

Selected Poems

reviewed by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

In Review



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W. H. Auden; Edward Mendelson, ed.
Vintage

A meteor from the universe of Wystan Hugh Auden flashed into the atmosphere of American culture in 1994 when “Funeral Blues,” a poem written in 1936, was recited

in a eulogy scene in the movie *Three Weddings and a Funeral*. Soon pamphlets of the poem appeared for sale at bookstore checkout counters: “He was my North, my South, my East and West, / My working week and my Sunday rest, / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song / I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.” This example of Auden’s “light verse” (which he once defined as “poetry written by poets democratically in tune with their audience in straightforward language”) marches along in rhyme from a creative vantage point some distance from the depth of grief.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Auden’s birth in York, England. This volume of poems, edited and annotated by the poet’s literary executor, commemorates the occasion. An introductory essay provides the expected orientation and entryway into the poems; notes at the end shed light on the puzzles and knots in Auden’s work. On the back cover of the book, the editors draw attention to another recent occasion when an Auden poem reached a wide American audience.

“September 1, 1939,” written at the beginning of World War II, was discovered and read after the 9/11 attacks: “The unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night / . . . Defenceless under the night / Our world in stupor lies.” The poem ends with the poet struggling for a principled platform on which to stand against the nihilism of war: “May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame.” This “affirming flame” can be found throughout Auden’s work—instances of the Christian habits of praise and thanksgiving.

Inscribed on Auden’s memorial in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey are lines from another 1939 poem, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”: “In the prison of our days / Teach the free man how to praise.” This Christian note, ringing out in praise of Yeats, an unorthodox believer at best, follows the gathering motion of the church in its naming, noticing and blessing other sons and daughters of earth. Good and charitable words spoken about our fellow human beings reflect gospel words revealed to each one of us. Vocal patterns of praise and occasional encomiums well up from those trained and tuned to Christian revelation, as Auden must have been.

Poems written at the end of Auden’s life—he died in Vienna in 1973—reveal the great poet gladly naming his own heroes as he nears his final rest. “A Thanksgiving” is a brief autobiographical poem that begins: “When pre-pubescent I felt / that

moorland and woodlands were sacred: / people seemed rather profane." The poem continues with a meditation on world events and timeless authors: "Finally, hair-raising things / that Hitler and Stalin were doing / forced me to think about God. / Why was I sure they were wrong? / Wild *Kierkegaard*, *Williams* and *Lewis*/ guided me back to belief." The note in the back of the book pins down this trio as Søren, Charles and C. S.

Theologically oriented readers will look in vain in this volume for poems such as "Sabbath," "Luther" (first published in the *Christian Century*) and "Friday's Child" (in memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer). They will find these, along with all the other poems that Auden wished to remain in print, in the full volume of his collected poems (Vintage, 1991), also edited by Edward Mendelson.