Ernest Hilbert: On "September 1, 1939"

The most enduring and popular line from "September 1st, 1939" (the day Hitler's panzers jumped the border into Poland, effectively sparking the Second World War)"We must love one another or die"?was thought unsuitable by Auden because, strictly speaking, it isn't true. It was perfectly timed, in an historical sense, on the eve of the most destructive war in history, but, as Auden later lamented, not a word of poetry could have prevented the horrors of the Second World War. Of course, great poetry is often at once true and a bit of a reassuring fib. He changed the line to "we must love one another and die" because love cannot avert—even if it may forestall?death (though Dante Alighieri and possibly even Dylan Thomas might dispute that, and John Donne and Christina Rossetti suggest it a bit harsh). He then realized how unlovely the line had become once relieved of its original rhetorical punch, so he eliminated it altogether. It was only much later, when assembling a selected poems, that he was persuaded by friends to reinstate the line.

Publication Status:
Original Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:
W. H. Auden [2]

Review Process:
Single Review

Author:
Ernest Hilbert [3]

Poem:
September 1, 1939 [4]

Source URL: http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/ernest-hilbert-september-1-1939

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