slightly erred in two aspects.

Firstly, Šárka Tůmová seems to have embraced the notion of 'influence' too willingly and uncritically where mere 'likeness' or 'similarity' of Auden's and Niebuhr's views of religion, politics and history would be more appropriate. Several aspects of Auden's 1940s-1960s thought which the author claims to have been shaped under the pressure of Niebuhr's ideas were held by the poet already in the 1930s. An example is the relation between Humanity, freedom and responsibility of the individual, which Auden repeatedly defended already in his interwar prose. Another example is Auden's view of history as shapable by humans, which he held in the interwar period. Also, Auden's distrust towards egalitarian and oppressive systems which "arrogate too much power" (p 26) was fully formed already in the 1930s (i.e. not in the 'Niebuhr' stage of Auden's life) when Auden wrote repeatedly about coercion and (centralistic) misuse of power in response to continental Nazism beginning to encroach upon western democracies.

Secondly, I registered undue simplification and, occasionally, complete omission of several relevant issues. An example of the former is the two-paragraph distinction between Soviet and US cold-war propaganda, which is shallow and unconvincing. Another problem is the candidate's simplified approach to Democracy in Auden's work. Because Šárka Tůmová wants to deal with this issue and, to some extent, Auden's distrust of Liberalism, I would expect her to at least mention the poet's differentiation between Liberal Democracy and Social Democracy as well as his attacks on the former. The amount of Auden's attention to these notions shows how important they were for him and how relevant they are for the present work.

Lastly, the candidate occasionally displays an uncritical eagerness to accept commonplace clichés. One of them concerns Auden's post-1939 view of art as ineffective. A close examination of his post-1939 prose reveals that Auden took to the USA his early trust in the 'humanizing' potential of poetry to crystalize the readers' thoughts and so make their choice easier. In 1936 he wrote that the power of poetry "to deepen understanding, to enlarge sympathy, to strengthen the will to action, and, last but not least, to entertain, give it an honourable function in any proper community" (CPR I 134). In 1938, he added that "The primary function of poetry, as of all arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. [...] it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to
deceive, which is why, perhaps, all totalitarian theories of the State [...] have deeply mistrusted the arts” (CPR I 470). In 1948, ten years after his denunciation of poetry, he still maintained that art “can do good” because it “enables us to realize alternatives” (CPR II 493). Clearly, this last claim echoes those from the 1930s and shows that the post-war Auden was not prepared to take his 1939 claim “poetry makes nothing happen” literally. I would also like to ask the candidate to explain and justify her inattention to Auden’s inclination towards ritualistic (High-Anglican) communion, his discussion of Catholicism and Protestantism, and his fascination in the 1940s with S. Kierkegaard. I consider all relevant to her argument.

With regards to literary analysis, I am convinced that the text would benefit from a greater amount of critical engagement with Auden’s poems by the author herself. She supports her arguments with quotations from poetry too seldom for a thesis which promises to deliver the examination of ‘the Poetry of W.H. Auden’ in its title. When she does refer to poems, she hardly ever displays her interpretative skills and, instead, tends towards uncritical presentation of readings by other critics (e.g. p.24, note 77).

On the level of style and language, the author should improve clarity. For example, are the propositions in the last three sentences on page 25 Auden’s, Kirsch’s or her own? Also, the candidate should better signal the date of her quotations (e.g at the end of page 21 she refers to Auden’s text from 1956, then, without flagging it, she cites from a 1939 text and, immediately, returns to 1955 at the top of page 22). This can be misleading and confusing for a reader without a thorough knowledge of Auden’s prose. Otherwise, the text is executed in fine English with only a small number of mistakes which, however, do not affect comprehension of the argument (e.g. “have not yet been firmly established” [p.9], “of human of choice” [p.10], “had not underwent” [p.16], etc.).

Perhaps a narrower scope and greater emphasis on Christianity with just an occasional digression to politics and history would prevent the author from erring in the aspects outlined above. Nevertheless, I respect her decision to submit the paper in the present form.

My criticisms are not rebukes but stimuli for discussion. They are intended to help the candidate in her critical growth. It is so because I cannot fail to notice the amount of energy she must have poured into writing this Bachelor thesis. It is well researched, finely written and brimming with enthusiasm. As a whole it is quite outstanding at this level of study. Therefore, I look forward to the defence in which, I hope, the candidate will address the issues raised in this review.

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