

Praying the hours with W. H. Auden

The poet's *Horae Canonicae* sequence is an underappreciated spiritual classic.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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(Century illustration)

In 1955, W. H. Auden published *The Shield of Achilles*. The poetry collection includes a lengthy sequence of poems that I would rate high among the spiritual and devotional classics of the 20th century but which still receive nothing like the attention they deserve. I am delighted that my Baylor University colleague Alan

Jacobs has produced a splendid new edition of that book (from Princeton University Press), with an invaluable introduction and scholarly commentary.

The sequence is titled *Horae Canonicae*, because its seven poems follow the canonical hours of the monastic day. They were originally published separately between 1949 and 1954. It's difficult to summarize these poems, not least because they are so richly allusive and theologically suggestive: imagine trying to offer a plot summary of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Reasons of space and copyright prevent me from offering extended quotations here. I can only beg you to turn to the original text and lose yourself in Auden's words.

Auden was drawn to Christian faith partly through his interactions with poet Charles Williams, of Inklings fame, and he began to identify publicly as a Christian in 1941. For some years he understood the faith strictly as an internal matter. Gradually, as he encountered the work of Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr, he acknowledged the need to relate faith to social life and daily interactions, all in the context of a sinful and fallen world.

By 1948 Auden was living on the Italian island of Ischia, which provides the fishing village setting of the poems. Throughout these years, he was acutely aware of the many threats to civilization and to humanity itself, from the seductive force of totalitarian ideologies and from the permanent prospect of nuclear annihilation (the first hydrogen bomb was tested in 1952). *Horae Canonicae* is written almost literally under the shadow of an imminent final judgment, of crisis.

In one sense, the day in which the poems' successive hours fall is that of the crucifixion, of the historic Good Friday. The sequence opens with the phrase "Immolatus vicerit" ("sacrificed, he will be victorious") from the sixth-century Latin hymn "Pange, lingua, gloriosi proelium certaminis." But Auden's poems also follow the daily lives of individuals, as they pursue their functions and activities and in so doing shape their identities. The crucifixion is more than a backdrop, it is the ever-present reality.

The first poem is "Prime," my personal favorite, which describes the confused and inchoate moment of waking as a primordial Adam at the moment of creation. Gradually we assume identity and consciousness—but that is also the moment of the Fall, in which paradise is lost. Much of the cycle can be read as a meditation on the Fall, which gives us civilization but in an imperfect form. Although we have a city, it

is “a lying, self-made city.” (That recurring “city” language suggests the strong continuing influence of Williams.)

In “Terce,” we go forth into that city as we begin to engage with the day, and also of course with The Day, the perpetual Good Friday. Initially our identities and roles are fluid—“At this hour we all might be anyone”—but the day will be dominated by three individuals who personify the components of that civilized life: the hangman (Justice), the judge (Law), and the poet (Truth). Even so, the prospects of the day in this village seem fair, and we all hope that by sundown there will be a sacrifice, and only then “we shall have had a good Friday.”

At one level, “Sext” concerns the expertise and authority on which civilization is built and which have permitted us to rise from a savage state. We no longer have to contend with a squalid existence “tethered for life to some hut village, afraid of the local snake / or the local ford demon.” But that civilization is also the perpetrator of this execution, when we “worship The Prince of this world . . . at this noon, on this hill, / in the occasion of this dying.” It is those same authorities and experts who have commanded the death, on which we look back in “Nones.” By this point, the victim’s shed blood covers the grass, and the darkness has passed away, so that we can achieve a kind of clarity. However hard we deny our involvement, we are deceiving ourselves: “It was a monster with one red eye, / A crowd that saw him die, not I.”

If a Christian vision is indeed offered, it can be understood in very different ways, and some of the most natural and tempting are also heretical. “Vespers” offers a theme long cherished by Auden, which is the conflict between the utopian and the arcadian—between one who looks forward to an idealized future and another who is wholly devoted to a primeval past, to Eden. But however irreconcilable our differences seem to be, we both recognize one fundamental shared reality: that “without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.”

“Compline” presents a prayerful and contrite view back at this day both so commonplace and so unique. He hopes fervently for a time of salvation and a realized kingdom of heaven:

That we, too, may come to the picnic
With nothing to hide, join the dance

As it moves in perichoresis,
Turns about the abiding tree.

His day ends in the comprehensive blessing of “Lauds”—but as we know, he will wake again, as the cycle begins afresh.

Horae Canonicae is a resounding accomplishment of modern Christian literature. It also reminds us that Auden should be contextualized alongside those Inklings who have become such beloved fixtures of Christian culture.