

Advent 2009

*W.H Auden: "For the Time Being; A Christmas Oratorio"
Sunday, November 29, 2009*

ADVENT

I

Chorus

Darkness and snow descend;
The clock on the mantelpiece
Has nothing to recommend,
Nor does the face in the glass
Appear nobler than our own
As darkness and snow descend
On all personality.
Huge crowds mumble—"Alas,
Our angers do not increase,
Love is not what she used to be;"
Portly Caesar yawns—"I know;"
He falls asleep on his throne,
They shuffle off through the snow:
Darkness and snow descend.

Semi-Chorus

Can great Hercules keep his
Extraordinary promise
To reinvigorate the Empire?
Utterly lost, he cannot
Even locate his task but
Stands in some decaying orchard
Or the irregular shadow
Of a ruined temple, aware of
Being watched from the horrid mountains
By fanatical eyes yet
Seeing no one at all, only hearing
The silence softly broken
By the poisonous rustle
Of famishing Arachne.

Chorus

Winter completes an age
With its thorough levelling;
Heaven's tourbillions of rage
Abolish the watchman's tower
And delete the cedar grove.
As winter completes an age,
The eyes huddle like cattle, doubt

Seeps into tile pores and power
Ebbs from the heavy signet ring;
The prophet's lantern is out
And gone the boundary stone
Cold the heart and cold the stove,
Ice condenses on the bone:
Winter completes an age.

Semi-chorus

Outside the civil garden
Of every day of love there
Crouches a wild passion
 To destroy and be destroyed.
O who to boast their power
Have challenged it to charge? Like
Wheat our souls are sifted
 And cast into the void.

Chorus

The evil and armed draw near
The weather smells of their hate
And the houses smell of our fear;
Death has opened his white eye
And the black hole calls the thief
As the evil and armed draw near,
Ravens alight on the wall,
Our plans have all gone awry
The rains will arrive too late,
Our resourceful general
Fell down dead as he drank
And his horses died of grief,
Our navy sailed away and sank;
The evil and armed draw near.

II

Narrator

If, on account of the political situation,
There are quite a number of homes without roofs, and men
Lying about in the countryside neither drunk nor asleep,
If all sailings have been cancelled till further notice,
If it's unwise now to say much in letters, and if,
Under the subnormal temperatures prevailing,
The two sexes are at present the weak and the strong,
That is not at all unusual for this time of year.
If that were all we should know how to manage. Flood, fire,
The desiccation of grasslands, restraint of princes,

Piracy on the high seas, physical pain and fiscal grief,
These after all are our familiar tribulations,
And we have been through them all before, many, many times.
As events which belong to the natural world where
The occupation of space is the real and final fact
And time turns round itself in an obedient circle,
They occur again and again but only to pass
Again and again into their formal opposites,
From sword to ploughshare, coffin to cradle, war to work,
So that, taking the bad with the good, the pattern composed
By the ten thousand odd things that can possibly happen
Is permanent in a general average way.
Till lately we knew of no other, and between us we seemed
To have what it took—the adrenal courage of the tiger,
The chameleon's discretion, the modesty of the doe,
Or the fern's devotion to spatial necessity:
To practise one's peculiar civic virtue was not
So impossible after all; to cut our losses
And bury our dead was really quite easy: That was why
We were always able to say: "We are children of God,
And our Father has never forsaken His people."
But then we were children: That was a moment ago,
Before an outrageous novelty had been introduced
Into our lives. Why were we never warned? Perhaps we were.

Perhaps that mysterious noise at the back of the brain
We noticed on certain occasions—sitting alone
In the waiting room of the country junction, looking
Up at the toilet window—was not indigestion
But this Horror starting already to scratch Its way in?
Just how, just when It succeeded we shall never know:
We can only say that now It is there and that nothing
We learnt before It was there is now of the slightest use,
For nothing like It has happened before. It's as if
We had left our house for five minutes to nail a letter,
And during that time the living room had hanged places
With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace;
It's as if, waking up with a start, we discovered
Ourselves stretched out flat on the floor, watching our shadow
Sleepily stretching itself at the window. I
That the world of space where events re—occur is still there,
Only now it's no longer real; the real one's nowhere
Where time never moves and nothing can ever happen:
I mean that although there's a person we know all about
Still bearing our name and loving himself as before,
That person has become a fiction; our true existence

Is decided by no one and has no importance to love.
That is why we despair; that is why we would welcome
The nursery bogey or the winecellar ghost, why even
The violent howling of winter and war has become
Like a juke-box tune that we dare not stop. We are afraid
Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare
Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void.
This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God.

III

Chorus

Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind,
Dreading to find its Father lest it find
The Goodness it has dreaded is not good:
Alone, alone, about our dreadful wood.

Where is that Law for which we broke our own,
Where now that Justice for which Flesh resigned
Her hereditary right to passion, Mind
His will to absolute power? Gone. Gone.
Where is that Law for which we broke our own?

The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss.
Was it to meet such grinning evidence
We left our richly odoured ignorance?
Was the triumphant answer to be this?
The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss.

We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle.

IV

Recitative

If the muscle can feel repugnance, there is still a false
move to be made;
If the mind can imagine to—morrow, there is still a defeat to
remember;
As long as the self can say “I”, it is impossible not to rebel;
As long as there is an accidental virtue, there is a necessary vice:
And the garden cannot exist, the miracle cannot occur.

For the garden is the only place there is, but you will not find it

Until you have looked for it everywhere and found nowhere
that is not a desert;
The miracle is the only thing that happens, but to you it will
not be apparent,
Until all events have been studied and nothing happens that you
cannot explain;
And life is the destiny you are bound to refuse until you have
consented to die.

Therefore, see without looking, hear without listening, breathe
without asking:
The Inevitable is what will seem to happen to you
purely by chance;
The Real is what will strike you as really absurd;
Unless you are certain you are dreaming, it is certainly a dream
of your own;
Unless you exclaim—"There must be some mistake"—you must
be mistaken.

V

Chorus

O where is that immortal and nameless Centre
from which our points of
Definition and death are all equi—distant? Where
The well of our wish to wander, the everlasting fountain
Of the waters of joy that our sorrow uses for tears?
O where is the garden of Being that is only known in Existence
As the command to be never there, the sentence by which
Alephs of throbbing fact have been banished into position,
The clock that dismisses the moment into the turbine of time?

O would I could mourn over Fate like the others,
the resolute creatures,
By seizing my chance to regret. The stone is content
With a formal anger and falls and falls; the plants are indignant
With one dimension only and can only doubt
Whether light or darkness lies in the worse direction; and the subtler
Exiles who try every path are satisfied
With proving that none have a goal: why must Man also
acknowledge
It is not enough to bear witness, for even protest is wrong?

Earth is cooled and fire is quenched by his unique excitement,
All answers expire in the clench of his questioning hand,
His singular emphasis frustrates all possible order:
Alas, his genius is wholly for envy; alas,

The vegetative sadness of lakes, the locomotive beauty
Of choleric beasts of prey, are nearer than he
To the dreams that deprive him of sleep, the powers that
compel him to idle,
To his amorous nymphs and his sanguine athletic gods.

How can his knowledge protect his desire for truth from illusion?
How can he wait without idols to worship, without
Their overwhelming persuasion that somewhere, over the high hill,
Under the roots of the oak, in the depths of the sea,
Is a womb or a tomb wherein he may halt to express
some attainment?

How can he hope and not dream that his solitude
Shall disclose a vibrating flame at last and entrust him forever
With its magic secret of how to extemporise life?