STRAVINSKY, AUDEN AND THE MID-CENTURY MODERNISM OF THE RAKE’S PROGRESS

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I. The “Beautiful”

Interviewed on a BBC television documentary about his librettist W. H. Auden 14 years after The Rake’s Progress was first performed, Igor Stravinsky looked back at their joint project with the following words: “As soon as we began to work together I discovered that we shared the same views not only about opera, but also on the nature of the Beautiful and the Good. Thus, our opera is indeed, and in the highest sense, a collaboration.”¹ Those who have studied the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaborations, or the collaborations of Verdi with his various librettists, are more aware of tensions and differences than they are of the solid harmony that marked Stravinsky’s work with Auden—or, more precisely, his work with Auden and his partner Chester Kallman, who drafted roughly half of the libretto.²

If this harmony between Stravinsky and Auden was made possible by their agreement “on the nature of the Beautiful and the Good,” as well as about the genre within which they were working, it is clear that they shared both an aesthetic and an ethical framework that might shed some light on what has now, after more than 60 years, emerged as one of the great classic operas. I start with the aesthetic framework guiding The Rake’s Progress. Both Stravinsky and Auden at the time of composition could be called “neoclassicists.” Although this designation had long been used to characterize the composer during the over 30-year period preceding the opera, there is no generally recognized classification of the poet, for British and American
critics have traditionally been resistant to such period terms as baroque and neoclassicism that are drawn from other art forms.

Stravinsky can be described as the founder of musical neoclassicism, though some of the style’s characteristics were anticipated by others, notably Ferruccio Busoni. Flanked by his so-called “Russian” and serial periods, neoclassicism marked the longest and most productive of the three phases of his career. And *The Rake’s Progress* represents the most large-scale and complex and also the final work of this composer’s neoclassical period. Perhaps the most conspicuous mark of his neoclassical phase is its self-consciousness about the musical past, which manifests itself in imitations of earlier musical forms—for example, Bach inventions, sonata-type movements—forms that he had obviously eschewed in the works that established his fame during his Russian period. Some of Stravinsky’s neoclassical works were essentially remakings of compositions by a specific composer, as in *Pulcinella* (1920), which rewrote a number of pieces that Stravinsky took to be by Pergolesi, and *Le Baiser de la fée* (1928), a loving homage to Tchaikovsky. Yet in listening to a neoclassical piece, the listener is always reminded, by means of its dissonances and rhythmic irregularities, that the composer is not simply reproducing the past but rather interpreting it in a characteristically contemporary way.

Auden’s neoclassicism manifested itself most obviously in the dazzling array of English and classical poetic forms that he borrowed and rethought. For example, two of his finest poems from widely separated parts of his career use Greco-Roman ode stanzas: “In Memory of Sigmund Freud” (1939) is written in alcaics, “River Profile” (1966), in sapphics. Note the following stanza from the latter poem:

Disemboguing from foothills, now in hushed meanders, now in riffling braids, it vaunts across a senile plain, well-entered, chateau-and-cider-press country, its regal progress . . .

Just as Stravinsky distorts earlier musical forms through unexpected dissonances and rhythmic changes, so Auden here strains the English language in his supposed attempt to approximate the long and short syllables of Greek and Latin verse. The unexpected locutions (“disemboguing,” “senile plain”), together with the distorted syntax,
challenge readers of poetry in ways similar to those that listeners to Stravinsky’s neoclassical works experienced.

Moreover, the forms appropriated by Auden encompass the whole history of English poetry. His early poem “The Wanderer” (1930), from its opening line, “Doom is dark and deeper than any seadingle” (p. 62) invokes Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. “Letter to Lord Byron” (1936) borrows the tone of the addressee’s Don Juan, though it shifts from the latter’s ottava rima to rhyme royal because, as the poet jokes, the former proved too difficult for him (p. 85). “New Year Letter” (1940) renews the convention of the verse epistle in rhymed octosyllabics. “The Sea and the Mirror” (1944), which Auden calls a “commentary” on Shakespeare’s Tempest, contains a whole plethora of earlier poetic forms, for example, Petrarchan sonnet (Ferdinand’s speech, p. 412); terza rima (Antonio’s speech, pp. 410-12); sestina (Sebastian’s speech, pp. 419-20); villanelle (Miranda’s speech, pp. 421-22), Shakespearean-style songs (pp. 408-22 passim), not to speak of the late Henry-Jamesian prose of “Caliban to the Audience” (pp. 422-44), the work’s longest section.

It is little wonder that Aldous Huxley, Stravinsky’s friend and neighbor, suggested Auden as librettist when the composer sought his advice after determining to create an opera out of William Hogarth’s eight-painting narrative entitled A Rake’s Progress (1734). “The making of poetry he seemed to regard as a game,” Stravinsky later remarked of Auden. “All his conversation about Art was, so speak, sub specie ludi.” Much the same could be said of the composer’s attitude toward his own work, at least during his neoclassical phase. Indeed, many readers, listeners and critics during this time complained that, instead of making major pronouncements or stirring up big emotions, neoclassical composers and poets teased their consumers by doing little more than playing games. Although most of the significant composers and poets during this period played the neoclassicist game, their consumers, however attentive to their work, often felt a bit let down. I can speak for this myself, having become quite familiar with both Stravinsky and Auden’s work during the 1940s—before the creation of The Rake’s Progress. For example, “interesting” though a work such as Stravinsky’s Symphony in Three Movements seemed when I first heard it about 1946, I could not feel the same excitement that the great works of his Russian period—above all, The Rite of
Spring—generated. Similarly, although I could “appreciate” the verbal ingenuity of, say, “Mundus et Infans” (pp. 324-25) it could not “do” the things for me that I had come to expect from such “exciting” high-modernist poets as Yeats, Eliot and Pound.

I did not, to be sure, assent to the outright rejection of the neoclassical Stravinsky common among many music critics at the time. For example, the veteran New York Times reviewer Olin Downes characteristically decried each new Stravinsky piece of the period with terms such as dry and uninspired—while reminding his readers that this was the composer who had once thrilled his listeners with works such as The Firebird and Petrushka. It had clearly become difficult to experience works in the neoclassical mold, whether musical or literary, within the same frame of mind that one assumed for high-modernist ones.

The irony in all this is that, whatever the differences in frame of mind demanded from the listener, the composer’s “Russian” and seemingly antithetical neoclassical works issued from the same mind. Auden, on the other hand, was born too late to participate in the high-modernist revolution. A full generation younger than the composer, his poetry, despite some workmanlike early imitations of Eliot, remained neoclassical throughout his career. And it is no accident that, well before the opera project with Stravinsky had entered his life, he had expressed his preference for the composer’s neoclassical over his “Russian” works.5

Even if listeners and readers did not yet possess the necessary frame of mind, we can now look back to neoclassicism as the dominant among several competing styles in all the arts between 1920 and 1950. Even Picasso had a brief neoclassical fling during the 1920s (he had, as well, collaborated with Stravinsky in the Pulcinella production), and viewers of his neoclassical nudes needed a different frame of mind from that demanded by Les Demoiselles d’Avignon or the Cubist paintings of the first decade of the century. In music the neoclassical style encompassed a wide variety of composers in all Western countries—Poulenc, Milhaud, Hindemith, Weill, Martinu, Copland, to name only a few—and was propagated widely through the teachings of Nadia Boulanger. Even Schoenberg, whom Stravinsky for strategic reasons chose to ignore for most of his life, had his neoclassical period during the 1920s in works that, within his new twelve-tone style,
imitated the likes of Bach-style suites and sonata-type compositions. At one point Stravinsky described the music that Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern composed during the 1920s as neoclassic but added that, in contrast with his own practice, in which historical references were “overt,” theirs were “elaborately disguised.” Indeed, Robert Craft reports a brief crisis in confidence on the part of Stravinsky, when, remembering a recent performance by Craft of Schoenberg’s *Septet* (Opus 29 [1927]), a suite of Baroque-like dance movements in 12-tone form, the Russian composer, on a car trip to the Mojave desert, came close to weeping—less, apparently, from the effect of the music than from the fact that the Austrian had beat him at his own game. (Stravinsky resolved the crisis by himself picking up the 12-tone method from its now safely dead creator.)

And within Anglophone poetry at midcentury neoclassicism (even though nobody used this or any common name) was pretty much the only game in town. A restrained tone, traditional syntax, clever rhyming—all this in contrast with the free and obscure verse of the preceding generation—characterized an array of otherwise diverse poets: Robert Lowell (at least up to his Confessional period), Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, Stanley Kunitz, Louise Bogan, Yvor Winters, and such British “Movement” poets as Donald Davie and Philip Larkin. Many, like Auden, revived elaborate verse forms. And even so oracular, otherwise un-Audenesque a poet such as Dylan Thomas forced his obscure syntax into elaborate stanzaic patterns.

It is scarcely any wonder that Auden and Stravinsky proved so successful a match aesthetically—or that both the libretto and music of *The Rake’s Progress* should take neoclassical practices to an extreme. The libretto alone, as Willard Spiegelman has shown, is encyclopedic in the references to earlier literature that it brings together. Not that the listener is necessarily aware of these references. To be sure, the various myths that Auden invokes—the Faust story by means of Nick Shadow’s Mephistophelian relationship to Tom Rockwell; Mother Goose in the brothel scene; Venus and Adonis in the final scene—are pretty obvious on the surface. Yet he also includes a plethora of literary allusions—to Milton, the eighteenth-century satirists, Wordsworth, Keats, among many more—that, even though they might not be discernible in the opera house, would look familiar in a reading of the libretto.
Similarly with the music. Stravinsky has ransacked the history of opera, at least the history of “number” opera—without demanding that his listeners recognize his allusions. Some, like the myths cited above, are obvious. Every serious operagoer thinks of the Don Giovanni epilogue while hearing the Rake’s epilogue, and the latter opera’s cemetery scene, if only by virtue of its setting, recalls the scene in which Don Giovanni first confronts the Commendatore’s statue. But who would necessarily hear the opening of Monteverdi’s Orfeo in Stravinsky’s opening bars? This early opera, indeed, was known largely to musicologists at the time Stravinsky composed The Rake’s Progress. During the brief period in late 1947 that Auden spent in the Stravinsky household planning the opera, the two collaborators attended a two-piano performance of Così fan tutte that later elicited the composer’s remark, “An omen, perhaps, for the Rake is deeply involved in Così” (Memories and Commentaries, p. 158). And, to be sure, Così, not to speak of Don Giovanni, is mentioned frequently in musicological commentaries on Stravinsky’s operas. Operagoers attending the Rake will doubtless feel at various points that they have heard this kind of music before—Mozart?, Monteverdi?, Donizetti?, Verdi?—but without the dissonances that the composer has injected.

Imitation of earlier operatic forms came easily to the Rake’s creators, for both Stravinsky and Auden were steeped in the operatic repertory. As a child, the composer sat through innumerable performances at the Mariinsky, where his father was a principal bass. Auden began attending opera regularly in New York after his relationship with Kallman, already an opera buff, started in 1939. Echoing the operatic past for The Rake’s Progress must have been a pleasure for both the composer and the librettists. Indeed, the one time I met Auden, in a faculty reception following a reading he gave during the mid-1950s, he wanted to talk about nothing but opera once he discovered that I knew a thing or two about this topic; attempts by my colleagues to introduce other topics of conversation were stifled by our distinguished guest.

To illustrate some of the ways that a listener can react to one of the long-antiquated forms employed in the Rake, consider the cabaletta to Anne Trulove’s aria at the end of Act One:

I go, I go to him.
Love cannot falter,
cannot desert;
Though it be shunned
or be forgotten,
though it be hurt,
if love be love
it will not alter.
O should I see
My love in need,
It shall not matter,
What he may be.
Time cannot alter
A loving heart,
an ever loving heart.¹⁰

As one reads these words without the music, it is instantly clear that
Auden, recognizing the difference between libretto-style and poetry as
such, would never have written this passage as an independent poem.
Everything is exaggerated—much as it was in the Italian libretti that
Auden knew so well. Anne expresses the constancy of her love in the
traditional discourse of the many constancy arias that span the history
of opera. Who would expect anything except the most outrageous
clichés ("If love be love, / It will not alter") from a soprano voicing the
steadfastness of her love?

Moreover, the section is carefully marked “cabaletta” in the score
(p. 120)—just as the other set pieces—duettino, trio, aria, recitative
and the like—are explicitly marked. Although the score contains a
number of arias, each in an individual style, only Anne’s aria contains
a cabaletta. It is as though the librettist and composer are telling us
that we are experiencing a cabaletta in its most essential, most
archetypal form. The monosyllabic opening, with its almost banal
vocal line (G-E-C, F-D-B) outlining two obvious chords (p. 121),
reflects at once the simplicity of the heroine and the simplicity at the
heart of any cabaletta (one remembers how the aging Verdi often
expressed his embarrassment about having to compose cabalettas for
his singers). And look at the line “It will not alter,” which Stravinsky
repeats four times with different ornamentations (pp. 122-25). (Had
the opera been composed two decades later—after the bel canto
revival had begun—one suspects that the ornamentations would have
been even more extravagant.) And although the cabaletta had
originally ended with a lower note, Auden, quite conscious of the need for a cabaletta to show off a singer’s higher range, talked the composer into a high C (p. 129). Indeed, the whole idea behind a high C had a special meaning for Auden, who once wrote, “Every high C accurately struck utterly demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance.”

When I first attended *The Rake’s Progress* about a year after its premiere I took Anne’s cabaletta to be simply a parody of its form. But I later came to realize that it was far more than that, for Auden and Stravinsky were telling us many things: that the cabaletta form and its exaggerations are central to the nature of opera; that we are to see Anne both as silly and, through the earnestness of her vocalizing, as utterly serious; that in the extravagance of both text and music—here and in a multitude of other passages, for example, Baba’s farewell aria—opera reveals itself as at once noble and foolish. Anne’s cabaletta, one suspects, also makes a statement about the many real-life people who choose to lead their lives in an overtly operatic way. As I listen to it now after attending many diverse productions, I hear it as the cabaletta to end all cabalettas. (I can think of no cabalettas in subsequent operas, but then the convention had been dead for at least half a century before *The Rake’s Progress*.)

Among the productions I have attended, none seems as appropriate to the Auden-Stravinsky aesthetic as the one designed by David Hockney for the Glyndebourne Festival in 1975 and subsequently seen in several opera houses. Hockney’s sets pretend to be engravings in the style of those that Hogarth authorized to reproduce his paintings for *A Rake’s Progress*. The exaggerated cross-hatchings that Hockney devised within each scene revisit, with an appropriate ironic distance, the world of eighteenth-century engraving. Moreover, the cross-hatching affects not only the walls and windows, but also the curtains and many of the costumes. Together with the words and the music performed within these settings, the audience here experiences a neoclassical, thoroughly un-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

II. The “Good”

If the completed opera embodies its creators’ conception of “the Beautiful,” how does it give voice to that other term, “the Good,” that
Stravinsky used to indicate their intellectual compatibility? Although it is easy enough to analyze literary works for their ethical content, finding this content in music is a tricky endeavor. After all, musical discourse does not make statements that can easily be translated into verbal terms. One could, of course, cite certain works, for example, Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and *Ninth Symphony*, whose humanitarian messages are clear to any listener—yet we also possess the words to which these works are set, words that help clarify the musical messages that hit audiences in so powerful a way.

Poetry, by contrast, readily reveals its ethical content. And within twentieth-century poetry in English, no body of verse is more ethically laden than Auden’s. One of his most-quoted lines, “We must love one another or die,” is so overtly didactic that the poet’s ethical conscience ultimately found it “inauthentic”—with the result that Auden, after rereading “September 1, 1939,” in which the line occurred, decided that the whole poem “was infected with an incurable dishonesty” and thenceforth banished it from his collected works.13

But making moral statements, even if not so overt as the line “We must love one another or die,” was central to Auden’s writing, whether in verse or prose. The epilogue to *The Rake’s Progress* is a brief collection of moral apothegms, for example, in Tom’s lines:

>Beware, young men who fancy
You are Virgil or Julius Caesar,
Lest when you wake
You be only a rake. (Pp. 404-5)

Yet the epilogue, both its words and its music, is, like the opera as a whole, thoroughly ironic, and determining what real ethical messages come through this opera would be difficult at best.

To get a more precise hold on this topic, I limit my discussion to the ways that works of art stimulate distinct ethical responses in their audiences. However one might evaluate “September 1, 1939,” nobody would question Auden’s ability throughout his career—whether during his leftist or his Christian period—to elicit such responses. For example, his elegy to Yeats, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939), forces the reader to think about the gap between a poet’s morality and the quality of his writing. “The Shield of Achilles” (1952), by juxtaposing Homer’s seemingly beautiful shield with descriptions of modern war,
reduces the ancient scene to the horrors that Hephaestos’s art had sought to disguise.

Literature, whether poetry or fiction, performs its ethical work far more readily—or at least more discernibly—than the visual arts or music. To be sure, certain visual artists are conspicuous for their ability to elicit ethical responses. Many Rembrandt portraits are notable for the power with which they awaken compassion in their viewers, and Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893-1910), with its literal cry for help on the part of the woman at the center—not to speak of the figures contemplating suicide on the bridge behind her—puts to the test the viewer’s ability to respond to the plight of others.

Yet there is one form of painting, the narrative cycle, that rivals literary narrative in its ability to draw ethical responses from its viewers. In the innumerable stories of the Passion told in multiple panels in medieval and Renaissance churches, it is clear that the Catholic church knew that it could communicate its doctrines in visual terms with a special effectiveness to its often illiterate viewers. I bring up the narrative cycle since Stravinsky’s opera derives not from an earlier written text but from one of the major narrative cycles in the history of art.

Stravinsky remembered seeing William Hogarth’s *A Rake’s Progress* at the Chicago Art Institute in 1947 (*Memories and Commentaries*, p. 154). Actually the year was 1946, for I myself attended the exhibition, which closed in December of that year; indeed, over the years I have fantasized how wonderful it might have been to follow the composer through the show and observe him looking at each of the eight panels to assess its operatic possibilities.

*A Rake’s Progress*, together with Hogarth’s other cycles, *The Harlot’s Progress* (known today only through its engravings since the paintings were destroyed in a fire) and *Marriage A-la-Mode*, rivals the work of the painter’s literary colleagues Swift, Pope, and Gay in the satirical power with which it uncovers the vices and the hypocrisy of the society around him. And like its literary contemporaries, *A Rake* seeks to awaken its consumers’ moral sensibilities. Hogarth’s Tom Rakewell, like his operatic descendant, is pictured “progressing” through a series of bad choices—squandering his money, dissipating, marrying foolishly—that culminate in his relegation to Bedlam.
Just as *The Rake* is suffused with allusions to the musical past, so *A Rake* depicts many earlier paintings on the walls as a means of casting an ironic light on its various dramatic situations. For example, Painting 2 has a large *Judgment of Paris* that implicitly contrasts Paris’s choice of Helen with Tom’s choice (in Painting 5) of an aging, ugly rich woman whom he marries for financial reasons alone. And the Bedlam scene in the final painting shows Tom in the unmistakable pose of Christ in a Pietà. Hogarth alludes not only to painting but to music: Painting 2 shows a composer, thought to be Handel or Porpora, playing an operatic score entitled *The Rape of the Sabines*—still another allusion to Tom’s dissolute life; the later, engraved version of this painting contains the names of specific singers such Senesino and Cuzzoni. A *Rake*, moreover, already contains the traces of an opera (or an opera of sorts) in its allusion to *The Beggar’s Opera* (see Paulson, *Hogarth*, pp. 24-25), from which Hogarth had already painted a scene—Polly Peachum’s plea to her father—on at least two occasions (reproduced in *Hogarth*, eds. Hallett and Riding, pp. 70-71). It is no wonder that Stravinsky saw operatic possibilities in the paintings he viewed in Chicago.

Yet the viewer’s experience in reading Hogarth’s paintings against the earlier paintings depicted in them is considerably different from that of those attending Stravinsky’s opera. Seeing Tom Rakewell juxtaposed with the mythical Paris, or posing in a Pietà immediately tells us how mediocre this hero is compared to these other figures. By contrast, even if we recognize the opening sinfonia of *Orfeo* in the introduction to *The Rake*, the allusion in itself does not make a moral point. And even though *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* play a considerable role in the composition of the later opera, we are not easily aware of the allusions to *Così*, while the references to the other Mozart opera—the cemetery scene and the epilogue—do not in themselves make us see Tom’s story in any new way.

The Hogarth paintings that played most directly into the opera are the tavern scene (No. 3) and the final scene in Bedlam. Both would likely have struck the composer as operatic in character when he first saw them. Many of the changes, including the additions, that he and Auden made sought to heighten the operatic nature of the work. Most notably, Hogarth made no use for the Faust story, which, after Marlowe’s work, did not re-enter literature until the late
eighteenth century. But the addition of Nick Shadow and his Faustian pact with Tom Rakewell put *The Rake’s Progress* squarely within an operatic tradition that, besides those works—by Berlioz, Gounod, Boito, and Busoni—in which Faust is specifically named, includes such Faust-influenced tales as Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable*, Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, and Stravinsky’s own, generically unclassifiable *L’Histoire du soldat* (1918). It is as though the process of selling one’s soul to the devil keeps demanding operatic treatment. Still, whatever ethical problems emerge from Marlowe’s and Goethe’s literary versions of the story are pretty much lost in their musical embodiments, in which the relation between devil and victim largely assumes the characteristics of a game—and a literal card game at that in the cemetery scene of Stravinsky’s opera.

Moreover, the two leading female characters in *A Rake* needed operatic uplifting to make them more theatrically viable than they appeared in the paintings. Thus, the lowly Sarah Young, whom Tom has impregnated in *A Rake*, becomes the far classier and chaste Anne Trulove: by raising her class status, Auden and Stravinsky were able to portray a figure of more will than Hogarth’s pathetic figure. Yet in both the paintings and the opera this figure is notable for the loyalty she maintains toward her thoroughly unreliable lover. In Painting 4, for example, Sarah appears to help Tom escape debtor’s punishment by means of the small sum she has earned as a seamstress; and in the Bedlam scene she weeps at his side without Tom’s showing any awareness of her presence. And in both the paintings and in the opera the loyal woman appears as the only positive figure within an otherwise corrupt world.

The dumpy, middle-aged woman whom Tom takes as his wife in *A Rake* is thoroughly transformed in the opera. Now she becomes the grotesque bearded lady Baba the Turk, the thought of whom supposedly caused Auden and Kallman to burst into uproarious laughter together. “The quality common to all great operatic roles,” Auden wrote soon after *The Rake*, “is that each of them is a passionate and wilful [sic!] state of being” (*Prose*, 3: 299). Although the hero and heroine of *The Rake* scarcely qualify as willful beings (except for the cabaletta that briefly endows Anne with willfulness) Baba surely does. Her tempers and her constant posturing represent an unbearable
assertion of will, and, like a number of Verdi mezzo figures, Baba ordinarily steals the show.

In the outrageousness of her theatricality, Baba points to an aspect of the opera relevant to this discussion of the work’s ethical implications. In an earlier paper, “Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera,” I discussed four operas—Pelléas et Mélisande, Moses und Aron, Saint François d’Assise, and The Rake’s Progress—to argue that these major works all question the nature of theatricality. The first three of these operas, moreover, display an overt, virtually puritanical disdain for theatricality, which their composers associate with a certain inauthenticity. One may wonder why I included The Rake’s Progress in this group, for it is as overtly theatrical as any opera in the classic repertory. Its theatrical extravagance is evident especially in scenes such as the visit to Mother Goose’s brothel, the cemetery scene, and the attempted sale of Baba the Turk as Tom auctions off his possessions; yet this extravagance also marks such other moments as Anne’s cabaletta and the scene with the bogus bread-making machine. At the same time that The Rake’s Progress demonstrates how wildly operatic it can be, it also asks its listeners to note the extreme artifice at the heart of the form, indeed, to maintain a skeptical stance toward the emotions it purports to convey to its audiences. Although Auden, Kallman, and Stravinsky all dearly loved opera, their very love also enabled them to expose its inauthentic underside.

To keep their audience at a distance sufficient enough so that it may evaluate what is going on, the creators of The Rake’s Progress maintain their ironic masks throughout the opera. To be sure, this distancing is a hallmark of neoclassical style in both poetry and music, and anybody comfortable with this style would approach the opera without demanding that it speak out to us in a directly emotional way. Yet there is one conspicuous spot in the final scene in which Stravinsky briefly removes his mask. I refer to the great lullaby that the ever-faithful Anne sings to her mad Tom in Bedlam (pp. 383-85). The voice is marked “dolce” and the flute accompaniment, “dolce e cantabile.” From the opening lines we recognize that this lullaby is as straightforward as, say, Marie’s lullaby to her child in Wozzeck: Gently, little boat, Across the ocean float,
The crystal waves dividing:
The sun in the west
Is going to rest;
Glide, glide, glide
Toward the Islands of the Blest. (P. 383)

With its haunting obbligato for two flutes, this lullaby displays a direct
lyric expressiveness rare within the otherwise ironic style dominating
the opera.

What we quickly recognize is that, amid the theatrical antics that
dominate The Rake’s Progress, a strong emotion such as compassion
can still manifest itself and work infectiously on its audience. The
forgiveness that the much-wronged heroine grants Tom—as weak and
foolish a tenor hero as one can find within the history of opera—
provides an ethical lesson that listeners can absorb directly without
having to reflect on the action as they do throughout the rest of the
work. After attending many productions since 1952, only a year after
the premiere, I still leave the opera house not only hearing Anne’s
melody in my head but also feeling thoroughly moved by the
compassion emanating from the music.

Beyond the opera itself one can speak of a particular attitude
that both Auden and Stravinsky took to their vocation as artists, an
attitude, moreover, whose ethical implications are relevant to our
understanding of their work. I refer to the fact that both practiced the
game of High Art in a self-consciously responsible way. For Auden
every word, and for Stravinsky, every note and chord had to count.
Both could be immensely tough on other practitioners who they felt did
not meet the standards they set for themselves. “That now so
ascendant Ariadne auf Naxos?” Stravinsky remarked during the 1950s;
“I cannot bear Strauss’s six-four chords. Ariadne makes me want to
scream” (Conversations with Stravinsky, p. 75). Or Auden within his
introduction to an edition of selected Tennyson poems: “He
[Tennyson] had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet; he was
also undoubtedly the stupidest.” Statements such as these, flippant
though they may sound, also indicate the high standards that they
characteristically set for their respective art forms. Auden’s continuing
revising of earlier poems, together with his refusal to allow several of
his most famous pieces to appear in his collected editions, testifies to
the extraordinary demands that he made on himself. Both Stravinsky
and Auden, unlike many of their contemporaries, scrupulously put into practice the famous advice that the perfectionist John Keats gave to his sometimes sloppy fellow poet Percy Shelley to “‘load every rift’ of your subject with ore.”

Neither Stravinsky nor or Auden had any patience with the notion that art should be a means of self-expression. The neoclassical aesthetic that they practiced was itself an attempt to expunge whatever romantic elements they might be tempted to allow into their work; and in his earlier High Modernist period Stravinsky had already, unlike his rival Schoenberg, distanced himself from self-expressive indulgences. The notion of poetry or music as a game provided both poet and composer with a metaphor to avoid the leftovers of romanticism that can be found in many otherwise modernist artists. To the extent that they pursued the game with authority and without compromise, they demonstrated that the Good is by no means incompatible with the games of art.

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2 For convenience’s sake, I shall refer to Auden alone as the librettist throughout this essay. Despite Kallman’s major role in the project, it was Auden who initially worked out the plan for *The Rake’s Progress*, which he presented to the composer without mentioning his partner’s proposed role. When Stravinsky, already in the midst of composition, learned that Auden was not the sole librettist, he was at first miffed but soon after accepted the arrangement. Kallman adapted himself so comfortably to Auden’s style that readers have found it hard to distinguish who drafted which parts. For a list of which partner was responsible for particular passages, see *ibid.*, p. 14.


10 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rake’s Progress: An Opera in 3 Acts* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1951), pp. 121-30. Subsequent references to the score will be noted within my text.


12 For reproductions of Hockney’s set designs, together with earlier engravings that inspired them, see *The Rake’s Progress*, ed. J.-M. Vaccaro (Paris: Editions due Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1990), pp. 141-56. For an analysis of this production, see Myriam Chimènes, “Une Production de l’Opéra Glyndebourne: Les Décors et costumes de David Hockney, la mise en scène de John Cox,” in *ibid.*, pp. 157-76.

1939” today one needs to look in the various anthologies that, despite the poet’s rejection, have continued to reprint it. The poem is available, for example, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 1474-76. This anthology also contains “Spain 1937” (pp. 1466-68), a once-popular poem that Auden also removed from his collected works.


