

Advent 2009

W.H Auden: "For the Time Being; A Christmas Oratorio"
December 13, 2009

THE ANNUNCIATION

I

THE FOUR FACULTIES

Over the life of Man

We watch and wait,

The Four who manage

His fallen estate:

We who are four were

Once but one,

Before his act of

Rebellion;

We were himself when

His will was free,

His error became our

Chance to be.

Powers of air and fire,

Water and earth,

Into our hands is given

Man from his birth:

INTUITION

As a dwarf in the dark of His belly I rest;

FEELING

A nymph, I inhabit

The heart in his breast;

SENSATION

A giant, at the gates of

His body I stand;

THOUGHT

His dreaming brain is

My fairyland.

TUTTI

Invisible phantoms,
The forms we assume are
Adapted to each
Individual humour,
Beautiful facts or true
Generalisations,
Test cases in Law or
Market quotations:
As figures and formulae
Chemists have seen us,
Who to true lovers were
Putti of Venus.
Ambiguous causes
Of all temptation,
We lure men either
To death or salvation:
We alone may look over
The wall of that hidden
Garden whose entrance
To him is forbidden;
Must truthfully tell him
What happens inside,
But what it may mean he
Alone must decide.

THOUGHT

The garden is unchanged, the silence is unbroken.
Truth has not yet intruded to possess
Its empty morning nor the promised hour
Shaken its lasting May.

INTUITION

The human night,
Whose messengers we are, cannot dispel
Its wanton dreams, and they are all we know.

SENSATION

My senses are still coarse
From late engrossment in a fair. Old tunes
Reiterated, lights with repeated winks,

Were fascinating like a tic and brought
Whole populations running to a plain,
Making its lush alluvial meadows
One boisterous preposter. By the river
A whistling crowd had waited many hours
To see a naked woman swim upstream;
Honours and reckless medicines were served
In booths where interest was lost
As easily as money; at the back,
In a wet vacancy among the ash cans,
A waiter coupled sadly with a crow.

FEELING

I have but now escaped a raging landscape:
There woods were in a tremor from the shouts
Of hunchbacks hunting a hermaphrodite;
A burning village scampered down a lane;
Insects with ladders stormed a virgin's house;
On a green knoll littered with picnics
A mob of horses kicked a gull to death.

INTUITION

Remembrance of the moment before last
Is like a yawning drug. I have observed
The sombre valley of an industry
In dereliction. Conduits, ponds, canals,
Distressed with weeds; engines and furnaces
At rust in rotting sheds; and their strong users
Transformed to spongy heaps of drunken flesh.
Deep among dock and dusty nettle lay
Each ruin of a will; manors of mould
Grew into empires as a westering sun
Left the air chilly; not a sound disturbed
The autumn dusk except a stertorous snore
That over their drowned condition like a sea
Wept without grief.

THOUGHT

My recent company
Was worse than your three visions. Where I was,

The haunting ghosts were figures with no ground,
Areas of wide omission and vast regions
Of passive colour; higher than any squeak,
One note went on for ever; an embarrassed sum
Stuck on the stutter of a decimal,
And points almost coincident already
Approached so slowly they could never meet.
There nothing could be stated or constructed:
To Be was an archaic nuisance.

INTUITION

Look. There is someone in the garden.

FEELING

The garden is unchanged, the silence is unbroken
For she is still walking in her sleep of childhood:
Many before
Have wandered in, like her, then wandered out
Unconscious of their visit and unaltered,
The garden unchanged, the silence unbroken:
None may wake there but One who shall be woken.

THE ANGEL GABRIEL

Wake.

III

GABRIEL

Mary, in a dream of love
Playing as all children play,
For unsuspecting children may
Express in comic make—believe
The wish that later they will know
Is tragic and impossible;
Hear, child, what I am sent to tell:
Love wills your dream to happen, so
Love's will on earth may be, through you,
No longer a pretend but true.

MARY

What dancing joy would whirl
My ignorance away?

Light blazes out of the stone,
The taciturn water
Bursts into music, and warm wings throb within
the motionless rose:
What sudden rush of Power
Commands me to command?

GABRIEL

When Eve, in love with her own will,
Denied the will of Love and fell,
She turned the flesh Love knew so well
To knowledge of her love until
Both love and knowledge were of sin:
What her negation wounded, may
Your affirmation heal to-day;
Love's will requires your own, that in
The flesh whose love you do not know,
Love's knowledge into flesh may grow.
Wake.

MARY

My flesh in terror and fire
Rejoices that the Word
Who utters the world out of nothing,
As a pledge of His word to love her
Against her will, and to turn
Her desperate longing to love,
Should ask to wear me,
From now to their wedding day,
For an engagement ring.

GABRIEL

Since Adam, being free to choose,
Chose to imagine he was free
To choose his own necessity,
Lost in his freedom, Man pursues
The shadow of his images:
Today the Unknown seeks the known;
What I am willed to ask, your own

Will has to answer; child, it lies
Within your power of choosing to
Conceive the Child who chooses you.

IV

SOLO AND CHORUS

Let number and weight rejoice
In this hour of their translation
Into conscious happiness:
For the whole in every part,
The truth at the proper centre
(*There's a Way. There's a Voice.*)
Of language and distress
Is recognized in her heart
Singing and dancing.

Let even the great rejoice.
Though buffeted by admirers
And arrogant as noon,
The rich and the lovely have seen
For an infinitesimal moment
(*There's a Way. There's a Voice.*)
In another's eye till their own
Reflection came between,
Singing and dancing.

Let even the small rejoice.
Though threatened from purple rostra
And dazed by the soldier's drum
Proclaiming total defeat,
The general loquacious Public
(*There's a Way. There's a Voice.*)
Have been puzzled and struck dumb,
Hearing in every street
Singing and dancing.

Let even the young rejoice.
Lovers at their betrayal
weeping alone in the night,
Have fallen asleep as they heard,

Though too far off to be certain
(There's a Way. There's a Voice.)
They had not imagined it,
Sounds that made grief absurd,
Singing and dancing.
Let even the old rejoice.
The Bleak and the Dim, abandoned
By impulse and regret,
Are startled out of their lives;
For to footsteps long expected
(There's a Way. There's a Voice.)
Their ruins echo, yet
The Demolisher arrives
Singing and dancing.