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W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" and the Evocation of War

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ABSTRACT

W. H. Auden uses "September 1, 1939" as a site to raise his voice against all contemporary odds. The poem is not a mere account of German invasion of Poland and other historical incidents of war but a chronicle of social depravations and spiritual barrenness of the decade of 1930s. It is a complicated poem, where Auden, perhaps unconsciously, tests his own attitudes. On the one hand, he considers that the piteous existence of modern life and the immobilization of cultural progress are without panacea. On the other, he eschews and disregards the poem's existence by calling it a mere 'trash'.

Keywords: Auden; panacea; war; 1930s; ideology

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing, wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing, there is yet faith
But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting. ("East Coker" 124-27)

T. S. Eliot's oft-repeated passage voices the true disease of the modern age. The age seems to have no panacea, as Eliot presumes by ironically stating: "the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" (129). The Thirties' poets were the admirer of Eliot, and a sense of rapport in the thought process was observed in their poetics. The mature poets writing during and after the First World War somehow endured the pain of civil vacuum. But its impact on the minds of teenagers was intense and complicated. Auden was a boy of eleven when WWI ended. For such a young age, the fragmented scenario caused by the War was heavy on him; one had to realize the state of horror and dejection that the contemporary people had been suffering from. It is understandable that a deep gloom circled modern society. However, almost all important modern poets of the 1920s, except for a few exceptions in Eliot, tried to soften the darkness. Auden's modernist predecessors such as Yeats, Lawrence or Pound tried to portray an image of unreachable nirvana¹; in that they could not but romanticize the disturbed reality. Denouncing the practice, W. H. Auden portrayed an image of ruined earth and decayed civilization in wry manner in the 1930s.

From the time of WWI a considerable shift in poetry was found. The First World War poets were directly influenced by the War. Later, canonical authors like Eliot delved deep into modern human psyche and represented spiritual desiccation. Like Eliot, Auden, a representative of the following decade, too realized the incoherence of modern waste land. Question may arise what is new in the Thirties? The poets of 1930s indulged in direct influence of socio-political life. Their poems, as a result of that, became more colloquial and direct to contemporary attitudes. Writing about the emerging poets of the Thirties, Michael Alexander tersely puts: "They

had missed the war and had no jobs to lose. Guilty about the privilege, the idea of equality, even of revolution, appealed" (366). Alexander seems to highlight the inability and regret one may have in failing to reciprocate the pain from the 1930s. Society was lopsided; culture was questioned; peace was nowhere; emptiness was all around; and the failure to rescue the loss was felt deep inside.

As an eminent voice of bourgeois England, Auden depicted the unspoken rituals, the monotony of regular life and household chores of a fallen generation. By calling Auden's poetry "fundamentally romantic," R. G. Cox highlighted his sensitiveness which "registered the changing moods and opinion of his time" (377). His political bend for Marxist Communism ceased with his realization of totalitarian regimes and stagnant modern progress in about 1937. The disillusioned Auden, soon after this epiphany, decided to begin life anew in America and would shift to Christianity later on. Auden's departure from England in 1938, as Joseph Brodsky states, was enormously controversial:

His departure caused considerable uproar at home; he was charged with desertion, with abandoning his country in a time of peril . . . And the bulk of his accusers were precisely those who saw no peril coming: the left, the right, the pacifists, etc. What's more, his decision to move to the United States had very little to do with world politics: the reasons of the move were of a more private nature. ("On 'September 1, 1939' by W. H. Auden")

Written on the advent of World War II "September 1, 1939" is a layered chronicle of despair and desolation of the decade of 1930s. The poem can be read as a socio-political saga, as a literary piece that connects the contemporary sensibilities, as a moral obligation to develop human consciousness, and as a critique of Hitler's invasion of Poland and its aftermath. The fractioned and "dishonest" ("September 1, 1939" 5) decade of 1930s saw an unfortunate breakage of human emotion. The effect of the First World War was still in the air; the impact of modernist sensibilities of fragmentation and aloofness was still in vogue. It was in this context Auden's poetry reflects the bitter truth of war, constantly questioning human values and misery. The meaning of life in the late thirties became so topsy-turvy and purposeless that even the seminal thinkers tended to alter their belief. Perhaps, this is why Auden eschewed and disregarded the poem's existence later in his life by stating it a mere 'trash'.

However, Auden made "September 1, 1939" his arsenal to penetrate his voice against all odds. As a plain and objective public-life reporter Auden begins his poem with both British and American people in mind. The Fifty-second Street dive offers no certitude to the speaker; instead, it breeds confusion. The poet-persona is "uncertain" of modern life and "afraid" (3) of the future. The "clever hopes" (4) of laid-back appeased Europeans have come to an end with the awful emergence of Hitler's advancement and the sunken social attitudes. The news of the vicious deeds is broadcasted everywhere via different media and earns an alarming impact on "private lives" (9). However, the concluding lines of the first stanza show an emotional outburst of Auden. Looking back from foreign shore, he envisages an inevitable demise of human culture because of the infidelity of 1930s.

In the succeeding stanza, Auden reminisces how the Germans became victimized by Russia. His several visits to their land unearth the socio-economic plunder done by the Russian war-mongers. As German fought against the Russians "principally from fear of the growing industrial and military strength of their tyrannical neighbour Russia" (Paul Johnson 104), Auden opines that Hitler's early experiences as a German soldier is the very reason of his later violence. Now this "psychopathic god" ("September 1, 1939" 18), through his splurge, materialises the same evil occurred in the past.

Auden's allusion to Thucydides brings forth the reference to *Peloponnesian War* fought out of ignorance between Athens and Sparta. In his book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, besides giving speeches such as the one that "can say about democracy" ("September 1, 1939" 2-3), describes the total demolition of classical Greece. By alluding Thucydides Auden anticipates the inevitable demise of human civilization, and by adding the adjective "exiled" (23), Auden repeats his own state of alienation and in turn spiritual expatriation of modern human beings. He adds that people, forgetting the past, lives in a false hope in "elderly rubbish" (27).

Auden here, as if taking the responsibility of Thucydides sans any further promise, predicts the human gloom commenced much earlier, and people have yet not learnt.

Coming back to the present, the poet-speaker, a little later in the fourth stanza, notices that common people has lost their reason and insight. They are ignorant of the deceit that every nation plays. People have become indifferent before the “international wrong” (44). The stagnancy of mankind including the poet himself pinpoints their stubborn inactivity and flaw. Perhaps, the most direct reference to the war scenario appears in the following stanza, where Auden craftily uses light and darkness metaphor. Under the steady and mechanical light of the bar, the pub-goers find some seclusion bereft of cruel incidents happening outside. Temporal cheers makes them forget of broader human affliction and provides them some concealment—a long-desired concealment from not being “lost in a haunted wood” (53), where they, like the Children, are in agony and conflict.

According to some commentators, stanza six reveals the central argument of the poem. Here the poet asks us to consider Christian *Agape* over narrow *Eros*, universal love over self-centred fulfillment. The next stanza is what Brodsky aptly delineates: “On the whole the stanza depicts “a dispirited mechanical existence where ‘governors’ are not in any way superior to the governed and neither are able to escape from the enveloping gloom they have spun for themselves” (*Less Than One: Selected Essays*). The piteous existence of modern life, the monotony of uneventful incidents, and the immobilization of cultural progress are ubiquitous in Auden’s poems without any panacea. Auden writes:

. . . helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb? (“September 1, 1939” 73-77)

In the penultimate stanza, we notice a transformation in Auden’s voice—here first person narration comes into action. But, his detachment is dominating; and he does not deviate from his objectivity even towards the end of the poem. However, the true beauty of Auden’s poetry lies in its ‘diagnostic strength’, as Spender once mentioned, but ‘not in remedy’ (“Oxford to Communism” 254). Auden never intends to offer amendments to “the folded lies” (“September 1, 1939” 79):

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. . . . (78-83)

He aims at interpreting the follies of society and developing awareness, not to cure its odds and ills. “September 1, 1939” ends in the penultimate stanza; the concluding one seems to serve its epilogue.

Auden’s sarcasm is bitter, yet wholesome. His insight on war is understandable. He has an envious display of objectivity with which his writing gets a fresh dimension. His employment of technical images reflects the contemporary upheavals by air-raids, guns and cannons. Perhaps, T. S. Eliot envisaged such practices by the Thirties’ poets. In similar tone, if not the exact, the concluding lines of “The Hollow Men” (1925) anticipated Auden’s perspective by painting mankind’s doom:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. (95-98)

“September 1, 1939” is, thus, not a mere account of German invasion of Poland and other historical incidents of war but also a chronicle of social deprivations and spiritual barrenness of the decade of 1930s. Here the poet critiques modern entrapment, indifference and ambivalence. Still, what gives Auden’s poetry certain eloquence is his employment of wit with colloquial phrases and wisdom. Auden has never been a preacher; he is a wry commenter upon society and its progress. His political ideology—though fluctuating and transient—comes from the socio-cultural stances he chooses:

There is nothing of random observation in Auden’s method, no hapless recording of social ephemera. What we are given are synecdochic details, clues by which to read society’s ills. Auden, in common with many of his generation, had no doubt about its malaise. One manifestation of this was the Great War. (John Lucas 156).

Note:

1. Nirvana: Though in Buddhism nirvana stands for the state of peace and happiness, which can only be achieved through the extinction of all personal desires, here in this context it refers to an ideal place, a paradise, which is quite unreachable in the contemporary scenario.

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