

# Theology For Life

Beautiful Savior: Encountering Christ Through The Arts

Poetry

Matthew Boyleston

W. H. Auden  
1907-1973





# Musée des Beaux Arts

## 1938

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus* for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



Pieter Bruegel, the Elder  
*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* c.1560





# How May We Approach the Poem as Christians?

- ◆ The Banality of Evil
  - ◆ We Ignore the Suffering of Others
  - ◆ Suffering and Amazement
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- ◆ Suffering is Instrumental to God's Plan
  - ◆ Suffering is Inevitable in God's Plan
  - ◆ Suffering is Inimical to God's Plan

# Friday's Child

(IN MEMORY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, MARTYRED AT FLOSSENBURG, APRIL 9<sup>TH</sup>, 1945)

He told us we were free to choose  
But, children as we were, we thought—  
“Paternal Love will only use  
Force in the last resort

On those too bumptious to repent.”  
Accustomed to religious dread,  
It never crossed our minds He meant  
Exactly what He said.

Perhaps He frowns, perhaps He grieves,  
But it seems idle to discuss  
If anger or compassion leaves  
The bigger bangs to us.

What reverence is rightly paid  
To a Divinity so odd  
He lets the Adam whom He made  
Perform the Acts of God?

It might be jolly if we felt  
Awe at this Universal Man  
(When kings were local, people knelt);  
Some try to, but who can?

The self-observed observing Mind  
We meet when we observe at all  
Is not alarming or unkind  
But utterly banal.



Though instruments at Its command  
Make wish and counterwish come true,  
It clearly cannot understand  
    What It can clearly do.

Since the analogies are rot  
Our senses based belief upon,  
We have no means of learning what  
    Is really going on,

And must put up with having learned  
All proofs or disproofs that we tender  
Of His existence are returned  
    Unopened to the sender.

Now, did He really break the seal  
And rise again? We dare not say;  
But conscious unbelievers feel  
Quite sure of Judgement Day.

Meanwhile, a silence on the cross,  
As dead as we shall ever be,  
Speaks of some total gain or loss,  
And you and I are free

To guess from the insulted face  
Just what Appearances He saves  
By suffering in a public place  
A death reserved for slaves.