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PREFACE

In August of 1941, Constance Rosalie Bicknell Auden died in her sleep at her home in Birmingham, England, at the age of seventy-two. At the time her son W. H. Auden was living in the United States and visiting a friend in Rhode Island. The telephone call announcing her death was taken not by Auden himself but by his companion, Chester Kallman, who then came to Auden's bedroom and gave him the welcome news that they would not be attending a party that evening that Auden had been dreading. Then Kallman told him why they would be staying home.

Auden was stunned and grieved, and not only because he had been very close to his mother all his life. He was already in a state of emotional fragility, having learned just the month before that Kallman, whom he loved and to whom he considered himself married, had been having sex with other men and meant to continue the practice. Auden would later write, "When mother dies, one is, for the first time, really alone in the world and that is hard"; but that experience of isolation was surely made far more intense through its arriving in the midst of hopes already ruined. Some months after the crisis he told his friend James Stern, "I never really loved anyone before, and then when he got through the wall, he became so much a part of my life that I keep forgetting that he is a separate person, and having discovered love, I have also discovered what I never knew before, the dread of being abandoned and left alone."

These experiences were made still more complex for Auden by his recent return to the Christian faith in which he had been raised. His mother's attachment to High Church Anglicanism had shaped his early religious experience, and it was that form of Christian belief and

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practice that Auden had embraced in the year or so preceding her death. In poems he wrote during this period, especially "In Sickness and in Health," Auden clearly associated his transition from unbelief to belief with his transition from a sexual promiscuity focused on physical beauty to faithful marital love. The wedding ring he began to wear at some point in 1939—"this round O of faithfulness we swear"—testified simultaneously to his love for Kallman and to his belief in the God whom in another poem he called "the author and giver of all good things."

In a Christmas verse letter to Kallman he wrote, "Because it is through you that God has chosen to show me my beatitude, / As this morning I think of the Godhead I think of you." It is noteworthy that this letter was written in the Christmas season of 1941, *after* the revelation of Chester's infidelity. Rather than allow the complex, mutually reinforcing interrelations among his love of his mother, his love of Chester, and his embrace of Christianity to unravel, Auden made the decision to renew and reinvigorate them, by an act of intellectual and poetic will. The chief public evidence of this decision is "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," which he began writing about two months after his mother's death. It would become the most explicitly Christian and biblical poem of his career; it includes a character based on himself—Joseph, the husband of Mary; and it is dedicated to the memory of Constance Rosalie Auden.

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