

Eric McHenry: Auden on Bin Laden

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.

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