

ANGLAIS
ÉPREUVE À OPTION : ÉCRIT
COMMENTAIRE COMPOSÉ DE LITTÉRATURE ÉTRANGÈRE

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Coefficient : 3 ; **Durée** : 6 heures

Conformément à une décision du jury prise en réunion plénière en juin, le sujet proposé pour cette épreuve lors du prochain concours (2004) comportera un seul texte à commenter, comme c'est déjà le cas pour toutes les autres épreuves de commentaire en langue étrangère.

Concernant l'épreuve de commentaire « croisé » de 2003, voici d'abord quelques remarques générales : cinquante-deux candidats étaient présents cette année. Les notes s'échelonnent de 0 (trois copies blanches) à 18 sur 20, avec une moyenne à 7,39 et un écart type à 4,14, et le nombre des copies « moyennes » ou « médiocres » était beaucoup plus élevé que l'an dernier. Quatorze copies seulement ont obtenu une note égale ou supérieure à 10 sur 20, et trente huit copies une note inférieure à 10.

Comme les autres années, il y a eu peu de copies blanches ou presque vides ; cependant il est assez étonnant (et frustrant) de trouver parmi elles quelques copies qui comportent seulement une moitié de page, mais de qualité : il n'y a là qu'une introduction, mais très pertinente, qui pose une problématique intéressante et annonce un plan alléchant. Mais la copie s'arrête là, abruptement, et nous restons alors vraiment perplexes : pourquoi le candidat s'arrête-t-il en si bon chemin, alors que manifestement il (ou elle) a réfléchi au sujet ?

Nous avons aussi été frappées par le fait que les copies, en moyenne, étaient vraiment plus courtes que l'an dernier. Non seulement beaucoup de ces copies étaient très brèves, mais elles étaient également vagues et peu denses. Non pas que la qualité dépende de la quantité de mots écrits, mais un commentaire riche et précis de deux poèmes doit nécessairement être un tant soit peu étoffé et détaillé. Donnons quelques exemples : telle copie se contente d'affirmer sans rien démontrer, à grand renfort d'adjectifs. Or il ne suffit pas d'affirmer que le rythme des vers est « jaunty » ou « irregular » : encore faut-il traduire cette vague intuition en termes plus précis, et justifier ses affirmations.

Pour ce faire, il ne faut pas nécessairement une connaissance approfondie de la rhétorique : les élèves s'encombrent souvent l'esprit (et encombrant aussi leurs copies) de termes rhétoriques peu parlants tels que « épizeux », « épanalepse » ou « battologie », qu'ils traduisent avec plus ou moins de bonheur en anglais, là où « repetition » ou « duplication » (des termes qui fonctionnent dans les deux langues) suffiraient largement. En revanche, ils semblent très rétifs dès qu'il s'agit de prosodie, s'obstinant à compter les syllabes et évitant soigneusement de scander les vers ou de s'interroger sur le nombre et la place des accents. Si un rythme est « jaunty », peut-être est-ce parce qu'il comporte des anapestes, comme le vers 14 d'Auden, comique et irrévérencieux (« is folded and hung up to dry », [u/] [uu/] [uu/]). S'il est « irregular », encore faut-il énoncer la « règle », la norme, dont ce vers s'écarterait. Ainsi, si le poème de Graves présente un rythme principalement iambique, celui d'Auden comporte beaucoup de variations, s'écartant considérablement de la « norme » iambique. Dès le deuxième vers la répétition du verbe « walk » est mise en relief par une attaque trochaïque, (**walking**, [u]) et cette variation suggère une certaine fantaisie, peut-être une promenade sans but particulier, au hasard des rues. Chez Graves, dans le troisième vers, l'utilisation d'un pied faible suivi d'un spondée (« to her full height ») rompt le rythme iambique et contribue (très

économiquement, en peu de mots) à suggérer à la fois la plénitude de la lune et sa position dans le ciel. Il est certain qu'en ce qui concerne la prosodie tout au moins il serait souhaitable que les élèves acquièrent un lexique précis, mais surtout s'entraînent, en sensibilisant leur oreille à autre chose que les rythmes syllabiques français.

Qu'il s'agisse des élèves d'option (à l'écrit) ou des élèves de tronc commun (à l'oral), le choix est souvent de commencer l'explication d'un poème par des remarques générales sur la forme (sonnet ou vers libre, système choisi pour les rimes, mètre etc.). Il n'y aurait rien à redire à cela si ce n'était souvent, pour les élèves, une bonne excuse pour se « débarrasser » de la « forme » dès le début et ne plus y revenir ensuite, pour mieux se consacrer à la quête du « sens ». Certes il est possible de dégrossir dès le départ l'analyse formelle, mais cela ne dispense pas les élèves, au cours du commentaire, d'analyser comment tel mot est mis en relief par telle sonorité, par un changement de rythme, par un enjambement... ou tout simplement comment les variations ou les effets sonores *créent* le sens, car très souvent les écarts par rapport à la norme sont porteurs de signification.

Autre exemple : dans plusieurs copies, on trouve l'idée que la première strophe d'Auden est « positive » parce que l'image des champs de blé transforme la ville en campagne, l'artificiel en naturel, réintroduisant la fécondité, la fertilité, l'espoir etc. Une copie se détache, en proposant une lecture « négative » ; l'image serait en fait menaçante parce qu'elle évoque en creux « la grande faucheuse » : elle sous-entend que la mort attend ces foules, comme la faux attend les blés. Tant que les interprétations sont justifiées et défendues, elles restent défendables, mais telle autre copie se contente de faire brièvement allusion à l'image, avant de passer à autre chose (« Auden chooses the grim image of fields of wheat in his first stanza ») et là encore le jury attendrait un développement plus long : dans l'esprit de l'élève en question, l'idée de « grim reaper » est sans doute évidente lorsqu'il (ou elle) utilise l'adjectif « grim », mais il est nécessaire d'être plus explicite, et aussi de montrer en quoi cette lecture « négative » serait plus en accord avec le reste du poème et sa tonalité que les interprétations plus riantes citées plus haut. .

Le jury a des attentes très modestes concernant les connaissances des élèves en matière d'histoire littéraire et d'intertextualité ; en effet nous ne perdons pas de vue qu'il s'agit pour la plupart d'étudiants de deuxième année seulement. Nous ne nous attendions évidemment pas à ce qu'ils perçoivent des échos de Eliot et Dante dans le poème d'Auden, et si nous en parlons plus bas c'est pour apporter de l'eau au moulin des candidats qui ont senti intuitivement un rapport entre les champs de blé et le « pays des morts » évoqué plus loin.

En revanche nous avons été un peu surprises de voir combien peu de candidats entendaient chez Auden l'écho d'un poème qui figure dans presque toutes les anthologies de la littérature anglaise utilisées dans les classes préparatoires, à savoir « To His Coy Mistress », un poème dont nous savons qu'il est très souvent étudié (et à juste titre !).

Toujours dans le souci d'aider les futurs candidats, voici quelques réflexions en anglais sur le sujet 2003, assorties des précautions oratoires d'usage, à savoir que ces remarques ne sauraient constituer un « corrigé-type », encore moins un « modèle ». En effet on ne saurait comparer le travail (parfois vraiment remarquable) fait en six heures par des candidats dont la plupart découvrent les textes pour la première fois, et les idées suggérées par le jury, ne serait-ce que parce que le jury a eu bien plus de temps pour y réfléchir (ayant choisi ce sujet des mois avant l'épreuve) et parce que les réflexions proposées sont aussi la synthèse de propositions trouvées dans diverses copies.

The two poems under scrutiny are variations on the very codified form of the ballad, Auden's poem (hereafter referred to as "poem 2") very noticeably so, Graves's ("poem 1") more subtly so. Therefore one of the first questions that could be addressed here concerns the strategy of the poets: why did they choose this codified form? Did they attempt to renew it,

and in what way? A cursory reading of the two poems shows that they deal with the defeat (or the death) of love. This “death” is not so much narrated as suggested (in poem 1) in the evocation of a dreamlike, symbolical atmosphere, or else it is dramatically staged through dialogue (in poem 2). Therefore another question needs to be addressed: since those poems offer a specific treatment of the eminently “poetic” theme of love, one could wonder in what way they use, or differ from, other traditions. The romantic tradition, for instance, in which death separates devoted lovers, or the *carpe diem* tradition, in which love is not yet consummated, and the lover has to urge his beloved to “seize the day” before it is too late.

Playing with tradition : A tension between fixity of form and the theme of mutability

Both poems begin with a sentence that is almost formulaic (“As I walked”), and which can be found in famous medieval ballads such as “The Death of Geordie”. (Several of the many known variations of “The Death of Geordie” begin with “As I walked over London Bridge, / One morning that was foggy, / I overheard a fair one say, ‘Pray save the life of Geordie!’”)

Auden’s poem is made of fifteen stanzas, many of which conform to the pattern of the ballad stanza: a quatrain made of a tetrameter, a trimeter, another tetrameter and another trimeter, in which only the trimeters rhyme, in an abcb pattern. But Auden has chosen to introduce variations, and many of the lines which “should” be tetrameters in a ballad metre are in fact trimeters with a feminine ending (seven syllables, the last one unaccented). The first lines of Auden’s and Graves’s poems are very similar, but whereas Graves used a perfectly regular iambic tetrameter Auden chose a shorter line ([u/] [u/] [u/u]). In “Full Moon”, Graves used the ballad metre consistently (alternating tetrameters and trimeters), but he preferred an extended form of the ballad stanza, made of seven lines, a quatrain followed by a tercet, with an ababccb rhyme scheme, and a 4343443 rhythm.

Other noticeable characteristic traits of the ballad are duplication (duplication of the subject, for example, as in “the lovers they were gone”), repetition and anaphora (repeated use of “and” at the beginning of lines, especially in poem 2) and incremental repetition. In poem 1 for example line 21 is not only repeated but also lengthened in line 22. In poem 2 “I’ll love you” is repeated three times, and the poem is enclosed within a circular pattern, the last stanza, with “evening” and “river” echoing the words and descriptions present in the opening stanzas. In poem 2 also the lover’s song is framed by the mention of “love”, his alpha and his omega, and the clocks’ address is inscribed within a circular pattern, between the words “chime” (line 22) and “chiming” (line 59). Graves’s poem begins like a ballad, with a persona narrating an anecdote, while Auden uses the joined devices of narrative poetry, embedded discourse, and dialogue, all frequently present in ballads.

Both poems create a tension between a fixed, highly structured form on the one hand, and an exploration of the themes of Time and mutability on the other. In each poem there is great formal stability, and great symmetry. In Auden’s poem the speaker’s narrative (lines 1-7, lines 21-22, and stanza 15) encloses first a lover’s song (line 8, stanzas 3 to 5) and then a long warning addressed by the clocks to the lover, and ultimately to the reader. The temporal frame (the poem begins “one evening” and ends on the same evening, “late, late”) and the spatial frame (in a city by the river) are also stable. But within this unchanged frame we are led away into vague, limitless space (desert) and immeasurable time (“vaguely life leaks away”, “tomorrow or today”): the limited encloses the boundless, in a way. In poem 1 there is also a symmetrical frame, created by the use of the word “love” in the first and in the last stanza, but it is not a “circle”: love is expected in the first stanza, but vanishes in the last one, and the words “one” and “two” appear respectively on lines 2 and 31, emphasising the transformation from fusion and unity to separation and disunion.

The same ironic tension between form and content is palpable in poem 2, in stanza 2. The lover’s confident assertion of the eternal, enduring quality of love (“love has no ending.”) is

immediately interrupted by a full stop, and placed at the end of a stanza; in other words punctuation, typography and grammar suggest boundaries and limits, while the meaning of the sentence suggests the contrary. The naive, enthusiastic voice of the lover is undermined by humorous cynicism. In the same way, the lover believes his case to be unique, thinking that his love is “the first love of the world”, and that his beloved is the most beautiful ever, “the Flower of the Ages”. But his confidence in his eternal possession and enjoyment of her is mocked by the enjambment from line 18 to line 19: in this gap between verb and object, between holder and held, lies irony, and the device stresses the vulnerability and mortality of his beloved and of their love.

There is more humour than cynicism in the beginning of Auden’s poem, which playfully alludes to Andrew Marvell’s hyperboles in “To His Coy Mistress”. (For example “till China and Africa meet” sounds just as improbable as Marvell’s “till the conversion of the Jews”, and this impossible meeting of two continents recalls Marvell’s own playful evocation of a faithful lover languishing “by the tide / Of Humber” for a Mistress strolling “by the Indian Ganges’ side”. Marvell’s Time, the “winged chariot hurrying near”, is also “recycled” by Auden. On the contrary there is more melancholy and disenchantment than humour in Graves’ poem, which completely transforms the Romantic *topos* of the full moon. Keats’s romantic evocation of a “tender” night, filled with the song of the nightingale “In some melodious plot / Of beechen green”, under the benevolent gaze of the “Queen-Moon” (in *Ode to a Nightingale*) gives way to Graves’ evocation of a nightingale trivially chatting and of a moon that is no accomplice to love, but a deceitful, lying schemer, hypocritically “beaming like the sun” while secretly plotting against the lovers.

A dynamic progression in a dreamlike atmosphere

Traditional sung ballads very often mourn the sad fate of star-crossed “true” lovers, separated by death or a treacherous fate. Thus Geordie, hanged for his misdeeds: “He bid farewell to his own true love, / And it grieved him more than any”. Ballads often use dialogue or a speaker/narrator quoting other speakers’ words. But if both Graves and Auden use the same form and devices, they develop the opposite theme, denying the everlastingness of “true love” (Shakespeare’s “ever-fixed mark” in sonnet 46) and insisting on change and whim. In poem 1 the precise setting of the opening stanza (a field in the moonlight) soon shifts and changes, the metaphorical vehicles superseding the “real” tenors. In other words, the country background melts, as in a dream, into a dreamlike stately mansion in stanza 4, the fields become an ocean in the last stanza, and the escape from reality and realism is plainly visible in the mention of the “mermaids”. The evocation of the dreaming couple in stanza 2 contributes to creating in the reader the frame of mind necessary to appreciate the dreamlike logic of the shifting images. In Auden’s poem a surrealistic atmosphere also takes over after a “realistic” beginning, with humorous, incongruous hyperboles in the lover’s song, and striking, bleak, oxymoronic associations of everyday, mundane life (cupboard, teacup) and barren solitary landscapes (glacier, desert) in the clocks’ warning. In poem 2 the nightmarish quality of the clocks’ address is explicitly stated on line 25, but, as in dreams, a subterranean logic links this part to the preceding song: the image “the *burrows* of the Nightmare” seems to be prompted by the lover’s confident assertion that “the years shall run like *rabbits*”.

In poem 1 the death of love is suggested through a series of subtly changing images, in poem 2 the dialogue more brutally confronts illusion to reality. But both insist on mutability and reversibility, using an aesthetics of transmutation or of oxymoronic confrontation. This happens abruptly in poem 2, where from the beginning, through the use of imagery, the sterile, man-made, overcrowded world of the city is juxtaposed to, or replaced by, an image evocative of nature, and golden, ripe “harvest wheat”. The choice of the name “Bristol street” is too vague to evoke any particular city; and can be phonetically justified by the repetition of

the clustered consonants **st** in “Bristol” and “street,” but Bristol being a busy, industrial city its evocation also heightens the implicit contrast between depressingly grey cities and a bucolic nature.

In both poems the illusion that human beings can lead their own lives, and even tame and domesticate natural forces, is contrasted with their helplessness in the face of powerful forces. Thus in poem 1 the lovers “held the tyrannous queen above / Sole mover of their fate”, two lines couched in a precious, conventional poetic diction, which emphasises the poet’s ironic distance: the couple is guilty of pathetic fallacy, he is not. In poem 2, these transcendent, fearful forces are personified through the use of allegory: “Time”, “the Nightmare”, “Justice” (a human institution which is presented as “naked”, and therefore powerless). The naive lover thinks of the mundane as capable of taming the formidable, and his song is filled with comical, undignified images taken from the fantasy-filled universe of nursery-rhymes, folk-tales and cartoons, with personified, domesticated entities. Continents “meet”, the river “jumps”, the salmon “sing in the street”, the ocean becomes a harmless laundered sheet “hung up to dry” (line 14) and the evocation of what ought to be majestic and awesome, the cosmos, irresistibly conjures up the mundane image of a farmyard, because of the comparison with “squawking geese”. But then, in stanza 11, the clocks remind the lover that it is the forces of nature which threaten our daily existence with barrenness, loss and mourning. The lover’s hubris is checked by a dire warning, (lines 23-24) in which the chiasmic structure (Time you/ You Time) mimes man’s helplessness and imprisonment in Time. (Interestingly, Auden used the same kind of device in his poem “Funeral Blues”, in which the speaker mourns the death of his lover, and treats the stars as if they were theatre props in a stage set, but the effect is completely different, pathetic instead of comic [“Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun / pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood”])

In Graves’s poem the constant process of transformation and reversal, brutally summarised in line 29 (“And now warm earth was Arctic sea”) evolves subtly from stanza to stanza: the night is “sultry”, an adjective that evokes the sweltering temperatures of summer, but also the heat of noon. This prepares our minds for the startling transformation of moon into sun, of night into broad daylight, a usurpation also present in the ambiguous phrase “the broad moon” in line 32. “Sultry” also evokes sexual passion, but the association of the derogatory deictic “that”, the negative connotations of unbearable, oppressive heat, and perhaps also the phonetic resemblance of “sultry” and “sulky” all contribute to giving to the opening line a rather sinister flavour. The “tryst” is doomed from the very beginning. Love should conquer all, love should be eternally “true”, but in poem 1 the moon and the fields plot “love’s defeat” and in poem 2 the lover is reminded that he “cannot conquer Time”. Then, very gradually and subtly, the heat of the beginning gives way to an icy chill.

In poem 2 also the barren cold of winter threatens the “green valley” (line 32) and passion is doomed to turn to indifference and sterility. “The desert sighs in the bed” in poem 2, and in poem 1 what should be a perfect union is an instance of disunion, of joined solitudes: “Like man and wife who nightly keep / Inconsequent debate in sleep / As they dream side by side” The frequent use of “S” and “T” sounds continues the effect of whispering and plotting begun in stanza one. The enjambment from line 12 to 13, added to the perfect symmetry of line 14 (with the caesura right in the middle of two groups of three monosyllables) enhances the idea that man and wife live solitary, parallel lives instead of a common passion.

The disconnected, loveless man and wife are merely vehicles in a comparison, the tenors of which are the owlet and the nightingale, or perhaps also the poet and the nightingale. Instead of being enraptured and envious, like Keats’ poet in the “Ode to the Nightingale”, transported into a magic landscape, the poet is here disconnected from nature, incapable of interpreting the birdsong (“with this or that replied”, “a tedious owlet”), and beneath him the fields are “sick”, a pathetic fallacy suggestive of the fields’ sadness at their own treason and collusion

with the baleful moon, their guilty complicity (“mute assent in love’s defeat”) if not active compliance. The same negative feelings of meaninglessness and absurdity inform the clocks warning against the lover’s enthusiastic outburst in poem 2: “In headaches and in worry / Vaguely life leaks away”, in which the alliteration in L could be an attempt at mimicking the “leaking away”, the loss of water, threatening to turn the “brimming river” into a sterile desert, or at least a shallow “basin” where there is water only “up to the wrist” (stanza 10).

So both poems enact a dynamic progression, from heat to cold, from energetic mobility (“walking”) to stasis, from fertility to sterility, from fullness and fulfilment to emptiness and sorrow. In poem 2 the progression leads us also from the reassuring world of material things to the terrifying metaphysical abyss of “the land of the dead”, and to a world where nothing is predictable, where everything is reversed, even the reassuring, childish world of nursery rhymes. The “lane to the land of the dead” leads to a full stop and the end of the stanza, and yet the syntax continues, with a description of what could be hell, in stanza 12, which remains rather enigmatic. After death (in Hell?) beggars are rich (“raffl[ing] the banknotes”), Jack (from the fairy tale “Jack and the beanstalk”) is no longer terrified of the giant ogre, the “Lily-white”, or lily-livered boy “is a Roarer” (presumably, has become courageous, and “roars”, like a lion). The last line of this rather baffling stanza could perhaps be “read”, or paraphrased, as an allusion to infidelity: Jill, who should be faithful to Jack (“every Jack shall have his Jill”, goes the popular saying), Jill, who should be walking *up* (in the nursery rhyme, “Jack and Jill went up the hill”), now “goes *down* on her back”, presumably having sex with an illicit lover, not with her “true love”. The idea of infidelity was already suggested in line 31, in the polysemy of “fancy”.

The dynamic progression in poem 1 follows the logic of dreams, where one idea conjures up another, causing landscapes and situations to change smoothly and imperceptibly. Thus the looks exchanged by the lovers suggest their growing estrangement: neutral at first (“held the other’s eyes”) their gaze becomes a glare, a look of hatred (a word which also suggests a harsh, hostile light, denying the benevolent “beaming” of the moon). The idea of glaring logically leads to the evocation of the blank, hostile stare of statues, and these in turn suggest the cold elegance of stately houses. The repetition of “glared” and “glare”, words placed in a symmetrical position to each other suggests the formal, classical symmetry of the “tessellated stair” and of the “halls of state”. The preposition “across” economically sums up the attitude of the lovers, who now stand well apart from one another. Eventually the hostility between the lovers reaches a climax with the simile of the “dagger-keen” breath, evocative of a bitterly cold air but also of the hostile exchange of murderous words, as the hostile “glare” turns to the more subtle and more dangerous metallic “glint” of ice and dagger in line 31. But what is striking in this elegant variation on the rather vulgar theme of a “lovers’ tiff” is that contrary to Auden’s poem, no dialogue is reported: speech is only suggested through indirection, which adds to the strange, nightmarish atmosphere.

As the lovers become petrified and frozen, the use of clusters of consonants, difficult to pronounce, enhance the effect. Indeed the sibilant “S”, and the “ST” cluster are very much present in lines 26-28.

In poem 2 the death of love and even the loss of life are not enacted but their possibility is evoked in economic but beautiful images, enhanced by an alliteration in B: thus the sentence “Time breaks the threaded dances / And the divers’ brilliant bow” hints at the ruthless Parcae. And love is pitilessly discouraged: “Time coughs when you would kiss”.

A cold elegance and a passionate plea

Graves’s speaker in poem 1 is first a very present, active persona, and the pronoun I is present in lines 1 and 2, associated with very “realistic” actions: “I walked”, “I heard”. This assertive presence is diluted in stanza 2, in which the persona is no longer the subject of verbs,

and seems truncated into various parts, relegated to the end of lines 1 and 3 (“my tread”, “my head”). Then this active presence disappears, as if the speaker were now outside himself, watching himself, both subject and object, seeing and seen, exactly the kind of thing that happens when we dream. The I persona is dissolved into “my phantom”, and the loss of a sense of self is further demonstrated with the absence of the possessive adjective “my” in the phrase “each image”. Finally the “I” is alluded to as part of a third person plural in stanzas 3 and 4: “they”. In the last stanza the “I” pronoun does not reappear. The speaker is imprisoned and powerless, and this is reflected in the inversion on line 31, “Two bergs of glinting ice were we”, where the plural pronoun is relegated to the last position, in contrast with line 32, which asserts the power, presence and activity of the moon. In Auden’s poem, the “I” persona is presented only as a witness, an uninvolved observer, a discreet presence, so discreet that in the last stanza there is no “I” pronoun to remind us of the existence of a framing poetic voice. The poet has apparently chosen the neutral, impersonal watching presence of the speaker as his mask, his “persona” in the poem, but it can be argued that the speaker is in league with the sensible, warning voice of the clocks, in an attempt to denounce the naive illusions of the lover. On the surface the clocks address a warning to the lover: many urgent, duplicated, imperative verbs create a hypnotic, rhythmical, anaphoric effect (“O plunge” ... “plunge them”, “O look, look”... “O look”, “O stand, stand”), and the same urgent, pleading tone is perceptible in the frequent use of the pronoun “you” or the possessive adjective “your”. Thus the reader feels constantly implied, drawn into the dialogue, which becomes a dialogue between poet and reader much more than between “clocks” and “lover”.

Graves’s poem is an elegant, slightly flippant variation on versatility, and its fascination lies in the smooth, seamless way in which transitions occur. Graves insists on the impossibility of sustaining “true love” eternally; the last two lines are made of monosyllables (with the exception of “upon”, but not of “love” which phonetically only counts as one syllable), their rhythm is perfectly iambic, and the alliteration in “w” (went”, “wind”) contributes to the effect of effortless lightness and impalpability. The loveless ex-lovers are trapped in materiality and hatred, in the solid elements of earth, water and ice, the moon triumphs, and love flies away, impalpable, and airy. Love floats away like a will o’ the wisp, and the lovers cannot grasp it and hold it. The use of the verb “sailed”, often used metaphorically to evoke the majestic, ship-like gliding of a queen, reactivates the personification of the “Queen-moon”, and the internal rhyme between “sailed” and “tailed” links the mermaids to the queen, as if they were her maids of honour, thus creating another subtle association of ideas between the present ocean setting and the previous “halls of state”.

At the end, the very possibility of love’s existence is questioned: “as though it had not been”. Therefore the whole poem can be read as the expression of a sad, somewhat cynical, vision. In poem 2, the grave tone of the end of the poem contrasts with the lover’s foolish confidence and optimism, and yet the ending is far from pessimistic. In poem 1 love goes “by upon the wind”, in poem 2 “the lovers they were gone”, but not necessarily their love: the “falling out of love” is accomplished in poem 1, but not in poem 1, where it remains only a threat, a possibility. In poem 2, the clocks (and the poet) urge the reader not to believe naively in perfection but to settle for human imperfection, not to pine uncompromisingly for passionate, perfect, romantic love but to practice brotherly love of the Other, however imperfectly: “You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart”). A Judeo-Christian “message” couched in Biblical terms, a mixture of the ten commandments (“thou shalt”) and of the Biblical adjective “crooked”, evocative of the power of evil (as in “Leviathan, that crooked serpent”), but also of the power of God’s promise to men (“and the crooked shall be made straight”, as the gospel according to Luke reminds us). Just as Marvell broadened the sometimes rather sordid *carpe diem* exhortations of other poets by opposing not youth and old age, beauty and ugliness, but simply life and death (“the grave’s a fine and

private place”), Auden went beyond sexual or romantic passion, giving “love” a much wider, fuller meaning.

The brutal shift from city to country, from crowds to wheat in Auden’s first stanza can be read as an image of the human condition, constantly threatened by desiccation of the heart and impending death, all the more so since it echoes T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* (verses 61-63), in which the mention of “London Bridge” functions as an allusion to famous ballads, among which “The Death of Geordie”:

“Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.”

These lines by Eliot also echo the hell of Dante’s *Inferno*, a detail which gives depth to Auden’s evocation of “the land of the dead”. Graves’s poem has a “dead-end” ending, with petrified, sterile lovers doomed to glaring eternally at each other. “The shining gate” is “fogged”: a polysemic utterance, explicitly linked to the clouds hiding the light of the moon and the stars, and therefore symbolically hiding the gate to heaven. Implicitly, this “fogging” could also be a metaphorical depiction of the lovers’ eyes (popularly known as the gates of the soul), clouded by doubt and glaring hostility, in which the “eager flame of love” can no longer be seen. But in Auden’s poem the clocks urge the addressee (and therefore the reader) to “stare, stare”, to “look, look”, and finally the suggested introspection (“wonder what you’ve missed”, line 40) bears fruit, as the tears “scald and start”, bringing life and hope to the desiccated, desert-like “land of the dead”. Whereas in poem 1 symmetry only emphasises isolation and solitude (the statues staring at each other, for ever static, for ever separated) in poem 2 the symmetry of the self “look[ing] in the mirror” (line 49) leads to a higher understanding, almost a regenerative process: the tears are painful, but healing. In poem 1, humans are passive, believing they are the playthings of fate (line 25), in poem 2 they are urged to avoid or change what seems inescapable.

In an ironical echo of the lover’s foolish assertion “the years *shall* run like rabbits” the clocks solemnly state a commandment which is also a promise “you *shall* love”. Auden takes his reader beyond realism and pessimism, to a subdued, qualified optimism; consequently the last stanza is rounded and peaceful, the “chiming” of the clocks replaced by the “chiming” of a stanza in which both sets of lines rhyme (evening with chiming, gone with on) whereas in all the other stanzas only two lines out of the four rhyme together. And in the last line the once threatened plenitude of the “brimming river” is reasserted, while a slow, irregular rhythm adds solemnity: “And the deep river ran on” (which could be scanned as an anapaest followed by a trochee and a spondee).

En espérant que ces quelques notations auront pu encourager et inspirer les futurs candidats, nous souhaitons féliciter chaleureusement ceux de 2003, dont certains ont montré à quel point ils ont su maîtriser cet exercice exigeant qu’est le “commentaire croisé”. Ces félicitations sont aussi une façon de rendre hommage aux professeurs qui les ont préparés à cette épreuve, et sans la patience et la persévérance desquels cette maîtrise n’existerait pas. L’épreuve sera différente en 2004, puisqu’il n’y aura plus qu’un seul texte à commenter, mais que ceux qui vont s’inscrire au concours sachent que le jury n’en sera pas pour autant moins exigeant, ni moins bienveillant d’ailleurs!