

The Poem as a Field of Action

Talk given at the University of Washington, 1948

LET'S BEGIN by quoting Mr. Auden—(from *The Orators*): “Need I remind you that you’re no longer living in ancient Egypt?”

I’m going to say one thing to you—for a week! And I hope to God when I’m through that I’ve succeeded in making you understand me. It concerns the poem as a field of action, at what pitch the battle is today and what may come of it.

As Freud says bitterly in the first chapter of his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, speaking of the early opposition to his theory:

—the aversion of scientific men to learning something new

we shall learn that is a characteristic quite as pronounced in literature—where they will *copy* “the new”—but the tiresome repetition of this “new,” now twenty years old, disfigures every journal: I said a field of action. I can see why so many wish rather, avoiding thought, to return to the classic front of orthodox acceptance. As Anatole France put it in Freud’s time, “*Les savants ne sont pas curieux*.”

It is next to impossible to bring over the quantitative Greek and Latin texts into our language. But does anyone ever ask *why* a Latin line in translation tends to break in half in our language? *Why* it cannot be maintained in its character, its quantitative character as against our accented verse? Have *all* the equivalents been exhausted or even tried? I doubt it.

I offer you then an initiation, what seems and what is actually only a half-baked proposal—since I cannot follow it up

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with proofs or even *final* examples—but I do it with at least my eyes open—for what I myself may get out of it by presenting it as well as I can to you.

I propose sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure. I said structure. So now you are beginning to get the drift of my theme. I say we are *through* with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived, at least for dramatic verse; through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza, the sonnet. More has been done than you think about this though not yet been specifically named for what it is. I believe something can be said. Perhaps all that I can do here is to call attention to it: a revolution in the conception of the poetic foot—pointing out the evidence of something that has been going on for a long time.

At this point it might be profitable (since it would bring me back to my subject from a new point of view) to turn aside for a brief, very brief discussion (since it is not in the direct path of my essay) of the materials—that is to say, the subject matter of the poem. In this let me accept all the help I can get from Freud’s theory of the dream—as a fulfillment of the wish—which I accept here *holus-bolus*. The poem is a dream, a daydream of wish fulfillment but not by any means a field of action and purposive action of a less high order because of that.

It has had in the past a varying subject matter—almost one might say a progressively varying choice of subject matter as you shall see—I must stress here that we are talking of the *recent* past.

And let me remind you here to keep in your minds the term reality as contrasted with phantasy and to tell you that the *subject matter* of the poem is always phantasy—what is wished for, realized in the “dream” of the poem—but that the structure confronts something else.

We may mention Poe’s dreams in a pioneer society, his dreams of gentleness and bliss—also, by the way, his profes-

sional interest in meter and his very successful experiments with form. Yeats's subject matter of faery. Shakespeare—the butcher's son dreaming of Caesar and Wolsey. No need to go on through Keats, Shelley to Tennyson. It is all, the subject matter, a wish for aristocratic attainment—a "spiritual" bureaucracy of the "soul" or what you will.

There was then a subject matter that was "poetic" and in many minds that is still poetry—and exclusively so—the "beautiful" or pious (and so beautiful) wish expressed in beautiful language—a dream. That is still poetry: full stop. Well, that was the world to be desired and the poets merely expressed a general wish and so were useful each in his day.

But with the industrial revolution, and steadily since then, a new spirit—a new *Zeitgeist* has possessed the world, and as a consequence new values have replaced the old, aristocratic concepts—which had a pretty seamy side if you looked at them like a Christian. A new subject matter began to be manifest. It began to be noticed that there could be a new subject matter and that that was not in fact the poem at all. Briefly then, money talks, and the poet, the modern poet has admitted new subject matter to his dreams—that is, the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems—

Look at Mr. Auden's earlier poems as an example, with their ruined industrial background of waste and destruction. But even that is passing and becoming old-fashioned with the new physics taking its place. All this is a subject in itself and a fascinating one which I regret to leave, I am sorry to say, for a more pressing one.

Remember we are still in the world of fancy if perhaps disguised but still a world of wish-fulfillment in dreams. The poet was not an owner, he was not a money man—he was still only a poet; a wisher; a word man. The best of all to my way of thinking! Words are the keys that unlock the mind. But is that all of poetry? Certainly not—no more so than the material of dreams was phantasy to Dr. Sigmund Freud.

There is something else. Something if you will listen to many, something permanent and sacrosanct. The one thing that the poet has not wanted to change, the one thing he has clung to in his dream—unwilling to let go—the place where the time-lag is still adamant—is structure. Here we are unmoved. But here is precisely where we come into contact with reality. Reluctant, we waken from our dreams. And what is reality? How do we know reality? The only reality that we can know is MEASURE.

Now to return to our subject—the structure of the poem. Everything in the social, economic complex of the world at any time-sector ties in together—

(Quote Wilson on Proust—modern physics, etc.)

But it might at this time be a good thing to take up first what is spoken of as free verse.

How can we accept Einstein's theory of relativity, affecting our very conception of the heavens about us of which poets write so much, without incorporating its essential fact—the relativity of measurements—into our own category of activity: the poem. Do we think we stand outside the universe? Or that the Church of England does? Relativity applies to everything, like love, if it applies to anything in the world.

What, by this approach I am trying to sketch, what we are trying to do is not only to disengage the elements of a measure but to seek (what we believe is there) a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past. It is in many ways a different world from the past calling for a different measure.

According to this conception there is no such thing as "free verse" and so I insist. Imagism was not structural: that was the reason for its disappearance.

The impression I give is that we are about to make some discoveries. That they will be far-reaching in their effects.—

This will depend on many things. My address (toward the task) is all that concerns me now: That we do approach a change.

What is it? I make a clear and definite statement—that it lies in the structure of the verse. That it may possibly lie elsewhere I do not for a moment deny or care—I have here to defend that only and that is my theme.

I hope you will pardon my deliberation, for I wish again to enter a short by-path: It may be said that I wish to destroy the past. It is precisely a service to tradition, honoring it and serving it that is envisioned and intended by my attack, and not disfigurement—confirming and *enlarging* its application.

Set the overall proposal of an enlarged technical means—in order to liberate the possibilities of depicting reality in a modern world that has seen more if not felt more than in the past—in order to be *able* to feel more (for we know we feel less, or surmise that we do. Vocabulary opens the mind to feeling). But modern in that by psychology and all its dependencies we *know*, for we have learned that to feel more we have to have, in our day, the means to feel *with*—the tokens, the apparatus. We are lacking in the means—the appropriate paraphernalia, just as modern use of the products of chemistry for *refinement* must have means which the past lacked. Our poems are not subtly enough made, the structure, the staid manner of the poem cannot let our feelings through.

(Note: Then show (in what detail I can) what we may do to achieve this end by a review of early twentieth-century literary accomplishments. Work done.)

We seek profusion, the Mass—heterogeneous—ill-assorted—quite breathless—grasping at all kinds of things—as if—like Audubon shooting some little bird, really only to look at it the better.

If any one man's work lacks the distinction to be expected from the finished artist, we might well think of the *profusion* of a Rabelais—as against a limited output. It is as though for

the moment we should be profuse, we Americans; we need to build up a mass, a conglomerate maybe, containing few gems but bits of them—Brazilian brilliants—that shine of themselves, uncut as they are.

Now when Mr. Eliot came along he had a choice: 1. Join the crowd, adding his blackbird's voice to the flock, contributing to the conglomerate (or working over it for his selections) or 2. To go where there was already a mass of more ready distinction (to turn his back on the first), already an established literature in what to him was the same language (?) an already established place in world literature—a short cut, in short.

Stop a minute to emphasize our own position: It is *not* that of Mr. Eliot. We are making a modern bolus: That is our somewhat undistinguished burden; profusion, as, we must add in all fairness, against his distinction. His is a few poems beautifully phrased—in his longest effort thirty-five quotations in seven languages. We, let us say, are the Sermons of Launcelot Andrewes from which (in time) some selector will pick *one* phrase. Or say, the *Upamishad* that will contribute a single word! There are summative geniuses like that—they shine. We must value them—the extractors of genius—for what they do: extract. But they are there; we are here. It is not possible for us to imitate them. We are in a different phase—a new language—we are making the mass in which some other later Eliot will dig. We must *see* our opportunity and increase the hoard others will find to use. We must find our *pride* in *that*. We must have the pride, the humility and the thrill in the making. (Tell the story of Bramante and the building of the dome of the Duomo in Florence.)

The clearness we must have is first the clarity of knowing what we are doing—what we may do: Make anew—a re-examination of the means—on a fresh—basis. Not at *this* time an analysis so much as an accumulation. You couldn't expect us to be as prominent (as *read* in particular achievements—outstanding single poems). We're not doing the same thing.

We're not putting the rose, the single rose, in the little glass vase in the window—we're digging a hole for the tree—and as we dig have disappeared in it.

(Note: Pound's story of my being interested in the loam whereas he wanted the finished product.)

(Note: Read Bridges—two short pieces in the anthology: 1. The Child 2. Snow.)

We begin to pick up what so far is little more than a feeling (a feeling entirely foreign to a Mr. E. or a Mr. P.—though less to them than to some others) that something is taking place in the accepted prosody or ought to be taking place. (Of course we have had Whitman—but he is a difficult subject—prosodically and I do not want to get off into that now.) It is similar to what must have been the early feelings of Einstein toward the laws of Isaac Newton in physics. Thus from being fixed, our prosodic values should rightly be seen as only relatively true. Einstein had the speed of light as a constant—his only constant—What have we? Perhaps our concept of musical time. I think so. But don't let us close down on that either at least for the moment.

In any case we as loose, disassociated (linguistically), yawping speakers of a new language, are privileged (I guess) to sense and so to seek to discover that possible thing which is disturbing the metrical table of values—as unknown elements would disturb Mendelyev's table of the periodicity of atomic weights and so lead to discoveries.

And we had better get on the job and make our discoveries or, quietly, someone else will make them for us—covertly and without acknowledgment—(one acknowledges one's indebtedness in one's notes only to dead writers—preferably long dead!).

We wish to find an objective way at least of looking at verse and to redefine its elements; this I say is the theme (the

radium) that underlies Bridges' experiments as it is the yeast animating Whitman and all the "moderns."

That the very project itself, quite apart from its solutions, is not yet raised to consciousness, to a clear statement of purpose, is our fault. (Note: the little Mag: Variations) But one thing, a semiconscious sense of a rending discovery to be made is becoming apparent. For one great thing about "the bomb" is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic (but why?) alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art, in the arts. . . . We are too cowed by our fear to realize it fully. But it is *possible*. That is what we mean. This isn't optimism, it is chemistry: Or better, physics.

It appears, it disappears, a sheen of it comes up, when, as its shattering implications affront us, all the gnomes hurry to cover up its traces.

Note: *Proust*: (Wilson) He has supplied for the first time in literature an equivalent on the full scale for the new theory of modern physics—I mention this merely to show a possible relationship—between a style and a natural science—intelligently considered.

Now for an entirely new issue: Mr. Auden is an interesting case—in fact he presents to me a deciding issue. His poems are phenomenally worth studying in the context of this theme.

There is no modern poet so agile—so impressive in the use of the poetic means. He can do anything—except one thing. He came to America and became a citizen of this country. He is truly, I should say, learned. Now Mr. Auden didn't come here for nothing or, if you know Auden, without a deep-seated conviction that he *had* to come. Don't put it down to any of the superficial things that might first occur to you—that he hates England, etc. He came here because of a crisis in his career—his career as a writer, as a poet particularly I should say. Mr. Auden may disagree with me in some

of this but he will not disagree, I think, when I say he is a writer to whom writing is his life, his very breath which, as he or any man goes on, in the end absorbs *all* his breath.

Auden might have gone to France or to Italy or to South America or following Rimbaud to Ceylon or Timbuctoo. No! He came to the United States and became a citizen. Now the crisis, the only crisis which could drive a man, a distinguished poet, to that would be that he had come to an end of some sort in his poetic means—something that England could no longer supply, and that he came here implicitly to find an answer—in another language. As yet I see no evidence that he has found it. I wonder why? Mind you, this is one of the cleverest, most skilled poets of our age and one of the most versatile and prolific. He can do anything.

But when he writes an ode to a successful soccer season for his school, as Pindar wrote them for the Olympic heroes of his day—it is in a classic meter so successful in spite of the subject, which you might think trivial, that it becomes a serious poem. And a bad sign to me is always a religious or social tinge beginning to creep into a poet's work. You can put it down as a general rule that when a poet, in the broadest sense, begins to devote himself to the *subject matter* of his poems, *genre*, he has come to an end of his poetic means.

What does all this signify? That Auden came here to find a new way of writing—for it looked as if this were the place where one might reasonably expect to find that instability in the language where innovation would be at home. Remember even Mr. Eliot once said that no poetic drama could any longer be written in the iambic pentameter, but that perhaps jazz might offer a suggestion. He even wrote something about "My Baby," but it can't have been very successful for we seldom hear any more of it.

I wish I could enlist Auden in an attack, a basic attack upon the whole realm of structure in the poem. I have tried but without success so far. I think that's what he came here looking for, I think he has failed to find it (it may be constitu-

tional with him). I think we have disappointed him. Perhaps he has disappointed himself. I am sure the attack must be concentrated on the *rigidity of the poetic foot*.

This began as a basic criticism of Auden's poems—as a reason for his coming to America, and has at least served me as an illustration for the *theory* upon which I am speaking.

Look at his poems with this in view—his very skill seems to defeat him. It need not continue to do so in my opinion.

Mr. Eliot, meanwhile, has written his *Quartets*. He is a very subtle creator—who knows how to squeeze the last ounce of force out of his material. He has done a good job here though when he speaks of developing a new manner of writing, new manners following new manners only to be spent as soon as that particular piece of writing has been accomplished—I do not think he quite knows what he is about.

But in spite of everything and completely discounting his subject matter, his *genre*, Eliot's experiments in the *Quartets* though limited, show him to be more American in the sense I seek than, sad to relate, Auden, with his English ears and the best will in the world, will ever be able to be.

It may be the tragedy of a situation whose ramifications we are for the moment unable to trace: That the American gone over to England might make the contribution (or assist in it) which the Englishman come to America to find it and with the best will in the world, is unable to make.

Thus the Gallicized American, D'A—, according to Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle*, with the iambic pentameter in his brain, was able, at the beginning of the symbolist movement in Paris to break the French from their six-syllable line in a way they had of themselves never been able to do. There is Ezra Pound also to be thought of—another entire thesis—in this respect. I see that I am outlining a year's or at least a semester's series of lectures as I go along.

Now we come to the question of the origin of our discoveries. Where else can what we are seeking arise from but speech? From speech, from American speech as distinct from

English speech, or presumably so, if what I say above is correct. In any case (since we have no body of poems comparable to the English) from what we *hear* in America. Not, that is, from a study of the classics, not even the American "Classics"—the *dead* classics which—may I remind you, we have *never heard* as living speech. No one has or can *hear* them as they were written any more than we can *hear* Greek today.

I say this once again to emphasize what I have often said—that we here must *listen* to the language for the discoveries we hope to make. This is not the same as the hierarchic or tapeworm mode of making additions to the total poetic body: the mode of the schools. This will come up again elsewhere.

That being so, what I have presumed but not proven, concerning Auden's work, can we not say that there are many more *hints* toward literary composition in the American language than in English—where they are inhibited by classicism and "good taste." (Note the French word *tête*, its derivation from "pot.") I'd put it much stronger, but let's not be diverted at this point, there are too many more important things pressing for attention.

In the first place, we have to say, following H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*, which American language? Since Mencken pointed out that the American student (the *formative* years—very important) is bilingual, he speaks English in the classroom but his own tongue outside of it.

We mean, then, American—the language Mr. Eliot and Mr. Pound carried to Europe *in their ears*—willy-nilly—when they left here for their adventures and which presumably Mr. Auden came here to find—perhaps too late. A language full of those hints toward newness of which I have been speaking. I am not interested in the history but these things offer a point worth making, a rich opportunity for development lies before us at this point.

I said "hints toward composition." This does not mean re-

alism in the language. What it does mean, I think, is ways of managing the language, new ways. Primarily it means to me opportunity to expand the structure, the basis, the actual making of the poem.

It is a chance to attack the language of the poem seriously. For to us our language is serious in a way that English is not. Just as to them English is serious—too serious—in a way no dialect could be. But the dialect is the mobile phase, the changing phase, the productive phase—as their languages were to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Rabelais in their day.

It is there, in the mouths of the living, that the language is changing and giving new means for expanded possibilities in literary expression and, I add, basic structure—the most important of all.

To the English, English is England: "History is England," yodels Mr. Eliot. To us this is not so, not so *if* we prove it by writing a poem built to refute it—otherwise he wins!! But that leads to mere controversy. For us rehash of rehash of hash of rehash is *not* the business.

A whole semester of studies is implicit here. Perhaps a whole course of post-graduate studies—with theses—extending into a life's work!! But before I extol too much and advocate the experimental method, let me emphasize that, like God's creation, the objective is not experimentation but *man*. In our case, poems! There were enough experiments it seems, from what natural history shows, in that first instance but that was not the culmination. The poem is what we are after.

And again let me emphasize that this is something that has been going on, unrecognized for years—here *and* in England. What we are at is to try to discover and isolate and *use* the underlying element or principle motivating this change which is trying to speak outright. Do you not see now why I have been inveighing against the sonnet all these years? And why it has been so violently defended? Because it is a form which does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition.

—God, if I could fathom
the guts of shadows!

You to come with me
poking into negro houses
with their gloom and smell!
in among children
leaping around a dead dog!
Mimicking
onto the lawns of the rich!
You!
to go with me a-tip-toe,
head down under heaven,
nostrils lipping the wind!

PASTORAL

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself.
Older now
I walk back streets
admiring the houses
of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.

No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation.

CHICORY AND DAISIES

I

Lift your flowers
on bitter stems
chicory!
Lift them up
out of the scorched ground!
Bear no foliage
but give yourself
wholly to that!
Strain under them
you bitter stems
that no beast eats—
and scorn greyness!
Into the heat with them:
cool!

luxuriant! sky-blue!
The earth cracks and
is shriveled up;
the wind moans piteously;
the sky goes out
if you should fail.

II

I saw a child with daisies
for weaving into the hair
tear the stems
with her teeth!

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SPRING AND ALL

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast - a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines -

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches -

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind -

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined -
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance - Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

SPRING AND ALL

DEATH THE BARBER

Of death
the barber
the barber
talked to me

cutting my
life with
sleep to trim
my hair -

It's just
a moment
he said, we die
every night -

And of
the newest
ways to grow
hair on

bald death -
I told him
of the quartz
lamp

and of old men
with third
sets of teeth
to the cue

of an old man
who said
at the door -
Sunshine today!

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SPRING AND ALL

for which
death shaves
him twice
a week

TO ELSIE

The pure products of America
go crazy -
mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of
Jersey
with its isolate lakes and

valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves
old names
and promiscuity between

devil-may-care men who have taken
to railroading
out of sheer lust of adventure -

and young slatterns, bathed
in filth
from Monday to Saturday

to be tricked out that night
with gauds
from imaginations which have no

peasant traditions to give them
character
but flutter and flaunt

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SPRING AND ALL

sheer rags - succumbing without
emotion
save numbed terror

under some hedge of choke-cherry
or viburnum -
which they cannot express -

Unless it be that marriage
perhaps
with a dash of Indian blood

will throw up a girl so desolate
so hemmed round
with disease or murder

that she'll be rescued by an
agent -
reared by the state and

sent out at fifteen to work in
some hard-pressed
house in the suburbs -

some doctor's family, some Elsie -
voluptuous water
expressing with broken

brain the truth about us -
her great
ungainly hips and flopping breasts

addressed to cheap
jewelry
and rich young men with fine eyes

SPRING AND ALL

as if the earth under our feet
were
an extremity of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth

while the imagination strains
after deer
going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off

No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

COLLECTED POEMS 1921-1931

POEM

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloseset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

ON GAY WALLPAPER

The green-blue ground
is ruled with silver lines
to say the sun is shining

And on this moral sea
of grass or dreams lie flowers
or baskets of desires

Heaven knows what they are
between cerulean shapes
laid regularly round

Mat roses and tridentate
leaves of gold
threes, threes and threes

COLLECTED POEMS 1921-1931

Three roses and three stems
the basket floating
standing in the horns of blue

Repeated to the ceiling
to the windows
where the day

Blows in
the scalloped curtains to
the sound of rain

NANTUCKET

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains -
Smell of cleanliness -

Sunshine of late afternoon -
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying - And the
immaculate white bed

THE ATTIC WHICH IS DESIRE

the unused tent
of

bare beams
beyond which

AN EARLY MARTYR

But it's the foulness of it can't
be cured. And hatred, hatred of all men
-- and disgust.

THE YACHTS

contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
shielding them from the too-heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses

tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beatings, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute

brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls

ant-like, solicitously grooming them, releasing,
making fast as they turn, lean far over and having
caught the wind again, side by side, head for the mark.

In a well guarded arena of open water surrounded by
lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering
and flittering follow them, they appear youthful, rare

as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace
of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and
naturally to be desired. Now the sea which holds them

is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.

Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts

move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas.

AN EARLY MARTYR

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,
beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

THE CATHOLIC BELLS

Tho' I'm no Catholic
I listen hard when the bells
in the yellow-brick tower
of their new church

ring down the leaves
ring in the frost upon them
and the death of the flowers
ring out the grackle

toward the south, the sky
darkened by them, ring in
the new baby of Mr and Mrs
Krantz which cannot

for the fat of its cheeks

open well its eyes, ring out
the parrot under its hood
jealous of the child

ring in Sunday morning
and old age which adds as it
takes away. Let them ring
only ring! over the oil

for the new road
where

an old man
on his knees

reaps a basket-
ful of

matted grasses for
his goats

THE TERM

A rumbled sheet
of brown paper
about the length

and apparent bulk
of a man was
rolling with the

wind slowly over
and over in
the street as

a car drove down
upon it and
crushed it to

the ground. Unlike
a man it rose
again rolling

with the wind over
and over to be as
it was before.

THE SUN

lifts heavily
and cloud and sea
weigh upon the
unwaiting air -

Hasteless
the silence is
divided
by small waves

that wash away
night whose wave
is without
sound and gone -

Old categories
slacken
memoryless -
weed and shells where

in the night
a high tide left
its mark
and block of half

burned wood washed
clean -
The slovenly bearded
rocks hiss -

Obscene refuse
charms
this modern shore -
Listen!

THE CLOUDS

LABRADOR

How clean these shallows
how firm these rocks stand
about which wash
the waters of the world

It is ice to this body
that unclothes its pallors
to thoughts
of an immeasurable sea,

unmarred, that as it lifts
encloses this
straining mind, these
limbs in a single gesture.

A WOMAN IN FRONT OF A BANK

The bank is a matter of columns,
like. convention,
unlike invention; but the pediments
sit there in the sun

to convince the doubting of
investments 'solid
as rock' - upon which the world
stands, the world of finance,

the only world: just there,
talking with another woman while
rocking a baby carriage
back and forth stands a woman in

THE CLOUDS

a pink cotton dress, bare legged
and headed whose legs
are two columns to hold up
her face, like Lenin's (her loosely
arranged hair profusely blond) or
Darwin's and there you
have it:
a woman in front of a bank

THE BITTER WORLD OF SPRING

On a wet pavement the white sky recedes
mottled black by the inverted
pillars of the red elms,
in perspective, that lift the tangled

net of their desires hard into
the falling rain. And brown smoke
is driven down, running like
water over the roof of the bridge-

keeper's cubicle. And, as usual,
the fight as to the nature of poetry
- Shall the philosophers capture it? -
is on. And, casting an eye

down into the water, there, announced
by the silence of a white
bush in flower, close
under the bridge, the shad ascend,

midway between the surface and the mud,
and you can see their bodies
red-finned in the dark
water headed, unrelenting, upstream.

THE CLOUDS

THE WELL DISCIPLINED BARGEMAN

The shadow does not move. It is the water moves, running out. A monolith of sand on a passing barge, riding the swift water, makes that its fellow.

Standing upon the load the well disciplined bargeman rakes it carefully, smooth on top with nicely squared edges to conform to the barge outlines - ritually: sand.

All about him the silver water, fish-swift, races under the Presence. Whatever there is else is moving. The restless gulls, unlike companionable pigeons,

taking their cue from the ruffled water, dip and circle avidly into the gale. Only the bargeman raking upon his barge remains, like the shadow, sleeping

RAINDROPS ON A BRIAR

I, a writer, at one time hipped on painting, did not consider the effects, painting, for that reason, static, on

the contrary the stillness of the object - the flowers, the gloves - freed them precisely by that from a necessity merely to move

in space as if they had been - not children! but the thinking male or the charged and delivering female frantic with ecstasies;

THE CLOUDS

served rather to present, for me, a more pregnant motion: a series of varying leaves clinging still, let us say, to

the cat-briar after last night's storm, its waterdrops ranged upon the arching stems irregularly as an accompaniment.

SUZANNE

Brother Paul! look!

-but he rushes to a different window.

The moon!

I heard shrieks and thought:
What's that?

That's just Suzanne talking to the moon!
Pounding on the window with both fists:

Paul! Paul!

-and talking to the moon.
Shrieking and pounding the glass with both fists!

Brother Paul! the moon!

12

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

I SELF-PORTRAIT

In a red winter hat blue
eyes smiling
just the head and shoulders

crowded on the canvas
arms folded one
big ear the right showing

the face slightly tilted
a heavy wool coat
with broad buttons

gathered at the neck reveals
a bulbous nose
but the eyes red-rimmed

from over-use he must have
driven them hard
but the delicate wrists

show him to have been a
man unused to
manual labor unshaved his

blond beard half trimmed
no time for any-
thing but his painting

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

II LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

III THE HUNTERS IN THE SNOW

The over-all picture is winter
icy mountains
in the background the return

212

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

from the hunt it is toward evening
from the left
sturdy hunters lead in

their pack the inn-sign
hanging from a
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix

between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire

that flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond

the hill is a pattern of skaters
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen

a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture . . .

IV THE ADORATION OF THE KINGS

From the Nativity
which I have already celebrated
the Babe in its Mother's arms

the Wise Men in their stolen
splendor
and Joseph and the soldiery

attendant
with their incredulous faces
make a scene copied we'll say

213

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

from the Italian masters
but with a difference
the mastery

of the painting
and the mind the resourceful mind
that governed the whole

the alert mind dissatisfied with
what it is asked to
and cannot do

accepted the story and painted
it in the brilliant
colors of the chronicler

the downcast eyes of the Virgin
as a work of art
for profound worship

V PEASANT WEDDING

Pour the wine bridegroom
where before you the
bride is enthroned her hair

loose at her temples a head
of ripe wheat is on
the wall beside her the

guests seated at long tables
the bagpipers are ready
there is a bound under

the table the bearded Mayor
is present women in their
starched headgear are

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

gabbing all but the bride
hands folded in her
lap is awkwardly silent simple

dishes are being served
clabber and what not
from a trestle made of an

unhinged barn door by two
helpers one in a red
coat a spoon in his hatband

VI HAYMAKING

The living quality of
the man's mind
stands out

and its covert assertions
for art, art, art!
painting

that the Renaissance
tried to absorb
but

it remained a wheat field
over which the
wind played

men with scythes tumbling
the wheat in
rows

the gleaners already busy
it was his own -
maggies

13

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

the patient horses no one
could take that
from him

VII THE CORN HARVEST

Summer!
the painting is organized
about a young
reaper enjoying his
noonday rest
completely
relaxed
from his morning labors
sprawled
in fact sleeping
unbuttoned
on his back
the women
have brought him his lunch
perhaps
a spot of wine
they gather gossiping
under a tree
whose shade
carelessly
he does not share the
resting
center of
their workaday world

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

VIII THE WEDDING DANCE IN THE OPEN AIR

Disciplined by the artist
to go round
& round
in holiday gear
a riotously gay rabble of
peasants and their
ample-bottomed doxies
fills
the market square
featured by the women in
their starched
white headgear
they prance or go openly
toward the wood's
edges
round and around in
rough shoes and
farm breeches
mouths agape
Oya!
kicking up their heels

IX THE PARABLE OF THE BLIND

This horrible but superb painting
the parable of the blind
without a red

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PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

in the composition shows a group
of beggars leading
each other diagonally downward

across the canvas
from one side
to stumble finally into a bog

where the picture
and the composition ends back
of which no seeing man

is represented the unshaven
features of the des-
titute with their few

pitiful possessions a basin
to wash in a peasant
cottage is seen and a church spire

the faces are raised
as toward the light
there is no detail extraneous

to the composition one
follows the others stick in
hand triumphant to disaster

X CHILDREN'S GAMES

i

This is a schoolyard
crowded
with children

218

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

of all ages near a village
on a small stream
meandering by

where some boys
are swimming
bare-ass

or climbing a tree in leaf
everything
is motion

elder women are looking
after the small
fry

a play wedding a
christening
nearby one leans

hollering
into
an empty hogshhead

ii

Little girls
whirling their skirts about
until they stand out flat

tops pinwheels
to run in the wind with
or a toy in 3 tiers to spin

with a piece
of twine to make it go
blindman's-buff follow the

219

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

leader stilts
high and low tipcat jacks
bowls hanging by the knees
standing on your head
run the gauntlet
a dozen on their backs
feet together kicking
through which a boy must pass
roll the hoop or a
construction
made of bricks
some mason has abandoned

iii

The desperate toys
of children
their

imagination equilibrium
and rocks
which are to be

found
everywhere
and games to drag

the other down
blindfold
to make use of

a swinging
weight
with which

220

PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL

at random
to bash in the
heads about
them
Brueghel saw it all
and with his grim
humor faithfully
recorded
it

SONG

beauty is a shell
from the sea
where she rules triumphant
till love has had its way with her

scallops and
lion's paws
sculptured to the
tune of retreating waves

undying accents
repeated till
the ear and the eye lie
down together in the same bed

THE WOODTHRUSH

fortunate man it is not too late
the woodthrush
flies into my garden

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