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Perspective | Auden's foreboding poem 'September 1, 1939,' captures today's mood, too

His words have the power to connect us to the moral urgency of the day and challenge us to be an 'affirming flame'

By Peter Balakian

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Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine parallels Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in ways that aren't small. A dictator's claim to Lebensraum started with Sudetenland and Austria and then went cancerously to Poland. From there, we know what happened.

W.H. Auden could not have foreseen the extent of the horror to come when he wrote "[September 1, 1939](#)" in the days following the Nazi invasion. Who knew then that Hitler's move would lead to the deaths of over 75 million people, genocidal concentration camps and the ruin of Europe in the ensuing six years? Still, Auden's poem brings the reader into one man's fear as he freezes that fateful moment, and in the compressed, telescopic language that only poetry can create, the poet's feeling that the world is spinning into disaster becomes the reader's own.

"September 1, 1939," opens with the news that Hitler has invaded Poland.

*I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade
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.*

The poem does what powerful poems can do: It fuses eloquent language with arresting images in clipped, rhythmic phrases. Auden's terse lines are in iambic trimeter and handled with a deftness that makes for the memorable phrases that get stuck in the ear, always a passage to the brain. It's no surprise that this poem has been quoted so much over the years. Published in the New Republic six weeks after it was written, it has been anthologized frequently and cited by writers, scholars and readers, including President Lyndon B. Johnson during his 1964 campaign. It's one of those poems that has entered the popular imagination—rare for poems in our time. It came to prominence again after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and was read on NPR. When I watched Russian tanks on TV entering Ukraine and heard the sounds of explosions reported by CNN's Matthew Chance around 11 on Wednesday evening, I went to my library and got out Auden's poem.

What can poems give one at such a moment?



The sun sets in central Kyiv, Ukraine, on Feb. 28. (Emilio Morenatti/AP)

Although it opens with deep personal emotion, “September 1, 1939,” moves to the political realm in three-beat lines that turn on a dime to capture the megalomania of the dictator. Hitler, Putin. Fill in the blank: “What huge imago made/A psychopathic god.”

The language and rhythmic torque call forth the history of an idea: “Exiled Thucydides knew/All that a speech can say/About Democracy/And what dictators do.”

Amid the news of violence and portent of disaster, Auden watches the quotidian world go on: “Faces along the bar/Cling to their average day:/The lights must never go out,/The music must always play.” And, when the day comes “From the conservative dark/Into the ethical life/The dense commuters come,/Repeating their morning vows;/“I will be true to the wife,/I’ll concentrate more on my work.”

Auden captures the unbearable contradiction between the necessity of going on as usual while being tugged by the urgency of catastrophe elsewhere. The tension is not unlike what many Americans and people around the world feel as Putin unleashes violence on Ukraine.

As a good ironist, the poet acknowledges his limitations—perhaps the limitations of all art—when he confesses “All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie.” But the poem does have the power to connect us to the moral urgency of a historical moment. Auden’s lines make readers feel part of the bigger whole, a collective sense of the species, even as things seem to be sliding out of control.

Auden found the last line of the penultimate stanza didactic and so redacted it in his later revision, but it remains the most famous line of the poem, a kind of secular spiritual epigram: “We must love one another or die.”

The final stanza is an appeal to resistance and the power of human community:

*Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.*

In these past few days, the Ukrainians’ resistance to Putin’s megalomaniacal and criminal acts of aggression has made urgent a question Auden’s poem implicitly asks: Who are we and what are our responsibilities to our fellow humans in times of violence and war? The final image also poses a question: What is an “affirming flame”? If poems, like all literary forms, are what Kenneth Burke called “equipment for living,” then “September 1, 1939,” challenges all of us to find a way to be an affirming flame in the face of the “unmentionable odour of death” that offends our February night.

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