notebook 36
workbk for loose ends?

There are four aspects of our present Weltanschauung which have made an artistic vocation more difficult than it used to be.

1) The loss of belief in the eternity of the physical universe

.. Physics, geology & biology have now replaced this everlasting universe with a picture of nature as a process in which nothing is now what it was or what it will be. Today, Christian & Atheist alike are eschatologically minded. It is difficult for a modern artist to believe he can make an enduring object when he has no model of endurance to go by; he is more tempted than his predecessors to abandon the search for perfection as a waste of time and be content with sketches & improvisations.

2) The loss of belief in the significance and reality of sensory phenomena.

.. Hitherto, the traditional conception of the phenomenal world has been one of the sacramental analogies: what the senses perceived was an outward & visible sign of the inward & invisible, but both were believed to be real & valuable. Modern science has destroyed

our faith in the naïve observation of our senses; we cannot, it tells us, even know what the physical universe is really like; we can only hold whatever subjective notion is appropriate to the particular human purpose we have in view.

This destroys the traditional conception of art as mimesis, for there is no longer a nature out there to be truly or falsely imitated; all an artist can be true to are his subjective sensations & feelings.

3/ The loss of belief in a norm of human nature which will always require the same kind of man-fabricated world to be at home in. Until the Industrial Revolution, the way in which men lived changed so slowly that any man, thinking of his great-grandchildren, could imagine them as people living the same kind of life with the same kind of needs & satisfactions as himself. The artist, therefore, no longer has any assurance, when he makes something, that even the next generation will find it enjoyable or comprehensible.

He cannot help desiring an immediate success, with all the danger to his integrity which that implies.

Further, the fact that we now have at our disposal the arts of all ages and cultures, has completely changed the meaning of the word tradition. It no longer means a way of working handed down from one generation to the next, a sense of tradition now means a consciousness of the whole of the past as present, yet at the same time as a structured whole the parts of which are related in terms of before and after. Originality no longer means a slight modification in the style of one's immediate predecessors; it means a capacity to find in any work of any date or place a clue to finding one's authentic voice. The burden of choice & selection is put squarely upon the shoulders of each individual poet & it is a heavy one.

4/ The disappearance of the Public Realm as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds. To the Greeks the Private Realm was the sphere of life ruled by the necessity of sustaining life, & the Public Realm the sphere of freedom where a man could disclose himself to others.

Today, the significance of the terms private & public has been reversed; public life is the necessary impersonal life, the place where a man fulfils his social function, and it is in his private life that he is free to be his personal self. PP. 78-80

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In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous members, that Home Laborers are also Home Builders

P. 88

'The Poet & the City' in The Dyer's Hand and other essays: W. H. Auden. 1963

1952

Long ago this smouldering stuff, soon
and circle three times round
till in a ring of fiery smoke scarf of flame & smoke
your head and heart are bound wound
and you'll be free from any shell /side
from over, underground.

And, as you burst so,
repeat this ancient charm —
"The chariots and committee rooms sweatshops
my soul shall take no harm
for I have kindly fire burn earth
that kept my fathers warm!"

This blessed fire I bring burning
was voted by no switch
I took it from a poor man's hearth:
he dug it from the ditch
and with the ancient of its light (of life)
forever I am rich

Folk Custom

1952

On foolish neighbour farther up the hill
already twice before the bench, again
has worn more trouble with his favorite shell
he wore a path to like a rain-hard lane
running his head into that obeying noose
who only made potteen for stable use.

It had been something of this flashed the staff
at every ceilidh round the countryside
and from the ready orders shouted enough
to buy his drinks or get a second bride
but did no better and no more to do
than shatter a [illegible] fully, slay the bride.

This man has commodiousness that offends;
we all have little errors to confess —
but up before the petty sessions once
and made a man such rude a laughing-stock
that we heard of other men who strength
or skulking all those days were never caught

The High Deeds of Finn

1951

Before I was old enough for school
my grandfather told me of Finn MacCool
a middle-sized giant with laughing eyes
kitten-like any from tomes his size
strong as a buffalo self-reliant
he fought that year with the Scottish giant
and hurled a sod in a careless way
the hole that the lake-filled [illegible] became dark night
and the sod flew wide as the giant ran
and splashed in the sea as the Isle of Man
and Lough Neagh that holds a light
which shows up best that the Irish sky
Lough Neagh! why, Finn MacCool
sat down there on a creepie stool
The Mourne and the Sperrins are heaps of stone
that he pelted up to search for a bone
for the scythe he swung when he mowed the hills
the sweeping dark Erne between his two thumbs
he scooped a bay with the blade of his shield
and dumped the mud and called it Donegal

~~Fern~~ From the very book where his ancestors began
he day dreamt; there was now the Baron
He ganged and he groomed the same age's glens
where his flocks were wild for the work of spears
as Steyngrs, Carlingford, Scardy and Forfale
are monuments to some mourning's lord
O name engraven on lore yore elsewhere
twice heard in passing it like
it was Fern herself that took it there

I dreamed for years of Fern Macord returned
and carried my dream to the gates of the school
but the master declared there was nothing in't to
and he from his hound work over to hunts
where the book monsters a lesson they
a cadaver make a story
that Fern was refugeat
no giant at all but some frightened man
the shambling hand of a little child
who had strayed or wandered long ago
there amongst men the frightened
that Fern has suffered many a moan

~~dear~~ above all the deeds we account our gems
I was he for the barefoot children sorted
in the name of Patrick cleared every snake
He caught and returned the common bells
that Tyrconnell fired against Derry's walls
and when they left in my Ambrosian glen
of the sweetest of all the heartbeating men
who received the harvests from Castlewalk
and got to Glenarm before them all
it was Fern who took Sorcha to our lay shade
while the harvest crackers clung to the wildwoods
and the rocks that lay still call the Glenarmman's hight
and by Fern is a sign of his strength
he pushed it out of his careless way
and left it safe for another day

In gratitude for all that Macord has done
the bells he hunted the access he rose
the noble gestures the neighbour's
but his billet's lost in
that can always lost in instance facts

but there's still a lot for him to do
before we can let him say his thoughts
or of his walking gait has a hero
and so will you when you understand
He may even have done his strength to you
the fact is that you shelter of the better Bayne.

if, not for, his mother

the
I learns reversed from his mother
admiring herself in the mirror,
dissatisfied with the left shoes
to give the lame another shape
to what one she wore
the year before.

the
Faith taught to shed his years
everything lost face appears,
reduced to matter or to salts
or heavily drunk up his milk,
or thirsty lie
unshackedly;

destined
happy or lonely wheel inspired
his father died son learn his hands,
stepped overboard, cared end less
for all rude victim co success,
his poor but week
so gone and breath

while his brothers, the eleven and
and the garrick golfer, John,
were held before his cynic eyes
as instruction to be wise
as [illegible] [illegible]
for bevel cream

[illegible] [illegible] his image in her mind
enlarging slowly to a kind
of [illegible] [illegible] of [illegible] [illegible] of these
of the qualities of these
in [illegible]
[illegible]
a microphone.

and [illegible] he has betrayed
the hack with life has felt neither
the darkest air once she shook
for the darkness he seeks the weak
and never sight
for flattery

Already through his eyes he feel
the subtle horse sleep as steel
and find himself inclined to rise
his mother's [illegible] exercise
for bowing to
the less than wise.

1951

An Exercise in Standard Habbe

A student came from Ballintogy,
a wholesome, laughing countryboy
was new at the farm to employ
his [illegible] leisure
in turning verses to enjoy
the poets to assume

I showed him how with little cost
[illegible] better
his [illegible] expressed
in the bleak verse of Robert Frost
Nairn
and as a shock
takes to the barn to shed the husks,
he tried his hand.

The lines came supple, steady, clear
[illegible] to
they held the country countryman.
There were no flowery discourses
but hard spheres
and half a dozen times over

he's seek my praising.

But once he read his verses over
to some one calling at the door
who had a farm a mile or three or four
townlands for visiting
that he might show his mind he's score
by her skilled timing

Awhile she listened to him, dumb,
without so much as "Law" or "hum";
the, sucking at her toothless gum,
she said: I think
I'd rather see the thoughts that come
towards that chink!"

1951

The Old Weir Disturbed Millrace

From the high stream the water poured and foaled
a unstaunched torrent though the gaping boards
which fenced, in better times, the streams short;
but now it struck the lower constant river
with such a jet that rose a fountain head,
a crest of spray which curved to the light
a bell of blossom like a summer thorn
weaving the gentle colours of the sun
a breathless moment, a thousand things
as suddenly becoming, then withdrawn,
a snowy bush that quivered with shell flakes
a bud of snow & bud of lambent blossom,
a delicate shape of ever shifting atoms,
marked then also, lost into the sea.

1949

My verses are the leaves of my heart;
that tree was there because I saw it so
I neared that rough well where crusts lichens grow
not for itself but since it was a part
of my and the jolting cart
far in the dusk, the mountain smeared with snow
gave sound and light from which I had to know
to fix the beat from which my start.

Now I have learned this very active sense
the full grained multiplicity of things
till by experience
reaped, ground and rendered into common bread
which will sustain my journeyings
awhile, and who knows after, I am dead.

An Autumn Moment

All day the strong wind rushed northwest by north,
rending the leaves in corners, writing dry
the bare-wet lands, and over broken earth
spread a lighter surface, sundered by
and flicking skirts of shadow on the ground
Till breath was an adventure gaily borne
despite the bitter winter's forecast found
in crowded berries on the whistling thorn
Then as the sun ~~went~~ dusked down, his tilted light
raking the rocking treetops, the black crows
whirling in gusts, were each this moment bright
against the wind's feel as they sank or rose
And ~~the~~ rich autumnus ~~clamor~~ declined and fell
was checked and held by this interval
So weather in this March-fresh interval
played have with shy autumn's dying fall.

memory
My thought ~~skips back~~
~~I think back~~ ~~now~~ to younger years that bred
the singing lyric ~~clustering round~~ clustering lecking off the thought,
~~The thick tang of spiced wine~~ — unsought
~~with little labour forced cheerily wrought~~
~~Crisp, the lines sotting~~
and easily carried in a memory head;
these days, with skill no less and knowledge wisdom more,
the verses come far slower, in a key
closer to speech than song, their quality
~~not~~ this time ~~of~~ one season's ~~early but of~~ but the last is of four. but the best of four but doubtful yet.

And yet the ~~change~~ lack is obvious, the mood
that was ~~sharp~~ light lyric is diffused and ~~gray~~ grey day,
each new blown sun rises on a ~~wider~~ shriver day, winter
with green bravery ~~merely~~ sickening but the ripened corn. gathered
~~yet~~ I look back with simple gratitude
~~to the~~ that first honey made from blossomed thorn.

1946

Periodicity

First Day and Night surprised the child's moist eye
Night cold to wake in, not the warm close dark womb
and, spaced with noises, sometimes you among,
and Day that tiptoes from the toy-stacked room

The lessons told by holidays and games,
the kite, the egg, the hoop, the wedding sea,
by loaves piled in the church porch, air by memes
or parcels hanging from a grocer's tree.

This takes a while to learn and as you learn
you too are changing into someone else
then years appear, the date they say you were born,
the New Year strange upon the tongues of bells

Known ~~as emotions~~ as emotions, known by senses now
the abundance in sleep, the snowarmed well,
the smell of fog, the bitter taste of snow,

the evening shouts that greet the fielded ball.
burning

1964

Ecumenism

They make their truce among the sundered sects
and know ~~bows~~ nods to beard, ~~tongue~~ bowtrees answers bell:
the pulpits that once condemned the scarlet whore
pronounce a lisping disbelief in hell.

The stakes and faggots ~~alone~~ dumbly thrust away,
martyrs and thumbscrews handled out of sight,
the revered oils poured into one round dish
to feed one flame against ~~the Arctic~~ abhorrent Night

1962

I pace these lanes where progress and decay
scribble my palimpsests upon the scene:
the new bypass gable stairs rises white and clean
where once a reeking midden seeped away;
the tractor treads her sheer into the clay
but left the middle track still clover green;
these tired wells, once a homestead, bulge and lean
and restless swarm where children used to play.

And all those old men gone, those slow old men
whose hands were thick with stalls, no longer wait
on my approach at loosen end or gate
to warm my heart's dull embers with their speech
that offered thanks for sermons I'll still preach
when I am master of my moods again.

The Milk Cart

It is hard to remember the changes. I recall,
for example, that milk used to come in a two wheeled cart
carried in metal containers like two farm churns.

Stopped at the corner, horse nose begged, the lids wrenched off
a men's dirty wrist scooped milk in a little tin
a tin with a curved half handle, filling in turn
quart cans, pint cans, half pints, jugs that the boys
learned to waiting doors with, but hands laden
to tilt the liquid into flowered jugs and bowls.

I can even remember my fathers' word for it
Unhygienic he called it. Splashing that shows
and dust and horse droppings were thick in the motty air
it is true, indeed, that the milk was sour next morning

Now milkfloats pass in the morning before we are up
the pasteurised bottles stand afterwards stark by the door step

the process reduced to repeated patter of feet
and the dance of gloss upon metal jingling, a sound
scarcely part of the morning's wakening birdsong

but even so I miss the small jet hitting horses
and the men between his guest cars like a charioteer.

1966

The Nickel-eat

We had not met for six or seven years,
a slight lad then, his eyes, his mind were bright
with dreams of social justice, for revolution;
his being strapped for action, his thought single
clear as an ~~arrow~~ bow strung, tense for its intention;
with none of the crippling harness of the world
to hamper or hobble him. Neither girls nor cars,
career or hobby, love of self or money,
birdcline of scholarship, sweet thing of art
traps of domestic comfort, to divert
his frank gaze from the first, fierce hint of dawn.

And I had envied him his youth, his dream
my own dream more disciplined. But blurred
with too much reading, thought, with ~~resolutions~~ diversions
of interest, of liking, of indulgence
with what I like to call my loyalties
his shen lack of selfinterest, his open heart.

it known he'd remained the sort of person' interested
with strikes, with strike committees, protest meetings
agitation, propaganda conference
I'd seen his name threed through the jeering street
bandage up my aching conscience - work,
student west end south - factory - gate
bannered at demonstrations, now and then
signed - to some article - which work itself
in the numb jargon of his honest sect
I'd thought the mould was set, the brittle lash
with reflex gestures, slogan toted and aired.

When he arrived to ask my signature
as cheerfully as one might beg a match.
A man, now six years older, he had not lost
the brightness of the eyes, the friendly smile
nor puffed or stuffed with windy rhetoric,
the cliches
~~nor offered~~ tired cliché in his talk
gentler, less arrogant, not less resolute

My envy now was spiced with admiration
still undefected, not grown cynical
the dream survived intact, the locked rooms
his course was marked with had gone slipping past
had been navigated

He knew the men he'd worked with, virtues, faults
He asked to stand aside for six months, a year
to ponder over his experience
take stock, decide how best he could be used
and what he'd need to learn to meet that use.

So for the once he'd need a reference
to buy the time in some university job
He'd fixed his mind on. So I signed the form
Were he my son I should be satisfied.

An Artist: S B McC.

a senior student
~~Still~~ at the art school
a gangling fellow who loped rather than walked
his paintings stilted but derivative
his wood carvings clumsily experimental
only his drypoints – the copper plate in his pocket
~~to~~ be drawn upon directly with the needle –
commanded a delicate personal quality
these, and one brief imagist poem
about a lion and a fern cart.

It was because of this
he suddenly took me for his enemy –
I had hoped – pretended – without asking his permission –
It happened in an evening – ~~without~~ a word
I walked round the shelves and tables gathering up
his sketches, carvings and wooden figures.
I lumbered down the stairs for the last time.

The drypoints he could not remove
because I had paid for them.

Within the year he was dead
I did not hear of this for several months
and now, with other ~~contemporaries dead~~ dead who knew him,
I do not know if anyone else remembers him.

I had learned that it was not the printing of the poem
which had so enraged him
but where it had been printed,
a circumstance I could not comprehend
for most young poets like to see their verses
in print, anywhere.
It seemed too cheap a price, in spite of the handsome sum
to among the few pictures in my possession
which I always keep somewhere at hand
but the last line of the poem
~~is his best epitaph~~:
"~~the lion~~ that laid away"

19.11.1959

Dresden.

For me your city was plucked out of time
a dream-pavilion cast in porcelain,
where courtly dancers paced in masque and mime,
its fell wells ringed with forests that again
no age should ever challenge. Time ground on,
your fire's disaster scorching then my fears.
These wells were shattered, all the dancers gone
in the dark Europe of my middle years.

But now the darkness breaks. And I have stood
here with my thousands in the Altmarkt square
and watch my silent exit of brotherhood
and yoked my lonely prayer to your vast prayer
that, by the courage with of common men
we never shall ever dare let darkness again

For me your city was plucked out of time,
a dream-pavilion cast in porcelain,
where the masked courtly dancers paced in ~~masque and~~ mime,
its fell wells ringed with forests that again
no age should ever challenge. Time ground on,
your fire's disaster ~~scorched my~~ intensified this my fears.
~~These wells were~~ to shards all shattered, all the dancers those gone,
in the dark Europe of my middle years

4.1.82

To the People of Dresden

Your famous city stood, plucked out of time,
a dream-pavilion glazed in porcelain
when the masked dancers paced in stately mime
with grace no later age could ~~match again~~ sustain attain.
Then towards disaster ~~we~~ all ~~saw~~ now ~~only~~ with dreams
your cruel firestorm flashing on fears,
to shards all shattered, all those dancers gone,
in the dark Europe of my middle years.

But now that darkness breaks; and I have stood,
shouldered with thousands in your Altmarkt square,
~~at noon~~ to sweep my silent oath of brotherhood
and ~~pound~~ pour my lonely prayer to you vast height
that, by the common will of common men,
no man shall ever darken day again.

I. Representative Person

We met her first in Prague on our First Form visit—
more like a Swede than Czech, or so we gauged
against our meagre gallery of types,
with pale blonde hair and skin, her hair swept up
in what we'd then thought western fashion only,
dark brows, grey eyes, with a full friendly mouth,
soft down along the lips, a comely girl.

Her vivid English lively from a mind
informed as few of our contemporaries
on theatre and art, precise with names
recognised as masters of the schools,
as quick with exposition of the facts
of industry, production, wages, leisure
without evasion or apologies;
yet never priggish, never doctrinaire,
would take proferred drink or cigarette,
dance at the evening's end and join a chorus.

And in our thoughts she became identified
with the best facets of The People's state,
part of our Europe still, though communist,
intelligent, assured, - a rounded person
unlike those aird Dresden bourgeoisie,
humourless, scarcely orthodox
nor flashy, brittle as her counterpart
might be with us, a cynic P.R.O

Over the years cards crossed remembering,
and when, at odds with our sick polity,
our hopes swung eastward to the growing end,
the sprouting grain of harvest we'd not share
she stood, taught, a symbol for that hope.

Then Sonja came herself, her altered hair
with centre parting, curling round her face,
the natural colour showing out the bleach,
a little tired, a shade more womanly
who'd been all girl before, the lips still soft.

I wondered if she'd see much change in us
more grey for sure, coarsened, less flexible
in mind, so much the years had lost, then shining ~~the gleam~~.
with our divided loyalties ~~laid~~ ~~bare~~ shelter tense,
tarnished by acceptance, ~~self~~ and deceived,
with comfort in this mixed ~~society~~ economy

We dared not ask but hoped. She never answered;
yet friendship had not flagged. But when we guzzled
what seemed to her commendable envy us
in this old Middlendaty of spices and cars,
it was the little redbrick slated houses, roughcast
the quiet ~~towns~~ semis in the leafy suburb
which gripped attention,
~~the standard roses, walls of Cotswold stone,~~
a wry corrective to our smug disdain
we had no heart to seek to justify
in face of her deep unashamed delight
in standard roses, low walls of Cotswold stone
~~the small neat lawns~~, close-trimmed grass, ~~in~~ leaded glass in doors.

St. Stephen's Day, the weather's warm:
it seems a premate of the spring
the finches twitch & twitted teem
& stiff-necked swans beat steady wing

The old man [illegible] [illegible] coats
walks thinking out to greet the sun
as the elm jewel-headed twigs
their spindled walls flenty stone.