Peter Levine: On "September 1, 1939"

The poem begins, ?I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-second street. ?? That would be a gay bar, probably the Dizzy Club, to which Auden had been introduced by his American lover Chester Kallman. But ?I? implies that the writer sits alone. There?s a gay couple in stanza 6, Nijinksy and Diaghilev, who are introduced in contrast to the ?normal heart.? Auden is asking whether his own love is ?normal??and also whether human love (in general) is a source of evil or a solution to it.

Kallman and a few others would recognize this particular bar, and maybe they knew or could imagine what Auden really did on the evening when Hitler invaded Poland. In that sense, the poem was a private communication. But it was destined for The New Republic and written in an accessible style about events in the world. Thus it was also an effort to communicate to a public of strangers. Even if Auden?s original readers missed the reference to a gay bar, they would know what a ?dive? is. It?s a place for solitary drinking or for secretive, sometimes shameful encounters. In that sense, it is private: a place one goes not to be seen. At the same time, it?s public in that it?s no one?s home and anyone can walk in: in fact, the British might call it a public house (a ?pub?). Throughout the poem, Auden wants us to consider the relationship between private and public.

A related question is the role of lyric poetry, which can be private, subtle, and confessional, or transparent, impersonal, and political?or both. Auden later repudiated ?September 1, 1939,? along with four other political poems, requiring that a note be added whenever they were anthologized: ?Mr. W. H. Auden considers these five poems to be trash which he is ashamed to have written.? I think that?s because he later decided that the explicit, hortatory, public slogans of these poems (for instance, ?We must love one another or die?) were false to his own experience. But to communicate effectively in the public sphere requires a degree of simplification and even falsification.

The war, Auden observes, ?obsess[es] our private lives? and brings ?the unmistakable odor of death.? Here the causal arrow points from a vast public act of the German state toward the private lives of men sitting at a Midtown bar. In subsequent stanzas, Auden will reverse the direction, exploring how private desires and sins influence public evils. The whole poem alludes to Yeats? ?Easter, 1916,? in which a major theme is the power of heroic political acts to erase petty human sins and entanglements (?the casual comedy?). Yeats even forgives ?A drunken, vainglorious lout? who ?had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart,? because that man was a martyr in the Irish uprising. But the events of September, 1939 are vicious rather than heroic, and they mirror?rather than erase?the private sins of the ?sensual man-in-the-street.?

Auden pictures himself in the dive when the first day of World War II was ending in Europe, which is 6-8 hours ahead of New York. I mention the time lag because he views that infamous day in global perspective: ?Waves of anger and fear/ Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth.? As he sits at the bar, Poland is literally dark because night has fallen there; it is also figuratively blackened by the Nazis? assault.
The second stanza introduces an explanation for the day’s events, the kind of story that accurate scholarship might provide. Martin Luther’s ideas ultimately drove a whole culture mad, until a child growing up in Linz?Adolf Hitler?inherited a fundamental worldview (an ?imago,? in Jungian jargon) that turned him into a ?psychopathic god.? I do not know what precise intellectual history Auden has in mind. Perhaps he believes that Martin Luther’s antisemitism was the root of modern German antisemitism, or perhaps he is thinking of another aspect of Luther’s thought, such as his deference to ?princes.? It doesn?t matter much, because what the poem introduces here is a general style of analysis: grand political events are traced to the high, theoretical concepts of long-dead authors. It?s a style that Auden himself used in his prose writing and that his friends, like Hannah Arendt, practiced with great sophistication.

So maybe we are to imagine Auden brooding over German intellectual history at Dizzy’s on Sept. 1. But the last four lines of the stanza offer a completely different explanation:

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

No logical connective links this quatrain to the previous seven lines: no ?and,? ?but,? or ?on the other hand??just a colon. So it?s ambiguous whether the fancy intellectual explanation of Hitler’s ideas is wrong and ?the public? is right, or whether both are saying the same thing. This quatrain is problematic because it suggests that the wrong of invading Poland is somehow justified by sins the aggressors had sustained. Is that a reference to Versailles? To Hitler’s personal childhood traumas? To the plight of the German working class? An alternative reading might be that those wronged by Hitler will inevitably strike back later, perpetuating the tragic cycle. In any case, the broader argument is that people are cruel to each other, and the massive cruelty of Blitzkrieg is just a manifestation of our everyday sin.

The third stanza suddenly takes us back to ancient Greece, perhaps enacting the way that an educated person would turn from one topic to another over a solitary alcoholic drink on a terrible night. It begins:

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave ...

Thucydides was unjustly exiled from democratic Athens for a military failure, at which he point he wrote his great history of the Peloponnesian War that contains Pericles? paean to democracy (the strongest pro-democratic statement of ancient times). Thucydides probably
presents Pericles? speech ironically. He implies that it is propaganda; in fact, self-interest explains all politics. Thucydides, Auden thinks, ?analyzed all in his book ? / The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief.?

In stanza 4, we are back in New York, where ?blind skyscrapers? reach into the ?neutral air.? One sense of ?neutral? may be political: the United States is neutral in the war, hence at peace, but also complicit because we do nothing to stop Hitler. Auden is a citizen of a combatant nation who is guiltily safe in neutral Manhattan. Neutrality had been a characteristic failure of the ?low dishonest decade? that Auden invoked in the first stanza. The Western democracies chose to be neutral in the Spanish Civil War, which made them complicit to fascist rule. Most of New York?s ?blind skyscrapers? house private enterprises, ostensibly free and private, but Auden compares them to the grandiose structures of Berlin and Moscow. New York?s buildings, too, ?use / their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man.? The ideology that drives them is presumably ?imperialism,? a mirror for the ideologies of Europe.

With stanza 5, we return again to the bar, where the men ?cling to their average day,? trying to ignore the world-altering events of Sept. 1, 1939. The homelike decorations of a ?dive? are always fake, but never more so than on a day when everyone should face history and its evils:

All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Stanza 6 pulls the public and the private together. The propaganda of political leaders (?the windiest militant trash / Important persons shout?) is no different from the passionate exclamations of lovers in troubled affairs. ?Mad,? histrionic, brilliant (and gay) lovers like Nijinsky are really no different from everyone else. The root cause is always the same:

For 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.

Each human beings wants the benefits of romance (sex, and the exclusive concern of another person) without the ethical requirements of loving back and loving everyone.

Stanza 7 depicts ?dense commuters? coming out of the ?conservative dark? (the bedroom?
By now, we need to know where Auden stands, what he intends to do, and what he asks of us. Stanza 8 explains that he will describe both private sin and public tyranny accurately and critically and will call on us to be better to one another:

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 later hated the last of these lines. As he noted, it’s false, since we will die even if we do love one another. It’s also false that Auden had nothing but a voice; he had a vote, money, the ability to carry a gun. In any case, it’s perilous to insert into a modern, lyric poem such bold, declarative propositions as “There is no such thing as the State” or “We must love one another or die.” What gives Mr. Auden the license to say such things?

In the eighth and final stanza, he pledges to “show an affirming flame” to the other “Ironic points of light” that are “dotted everywhere” across the world. I presume “Ironic” means detached from mass beliefs and political agendas. The beleaguered “Just” who exchange messages like wireless operators are independent human beings, committed to truth and love despite “Negation and despair.” But the signals that Auden transmits into that ether are pronouncements that he does not actually believe, such as “We must love one another or die.” When Lyndon Johnson’s campaign borrowed that phrase for his “Daisy” TV commercial in 1964, when George H.W. Bush quoted “points of light” in his 1988 Republican Convention speech, and when at least six newspapers printed the whole poem right after Sept. 11, 2001, they demonstrated that Auden had come close to sloganeering.

That is the critique—one that Auden himself made very strongly in later years. But here is the defense: Auden wrote, “We must love one another or die” not because it expressed the most accurate moral or social theory. He said it because he wanted to grab the stranger who read his verse and communicate a disinterested, ethical love as the world was engulfed by hatred.
It was an impartial love that extended to anyone, Jew or German, gay or straight, who was composed of Eros and of dust. To put that down on paper took courage, and maybe the right response is assent.