

## *Time and Elegiac in the Later Poetry of Andrew Young*

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### **Abstract**

The poetry of Andrew Young (1885–1971) has most usually been contextualized within the landscapes of his adopted home in the county of Sussex, and the Anglican church to which he turned in later life. While turning points seem to characterize Young’s career, his later work is indebted to a long-held commitment to the exploration of a metaphysics drawn from nature and expressed in formal but often surprisingly insightful and subtle poetry. This paper notes Young’s interest in the pastoral and in particular, the way that the forms and commitments of the elegiac take root in his later work. In particular, the companion poems of ‘Into Hades’ and ‘A Traveller in Time’, often considered to be somewhat anachronistic in terms of his poetic development toward a sparer approach, are viewed against the elegiac formulation developed here. This results in a view of Young as still the “superb minimalist” celebrated by his biographer and champion Leonard Clark, but which allows for some elucidation of the themes of time and loss, and the introduction of William James’ concepts of the ‘specious present’ and the ‘obvious past’. Young is then seen as a poet aware to some degree of the mystery of passing time, but who is unable to fully reconcile this with his other metaphysical sureties.

Keywords: Andrew Young, ‘Into Hades’ and ‘A Traveller in Time’, William James

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## Introduction

The work of Scottish poet Andrew Young (1885–1971) has most usually been contextualized within the landscapes of his adopted home in the county of Sussex, and the influence of the Anglican church to which he converted after many years as a Presbyterian minister, retiring in 1959 to become a canon of Chichester Cathedral. His ‘middle period’ poetic output is the poetical refinement, over many years in relative obscurity, of a long-held commitment to the exploration of a metaphysics drawn from nature and expressed in formal but often surprisingly insightful and subtle poetry, much of it concerned with local landscapes: Young’s passion for wild flowers generated two books of prose and abundantly populates his verse. His middle-period poetry was unpublished until *Winter Harvest* (1933) which appeared in his late forties, then celebrated for a time, Young has not received a great deal of critical interest over the years since his death. What commentary there is often cannot agree to which side of the Modernist line the poet falls: many reviews mention his rather unfashionable ‘Georgian style’, and much other commentary contradicts this to state that in fact Young was something else (Sell, 2001, pp. 59-60): ‘quietly modern’, perhaps, and then only in the somewhat particular ways relating to his relationship with mysticism and temporality. It is these subjects which are so clearly at the forefront of his mind in his two long poems of 1958. Young’s biographers have noted the significance of the mystical and its interplay with metaphysics in the poetry, remarking on William James’ (1920, p. 380) comment that mysticism is “insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect,” and linking this to Young’s own “other-worldly” instincts. Young’s career would begin by honing his observational skills, however, and this would present the first opportunity for recognition.

In May of 1951, C. S. Lewis had written to Young and punned his admiration: “You appear to me a modern Marvell and a modern marvel,” he enthused, delighted by Young’s ability to capture elements of the landscape and fix them in the reader’s mind. Lewis thought that “there has been nothing so choice, so delicate and so controlled in this century,” (2004, p. 118), and indeed by the time his poetry had matured, and developed precision; a gift for the innovational image marked Young out as a fine nature poet, and the early 1950s were something of a high point in the poet’s career. At this time, his work is characterised by brevity, even terseness; Lawrence (1953) rather beautifully characterizes the poet’s facility in the observation that “no poet has made a word work harder for its living than Andrew Young”, and to drive the point, contrasts him with his early hero Swinburne (p. 130). Intermixed with this is Young’s interest in the movement and malleability of time as a both a concept and as explored reality, central to the natural landscape:

And as the wind blows back the stream  
Shaking the buckthorns from their dream.  
Time flows back here at Wicken Fen  
To swine-steads and blue-woaded men. (1985, p. 145)

## Time’s Arrow

Early on, Young had mentioned privately to a poet-friend (George MacBeth) his “disbelief in Time as a matter of past, present and future,” and that he instead felt the presence of an “everlasting now” (Lowbury & Young, 1997, p.273). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that Young’s middle-period poems have an idiosyncratic thoughtfulness to them, with many of them even allowing the poem to drift off, absorbed, with the words “I feel...” or “I wonder...” as in ‘The Ruined Chapel’ (1935) where we see his characteristic pulling at the flow of time:

From meadows with the sheep so shorn  
 They, not their lambs, seem newly born  
 Through the graveyard I pass,  
 Where only blue plume-thistle waves  
 And headstones lie so deep in grass  
 They follow dead men to their graves,  
 And as I enter by no door  
 This chapel where the slow moss crawls  
 I wonder that so small a floor  
 Can have the sky for roof, mountains for walls. (1985, p. 32)

As he resists the natural markers of nature's flow in the opening couplet, Young introduces a kind of farmyard domesticity to the modest familiars of the long-dead: grave stones are made to saunter behind their master, and moss, caterpillar-like, traverses the stones. The tetrameter which, comfortably almost, rolls along, outlining landscape and its implied chronology, gives way at the poet's intrusion in line 3, and then to his 'wondering' which extends the final line, and loosens its rhythm just at the poet's gaze moves upward. The lightly-handled formal control of mostly monosyllables feels modern, but with elegiac motifs such as there are here (the ruined church on the country walk, the ceilinged sky) are enough to suggest that the walker is aware of the passing of other poets through that "deep grass."

This little poem is almost an upended sonnet; like a turned-over object itself, it encourages curiosity, not least to ask how it managed to find us, and we, it: set within the accoutrements of the long-past, approached through the lambing season, but giving perpetuate access by its ruined form. "For doors / are both frame and monument / to our spent time," notes Charles Tomlinson, (112): Young presents the reader with the starkness of time in suspension, and thus queries our relationship with Time as frame or monument. The nod to the Romantic sublime with which the poem drifts away, is characteristic Young, approaching the cosmic after peering at the singular. It is this resistance to narrativistic expectations which makes Young's poems interesting: the examination of the *instance*, the *essential*, in a scene, being enough to suggest the whole.

Leonard Clark calls him a "superb minimalist," and indeed, Young never overcrowds his descriptions, preferring instead the sparer, smaller narratives. This is complicated however by an extrapolation outward, and an idiosyncratic desire to see all things at once, such as in the suspended state of the chapel. Young is almost always alert to the goings-on of nature: as calm and bucolic as these ten lines are, the poetic eye is stubborn in its preference of the moment over the whole; time does not move very much at all despite the metricality on display. Just as lamb is shown with sheep, and living walker with dead sleeper, Young gives us mid-summer plume-thistle *outside*, and time-immune moss *inside* the chapel, almost to suggest that the contradictions of its physical scale are present in the curious fixity of time here.

### **A Preface to the Late Period: Young's Early Poetry**

The philosopher and poet George Santayana once wrote that "metaphysics or theology ... is essentially a kind of poetry ... a natural expression of the reflective imagination, ... good poetry, good religion, [is] something morally significant although literally mythical" (2001, p. 218). Young was always interested in mythic themes, but in his early years, the poetry invariably drew exclusively on his Presbyterian upbringing as its source, and his "good

poetry” of troubled perspective and elegiac awareness of loss was something to be developed and which would need to mature.

Young did not achieve this ability to find richness in detail and inverted perspective for a comparatively long time: he began by publishing rather more derivative verse set within his beloved flowers as they appeared through the seasons. Even here, though, the beginnings of his technique are on display, such as in his ‘To a Violet in Autumn’ (1921):

Thou, born again beyond thy time,  
Speakest of woods, dark-leaved and wet,  
And brown ploughed earth and silver rime,  
Melting on early grass; and yet

Thou touchest thoughts within my blood  
That make thy coming doubly dear,  
O pilgrim in thy purple hood,  
That strayest late into the year. (p. 7)

The country settings, the worrying at the arrow of time, and the eye for detail are here, the cadence is nearly right, but all are put to work only to rehearse the tropes (many of which are heavy-handed allusions to Christianity) and token formalisms from which Young had still to free himself. To the applause of Clark, and C. S. Lewis among many others, the minimalist with the eye for the essential would eventually emerge to produce a good handful of volumes of fine poems, eventually receiving the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 1952. Just a few years later, however, he would make the confounding decision to once again perform a *volte face*.

More than 35 years after the poem above, Young would publish *Out of the World and Back* (1958), a slim volume containing (only) the pairing of a redrafted ‘Into Hades’ which had been published first in 1952, and its sequel, ‘A Traveller in Time’. Essentially forming one blank-verse text (of 1600 or so lines) presented in two books, in an extraordinary departure from his previous spare and measured style. His own explanation for this invoked a characteristic redirection: away from the pastoral and decades of work at “the spring of short Nature poems”, toward the “other-worldly”, as he characterised his new, and as shall be seen, very different poetic outlook (Lowbury & Young, 1997, p.239).

### **‘Into Hades’ and ‘A Traveller in Time’**

Conceived of, and written as a personal vision, ‘Into Hades’ begins in Paris, where Young had spent time in his early 20s. The traveller-narrator is Young as a ghost who experiences first his own funeral, and then a series of disoriented sequences involving memories from his past life, fears of inhumation and entombment, and a (chaste) phantom mistress. There appear to be scattered moments of the middle-period Young’s voice in the poem, only to be pushed back by the new, disoriented and aged-sounding narrator:

Was the church a well,  
That filled from within? I had seen no people enter,  
Yet voices sang to the organ. They sang *Venite*,  
But I did not come; I sat, too, through the Psalms  
Like an invalid. Gazing about the churchyard,

I saw it was autumn; berries on the hedge  
Hung in bright bracelets; bryony, nightshade, how vain  
To remember the names. (1985, p. 276)

This self-castigating notion that remembering flower names constitutes a kind of vanity must obviously strike at the heart of Young's prior poetic identity. Having had a long-held interest in the Metaphysical poets of the 17th century (Lowbury & Young, 1997, p.283), it is no surprise to see here the ideal of decorative adornment examined against the values of the Church. One anonymous writer from the period rehearses the idea that Nature may offend in its celebration of its own God-given splendour: "Meekness consists not in the clothes, but heart; / Nature may be vainglorious well as art" (Broadbent, 1973, p. 72), and this is fairly clearly on Young's mind. Yet he continues until the close of the book to luxuriate, and perhaps to depend upon, the names of the flowers, like the fixed points of Young's world, as stars are to sailors:

...a world that itself had fallen to nothing.  
I was further from that world than the nebulae,  
Not space enough between us to drop a pin.  
Trout in time's stream, nosing its solid wind. (1985, p. 278)

This image of the fish moving in the water can be seen as a poetic product of Young's middle period: sharp, and conscious of the universe around him. It might also function as an allegory of Young as he sees himself: the fish, emblem of his faith, moving against the currents of Time and the water, a pin-width away from the truly cosmic, the 'fallen world' around him. All of this troubles the straightforward progress from past to future which the motif of the journey suggests, and perhaps indicates one of the motivations for *Out of the World and Back* as a whole: the fact that Young has relinquished the worldly, but it continues to haunt him. The "vanity" of this long Dantean episode is its elegiac for the life once possessed and now transformed into a quest for renewal. One irony of Young's poetic formulation is that the elegiac is traditionally given a Pastoral setting, yet he is himself culpable in the attempt to decouple it from Nature.

Reflected in this contradiction, the progression of *Out of the World and Back's* split narrative is toward a reformulation of Young's commitments to Christian mysticism which seem to accommodate a new resistance to Time. One might recall Spinoza's discrimination between the mundane ideas of tense and locality on a timeline and that vantage point allowed by participation in the divine consciousness: "at the highest level of knowledge Nature is presented *sub specie aeternitatis*; ... not as a temporal sequence of events, but ... a logical sequence of modifications necessarily connected with each other" (Hampshire, 1956, p. 130). As Young's perception of his situation expands, so does his 'vision': "Time was not long or short enough to measure / My gazing" (p. 279), he muses, wishing again for this special kind of emancipation.

Young's two long poems consistently return to the idea of the 'universal view,' and its complications for the narrator, but it is often the landscape (and not the Divine) which affords him security:

My makeshift body, too,  
Melted away. My substance was a thought,  
That fell back on itself like a wave rising

White on a stream's current. Buoyant, open,  
I expatiated in freedom. But not for long;  
Too near to nothing, exposed, I craved for objects,  
The body's mutual touch, the rough and hard,  
A rock's resistance, the boundary of a thorn,  
A limit to my false infinitude. (p. 279)

If the abandoned object of the elegiac is constantly slipping away, so also are the characters in the text. In 'A Traveller in Time', the ideas of certainty and the temporal are embodied in the "floating head and shoulders" of a ghostly visitor:

They had the timeless air of a marble bust,  
Yet eyes were alive and looking straight ahead,  
Intent on the future. Near, but as though from a distance,  
He slowly faded from sight. (p. 289)

This figure seems to be composed by temporal juxtapositions. One might wonder why it is that Young is constantly proposing allegories of the transition from perceived state to subsequent moment, or from past to future: his constant return to the question of one moment's presence with regard to the forthcoming future moment, and the preceding succession of pasts. *Prima facie*, the answer is mysticism, but the linking figure is Tennyson, recalled by William James.

The connection between Young and William James (beyond the poet's biographers' insights) is the idea of the puzzle of temporality as experienced by the human mind. James outlines this in a thought experiment:

Let one sit with closed eyes and, abstracting entirely from the outer world, attend exclusively to the passage of time, like one who wakes, as the poet says, "to hear time flowing in the middle of the night, and all things creeping to a day of doom." There seems under such circumstances as these no variety in the material content of our thought, and what we notice appears, if anything, to be the pure series of durations budding, as it were, and growing beneath our indrawn gaze.

James develops this, and finds that this feeling is an illusion:

it must be that our perception of time's flight, in the experiences quoted, is due to the filling of the time, and to our memory of a content which it had a moment previous, and which we feel to agree or disagree with its content now. (James, 1983, p. 583)

In other words, there exists in the mind a period of attention which begins in the past and ends in the future, and which we experience as the moment of 'now': this he calls the "specious present." In explicating this, James quotes from Tennyson's fascinating poem 'The Mystic.' Arguably its best-known lines are those quoted, but their context is useful here:

He often lying broad awake, and yet  
Remaining from the body, and apart  
In intellect and power and will, hath heard  
Time flowing in the middle of the night,  
And all things creeping to a day of doom.

How could ye know him? Ye were yet within  
The narrower circle; he had well nigh reached  
The last, ... (1971, p. 838)

Tennyson is referring to the tradition, reaching back to antiquity, of certain blessed (or cursed) souls being able to leave the corporeal body to travel through the air, usually at night, and in this way attain greater understanding of the world, perhaps even the kind enjoyed by the gods. Hermetimus of Clazomenae was the pre-Pythagorean philosopher whose soul was said to leave his body each night as he slept, and whose enemies stole into his house and burned his body before the soul could return (Pliny, vii, 52). His *metempsychosis*, or transmigration of the soul, is the model upon which Young has based his own:

Like the soul of Hermetimus,  
Returned from the air to find his body burnt,  
I was at a loss. I could have hailed a stone,  
Made it an idol; squeezed into a rabbit's burrow  
To crush myself to shape. All was so empty,  
I was not even defined by what I was not;  
I might have flown for ever ... (1985, p. 280)

This is to describe, however, another form of escape from a predicament set up by Young and only incompletely addressed: 'A Traveller in Time', and with it, the book, ends with the same ephemerality as the image of Hermetimus / Young has taken on himself throughout. The reader surely longs for a satisfactory cadence: either a return to corporeality or a resolution to Time's flux on the one hand, and his new 'specious present' viewpoint on the other, but instead, we are left with an internalisation of Time:

A traveller in time,  
Backward, forward, I had but to set my heart!  
Why, with Good Friday hardly yesterday  
I could wake the sun, sleeping in its sea-bed,  
Say it had missed a day. The regress was so short,  
It was but a step to the miles of centuries  
I had lately journeyed. (1985, p. 312)

A clock mechanism for a heart keeping the hours, but the Christian calendar keeping the days: one might wonder just why we have come back to this when there were infinite possibilities at the start of the journey to complicate and explore the relationships implied in just these few lines. The "setting" of the heart (as if anyone is capable of taming the heart) calls both the clock mainspring and the ship mainsail to mind: where the coil can be wound in one way only, the other is freer than the trout in the stream.

## Conclusion

Young's career was characterised to some extent by a negotiation with metaphysical ideas, and the late explorations of *Out of the World and Back* depend for their underpinning on that same kind of dialogue. What marks them out seems to be the sense one gets of Young adrift, having abandoned the formal nature poetry of his earlier work, striving to effect a return via the 'specious present effect' of claiming past and future as part of his metaphysical objectification of the process of his Dantean journey. Such an effect is extremely difficult to

sustain, and this in part explains the unevenness of the book as a whole. Young seems to demonstrate F. H. Bradley's apothegm that "Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct" (1962, p. x). As he fails to convince himself of the move away from nature writing, he concomitantly fails to effect a convincing reason for the presence of the Christian instinct throughout it, thus, in concluding the story, precludes the possibility of a well-wrought resolution.

Santayana, who so loved to equate religion, myth and poetry, found himself fascinated by the "whole allegorical, pseudo-historical pageant", but in truth believed not a single word of it (1963, p. 173), although he knew that there was something about the mixing of these three elements which produces essential sustenance for the human spirit. Young, despite successfully escaping the staid limitations of his early work, seems nevertheless to have been unable to satisfactorily explore his personal sense of the mystical "everlasting now."

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