

The Lives of the Poets: Clerihews after Auden

by [Petrus Tornarius](#) (November 2023)



*Edward Lear Aged 73 and a Half and His Cat Foss, Aged 16,
Edward Lear, 1885*

*... to stink of Poetry / is unbecoming, and never / to
be dull shows a lack of taste. Even a limerick / ought*

*to be something a man of / honor, awaiting death ... /
could read without contempt ...* –W. H. Auden, “The Cave
of Making”

William Blake
took the cake
playing at Adam and Eve in the nude.
Said Catherine Sophia: But isn't it rude!?

Robert Browning
wasn't much given to clowning.
Instead of a risqué anthology,
he gave us *Bishop Blougram's Apology*.

George Gordon, Lord Byron,
never slept with a Siren.
He would've if he could've.
Which is not to say he should've!

Arthur Hugh Clough
wasn't terribly tough.
Say not the struggle nought availeth,
he was sometimes known to complaineth.

George Herbert
denied himself that second scoop of sherbert,
fearing such indulgence
would mess up his metaphysical refulgence.

Edward Lear,
that owlish old dear,
kept a cat called Foss.
Who was definitely the boss.

John Milton

never raised a toast at the Paris Hilton
but enjoyed many a festive *trinque*
at the Four Seasons Hotel George V.

Alexander Pope,
being no kind of dope,
would not have wanted just any old motto
inscribed on his personal grotto!

Thomas the Rhymer,
that street-smart old timer,
was troubled by the implications
of *The Gotham Review of Revelations*.

Sir Thomas Wyatt
(just on the quiet)
took *Noli me tangere*
for a come-on query.

*Auden's clerihews are neat.**
They're just as witty perhaps as sweet
—he was never too grand to think
up metaphors teetering on the brink.

*W. H. Auden, "Academic Graffiti," in *Collected Poems* (Vintage International, 1991), 676–86.

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Petrus Tornarius is the latinized name of the South African American poet Peter Dreyer—a form often used by some of his medieval German ancestors. He employs this pseudonym to sign poems he thinks "worth publishing, but perhaps a bit *infra dig.*" Dreyer is the author, among other books, of *A Beast in*

View (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), and *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg).

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