

Markings

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Translated from the Swedish by Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden

From generations of soldiers and government officials on my father's side I inherited a belief that no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to your country – or humanity. This service required a sacrifice of all personal interests, but likewise the courage to stand up unflinchingly for your convictions.

From scholars and clergymen on my mother's side I inherited a belief that, in the very radical sense of the Gospels, all men were equals as children of God, and should be met and treated by us as our masters.

Faith is a state of the mind and the soul. ... The language of religion is a set of formulas which register a basic spiritual experience. It must not be regarded as describings in terms to be defined by philosophy, the reality which is accessible to our senses and which we can analyze with the tools of logic. I was late in understanding what this meant. When I finally reached that point, the beliefs in which I was once brought up and which, in fact, had given my life direction even while my intellect still challenged their validity, were recognized by me as mine in their own right and by my free choice . . . the explanation of how man should live a life of active social service in full harmony with himself as a member of the community of the spirit, I found in the writings of those great medieval mystics for whom "self-surrender" had been the way to self-realization, and who in "singleness of mind" and "inwardness" had found strength to say Yes to every demand which the needs of their neighbors made them face, and to say Yes also to every fate life had in store for them. ... Love – that much misused and misinterpreted word – for them meant simply an overflowing of the strength with which they felt themselves filled when living in true self-oblivion. And this love found natural expression in an unhesitant fulfillment of duty and an unreserved acceptance of life, whatever it brought them personally of toil, suffering - or happiness. 10 – from the Foreword

Thoreau: It is as hard to see oneself as to look backwards without turning round. 11

As the records of the mystics show, the great temptation of the contemplative life—many of them passed through periods when they succumbed to it—is some form or other of Quietism, an indifference to and impatience with, not only "works" in the conventional sense, but also all the institutional and intellectual aspects of human life. 25

Tomorrow we shall meet.

Death and I -

And he shall thrust his sword

Into one who is wide awake.

But in the meantime how grievous the memory

Of hours frittered away. 31

Life only demands from you the strength you possess. Only one feat is possible—not to have run away. 33

How can you expect to keep your powers of hearing when you never want to listen? That God should have time for you, you seem to take as much for granted as that you cannot have time for Him. 34

It makes one's heart ache when one sees that a man has staked his soul upon some end, the hopeless imperfection and futility of which is immediately obvious to everyone but himself. But isn't this, after all, merely a matter of degree? Isn't the pathetic grandeur of human existence in some way bound up with the eternal disproportion in this world, where self-delusion is necessary to life, between the honesty of the striving and the nullity of the result? That we all—every one of us—take ourselves seriously is not *merely* ridiculous. 35

To reach perfection, we must all pass, one by one, through the death of self-effacement. 42

Descending into the valley, at the last curve he lost control of the car. As it toppled over the bank at the side of the road, his only thought was: "Well, at least my job's done."
His one, weary, happy thought.

It wasn't so: he was to go on living. But not to go on with this journey. When he came to, and the solid world again took shape around him, he could hardly keep back his tears—tears of self-pity and disappointment because his vacation plans had been ruined.

The one reaction was no less genuine than the other. We may be willing to turn our backs on life, but we still complain like children when life does not grant our wishes. 46

So, in the end, we were, in fact, to blame. We had not voiced our criticisms, but we had allowed them to stop us from giving him a single word of acknowledgment, and in this way had barred every road to improvement.

For it is always the stronger one who is to blame. We lack life's patience. Instinctively, we try to eliminate a person from our sphere of responsibility as soon as the outcome of this particular experiment by Life appears, in our eyes, to be a failure. 47

... all his talk about the necessary preconditions for doing something worthwhile prove an insecure barrier against self-disgust. 50

When the conflicting currents of the unconscious create engulfing whirlpools, the waters can again be guided into a single current if the dam sluice be opened into the channel of prayer—and if that channel has been dug deep enough. 56

Between experiencing and having experienced—the moment when the experience yields its last secrets. A moment we only discover is already past when cracks and stains appear, the gilding flakes off, and we wonder what it was that once so attracted us. 58

Like the bee, we distill poison from honey for our self-defense – what happens to the bee if it uses its sting is well known. 58

The little urchin makes a couple of feeble hops on one leg without falling down. And is filled with admiration at his dexterity, doubly so, because there are onlookers. Do we ever grow up?
63

How can we ever be the sold short or the cheated, we who for every service have long ago been overpaid? - Meister Eckhart – 67

Old men ought to be explorers (T.S. Eliot) – last lines of *East Coker*.

[Not in *Markings*, but the stanza runs:

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.]

To be "sociable"—to talk merely because convention forbids silence, to rub against one another in order to create the illusion of intimacy and contact: what an example of *la condition humaine*. Exhausting, naturally, like any improper use of our spiritual resources. In miniature, one of the many ways in which mankind successfully acts as its own scourge—in the hell of spiritual death. 68

A fable: once upon a time, there was a crown so heavy that it could only be worn by one who remained completely oblivious to its glitter. 69

Your fancy dress, the mask you put on with such care so as to appear to your best advantage was the wall between you and the sympathy you sought. A sympathy you won on the day when you stood there naked.

The voice which gave orders was only obeyed when it became a helpless wail. 69

... a man has given himself completely to something he finds worth living for. 71

The man who is unwilling to accept the axiom that he who chooses one path is denied the others must try to persuade himself, I suppose, that the logical thing to do is to remain at the crossroads. 71

The irredeemable in a man of power: vice versa, the power of the redeemed. 76

Work as an anaesthetic against loneliness, books as a substitute for people—! 82

Is your disgust at your emptiness to be the only life with which you fill it? 84

A landscape can sing about God, a body about Spirit. 89

Maturity: among other things, the unclouded happiness of the child at play, who takes it for granted that he is at one with his playmates. 89

Then I saw that the wall had never been there, that the "unheard-of" is here and this, not something and somewhere else, that the "offering" is here and now, always and everywhere - "surrendered" to be what, in me, God gives of Himself to Himself. 90-91

"Faith is the marriage of God and the Soul." (St. John of the Cross) Faith *is*: it cannot, therefore, be comprehended, far less identified with, the formulae in which we paraphrase what is.

“ - *en una noche oscura.*’ The Dark Night of the Soul – so dark that we may not even look for faith. The night in Gethsemane when the last friends left you have fallen asleep, all the others are seeking your downfall, and *God is silent*, as the marriage is consummated. 91

Before Thee in humility, with Thee in faith, in Thee in peace. 95

Your position never gives you the right to command. It only imposes on you the duty of so living your life that others can receive your orders without being humiliated. 96

The only kind of dignity which is genuine is that which is not diminished by the indifference of others. 97

Prayer, crystallized in words, assigns a permanent wave length on which the dialogue has to be continued, even when our mind is occupied with other matters. 97

He broke fresh ground—because, and only because, he had the courage to go ahead without asking whether others were following or even understood. He had no need for the divided responsibility in which others seek to be safe from ridicule, because he had been granted a faith which required no confirmation—a contact with reality, light and intense like the touch of a loved hand: a union in self-surrender without self-destruction, where his heart was lucid and his mind loving. In sun and wind, how near and how remote— How different from what the knowing ones call Mysticism. 100

"Concerning men and their way to peace and concord—?" The truth is so simple that it is considered a pretentious banality. Yet it is continually being denied by our behaviour. Every day furnishes new examples.

- It is more important to be aware of the grounds for your own behaviour than to understand the motives of another.
- The other's "face" is more important than your own.
- If, while pleading another's cause, you are at the same time seeking something for yourself, you cannot hope to succeed.
- You can only hope to find a lasting solution to a conflict if you have learned to see the other objectively, but, at the same time, to experience his difficulties subjectively.
- The man who "likes people" disposes once and for all of the man who despises them.
- All first-hand experience is valuable, and he who has given up looking for it will one day find—that he lacks what he needs: a closed mind is a weakness, and he who approaches persons or painting or poetry without the youthful ambition to learn a new language and so gain access to someone else's perspective on life, let him beware.
- A successful lie is doubly a lie, an error which has to be corrected is a heavier burden than truth: only an uncompromising "honesty" can reach the bedrock of decency which you should always expect to find, even under deep layers of evil.
- Diplomatic "finesse" must never be another word for fear of being unpopular; that is to seek the appearance of influence at the cost of its reality. 102

The everlastingness of things – an ironic commentary upon your claims to ownership. 104

The Lover desires the perfection of the Beloved – which requires, among other things, the liberation of the Beloved from the Lover. 105

Before Thee, Father,

In righteousness and humility,

With Thee, Brother,

In faith and courage,

In Thee, Spirit,

In stillness.

Thine – for Thy will is my destiny,

Dedicated – for my destiny is to be used and used up according to Thy will. 109

Do what you can – and the task will rest lightly in your hand, so lightly that you will be able to look forward to the more difficult tests which may be awaiting you. 109

Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean. The dream explains why we need to be forgiven, and why we must forgive. In the presence of God, nothing stands between Him and us – we *are* forgiven. But we *cannot* feel His presence if anything is allowed to stand between ourselves and others. 110

The third hour. And the ninth. — They are *here*. And *now*. They *are* now! "Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. We must not sleep during that time." (Pascal) 111

To love life and men as God loves them – for the sake of their infinite possibilities,

- to wait like Him,
- to judge like Him
- without passing judgment,
- to obey the order when it is given
- and never look back –
- then He can use you – then, *perhaps*, He will use you.

And if he doesn't use you – what matter. In His hand, every moment has its meaning, its greatness, its glory, its peace, its co-inherence. 112

How poor is the courage which knows its "why," compared to the quiet heroism an unreflective mind can display in the most inglorious and degrading trials. 115

He who can totally sweep clean the chalice of himself can carry the inborn nature of others to its fulfillment ... 117

"looking straight into one's own heart" - (as we can do in the mirror-image of the Father)

"watching with affection the way people grow" - (as in imitation of the Son)

"coming to rest in perfect equity" - (as in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost)

Like the ultimate experience, our ethical experience is the same for all. Even the Way of the Confucian world is a "Trinity." 117

Uneasy, uneasy, uneasy – Why?

- Because—when opportunity gives you the obligation to create, you are content to meet the demands of the moment, from one day to the next.
- Because—anxious for the good opinion of others, and jealous of the possibility that they may become "famous," you have lowered yourself to wondering what will happen in the end to what you have done and been.

How dead can a man be behind a façade of great ability, loyalty – and ambition!

Bless your uneasiness as a sign that there is still life in you. 119

In the suction of the vacuum, created when a strain upon the nerves ceases but the nerves have not yet relaxed, the lust of the flesh gets its chance to reveal the loneliness of the soul. 120

The "men of the hour," the self-assured who strut about among us in the jingling harness of their success and importance, how can you let yourself be irritated by them. Let them enjoy their triumph—on the level to which it belongs. 120

Faulkner: Our final wish is to have scribbled on the wall our "Kilroy was here."

The last ditch of the enemy. We can sacrifice ourselves completely to that which is beyond and above us – and still hope that the memory of our choice shall remain tied to our name or, at least, that future generations shall understand why and how we acted. At times it seems to us that the bitterness we feel when we fail at an attempted task lies in this: that our failure will condemn our efforts themselves to oblivion.

O contradiction! O last stand! If only the goal can justify the sacrifice, how, then, can you attach a shadow of importance to the question whether or not the memory of your efforts will be associated with your name? If you do, is it not all too obvious that you are still being influenced in your actions by that vain dead dream about "posterity"? 122

Hallowed be Thy name, *not mine*.

Thy kingdom come, *not mine*.

Thy will be done, *not mine*.

Give us peace with Thee

Peace with men

Peace with ourselves.

And free us from all fear. 125

"Of the Eternal Birth"—to me, this now says everything there is to be said about what I have learned and have still to learn.

"The soul that would experience this birth must detach herself from all outward things: within herself completely at one with herself. . . . You must have an exalted mind and a *burning* heart in which, nevertheless, reign silence and stillness." (Meister Eckhart) 124

Be grateful as your deeds become less and less associated with your name, as your feet ever more lightly tread the earth. 126

Night is drawing nigh—

Each day the first day: each day a life.

Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back. It must be held out empty – for the past must only be reflected in its polish, its shape, its capacity. 127

We can reach the point where it becomes possible for us to recognize and understand Original Sin, that dark counter-center of evil in our nature—that is to say, though it is not our nature, it is of it—that something within us which rejoices when disaster befalls the very cause we are trying to serve, or misfortune overtakes even those whom we love. Life in God is not an escape from this, but the way to gain full insight concerning it. It is not our depravity which forces a fictitious religious explanation upon us, but the experience of religious reality which forces the 'Night Side' out into the Light. It is when we stand in the righteous all-seeing light of love that we can dare to look at, admit, and consciously suffer under this something in us which wills disaster, misfortune, defeat to everything outside the sphere of our narrowest self-interest. So

a living relation to God is the necessary precondition for the self-knowledge which enables us to follow a straight path, and so be victorious over ourselves, forgiven by ourselves. 128

We have to acquire a peace and balance of mind such that we can give every word of criticism its due weight, and humble ourselves before every word of praise. 130

"The flutes of exile." (*St John Perse*) Forever among strangers to all that has shaped your life – *alone*. Forever thirsting for the living waters – but not even free to seek them, a *prisoner*.

The answer—the hard straight brutal answer: in the One you are never alone, in the One you are always at home. 132

You are not the oil, you are not the air – merely the point of combustion, the flash-point where the light is born. You are merely the lens in the beam. You can only receive, give, and possess the light as a lens does. 133

You will know Life and be acknowledged by it according to your degree of transparency, your capacity, that is, to vanish as an end, and remain purely as a means. 133

You will have to give up everything. Why, then, weep at this little death? Take it to you – quickly – with a smile die this death, and become free to go further – one with your task, whole in your duty of the moment. 135

In Thy breath – in Thy light –
How insignificant is everything else, how small are we – and how happy in that which alone is great. 137

In the faith which is "God's marriage to the soul," you are *one* in God, and
God is wholly in you,
just as, for you, He is wholly in all you meet.

With this faith, in prayer you descend into yourself to meet the Other,
in the steadfastness and light of this union,
see that all things stand, like yourself, alone before God,
and that each of your acts is an act of creation, conscious, because you are a human
being with human responsibilities, but governed, nevertheless, by the power
beyond human consciousness which has created man.

You are liberated from things, but you encounter in them an experience which has the purity
and clarity of revelation.

In the faith which is "God's marriage to the soul," *everything*, therefore, has a meaning.
So live, then, that you may use what has been put into your hand. ... 139

Too tired for company.
You seek a solitude
You are too tired to fill. 146

Humility is just as much the opposite of self-abasement as it is of self-exaltation. To be humble is *not to make comparisons*. Secure in its reality, the self is neither better nor worse, bigger nor smaller, than anything else in the universe. It is – is nothing, yet at the same time one with everything. It is in this sense that humility is absolute self-effacement.

To be nothing in the self-effacement of humility, yet, for the sake of the task, to embody *its* whole weight and importance in your bearing, as the one who has been called to undertake it. To give to people, works, poetry, art, what the self can contribute, and to take, simply and freely, what belongs to it by reason of its identity. Praise and blame, the winds of success and adversity, blow over such a life without leaving a trace or upsetting its balance.

Towards this, so help me, God - 148

Whitsunday, 1961

I don't know Who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. 169