

Writing 'September 1, 1939'

From 'Auden' by Richard Davenport-Hines

'By the end of the month [August] the European war was looming. On his way from California to New York on 28 August he [Auden] wrote again to Mrs Dodds as he and Kallman neared Kansas City; 'There is a radio in this coach so that every hour or so, one has a violent pain in one's stomach as the news comes on. By the time you get this, I suppose, we shall know one way or the other...

'On reaching New York Kallman had a reunion with Norse, with whom he went to Dizzy's Club in the jazz strip on West 52nd Street. 'The dive was the sex addict's quick fix, packed to the rafters with college boys and working-class youths,' Norse recorded. 'Amid the laughter and screaming and ear-splitting jukebox music, it was like an orgy room for the fully-clad'. They recommended it to Auden. On the following evening of 1 September, hours after Germany invaded Poland, Auden went there alone. 'With floppy shoelaces, creased suit and tie, ash-stained, he must have looked out of place,' as Norse has imagined. 'Aware of the age difference and quite shy, he would have selected one of the two unused corner tables in the rear of the bar, which was usually deserted except for those too drunk to stand, from where he could observe boys kissing and groping under the bright lights ... Surely he jotted notes, or even the first stanzas, for it begins with the immediacy of composition in situ.'

His poetic reaction to the imminence of war begins in this way:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street

Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

He spoke of the radio broadcasts that he and Naomi Michison and millions of others had heard:

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

'September 1, 1939' was a poem which Auden later disowned; a line in the eighth verse 'We must love one another or die' seemed to him particularly mendacious, but whether the phrase is a muddling of the importunate demands of lust with the voluntary gift of love, or whether, as the poet Joseph Brodsky suggests, it should be read as meaning, 'We must love one another or kill' the poem is neither contemptible nor insignificant. Its opening stanza is the most famous epitaph on the 1930s; it was the first poem of the Second World War, and less modish or corrupt than it later seemed to Auden.

In his brilliant commentary on the poem, Brodsky stresses that it is pre-eminently about shame, which Auden presents with all-encompassing irony. The setting of the poem affected Auden's tone, for like anyone who is surrounded by people getting drunk faster than himself, he shifted from sympathy with 'faces along the bar' to estrangement and a sense of superiority of 'the sensual man-in-the-street.' The habitués of Dizzy's Club 'groping' one another, in Norse's word, may have suggested to Auden his image of the New York skyline, where 'buildings grope the sky' and are magnificent in their indifference to suffering. Auden's stress on 'the lie of Authority' shows a man who has already repudiated political organisation, and all the deceits of partisan life. The poem concludes, says Brodsky, with 'a self-portrait' of 'a stoic who prays', which is the goal but not yet the definition of the human species.

1944

Auden dropped a stanza from 'September 1, 1939'. The stanza was the one which included the famous line, 'We must love one another or die'. He explained that the line was a lie, for we must die anyway whether or not we love, which some of his critics thought frivolous. 'Perhaps they prefer literature to tell lies; that way it frees itself from responsibility to the world of ethics, where lies have real and painful consequences,' his executor Edward Mendelson reflected later.

1964

During the US presidential election of 1964, when the incumbent Lyndon Johnson was publicly denouncing his opponent as a warmonger while privately planning to obliterate Vietnam by bombing, Johnson's campaign ran a television advertisement which caused such controversy that a still photograph from it was used on the front cover of Time magazine. The advertisement featured 'a little girl counting the petals of a flower, then interrupted her with a stern male voice counting down from ten to zero' when the little girl was abruptly replaced on the screen by a nuclear explosion. This left viewers rather shaken. Before they recovered, they heard Johnson's voice intoning, 'These are the stakes; to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the dark. We must love each other or we must die'. The dark, and possibly the children, as well as Johnson's misquotation, echo Auden's poem.

This was a shockingly offensive incident to which Auden never referred directly, though the degradation of his ideas clearly rankled. 'one cannot let one's name be associated with the shits,' Auden wrote shortly afterwards to Stella Musulin. It was no wonder that after this Auden felt repelled by the poem. He wrote that it was 'the most dishonest poem I have ever written', he told Naomi Mitchison: 'I pray to God that I shall never be memorable like that again.' When he prepared his *Collected Shorter Poems* for publication the following year, he omitted the poem and later gave instructions that it was not to be reprinted in his lifetime.

"Literature," said Ezra Pound, "is news that stays news."

Auden on Bin Laden

By Eric McHenry

Posted Thursday, September 20, 2001, at 8:30 PM PT

Last Wednesday I e-mailed W.H. Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939' to members of my family. Two days later a friend e-mailed it to me, having received it from another friend who was circulating it. On Saturday my mother told me that Scott Simon had read portions of it on NPR. And on Monday my wife, a prep school teacher, saw it lying on the faculty photocopy machine. Tragedy sends people to poetry. "Suffering is exact," Philip Larkin wrote, but the vocabulary of consolation is loaded with abstraction and cliché, as anyone who has tried to write a sympathy note in the past week knows. Naturally, there's a certain comfort in pillowy, familiar phrases "This too shall pass," "Our hearts are with you" but living through a day like Sept. 11, and listening to all the subsequent cant from public figures and TV personalities, can leave people craving language that's as precise as their pain.

What's striking about "September 1, 1939," which Auden wrote in response to Germany's invasion of Poland, is how precisely it matches much of what happened last Tuesday, how weirdly prescient it seems. Of course, that's the point: Zealotry and violence are cyclical "The habit-forming pain,/ Mismanagement and grief:/ We must suffer them all again." But those weren't the lines that brought me to my bookshelf last Wednesday, looking for the poem. The passages that had been playing through my head since I first saw the World Trade Center footage were more concrete and actually seemed more specific to the past week than to the poem's occasion. "Where blind skyscrapers use/ Their full height to proclaim/ The strength of Collective Man," and "Into the ethical life/ The dense commuters come." The poem, which is set in Manhattan, opens with the "unmentionable odour of death/ Offend[ing] the September night," something it could have done only figuratively in 1939, and the poem closes with a candlelight vigil: "May I [...]/ Beleaguered by the same/ Negation and despair,/ Show an affirming flame." Even when Auden is writing explicitly about Hitler, his language could hardly be altered to better fit the hijackers. Borrowing terms from Jungian psychoanalysis, he wonders "What huge imago made/ A psychopathic god." My Muslim friends, whose god is unrecognizable in the murderous theology of Osama Bin Laden, have spent the past week wondering the same thing. Ezra Pound defined poetry as "news that stays news," but even he may not have had this degree of fidelity in mind.

Coincidences aside, "September 1, 1939" stays news because it reveals a little more of itself with each reading. Last Wednesday, it gave me some of the emotional nourishment I had been needing, in the form of concise explanations ("Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return") and bold pronouncements ("There is no such thing as the State/ And

no one exists alone [...]/ We must love one another or die"). By Thursday, though, it had unsettled me again. Those phrases, despite their rhetorical poise, are undermined by Auden's ambivalence and self-contradiction. Auden seems to doubt whether universal love can obtain in a world where "the error bred in the bone/ Of each woman and each man/ Craves what it cannot have,/ Not universal love/ But to be loved alone." And his poem is, as the critic John Fuller points out, "a parade of rhetoric designed to question the function of rhetoric."

A poem, of course, that offered only unambiguous answers to these sorts of questions would neither be news nor stay news. Poetry does justice to life by describing it, not by reducing it to more reasonable dimensions. So all of Auden's doubts and doublings-back only improve the poem as far as John Fuller and I are concerned, anyway. Auden, apparently, decided that its ambiguities couldn't be reconciled with its declamatory tone. Rereading it shortly after its publication, he arrived at the line "We must love one another or die" and "said to myself: 'That's a damned lie! We must die anyway.' So, in the next edition, I altered it to 'We must love one another and die.' This didn't seem to do either, so I cut the stanza. Still no good. The whole poem, I realized, was infected with an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped."

He banished it from subsequent editions of his work, and I'm not sure, frankly, how it finally found its way back into print. I'm thankful it did. Its thematic ambiguity only strengthens the sense that it is the poem for our present pain. When Auden called it "trash which [he was] ashamed to have written," as Edward Mendelson observes, he was taking the poem "far more seriously and taking poetic language far more seriously than his critics ever did." By expressing such disappointment in a poem so great, by attaching such a profound sense of failure to it, Auden kept in play the possibility by no means a certainty that there are sorrows even the most well-chosen words can't reach.

December 1, 2001

Auden's Poem Is Drawing New Attention
By PETER STEINFELS

It begins in a bar, ends with a prayer and, after Sept. 11, was endlessly quoted and reprinted to express grief over what had happened and foreboding about what was to come.

"I sit in one of the dives/On Fifty- second Street/Uncertain and afraid," W. H. Auden, responding to the outbreak of World War II, wrote in his poem "September 1, 1939." In an America that was unaccustomed to being uncertain and afraid, yet was determined, as the poem's last line put it, to "show an affirming flame," many people turned to poetry as something akin to religious ritual. And Auden's stanzas in particular quickly took on a quasi-scriptural status.

That was not enough, however, to shield this 62-year-old poem from the close moral and political scrutiny that words and ideas, as well as immigrants, have been receiving in the glare of the war on terrorism.

"Auden's words are everywhere," wrote the author of a "Letter From New York" in The Times Literary Supplement of London. At least a half-dozen major newspapers reprinted "September 1, 1939" in its entirety. It was read on National Public Radio. It was introduced into hundreds of chat rooms on the Internet. In the Chicago area, the Great Books Foundation and The Chicago Tribune sponsored discussions of it. Students at Stuyvesant High School, four blocks from ground zero in Manhattan, produced a special issue of their school newspaper (which The New York Times distributed to its readers in the metropolitan area) prominently featuring one of the poem's most familiar lines, "We must love one another or die."

Reasons for the poem's resonance are obvious, beginning with the month and day of its title, its New York setting and its evocation of how "the unmentionable odor of death/ Offends the September night." History "has driven a culture mad," the poem states; and although "blind skyscrapers use/Their full height to proclaim/The strength of Collective Man," there is no disguising the fragility of civilization: "Defenseless under the night/Our world in stupor lies."

Many who recently found solace in "September 1, 1939" were aware of the poem's troubled history. They knew, for example, that Auden had declared himself unhappy with the very line now quoted so frequently, "We must love one another or die"; that he had tinkered with it; that he had then, for later editions, yanked out the whole stanza it concluded; and that he had finally renounced the entire poem as "infected with an incurable dishonesty." To the disappointment of admirers, the poem has been omitted from many collections of his work.

Lacking Auden's fuller explanation of this "incurable dishonesty," commentators have identified it with traces of sentimentality, preachiness or smugness that they detect in "September 1, 1939."

But The Times Literary Supplement's "Letter From New York" brought on serious charges of moral and political failure as well. A letter writer in the British journal called the poem "a meretricious piece of work" that, despite "its seductive cadences," should be "consigned to the scrapheap." In particular, he denounced the lines "Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return" as "a ringing apologia for the Third Reich as the product of Versailles."

The reader also found "applause for Soviet Communism" in the poem's later references to "Imperialism's face/And the international wrong." To top things off, he judged the poem to be riddled with "snide remarks about America."

Another letter writer to The Times Literary Supplement pooh-poohed this "perverse reading" of the poem. Auden's references to cycles of violence and "international wrong," this reply maintained, are hardly alibis for Hitler or Stalin but age-old, undeniable truths about the human condition. As for "snide remarks about America," the respondent could find none.

Points well taken, and yet it cannot be denied that Auden, in his 1939 poem, viewed the coming of war through a mixture of conventional psychoanalytic and left-wing sentiments, and viewed America with a similarly conventional antipathy toward mass culture and politics.

Politics, whether democratic or dictatorial, are characterized in his poem as so much windy trash and rubbish. The "dense commuters" who stream into Manhattan's skyscrapers "Repeating their morning vow;/ I will be true to the wife,/ I'll concentrate more on my work" are treated with at least as much condescension as compassion.

One suspects that these characterizations would earn sharp rebukes if expressed in a poem titled "September 11, 2001." More important, would a contemporary version of the 1939 poem be found guilty of what has come to be labeled "moral equivalence"? Was Auden shifting moral responsibility from totalitarian evildoers to past misdeeds by those under attack and to a universal human egotism in which everyone was more or less equally complicit?

Would The New Republic, which first published Auden's poem in October 1939, today cite it in the "Idiocy Watch," the feature where the editors skewer what they consider egregiously softheaded responses to the war against terrorism?

This mini-controversy may say something about the post-September moral, intellectual and political climate. There is a new demand that ideas and language, especially about war and peace but also about religion and moral obligation, be precise and explicit. A pronouncement like "Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return" might once have

earned a passing nod; now it is put under pressure: Is it true? How true? Exactly what is it suggesting in the present circumstances?

In many respects, this heightened scrutiny is healthy. It wrings out sentimentality. It questions conventional wisdom, well-meaning phrases and opinions certified to generate applause.

But that greater scrutiny can also be dangerous and stultifying. It can be applied selectively. It can filter out valuable insights that unfortunately come crusted with clichés or inflated with exaggerations. It can dismiss intuitions that fly beneath the radar of clear and distinct propositions, even perhaps on the wings of a poem's multivalent images.

Were the Americans who seized on Auden's 1939 poem careless readers? Or were they right to find there personal and even historical truths about the nation's trauma that transcended any of the poem's debatable lines? Poetry demands both rigor of intellect and generosity of spirit. So, it seems, do perilous times.

DISASTER CALLS POETRY TO ACTION; AUDEN'S VERSES ARE BACK AT WORK

By Sven Birkerts

I teach two writing courses at Mt. Holyoke College, normally an orderly drill in which I try to supply useful strategies for a series of expressive tasks.

But of course "normally" vaporized this year as soon as the semester began, and I found myself, like every teacher in the country, faced with the question of how to proceed with my course, the premises of my subject, in the face of a collective sadness and unease unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Meeting my creative-writing class last week for the first time since the disaster, I brought in copies of W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939," a poem that's been everywhere in the air these last days. I thought that if my students didn't know it, they should. And as I was reading out the later lines of the opening stanza

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odor of death
Offends the September night.

I felt, I thought I felt, an attentiveness in the room that went beyond the usual open-eyed, if sometimes indiscriminating, receptivity. I had the sense that the words, to paraphrase a line from another Auden poem, were hurting and connecting.

We did not go on, as I'd thought we might, to talk about the poem. Instead, somehow, we got onto the question of the place of poetry—and, by extension, literature—in the face of the unspeakable. Why read or study it? What does it give us? Can words arranged on a page make a difference? Of course, I had to cite T.W. Adorno's famous dictum: "No poetry after Auschwitz." What could that mean?

Expressions around the room were mostly baffled. I wanted to break the question down. Did Adorno mean "no poetry" because we should not write it? Because the writing of poems celebrated the human in ways that had become unconscionable? Or because the assertion of purpose and inner coherence that poetry necessarily represents was somehow wrong, no longer viable? Or did Adorno mean "no poetry" because we could not? Because an extreme of barbarism had revealed language to be inadequate, limited in what it could represent? Because barbarism had thus undermined the core assumption of the enterprise? But why single out poetry? Everything is ultimately limited. One might as well mark the enormity of moral devastation by insisting on anything.

Which becomes, of course, a paper argument, carried on in the face of human contrariness, the biological persistence that will rebuild the world no matter how many times it's torn apart. The argument about the writing and reading of poetry is also finally academic. No poetry after Auschwitz. Except that there was and there is: Akhmatova, Milosz, Bishop, Brodsky, Heaney, Lowell, Walcott, Plath, Herbert and thousands of others. Poetry has flourished since the time of the death camps, and not because it has looked away. It hasn't.

Problem solved. Except, alas, that it continued to vex, as it must now that the world has been torn apart again. Must, for asking the question is a way of addressing the pain, the very real sense of hopelessness that floods me over and over throughout the day. What is the place, the purpose, of poetry? I was asking it again that afternoon as I blazed my way east on the Mass Pike, lost in a thought fugue rare even for me, who am given to thought fugues on these long commutes. And by the time I reached the outskirts of Boston, I had a kind of answer.

It took a while to get there. My first thought, contra Adorno, was that disaster requires poetry precisely because of the implied perspective it all literature assumes: the seriousness and ongoing point of all things, however fragile the web of meaning may seem at times; and because poetry springs directly from our primal need and capacity for communication. As I'd just declaimed to my class from Auden:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages

But then I had another, less expected idea. To understand the use of poetry, its particular importance in times like this, I realized, we need to understand the nature of trauma. This is a subject for deep study, of course, but a few generalizations are possible. To begin with, catastrophic trauma shatters norms; it upsets, in a way that feels permanent, the balance of things. It overwhelms our psychic system, melting down the usual response mechanisms whereby experiences are organized and stored as the stuff of memory. Further, this trauma creates for itself a kind of perpetual present. What is post-traumatic stress disorder but the psyche's inability to banish hurt to the past? In the sufferer—and we are now all to some degree sufferers—the pain stays alive, there to be activated at any moment. The plane keeps slicing into the building, each time fresh; it doesn't stop. We don't even need to see the loop any more.

And this, I thought, is where poetry comes in. Poetry does not, with its meanings and messages, defeat trauma; it does not argue it away with its countervailing sense of purpose. Nothing so simple: Poetry works on a deeper level. Because it mobilizes such a

concentration of devices, such an intensification of language via rhythm, syntax, image and metaphor; reading it the best of it can create another, very different kind of perpetual present, an awareness that can be as ongoing in the soul as the stop-time of trauma.

For poetry is the reverse of the terrorist act, its antithesis just as the terrorist act is the complete negation of the spirit of poetry. We read poetry because we need something to hold against horror, something to place alongside it that is equally persistent. Not because poetry overturns or disarms horror, but because it helps restore the delicate inner balance we call sanity.

And when this balance, this instinctive sense of moral proportion, is threatened as it is now we need poetry in the worst way. Shakespeare asked: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" A rhetorical question. He knew. As did Auden, who in that most sustaining poem, with a modesty that seems to me just slightly disingenuous, wrote:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Auden would not allow that poem to be reprinted in his *Collected Poems*, arguing that "We must love one another or die" was misleading, a false choice. I've always wondered where this sudden literalism came from, this misplaced sense of scruple. It's his best line.

This piece ran in the *New York Observer* on Monday, October 1, 2001