

Absent Friends

fewer heads are gathered round the table
fewer arses rest upon the chairs
fewer hands reach out to grasp the glasses
fewer footsteps sound upon the stairs

fewer voices join the conversation
fewer argue what be wrong or right
stiller the sounds that murmur in the morning
louder the silences that fill the night

sparer the dialectic thus debated
graver the dissertations won or lost
lesser the recognition of the value
greater the tendency to count the cost

first that bright young man arose and left us
his spirit undiminished to the end
some of us were pleased to call him comrade
many more were proud to deem him friend

so full was he of hope and optimism
that we could forge a safer, fairer place
if we would only rise to seize the instant
when we could stare injustice in the face

next that brazen bibliophilic blaggart
expired on his bed beside the sea
surrounded by his boxes books and whisky
so keen of wit; his mind so sharp and free

still I miss his surrealistic humour
the hinterland twixt truth and lie and hoax
his weird conundrums and his wild surmisings
his questions answers and his answers jokes

then that wise and wily old curmudgeon
decided not to play the waiting game
he put away his lenses, films, and filters
without regret or bitterness or blame

he knew that time had stretched beyond last orders
for once he didn't seek to hang on after
and we are better, richer for his friendship
and memories of his raw and raucous laughter

and yet I sense another guest has entered
unwelcome, uninvited, unbeknown
and forced my dearest brother from the fireside
and left us here bereft, bemused, alone

in doing so he's robbed us of the music
the instruments rest silent in the hall
his deep bass tones no more resound the rafters
the rockingseat stands empty gainst the wall

I glimpse again his tall and handsome presence
espy the trilby and the leather coat
the sidelong grin of quiet satisfaction
when he had blown that long sublime blue note

but now the house is rocked to the foundation
by cold mass murder, blind revenge and fear
and gloating in the corner without mercy
that demon stranger grins from ear to ear

I realize all too late he's lurked there lingering
since the dawn that ushered in my birth
to purge the room of love and life and pleasure
and close the curtain on a dying Earth

when it's my time come to quit the table
don't that interloper have my seat
keep it clear in open invitation
for one who's loud and lewd and indiscreet

may not that dire, doomladen, dismal visage
despoil the celebrations in my wake
go blare the cornet loud and strike the upbeat
and slap the bass strings til they nigh-on break

and fill the jugs abrim with red Chianti
and crow, carouse and curse and have a ball
and fetch another firkin from the cellar
because by then we will have drunk it all

Finale

The German conductor Wilhelm Furtwaengler, despite his initial attempts to lessen the full force of the attacks upon non-Nazi musicians in the 1930's eventually succumbed to the Nazi cultural policy. As a result he was never forgiven by some other musicians in the post-war years. He was, incidentally, a very great conductor indeed.

I stood before the band with arms outstretched
conducting with my strange uneven beat
the Freedom Ode to boundless Human Joy
great final movement of the glorious Ninth

behind me serried sitting in their ranks
the sons and daughters of the Master Race
displayed their emblems of a debased sun
while in the front row centre Hitler stared
brow locked tight in his perpetual frown

across the border miles to the east
other musicians shuffled to their deaths
along with poets, painters, artisans
towards the zyklon-chamber nemesis

some say I was perverse t linger there
in bad Berlin when wiser men had fled
far away from this dread German night
to propagate their craft in safer climes

did I collaborate that length too far?
after all, I'd rescued Hindemith
from the full impact of the first attack
and launched Mathis der Maler on the world

that sleek young psychopath who dogs my tail
all surface sheen in search of perfect sound
has far, far worse a history than mine

whose compromise was struck for music's sake

now I walk a lost, low, lonely man
never to greet again my closest peers
when Bruno dwells an ocean's length away
and craggy Otto conjures from his seat
his bare-boned Beethoven in London halls

around is sorrow, shame and calumny;
for art I mimicked Faust and lost my soul;
deaf to my accursed mefisto waltz
I strove to be the finest of my kind:
I meet my tomb the weakest of them all