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WHEN BODY IS RHYTHM AND SEX IS THE
PROTAGONIST: HOMOEROTICISM IN *THE PLATONIC
BLOW*, BY W. H. AUDEN



QUANDO O CORPO É O RITMO E SEXO É O
PROTAGONISTA: HOMOEROTISMO EM *THE PLATONIC
BLOW*, DE W. H. AUDEN

João Pimentel Santos Santana COELHO
Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasil

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyze homoeroticism in *The Platonic Blow*, by W. H. Auden, considering the sexual encounter between the speaker and Bud. *The Platonic Blow* is a narrative poem composed of thirty-four quatrains, depicting and describing the sexual activity engaged by the speaker and an unknown man called Bud. The sexual act, then, presumes a fusion between those two men. In becoming one, they are no longer two distinct persons. Based on Paz's (1996; 1973) and Bataille's (1986) studies on erotism, the essay also includes contributions from Lacan's (2020a; 2020b; 2005) thoughts on the phallus and Frappier-Mazur's (1993) essay surrounding the obscene word in pornographic French literature from the eighteenth century.

Resumo

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Esse ensaio objetiva analisar o homoerotismo em *The Platonic Blow*, de W. H. Auden, considerando o encontro sexual entre o eu lírico e Bud. *The Platonic Blow* é um poema narrativo composto de trinta e quatro estrofes, retratando a atividade sexual engajada pelo eu lírico e o homem desconhecido chamado Bud. O ato sexual, portanto, presume uma fusão entre estes dois homens. Ao tornarem-se um, eles não são mais duas pessoas distintas. Baseado nos estudos de erotismo de Paz (1996, 1973) e Bataille (1986), este ensaio também inclui contribuições de Lacan (2020a; 2020b; 2005) acerca do falo e do trabalho de Frappier Mazur envolvendo a palavra obscena na literatura pronogáfica francesa do século dezoito.

Entradas para indexação

Palavras-chave: Sex. Body. Homoeroticism. Auden. The Platonic Blow

Keywords: Sexo. Corpo. Homoerotismo. Auden. The Platonic Blow.

Texto integral

Introduction

Paz (1996, [s. p]) once said that “poetry and eroticism originate in the senses but do not end in them”. W. H. Auden’s *The Platonic Blow* illustrates that. This poem narrates an encounter between two men, resulting in oral sex. The poem opens by the speaker saying: “It was a spring day, a day for a lay, when the air / Smelled like a locker-room, a day to blow or get blown” (Auden, 2008, p. 48). First, the speaker is anxious when meeting a man in a corner and going towards his direction, as he observes features of his physical attributes:

I glanced as I advanced. The clean white T-shirt outlined
A forceful torso, the light-blue denims divulged
Much. I observed the snug curves where they hugged the behind,
I watched the crotch where the cloth intriguingly bulged. (Auden,
2008, p. 48).

Feeling anxious, the speaker invites the unknown man into his bedroom and, by talking to him, discovers aspects of his life:

I produced some beer and we talked. Like a little boy
He told me his story. Present address: next door.
Half Polish, half Irish. The youngest. From Illinois.
Profession: mechanic. Name: Bud. Age: twenty-four. (Auden, 2008,
p. 48).

Composed of thirty-four quatrains, the stanzas depict and describe the sexual activity engaged by both men. To some, the description might sound gratuitous or graphic, considering that Auden details Bud’s body and the sexual relation. According to Paz (1996, [s. p]), “the protagonist of the erotic act is sex, or, to be more precise, the sexes” and it is evident that, here, the protagonist is sex

itself, specially taking into account that there are not biographical, psychological or physical descriptions of the speaker, whereas some of Bud's characteristics, such as profession and age, for instance, are mentioned by the speaker in a mechanic way, as if he is filling a questionnaire; however, Bud's body is deeply explored.

It is not just because those characteristics are not explicit in this poem that these subjects are not real - or at least felt as real. The poem functions through a metonymic logic, in which parts of the body - such as hair, penis, tongue and thighs - receive a larger attention than the whole body itself; as Paz (1986, [s. p], author's emphasis) once said: "eroticism is first, and foremost, a *thirst for otherness*".

This essay aims to analyze homoeroticism in *The Platonic Blow*, considering the sexual encounter between the speaker and Bud, based on Paz's (1996; 1973) and Bataille's (1986) studies on erotism. The essay also includes contributions from Lacan's (2020a; 2020b; 2005) thoughts on the phallus and Frappier-Mazur's (1993) essay surrounding the obscene word in pornographic French literature from the eighteenth century.

Between eroticism and poetry

Still on Paz's (1986, [s. p]) perspective "An erotic encounter begins with the sight of the desired body. Whether clothed or naked, the body is a presence: a form that for an instant is every form of the world". Therefore, the act of accepting the invitation, the act of saying "O.K" with a "husky voice" cannot be underestimated. It starts with the view of this desired body, fully clothed, that later reveals itself as a microcosmos, in which every single part is erotic - especially considering that not only the sex act itself, but the rhythm, alliterations and rhymes carry a certain eroticism in Auden's play with the language. Paz (1986, [s. p]) continues by saying that the "moment we embrace that form, we cease to perceive it as a presence and grasp it as concrete, palpable matter, matter that fits within our arms and is nonetheless unlimited. But embracing the presence, we no longer see that palpable matter". The material presence fades away the moment the body begins to be explored, with such an excitement and even anxiety of the speaker:

And here he was sitting beside me, legs apart.
I could bear it no longer. I touched the inside of his thigh.
His reply was to move closer. I trembled, my heart
Thumped and jumped as my fingers went to his fly.
I opened a gap in the flap. I went in there.
I sought for a slit in the gripper shorts that had charge
Of the basket I asked for. I came to warm flesh then to hair.
I went on. I found what I hoped. I groped. It was large. (Auden,
2008, p. 48-49)

Another acceptance, here, happens; however, without the use of spoken language. The body is the answer that responds to a question made by another body:

He responded to my fondling in a charming, disarming way:
Without a word he unbuckled his belt while I felt.

And lolled back, stretching his legs. His pants fell away.
Carefully drawing it out, I beheld what I held. (Auden, 2008, p. 49)

When fully entwined, both Bud and the speaker become a continuous body; being two, by sex, they become one, connected by body parts that, despite being fragmented, can never stop being the whole body itself, in agreement with when Paz (1986, [s. p]) once affirmed that “each of these fragments exists in and of itself yet refers to the totality of a body. A body which suddenly has become infinite”.

To Bataille (1986, p. 17-18),

stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality. Through the activity of organs in a flow of coalescence and renewal, like the ebb and flow of waves surging into one another, the self is dispossessed, and so completely that most creatures in a state of nakedness, for nakedness is symbolic of this dispossession and heralds it, will hide; particularly if the erotic act follows, consummating it.

The Platonic Blow portrays this precise connection between these two men, in which nudity is the preamble to oral sex. The sexual act, then, presumes a fusion between those two men. In becoming one, they are no longer two distinct persons, as Bataille (1986) once called a state of continuity: “We *aligned* mouths. We *entwined*. All act was *clutch*, / All fact contact, the *attack* and the *interlock* / Of tongues, the *charms* of arms” (AUDEN, 2008, p. 50, our emphasis); the verbs emphasized are an interesting choice - “aligned” and “entwined” - and also the use of the adjective “clutch” and the noun “interlock”, for instance, attests the two bodies that become one; as if one body would capture another, illustrated by the intense presence of /k/ and /tʃ/ sounds. To still quote Bataille (1986, p. 17): “the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.”

Paz is evoked once again and his theory surrounding poetry. In *The bow and the lyre*, Paz (1973, p. 169) affirms that

The poem traces a line that separates the privileged instant from the temporal current: in that here and in that now, something begins: a love, a heroic act, a vision of the godhead, a momentary wonder at that tree or the face of Diana, smooth as a wall of polished stone. That instant is anointed with a special light: it has been consecrated by poetry, in the best sense of the word consecration. Unlike what occurs with the axioms of mathematicians, the truths of physicists, or the ideas of philosophers, the poem does not abstract the experience: that

time is alive, it is an instant packed with all of its irreducible particularity and its perpetually susceptible to repeating itself in another instant, to reengendering itself and illuminating new instants, new experiences with its light.



Therefore, *The Platonic Blow* crystallizes an erotic moment between two strangers. The moment seems to be frozen in a lively space and time; there are almost no descriptions of the bedroom or outside places. What it seems to exist is a consecration of an instant, such as Paz describes above. An instant where the five senses play a deep role: the encounter of random eyes; the taste of flesh; bodies anxious to be smelled; known sounds that come out of strange mouths and reveal heated desires; and the dance of two bodies that only intimacy can provide. The careful and exact detailment of Bud's body, especially his private parts, and the unroll of action, helps building this instant that ends precisely when Bud orgasms; the poem, then, ends and no other information is provided. Here, if desire is the propeller and body is the vessel, only sex can be the protagonist.

Moreover, the only description of something that remotely resembles an outdoor feature is the afternoon sunlight striking the blond on Bud's wrists near the speaker's head, as if the sunlight would draw attention to sex; and even more: to the precise moment in which both bodies are deeply connected: Bud's penis in the speaker's mouth, and Bud's hand on the speaker's head.

The orgasm happens precisely when the speaker introduces his finger on Bud's anus and the rhythm and alliteration intensify alongside with the sex intercourse:

I plunged with a rhythmical lunge steady and slow,
And at every stroke made a corkscrew roll with my tongue.
His soul reeled in the feeling. He whimpered "Oh!"
As I tongued and squeezed and rolled and tickled and swung.

Then I pressed on the spot where the groin is joined to the cock,
Slipped a finger into his arse and massaged him from inside.
The secret sluices of his juices began to unlock.
He melted into what he felt. "O Jesus!" he cried.
Waves of immeasurable pleasures mounted his member in quick
Spasms. I lay still in the notch of his crotch inhaling his sweat.
His ring convulsed round my finger. Into me, rich and thick,
His hot spunk spouted in gouts, spurted in jet after jet. (AUDEN,
2008, p. 52)

Sex is full of rhythm, and therefore, Auden's poem also is. The rhyme scheme is clear, as well as a fluid rhythm that almost dances in the tongue of the reader, considering that *The Platonic Blow* depicts an oral sexual relation between those two men. As an illustration, the second line is filled with the /ɹ/ phoneme, that emulates the movement of the speaker's tongue in Bud's penis - "And at eve/ɹ/y st/ɹ/oke made a co/ɹ/ksc/ɹ/ew /ɹ/oll with my tongue" (AUDEN, 2008, p. 52); with this alliteration, the speaker draws attention to the movement of his tongue and also to the rhythm of the poem itself, when mentioning the "rhythmical lunge".

Also, in the verse “The secret sluices of his juices began to unlock” and the last verse, “His hot spunk spouted in gouts, spurted in jet after jet”, the presence of the phoneme /s/ represents, through sound, the ejaculation. In this same way, the sentence “His ring convulsed round my finger [...]”, with the presence of the phoneme /ɹ/ depicts the circular movement made in Bud’s anus. Moreover, still taking into consideration formal aspects of this poem, Frappier-Mazur, in an essay on the obscene word in eighteenth-century French pornographic literature, asserted that the “when comparing erotic verse and erotic prose fiction, it becomes evident that the narrative framing is an even more significant factor than the use of prose” (1993, p. 207). Considering that *The Platonic Blow* is indeed a narrative poem and still on Frappier-Mazur perspective, “A narrative, more than any other form, will condition and engage the reader, and even more so if it uses the past tense and the first person, a joint strategy that promotes self-voyeurism in the reader” (1993, p. 207). Auden plays with language and, of course, with the reader’s desire not only by recounting a detailed sequence of oral sex, but also by writing in past tense verbs and in first person, deeply filled with isomorphisms that mirror the sexual experience itself.

More than the sound aspects, the abrupt end is connected with the absence of any features of the speaker, for instance. Again, and it is never enough to mention, sex, in Auden’s poem, is the most crucial figure. The abrupt end - and the complete end, since no other verse unrolls after the ejaculation - is in communion with Paz’s (1986, [s. p]) idea of orgasm:

The act in which the erotic experience culminates, orgasm, is inexpressible. It is a sensation that goes from extreme tension to the most complete self-surrender and from single-minded concentration to the forgetfulness of self. The reuniting of opposites, in the space of a second: the affirmation of the ego and its dissolution, ascent and fall; there and here, time and timelessness.

Since this dissolution and return to a self is not expressed in words, it is expressed by emptiness itself, since there are not any description of possible and following acts or words after the orgasm. This precise end represents this disintegration: the poem, in sum, starts with two men who are strangers and it leads to a sexual act, in which both of them become one bounded by sex; then, after the orgasm, this abrupt end represents the return to separate bodies that were previously represented by fragments and senses in such entangled bodies.

Still on Paz’s (1986, [s. p]) conception of eroticism,

The body of my partner ceases to be a form and becomes an immense thing in which I both lose and recover myself. We lose ourselves as persons and recover ourselves as sensations. As sensation becomes more intense, the body we embrace becomes more immense. A sensation of infinity: we lose our body in that body. The carnal embrace is the apogee of the body and the loss of the body. It is also the experience of the loss of identity: a diffusion of form into a thousand sensations and visions, a fall into an ocean, an evaporation of essence. There is neither form nor

presence: there is the wave that rocks us, the gallop across the plains of night.

Thus, there is, in Auden's creation, this loss in each other's bodies, a fusion - the nameless speaker loses himself in Bud's body, and vice-versa. Both of them originate deep sensations in every part of the body (hair, legs, penis, belly, ears, back...) that produce various effects, such as the speaker observes: "He thrilled to the trill. "That's lovely!" he hoarsely said. / 'Go on! Go on!' Very slowly I started to move" (Auden, 2008, p. 51). The body lies, then, in this complex image: it produces the senses in the same way that it benefits from them; both bodies crave for each other and also for the sensations they would feel - and ended up feeling. However, Bud is the only one, in the whole poem, to receive oral sex, while the speaker not only engages in it, but contemplates Bud's penis throughout the whole poem; the pleasure felt by the speaker is situated in the act of producing pleasure and desire.

Between the obscene word and the phallus

Something else must be considered: throughout the poem, images and analogues for the word *penis* are remarkably used, such as "royal column" and "gorgeous organ" (Auden, 2008, p. 49). According to Lacan (2020a, p. 24), "phallus and penis are not to be conflated"; penis, then, is connected with the real organ with real functions, meanwhile the phallus is the signifier of both absence and presence, also related to desire that produces an effect of signification:

To avoid the aimless wandering into which the authors have gradually been led over the years whenever they avoid this point, and to restore the proper position to what is at issue, the differential sinew by which to broach this is that on no account is this a real phallus, a phallus which, as real, would exist or not exist. It's a symbolic phallus, in so far as it's in its very nature to present in exchange as an absence, as an absence that functions as such.

Indeed, everything that can be tralatitious in symbolic exchange is always something that is as much absence as presence. It is made in such a way that it has a sort of fundamental alternation, which means that, having appeared at one point, it disappears then to reappear at another. In other words, it circulates, leaving behind it the sign of its absence at the point from which it came. In yet other words, we can immediately recognise that the phallus that is involved here is a symbolic object. (Lacan, 2020b, p. 144-145).

"Tower of power" (Auden, 2008, p. 51), for instance, reveals explicitly the connection between the phallus and, obviously, power, although in the poem the image of an organ functioning in a sexual relation, cannot be excluded. Bud's genitals work beyond that - moreover, if the poem establishes a metonymic logic when it comes to Bud's body, the same happens with his genitals, always circumscribed with fragmented expressions related to power ("Byzantine dome of the head" (Auden, 2008, p. 51) and "herculean eggs" (Auden, 2008, p. 50)). The

fragments of the fragment indicate not only a deeper attention to the phallus, considering that the sexual act is limited to a fellatio, yet profoundly detailed, and the choice of the signifiers, deeply connected to powerful images; it also indicates, in consonance with Lacan (2005, p. 220), that “the phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark [man’s relation as a subject to the signifier] in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire”.

Therefore, Bud and his genitals incarnate this dual nature: both organ that plays a decisive role in the sexual relation (penis) and both signifier of power (phallus), something that would fulfill the speaker - in this case, both indissociable. In the very words of Lacan (2005, p. 220, our emphasis): “It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) *copula*”. According to Rabinovich (1995), the real of sexual copulation appears not as real considering the meaning of real to Lacan, but the real in a sexual relationship, in a biological point of view. Therefore, here, the phallus receives a connotation that unites the real and biological meaning, the symbolic, when it comes to the symbolic order and lastly, the imaginary taking the tumescence into account - still in Rabinovich's reading of Lacan. However, there seems to be a subversion when it comes to the representation of the phallus in *The Platonic Blow*. The one who is in possession of the phallus is not who retains power: as previously mentioned, it is the speaker that produces pleasure and owns a voice that narrates the action. It is the nameless speaker’s point of view and experience.

To Frappier-Mazzur, “that particular pornographic sign - the obscene word - names sexual parts, but never an object (with the obvious exception of the dildo) and its recurrence reflects the prevalence of the fragmented body in pornography” (1993, p. 216). The prevalence of a fragmented body and the presence of obscene words in *The Platonic Blow*, such as those mentioned above, express this relation between the word and what it represents. To quote Frappier-Mazur: “the obscene word not only represents, but replaces, its referent. It acts as a substitute for, indeed sometimes as an improvement over, its referent” (1993, p. 221). Still from Frappier-Mazur's perspective, the obscene word “is therefore the only unit in pornography which, strictly speaking, qualifies as *trompe-l’oeil*. Unlike other words, the obscene word not only represents, but is, the thing itself” (1993, p. 221). The expressions that refer to Bud’s penis, for instance, denote something else rather than an organ: it is also power and desire; it is both presence and absence. It is not possible to dissociate signifiers and signifieds since they add extra layers to such a vital organ in the sex act between both men. The word, and all of its features, attaches to the meaning - and meaning here, is the body itself:

Well hung, slung from the fork of the muscular legs,
The firm vase of his sperm, like a bulging pear,
Cradling its handsome glands, two herculean eggs,
Swung as he came towards me, *shameless*, bare. (Auden, 2008, p. 50, our emphasis)

Important to note that there are not any traces of guilt or regret; the sex is unapologetic and the speaker and his partner seem to have only pleasure and joy.

Sex is presented not through any derogatory lenses, but the absolute feeling of pleasure with a contemplation of Bud's body and penis. Before they engage on oral sex, Bud stops and takes off all of his clothes:

But he pushed me gently away. He bent down. He unlaced
His shoes. He removed his socks. Stood up. Shed
His pants altogether. Muscles in arms and waist
Rippled as he whipped his T-shirt over his head.
I scanned his tan, enjoyed the contrast of brown
Trunk against white shorts taut around small
Hips. With a dig and a wriggle he peeled them down.
I tore off my clothes. He faced me, smiling. I saw all. (Auden, 2008,
p. 49)

Bud's whole body reappears, here, in a state of contemplation. When taking his clothes in a "wriggle" movement, in comparison to the speaker's hurry. The syntax between both men stripping down their own clothes denotes their different hunger for desire, considering that Bud believes to be in control of the situation. When asking "Shall I rim you?" followed by the acceptance of the speaker's invitation, Auden, then, shows that the belief of alleged control felt by Bud is indeed false.

Final considerations

To conclude, it is important to understand the history of Auden's poem, since it appears that the relevance and quality of this poem is often reduced to its history. According to Frotain (2013, p. 65-66),

The sexually explicit poem - written in 1948, circulated privately by Auden, and first appearing in print in 1965 without the poet's permission [...] - has never been formally acknowledged by either Auden or his estate. Moreover, it remains unclear how the poem came to circulate beyond its creator's control: whether "snatched" from an Auden notebook by one of Wystan's or Chester's casual sex partners as the latter left the St. Mark's Place apartment [...] or privately printed by a friend to whom Auden had lent a typescript.

However, the study and analysis of queer expressions is as important as its production, since debates and research on academic spaces are of extreme significance when it comes to acceptance of minority groups. Maybe the reaction of that period and the fact that Auden constantly denied having written *The Platonic Blow* and the pointless critiques toward a homoerotic poem even nowadays help understanding why, traditionally, this poem by Auden has been put aside in regards to literary critics. As an illustration, Humphrey Carpenter (2011, [s. p]), W. H. Auden's biographer, has said that "As poetry, 'The Platonic Blow' is negligible; as pornography, it has been much admired by readers with similar sexual preferences to Auden's", which reveals the treatment conceded to erotic poetry, especially those concerning queer expressions - and also to the poem in question.

Therefore, Bataille expresses, in the following words, what Auden wrote poetically in his verses: “the whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still” (1986, p 17). *The Platonic Blow* is a poem still misunderstood, in which sex is an important experience and in which the body is its constituent. Maybe a character from one of Marcus Vinicius Rodrigues’s short stories agrees with Auden when saying that

There is something really intimate in the act of having in your mouth, someone else’s body. Lips, hands, cock, ass. Savoring the body of another, their taste, and it is as if we knew more about the person, more than the body, skin, but within, deeper. Taste is the touch transcended (2018, p. 76).¹

The Platonic Blow depicts, then, the poetics of the body itself - rather, is the poetics of *two bodies* aligned in deep intimacy. Auden portrays a relation of otherness driven by desire and accomplished by sex, that only the thick thread of a common desire would allow - and it truly did.

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¹ Há algo de íntimo demais no ato de ter na boca o corpo de outra pessoa. Os lábios, as mãos, o pau, a bunda. Experimenta-se o gosto do outro, o sabor, e é como se soubéssemos mais da pessoa, mais que o corpo, a pele, mais dentro, mas profundo. O paladar é a transcendência do tato.

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Autoria

João Pimentel Santos Santana Coelho é graduando em Letras Vernáculas com Inglês pela Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA). E-mail: joapimentelcoelho@gmail.com; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4328-0159>.