

Advent 2009

W.H Auden: "For the Time Being; A Christmas Oratorio"

December 20, 2009

The Temptation of St. Joseph

I

JOSEPH

My shoes were shined, my pants were cleaned and pressed,

And I was hurrying to meet

My own true Love:

But a great crowd grew and grew

Till I could not push my way through,

Because

A star had fallen down the street;

When they saw who I was,

The police tried to do their best.

CHORUS (off)

Joseph, you have heard

What Mary says occurred;

Yes, it may be so.

Is it likely? No.

JOSEPH

The bar was gay, the lighting well-designed,

And I was sitting down to wait

My own true Love:

A voice I'd heard before, I think,

Cried: "This is on the House. I drink To him

Who does not know it is too late;"

When I asked for the time,

Everyone was very kind.

CHORUS (off)

*Mary may be pure,
But, Joseph, are you sure?*

JOSEPH

Through cracks, up ladders, into waters deep, I squeezed, I
climbed, I swam to save
My own true Love:
Under a dead apple tree
I saw an ass; when it saw me
It brayed;
A hermit sat in the mouth of a cave:
When I asked him the way,
He pretended to be asleep.

CHORUS (off)

*Maybe, maybe not.
But, Joseph, you know what
Your world, of course, will say
About you anyway.*

JOSEPH

Where are you, Father, where?
Caught in the jealous trap
Of an empty house I hear
As I sit alone in the dark
Everything, everything,
The drip of the bathroom tap,
The creak of the sofa spring,

The wind in the air—shaft, all
Making the same remark
Stupidly, stupidly,
Over and over again.
Father, what have I done?
Answer me, Father, how
Can I answer the tactless wall
Or the pompous furniture now?
Answer them...

GABRIEL

No, you must.

JOSEPH

How then am I to know, Father, that you are just?
Give me one reason.

GABRIEL

No.

JOSEPH

All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof
That what my Love had done
Was really at your will
And that your will is Love.

GABRIEL

No, you must believe;
Be silent, and sit still.

II

NARRATOR

For the perpetual excuse
Of Adam for his fall—"My little Eve, God bless her, did
beguile me and I ate,"
For his insistence on a nurse,
All service, breast, and lap, for giving
Fate
Feminine gender to make girls believe
That they can save him, you must now atone,
Joseph, in silence and alone;
While she who loves you makes you shake with fright,
Your love for her must tuck you up and kiss good night.
For likening Love to war, for all
The pay-off lines of limericks in which
The weak resentful bar-fly shows his sting,
For talking of their spiritual
Beauty to chorus-girls, for flattering
The features of old gorgons who are rich,
For the impudent grin and Irish charm
That hides a cold will to do harm,
To-day the roles are altered; you must be
The Weaker Sex whose passion is passivity.
For those delicious memories
Cigars and sips of brandy can restore
To old dried boys, for gallantry that scrawls
In idolatrous detail and size
A symbol of aggression on toilet walls,

For having reasoned—
"Woman is naturally pure Since she has no moustache,"
for having said,
"No woman has a business head,"
You must learn now that masculinity,
To Nature, is a non-essential luxury.
Lest, finding it impossible
To judge its object now or throatily
Forgive it as eternal God forgives, Lust, tempted by this
miracle
To more ingenious evil, should contrive
A heathen fetish from Virginity
To soothe the spiritual petulance
Of worn-out rakes and maiden aunts,
Forgetting nothing and believing all,
You must behave as if this were not strange at all.
Without a change in look or word,
You both must act exactly as before;
Joseph and Mary shall be man and wife
Just as if nothing had occurred.
There is one World of Nature and one Life;
Sin fractures the Vision, not the Fact; for
The Exceptional is always usual
And the Usual exceptional.
To choose what is difficult all one's days
As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, praise.

SEMI-CHORUS

Joseph, Mary, pray for those
Misled by moonlight and the rose,
For all in our perplexity.

Lovers who hear a distant bell
That tolls from somewhere in their head
Across the valley of their dream—
“All those who love excessively
Foot or thigh or arm or face
Pursue a louche and fatuous fire
And stumble into Hell”— Yet what can such foreboding
seem
But intellectual talk
So long as bodies walk
An earth where Time and Space
Turn Heaven to a finite bed
And Love into desire?
Pray for us, enchanted with
The green Bohemia of that myth
Where knowledge of the flesh can take
The guilt of being born away,
Simultaneous passions make
One eternal chastity:
Pray for us romantics, pray.

BOYS' SEMI-CHORUS
Joseph, Mary, pray for us,
Independent embryos who,
Unconscious in another, do
Evil as each creature does
In every definite decision
To improve; for even in
The germ-cell's primary division
Innocence is lost and sin,
Already given as a fact,

Once more issues as an act.

SEMI-CHORUS

Joseph, Mary, pray for all
The proper and conventional
Of whom this world approves.
Pray for us whose married loves
Acquire so readily
The indolent fidelity
Of unaired beds, for us to whom
Domestic hatred can become
A habit-forming drug, whose will
To civil anarchy
Uses disease to disobey
And makes our private bodies ill.
O pray for our salvation
Who take the prudent way,
Believing we shall be exempted
From the general condemnation
Because our self—respect is tempted
To incest not adultery:
O pray for us, the bourgeoisie.

BOYS' SEMI-CHORUS

Joseph, Mary, pray
For us children as in play
Upon the nursery floor
We gradually explore
Our members till our jealous lives
Have worked through to a clear
But trivial idea
Of that whence each derives

A vague but massive feel
Of being individual.
O pray for our redemption; for
The will that occupies
Our sensual infancy
Already is mature
And could immediately
Beget upon our flesh far more
Expressions of its disbelief
Than we shall manage to conceive
In a long life of lies.

CHORUS

Blessed Woman,
Excellent Man,
Redeem for the dull the
Average Way,
That common ungifted
Natures may
Believe that their normal
Vision can
Walk to perfection.