



Collected Poems

By W. H. Auden

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Between 1927 and his death in 1973, W. H. Auden endowed poetry in the English language with a new face. Or rather, with several faces, since his work ranged from the political to the religious, from the urbane to the pastoral, from the mandarin to the invigoratingly plain-spoken.

This collection presents all the poems Auden wished to preserve, in the texts that received his final approval. It includes the full contents of his previous collected editions along with all the later volumes of his shorter poems. Together, these works display the astonishing range of Auden's voice and the breadth of his concerns, his deep knowledge of the traditions he inherited, and his ability to recast those traditions in modern times.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

Between 1927 and his death in 1973, W. H. Auden endowed poetry in the English language with a new face. Or rather, with several faces, since his work ranged from the political to the religious, from the urbane to the pastoral, from the mandarin to the invigoratingly plain-spoken.

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About the Author

W. H. Auden was born in York, England, in 1907. His first book of poems was published in 1930, followed by a dozen volumes of shorter and longer poems. He collaborated on three plays with Christopher Isherwood and wrote books about his travels to Iceland (with Louis MacNeice) and wartime China (with Christopher Isherwood). In 1939 he settled in New York and became an American citizen in 1946. In collaboration with his companion Chester Kallman, he composed opera libretti for Igor Stravinsky, Hans Werner Henze, and Nicholas Nabokov. In 1972 Auden left his winter home in New York and returned to Oxford. He died in Vienna in 1973.

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Chapter 1

PART I

PAID ON BOTH SIDES

A Charade

To Cecil Day-Lewis

Characters

LintzgarthNatrass

John NowerAaron Shaw*****

DickSeth Shaw

George****The Spy—Seth's Brother

WalterBernard

KurtSeth's Mother***

CulleyAnne Shaw

Stephen**

Zeppel—John Nower's Servant

Number Six

Sturton

Joan—Mother of John Nower

Trudy***

Father Christmas*

The Doctor

Bo****

PO*****

The Man-Woman

The Doctor's Boy**

The Photographer*

The Announcer*

The Chief Guest*

The Butler*

The Chorus

The starred parts should be doubled

[No scenery is required. The stage should have a curtained-off recess. The distinction between the two hostile parties should be marked by different coloured arm-bands. the chorus, which should not consist of more than three persons, wear similar and distinctive clothing.]

[Enter trudy and walter.]

trudy: You've only just heard?

walter: Yes. A breakdown at the Mill needed attention, kept me all morning. I guessed no harm. But lately, riding at leisure, Dick met me, panted disaster. I came here at once. How did they get him?

trudy: In Kettle Dale above Colefangs road passes where high banks overhang dangerous from ambush. To Colefangs had to go, would speak with Layard, Jerry and Hunter with him only. They must have stolen

news, for Red Shaw waited with ten, so Jerry said, till for last time unconscious. Hunter was killed at first shot. They fought, exhausted ammunition, a brave defence but fight no more.

walter: Has Joan been told yet?

trudy: Yes. It couldn't be helped. Shock, starting birth pangs, caused a premature delivery.

walter: How is she?

trudy: Bad, I believe. But here's the doctor.

[Enter doctor.]

Well, Doctor, how are things going?

doctor: Better thanks. We've had a hard fight, but it's going to be all right. She'll pull through and have a fine infant as well. My God, I'm thirsty after all that. Where can I get a drink?

walter: Here in the next room, Doctor.

[Exeunt. Back curtains draw. joan with child and corpse.]

joan:

Not from this life, not from this life is any

To keep; sleep, day and play would not help there,

Dangerous to new ghost; new ghost learns from many,

Learns from old termers what death is, where.

Who's jealous of his latest company,

From one day to the next final to us,

A changed one, would use sorrow to deny

Sorrow, to replace death? Sorrow is sleeping thus.

Unforgetting is not today's forgetting

For yesterday, not bedrid scorning,

But a new begetting,

An unforgiving morning.

[Baby squeals.]

O see, he is impatient

To pass beyond this pretty lispig time:

There'll be some crying out when he's come there.

[Back curtains close.]

chorus:

Can speak of trouble, pressure on men

Born all the time, brought forward into light

For warm dark moan.

Though heart fears all heart cries for, rebuffs with mortal beat

Skyfall, the legs sucked under, adder's bite.

That prize held out of reach

Guides the unwilling tread,

The asking breath,

Till on attended bed

Or in untracked dishonour comes to each

His natural death.

We pass our days

Speak, man to men, easy, learning to point,

To jump before ladies, to show our scars:

But no,

We were mistaken, these faces are not ours.

They smile no more when we smile back:

Eyes, ears, tongue, nostrils bring

News of revolt, inadequate counsel to

An infirm king.

O watcher in the dark, you wake

Our dream of waking, we feel

Your finger on the flesh that has been skinned,

By your bright day

See clear what we were doing, that we were vile.

Your sudden hand

Shall humble great

Pride, break it, wear down to stumps old systems which await

The last transgression of the sea.

[Enter john nower and dick.]

john nower: If you have really made up your mind, Dick, I won't try and persuade you to stop. But I shall be sorry to lose you.

dick: I have thought it all over and I think it is the best thing to do. My cousin writes that the ranch is a thoroughly good proposition. I don't know how I shall like the Colonies but I feel I must get away from here. There is not room enough . . . but the actual moving is unpleasant.

john nower: I understand. When are you thinking of sailing?

dick: My cousin is sailing to-morrow. If I am going I am to join him at the Docks.

john nower: Right. Tell one of the men to go down to the post-office and send a wire for you. If you want anything else, let me know.

dick: Thank you.

[Exit dick. Enter zeppel.]

zeppel: Number Six wishes to see you, sir.

john nower: All right, show him in.

[Enter number six.]

Well, what is it?

number six: My area is Rookhope. Last night at Horse and Farrier, drank alone, one of Shaw's men. I sat down friendly next till muzzed with drink and lateness he was blabbing. Red Shaw goes to Brandon Walls to-day, visits a woman.

john nower: Alone?

number six: No, sir. He takes a few. I got no numbers.

john nower: This is good news. Here is a pound for you.

number six: Thank you very much, sir.

[Exit number six.]

john nower: Zeppel.

zeppel: Sir.

john nower: Ask George to come here at once.

zeppel: Very good, sir.

[john gets a map out. Enter george.]

john nower: Red Shaw is spending the day at Brandon Walls. We must get him. You know the ground well, don't you, George?

george: Pretty well. Let me see the map. There's a barn about a hundred yards from the house. Yes, here it is. If we can occupy that without attracting attention it will form a good base for operations, commands both house and road. If I remember rightly, on the other side of the stream is a steep bank. Yes, you can see from the contours. They couldn't get out that way, but lower down is marshy ground and possible. You want to post some men there to catch those who try.

john nower: Good. Who do you suggest to lead that party?

george: Send Sturton. He knows the whole district blindfold. He and I as boys fished all those streams together.

john nower: I shall come with you. Let's see: it's dark now about five. Fortunately there's no moon and it's cloudy. We'll start then about half-past. Pick your men and get some sandwiches made up in the kitchen. I'll see about the ammunition if you will remember to bring a compass. We meet outside at a quarter past.

[Exeunt. Enter kurt and culley.]

kurt: There's time for a quick one before changing. What's yours?

culley: I'll have a sidecar, thanks.

kurt: Zeppel, one sidecar and one C.P.S. I hear Chapman did the lake in eight.

culley: Yes, he is developing a very pretty style. I am not sure though that Pepys won't beat him next year if he can get out of that double kick. Thanks. Prosit.

kurt: Cheerio.

[Enter walter and trudy.]

walter: Two half pints, Zeppel, please. [To kurt.] Can you let me have a match? How is the Rugger going?

kurt: All right, thank you. We have not got a bad team this season.

walter: Where do you play yourself?

kurt: Wing 3Q.

walter: Did you ever see Warner? No, he'd be before your time. You remember him don't you, Trudy?

trudy: He was killed in the fight at Colefangs, wasn't he?

walter: You are muddling him up with Hunter. He was the best three- quarter I have ever seen. His sprinting was marvellous to watch.

zeppel (producing Christmas turkey): Not bad eh?

trudy (feeling it): Oh a fine one. For tomorrow's dinner?

zeppel: Yes. Here, puss . . . gobble, gobble . . .

trudy (to walter): What have you got Ingo for Christmas?

walter: A model crane. Do you think he will like it?

trudy: He loves anything mechanical. He's so excited he can't sleep.

kurt: Come on, Culley, finish your drink. We must be getting along.

[To walter.] You must come down to the field on Monday and

see us.

walter: I will if I can.

[Exit kurt and culley.]

trudy: Is there any news yet?

walter: Nothing has come through. If things are going right they may be back any time now.

trudy: I suppose they will get him?

walter: It's almost certain. Nower has waited long enough.

trudy: I am sick of this feud. What do we want to go on killing each other for? We are all the same. He's trash, yet if I cut my finger it bleeds like his. But he's swell, keeps double shifts working all night by flares: His mother squealed like a pig when he came crouching out.

Sometimes we read a sign, cloud in the sky,

The wet tracks of a hare, quicken the step

Promise the best day. But here no remedy

Is to be thought of, no news but the new death;

A Nower dragged out in the night, a Shaw

Ambushed behind the wall. Blood on the ground

Would welcome fighters. Last night at Hammergeill

A boy was born fanged like a weasel. I am old,

Shall die before next winter, but more than once shall hear

The cry for help, the shooting round the house.

walter: The best are gone.

Often the man, alone shut, shall consider

The killings in old winters, death of friends.

Sitting with stranger shall expect no good.

Spring came, urging to ships, a casting off,

But one would stay, vengeance not done; it seemed

Doubtful to them that they would meet again.

Fording in the cool of the day they rode

To meet at crossroads when the year was over:

Dead is Brody, such a man was Maul.

I will say this not falsely; I have seen

The just and the unjust die in the day,

All, willing or not, and some were willing.

Here they are.

[Enter John Nower, George, Sturton and others. The three speak alternately.]

Day was gone, Night covered sky,

Black over earth, When we came there,

To Brandon Walls, Where Red Shaw lay

Hateful and sleeping, Unfriendly visit.

I wished to revenge, Quit fully

Who my father at Colefangs valley,

Lying in ambush, Cruelly shot,

With life for life.

Then watchers saw They were attacked,

Shouted in fear, A night alarm

To men asleep, Doomed men awoke,

Felt for their guns, Ran to the doors,

Would wake their master Who lay with woman,

Upstairs together, Tired after love.

He saw then There would be shooting

Hard fight.

Shot answered shot, Bullets screamed,

Guns shook, Hot in the hand,

Fighters lay, Groaning on ground

Gave up life. Edward fell,

Shot through the chest, First of our lot,

By no means refused fight, Stephen was good,

His first encounter, Showed no fear,

Wounded many.

Then Shaw knew We were too strong,

Would get away Over the moor,

Return alive, But found at the ford

Sturton waiting, Greatest gun-anger,

There he died, Nor any came,

Fighters home, Nor wives shall go

Smiling to bed. They boast no more.

[stephen suddenly gets up.]

stephen: A forward forward can never be a backward backward.

george: Help me put Stephen to bed, somebody. He got tight on the way back. Hullo, they've caught a spy.

voices outside: Look out. There he is. Catch him. Got you.

[Enter kurt and others with prisoner.]

kurt: We found this chap hiding in an outhouse.

john nower: Bring him here. Who are you?

stephen: I know him. I saw him once at Eickhamp. He's Seth Shaw's brother.

john nower: He is, is he. What do you come here for? You know what we do to spies. I'll destroy the whole lot of you. Take him out.

spy: You may look big, but we'll get you one day, Nower.

[Exeunt all but john nower, stephen following.]

stephen: Don't go, darling.

[john nower sits. A shot outside followed by cheers.]

[Enter zeppel.]

zeppel: Will you be wanting anything more to-night, sir?

john nower: No, that will be all thank you.

zeppel: Good night, sir.

john nower:

Always the following wind of history
Of others' wisdom makes a buoyant air
Till we come suddenly on pockets where
Is nothing loud but us; where voices seem
Abrupt, untrained, competing with no lie
Our fathers shouted once. They taught us war,
To scamper after darlings, to climb hills,
To emigrate from weakness, find ourselves
The easy conquerors of empty bays:
But never told us this, left each to learn,
Hear something of that soon-arriving day
When to gaze longer and delighted on
A face or idea be impossible.

Could I have been some simpleton that lived

Before disaster sent his runners here:

Younger than worms, worms have too much to bear.

Yes, mineral were best: could I but see

These woods, these fields of green, this lively world

Sterile as moon.

chorus:

The Spring unsettles sleeping partnerships,

Foundries improve their casting process, shops

Open a further wing on credit till

The winter. In summer boys grow tall
With running races on the froth-wet sand,
War is declared there, here a treaty signed;
Here a scrum breaks up like a bomb, there troops
Deploy like birds. But proudest into traps
Have fallen. These gears which ran in oil for week
By week, needing no look, now will not work;
Those manors mortgaged twice to pay for love
Go to another.

O how shall man live
Whose thought is born, child of one farcical night,
To find him old? The body warm but not
By choice, he dreams of folks in dancing bunches,
Of tart wine spilt on home-made benches,
Where learns, one drawn apart, a secret will
Restore the dead; but comes thence to a wall.
Outside on frozen soil lie armies killed
Who seem familiar but they are cold.
Now the most solid wish he tries to keep
His hands show through; he never will look up,
Say "I am good". On him misfortune falls
More than enough. Better where no one feels,
The out-of-sight, buried too deep for shafts.

[Enter father christmas. He speaks to the audience.]

father christmas: Ladies and Gentlemen: I should like to thank you all very much for coming here to-night.

Now we have a little surprise for you. When you go home, I hope you will tell your friends to come and bring the kiddies, but you will remember to keep this a secret, won't you? Thank you. Now I will not keep you waiting any longer.

[Lights. A trial. John Nower as the accuser. The spy as accused. Joan as his warder with a gigantic feeding bottle. Father Christmas as president, the rest as jury, wearing school caps.]

Father Christmas: Is there any more evidence?

John Nower: Yes. I know we have and are making terrific sacrifices, but we cannot give in. We cannot betray the dead. As we pass their graves can we be deaf to the simple eloquence of their inscriptions, those who in the glory of their early manhood gave up their lives for us? No, we must fight to the finish.

Father Christmas: Very well. Call the witness.

[Enter Bo.]

Bo:

In these days during the migrations, days

Freshening with rain reported from the mountains,

By loss of memory we are reborn,

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Anita Jones:

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