



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

A. E. HOUSMAN

A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems

With an introduction by NICK LAIRD

A SHROPSHIRE LAD AND OTHER POEMS

A. E. HOUSMAN was born in 1859, the eldest son of a Worcestershire solicitor. He was educated at Bromsgrove School and won a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford. He gained first-class honours in Classical Moderations, his first public examination at Oxford, but then failed in Greats, the Final School, and so left Oxford without a degree. From 1882 he worked for ten years as a clerk in Her Majesty's Patent Office, proving himself by the publications of his leisure hours a superb scholar in Latin and Greek. In 1892 he was appointed Professor of Latin at University College, London. He was to publish editions of Manilius (1903–30), Juvenal (1905) and Lucan (1926), as well as magisterial papers on a range of classical authors, with the focus particularly on questions of principle, fact and tact within textual scholarship. He became Professor of Latin at Cambridge in 1911 and died there in 1936.

His scholarship drew admiration and fear; his poetry, love and fame. He published his first book of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, in 1896 and followed it only with *Last Poems* in 1922. Fortunately his brother, Laurence Housman, permitted the posthumous publication of *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*. Three years before Housman died he gave delight and offence with his vivid, lucid lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. He declined honours, including the Order of Merit.

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The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman

Edited by ARCHIE BURNETT
with an Introduction by NICK LAIRD

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Contents

[Introduction by Nick Laird](#)

[A SHROPSHIRE LAD](#)

[LAST POEMS](#)

[MORE POEMS](#)

[ADDITIONAL POEMS](#)

[TRANSLATIONS](#)

[Appendix: *The Name and Nature of Poetry*](#)

[Notes on the Text](#)

[Index of First Lines](#)

[Index of Titled Poems](#)

Introduction

Poetry tends to consume its practitioners, and they end up teaching it (Robert Frost), reviewing it (Edward Thomas) or even editing and publishing it (T. S. Eliot). A. E. Housman was different in kind: he was a Classics scholar first (by the time of his death, widely considered to be the finest of his time) and a poet second, and then only sporadically. His one public lecture on poetry, though, given in Cambridge in 1933 when he was seventy-four, shows a mind that knew what it demanded from the art. Disliking showiness and too obvious artifice, he wanted poetry free from circumlocution and synthetic diction, and was as scathing about Dryden and Pope as about his rival scholars' confused conjectures. He thought the years between Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) the great historical period of English 'sham poetry'. His own credo was that poetry should be direct, even if that put it in danger of collapsing into sentimentality or doggerel, and he believed entirely in the affective strength of the bare lyric. He was defending his own writing when, in that public lecture, *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (reproduced as an appendix in this edition), he sided with the weakest of rickety lyrics against the sophistications and ironies of the mock-heroic age:

'It is surely superfluous' says Johnson 'to answer the question that has once been asked, whether Pope was a poet, otherwise than by asking in return, if Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?' It is to be found, Dr Johnson, in Dr Watts.

Soft and easy is thy cradle;
Coarse and hard thy Saviour lay,
When his birthplace was a stable
And his softest bed was hay.

That simple verse, bad rhyme and all, is poetry beyond Pope.¹

Alfred Edward Housman was born to a High Church Anglican family in 1859 in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire (the birthplace, seventy-three years later, of the poet Geoffrey Hill). The eldest of seven children, his mother died when he was twelve, and in 1877 he won an annual scholarship of £100 and went up to St John's College, Oxford, to read Classics. There he roomed with Moses Jackson, a gifted athlete and science student, and a heterosexual, whom he fell irreparably in love with.

Although a brilliant scholar, Housman's all-consuming interest in the Roman poet Propertius led him to neglect the other set topics in his finals and, humiliatingly, he left Oxford without even a pass degree. In 1882 he sat his civil service exams and secured a job in the Patent Office where Jackson worked. Housman then moved in with Jackson and his brother Adalbert in Bayswater. In 1887 Jackson went to India, coming back soon after to be married, though Housman was kept in the dark about the nuptials until the newly-weds had returned to India.

While working in the Patent Office Housman devoted his evenings to studying Latin and Greek poets in the British Museum, determined to prove that the disaster of his final exams was an aberration. The articles he published analysing classical texts (including a celebrated piece on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*) were self-evidently the work of a brilliant scholar, and in 1892 he was appointed to the chair of Latin at University College London. In 1911 he moved to Cambridge to take up the Professorship of Latin at Trinity College.

Jackson died in 1923, and critical studies of Housman suggest that his two bursts of poetic activity were both occasioned by the loss of Jackson – the first (*A Shropshire Lad*) when Jackson left for India, and the second (*Last Poems*) when he learned of Jackson's illness. His own wry description of how he wrote doesn't quite overturn that notion, and indeed the tone seems to mock and disguise, consciously or not, the heart of the impulse, that 'sudden and unaccountable emotion':

I have seldom written poetry unless I was rather out of health, and the experience, though pleasurable, was generally agitating and exhausting. If

only that you may know what to avoid, I will give some account of the process.

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon – beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life – I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of.²

Compared, say, to his near contemporaries Frost or Yeats or Eliot, the poet Housman is a gifted amateur. His small output sticks almost exclusively to the same template throughout, i.e. strict rhyming ballad forms. The work therefore, like Heine's, whose songs he admired, lends itself to musical accompaniment and Vaughan Williams and Samuel Barber, among others, have set Housman poems to music.

It's not hard to see the tributaries that flow into his poetry – English and Scottish folk ballads (with all their soldiers and rural murders), Sir Walter Scott's jaunty rhythms, biblical echoes ('world without end', 'Be still, my soul, be still', 'If it chance your eye offend you'), Shakespeare ('Fear no more the heat of the sun') and also Shakespeare's contemporary Samuel Daniel. (Housman recommended that 'a promising young poetaster' should memorize the first stanza of Daniel's 'Ulysses and the Siren' 'not necessarily as a pattern to set before him, but as a touchstone to keep at his side'.) An acknowledged influence was also the simple (not simplistic) lyrics of Blake, who 'gives us poetry neat, or adulterated with so little meaning that nothing except poetic emotion is perceived and matters'.

Much has been made of how Housman embodied two opposing systems: a classical dry rigour, and a romantic belief that poetry lived only in emotion. (He claimed that, 'Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not.') In a *Paris Review* interview John Berryman – who never met Housman – states

Housman is one of my heroes and always has been. He was a detestable and miserable man. Arrogant, unspeakably lonely, cruel, and so on, but an

absolutely marvelous minor poet, I think, and a great scholar. And I'm about equally interested in those two activities. In him they are perfectly distinct. You are dealing with an absolute schizophrenic.³

This strikes me as a false division, overlooking the fact that he was a scholar of poetic texts; both his interests dealt with word-choices. Presumably one of the reasons he engaged his intellect so strenuously with the writings of Juvenal, Aeschylus, Horace and others, was that he connected with the work on an emotional level, and his famously tart corrections to academics he felt were traducing or misjudging those texts came from a man defending his loved ones. His scholarly articles weren't on architecture or crop rotation. And though he was happy to argue about textual corruption or conjecture, about chronology and etymology, Housman spoke of poetry as sacred, as if it passed all human understanding:

Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognized the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us. One of these symptoms was described in connexion with another object by Eliphaz the Temanite: 'A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up.' Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keats's last letters, where he says, speaking of Fanny Brawne, 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.'⁴

Propertius' elegies for Cynthia, the fascination of which had caused the Oxford student to fail his finals, combined his two main interests – death and love – which in Housman is always malformed or forbidden or unrequited. In his own poems, Eros and Thanatos battled and, since Eros couldn't win (the instinct to love being stifled by society and circumstance),

Thanatos was the sole conqueror and consolation. Nearly all the poems deal with death, whether viewing it with regret or love or relief or fear.

Housman believed in the poem as a kind of Wordsworthian emotional by-product:

The production of poetry, in its first stage, is less an active than a passive and involuntary process; and if I were obliged, not to define poetry, but to name the class of things to which it belongs, I should call it a secretion; whether a natural secretion, like turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster.⁵

His interest in words appears subservient to the demands of emotion, and the strictures of the chosen form. Though his work has, occasionally, some fine compound adjectives – ‘twelve-winded sky’, ‘sky-pavilioned land’, ‘star-defeated sighs’ – he tended to the plainest language, using and reusing simple phrases and monosyllabic words that allowed the possibilities of heavy rhyme; ‘long’, ‘cold’, ‘grave’ are favourites for him. And even in that short list you see the sensibility shaping the work. Like Webster, Housman was much possessed by death.

The poems often sound like someone talking to himself – full of imperatives, (‘wake’, ‘listen’) and remonstrations (‘I waste my time in talking’). The short lyrics and narratives are usually internal, for the self alone, and when the speaker tries to communicate outwards they often hint at deeper secrets that even the speaker cannot or won’t articulate: ‘I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,/ Never ask me whose’; ‘Gaze not in my eyes’; ‘Ask me no more, for fear I should reply.’ The traditions of the forms Housman used (the ballad and all its elliptic vagueness) suited his own need for opacity.

But he also wrote with longing about a kind of relaxed, carefree masculinity which compelled him, even as it remained foreign to his sensibility. Housman is the melancholy outsider, the watcher of ‘the moving pageant’ filing ‘warm and breathing through the street’, a caretaker of the ‘house of dust’, not one of the ‘careless people / That call their souls their own’. In the songs about football, ploughing, girls, about ‘lads’, in the celebrations of a kind of natural existence, there’s a hint of Walt Whitman who – it is not

coincidence – shared Housman's sexuality, and the concomitant restriction on what could be said:

The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair,

There's men from the barn and the forge and the mill and the fold ...

I wish one could know them ...⁶

But if in Whitman the keynote is celebratory, Housman's tone is much darker. These are modern poems, in impulse if not in execution, lacking the solace of religion, and there is something wonderfully subversive in how he writes coded homosexual love poems in a militaristic rhythm.

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread,

And out we troop to see:

A single redcoat turns his head,

He turns and looks at me.

The speaker and the soldier exchange eye contact:

What thoughts at heart have you and I

We cannot stop to tell;

But dead or living, drunk or dry,

Soldier, I wish you well.⁷

No one could accuse him of being faultless though. There are patchy moments of melodrama, high camp, gaucheness, inadvertent humour. A *Shropshire Lad* (self-published in 1896) was originally called 'The Poems of Terence Hearsay', and in one part Terence hears the confession of another farmboy ('look your last at me') who has killed his own brother:

And Maurice amongst the hay lies still

And my knife is in his side.

Housman's imagining of the monologue, as the murderer takes his leave, is meant to show something of pastoral decency, it seems, but blunders into awkward comedy, reminiscent of Rupert Brooke's crashing lines ('And stands the clock at ten to three? / And is there honey still for tea?').

'I wish you strength to bring you pride,

And a love to keep you clean,

And I wish you luck, come Lammastide,

At racing on the green.

'Long for me the rick will wait,

And long will wait the fold,

And long will stand the empty plate,

And dinner will be cold'.⁸

I've killed my brother. And dinner will be cold. It is like the bathetic closing note of the Dr Watts's lines Housman admired: here is the saviour in his stable, 'And his bed of softest hay.'

Still, the spare lyrics have their chanting atavistic charm, and *A Shropshire Lad* went on to become one of the most popular books of poetry in England in the early twentieth century. These poems of loss and longing, of lovers and friends separated by external forces, of fate and heartache and sudden death, resonated with a nation suffering the First World War and its attendant hardships. The book, published in 1896, seems to actually foresee the war and its effects, with all its talk of dead lads and soldiers and empty towns. And when he gets it right his ear is persuasive. In the line quoted earlier ('The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair') there is a whole battery of acoustic effects being engaged, and sometimes the work can slide in a few lines from vaguely comedic speechifying to something obdurately real as nightmare:

Others, I am not the first,
Have willed more mischief than they durst:
If in the breathless night I too
Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.

More than I, if truth were told,
Have stood and sweated hot and cold,
And through their reins in ice and fire
Fear contended with desire.

Agued once like me were they,
But I like them shall win my way
Lastly to the bed of mould
Where there's neither heat nor cold.

But from my grave across my brow
Plays no wind of healing now,
And fire and ice within me fight
Beneath the suffocating night.⁹

If Housman were an emotion then, he would be longing. The recurrent impulse in these poems, abroad in ‘the friendless world’, in ‘the land of lost content’, is to touch – to touch flesh certainly – but even more simply to engage with another being, to achieve communion or wholeness before the grave’s embrace. These are profoundly lonely poems, among the loneliest in the language.

Though the later work (he published a second book, *Last Poems*, in 1922, and then his brother Laurence published *More Poems* and *Additional Poems* after his death) lacks the coherence of *A Shropshire Lad*, the thought often becomes harder and leaner, more fully revealed, the tone more controlled, and the sentence sounds dovetail perfectly in the shape of the stanzas. This is a different Housman; rational, clipped, clear-eyed, and writing poems to make the skin bristle ‘so the razor ceases to act’:

It is no gift I tender,
A loan is all I can;
But do not scorn the lender;
Man gets no more from man.
Oh, mortal man may borrow
What mortal man can lend;
And ’twill not end to-morrow,
Though sure enough ’twill end.
If death and time are stronger
A love may yet be strong;

The world will last for longer,

But this will last for long.^{[10](#)}

NOTES

[1.](#) *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Cambridge: CUP, 1933), p. 30. (The full text of the lecture is included at the back of this volume.)

[2.](#) *ibid*, pp. 49–50.

[3.](#) John Berryman, *The Paris Review*, Issue 53, Winter 1972.

[4.](#) *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, pp. 46–7.

[5.](#) *ibid*, p. 48.

[6.](#) *A Shropshire Lad*, XXIII.

[7.](#) *ibid*, XXII.

[8.](#) *ibid*, VIII.

[9.](#) *ibid*, XXX.

[10.](#) *Additional Poems*, IV.

A SHROPSHIRE LAD

I
1887

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns, The shires have seen it plain,

From north and south the sign returns And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright, The dales are light between,

Because 'tis fifty years to-night

That God has saved the Queen.

Now, when the flame they watch not towers About the soil they trod,

Lads, we'll remember friends of ours

Who shared the work with God.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right, To fields that bred them brave,

The saviours come not home to-night:

Themselves they could not save.

It dawns in Asia, tombstones show

And Shropshire names are read;

And the Nile spills his overflow

Beside the Severn's dead.

We pledge in peace by farm and town The Queen they served in war,

And fire the beacons up and down
The land they perished for.
'God save the Queen' we living sing, From height to height 'tis heard;
And with the rest your voices ring,
Lads of the Fifty-third.
Oh, God will save her, fear you not: Be you the men you've been,
Get you the sons your fathers got,
And God will save the Queen.

II

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.
Now, of my threescore years and ten, Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score, It only leaves me fifty more.
And since to look at things in bloom Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

III

The Recruit

Leave your home behind, lad,
And reach your friends your hand,
And go, and luck go with you
While Ludlow tower shall stand.
Oh, come you home of Sunday
When Ludlow streets are still
And Ludlow bells are calling
To farm and lane and mill,
Or come you home of Monday
When Ludlow market hums
And Ludlow chimes are playing
'The conquering hero comes,'
Come you home a hero,
Or come not home at all,
The lads you leave will mind you
Till Ludlow tower shall fall.
And you will list the bugle
That blows in lands of morn,
And make the foes of England
Be sorry you were born.

And you till trump of doomsday
On lands of morn may lie,
And make the hearts of comrades
Be heavy where you die.

Leave your home behind you, Your friends by field and town:
Oh, town and field will mind you
Till Ludlow tower is down.

IV

Reveille

Wake: the silver dusk returning
Up the beach of darkness brims,
And the ship of sunrise burning
Strands upon the eastern rims.
Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,
Trampled to the floor it spanned,
And the tent of night in tatters
Straws the sky-pavilioned land.
Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play;
Hark, the empty highways crying

‘Who’ll beyond the hills away?’

Towns and countries woo together,

Forelands beacon, belfries call;

Never lad that trod on leather

Lived to feast his heart with all.

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber

Sunlit pallets never thrive;

Morns abed and daylight slumber

Were not meant for man alive.

Clay lies still, but blood’s a rover; Breath’s a ware that will not keep.

Up, lad: when the journey’s over

There’ll be time enough to sleep.

V

Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers

Are lying in field and lane,

With dandelions to tell the hours

That never are told again.

Oh may I squire you round the meads

And pick you posies gay?

– ’Twill do no harm to take my arm.

‘You may, young man, you may.’

Ah, spring was sent for lass and lad, ’Tis now the blood runs gold,

And man and maid had best be glad

Before the world is old.

What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow, But never as good as new.

– Suppose I wound my arm right round – ‘’Tis true, young man, ’tis true.’

Some lads there are, ’tis shame to say, That only court to thief,

And once they bear the bloom away

’Tis little enough they leave.

Then keep your heart for men like me

And safe from trustless chaps.

My love is true and all for you.

‘Perhaps, young man, perhaps.’

Oh, look in my eyes then, can you doubt?

– Why, ’tis a mile from town.

How green the grass is all about!

We might as well sit down.

– Ah, life, what is it but a flower?

Why must true lovers sigh?

Be kind, have pity, my own, my pretty, – ‘Good-bye, young man, good-bye.’

VI

When the lad for longing sighs,
Mute and dull of cheer and pale,
If at death's own door he lies,
Maiden, you can heal his ail.
Lovers' ills are all to buy:
The wan look, the hollow tone,
The hung head, the sunken eye,
You can have them for your own.
Buy them, buy them: eve and morn
Lovers' ills are all to sell.
Then you can lie down forlorn;
But the lover will be well.

VII

When smoke stood up from Ludlow,
And mist blew off from Teme,
And blithe afield to ploughing
Against the morning beam
I strode beside my team,
The blackbird in the coppice

Looked out to see me stride,
And hearkened as I whistled
The trampling team beside,
And fluted and replied:
‘Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
What use to rise and rise?
Rise man a thousand mornings
Yet down at last he lies,
And then the man is wise.’
I heard the tune he sang me,
And spied his yellow bill;
I picked a stone and aimed it
And threw it with a will:
Then the bird was still.
Then my soul within me
Took up the blackbird’s strain,
And still beside the horses
Along the dewy lane
It sang the song again:
‘Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;

The sun moves always west;
The road one treads to labour
Will lead one home to rest,
And that will be the best.'

VIII

'Farewell to barn and stack and tree, Farewell to Severn shore.
Terence, look your last at me,
For I come home no more.

'The sun burns on the half-mown hill, By now the blood is dried;
And Maurice amongst the hay lies still And my knife is in his side.

'My mother thinks us long away;

'Tis time the field were mown.

She had two sons at rising day,

To-night she'll be alone.

'And here's a bloody hand to shake, And oh, man, here's good-bye;

We'll sweat no more on scythe and rake, My bloody hands and I.

'I wish you strength to bring you pride, And a love to keep you clean,

And I wish you luck, come Lammastide, At racing on the green.

'Long for me the rick will wait,

And long will wait the fold,

And long will stand the empty plate,
And dinner will be cold.'

IX

On moonlit heath and lonesome bank
The sheep beside me graze;
And yon the gallows used to clank
Fast by the four cross ways.
A careless shepherd once would keep The flocks by moonlight there,*
And high amongst the glimmering sheep The dead man stood on air.
They hang us now in Shrewsbury jail: The whistles blow forlorn,
And trains all night groan on the rail To men that die at morn.
There sleeps in Shrewsbury jail to-night, Or wakes, as may betide,
A better lad, if things went right,
Than most that sleep outside.
And naked to the hangman's noose
The morning clocks will ring
A neck God made for other use
Than strangling in a string.
And sharp the link of life will snap, And dead on air will stand
Heels that held up as straight a chap As treads upon the land.

So here I'll watch the night and wait To see the morning shine,
When he will hear the stroke of eight And not the stroke of nine;
And wish my friend as sound a sleep As lads' I did not know,
That shepherded the moonlit sheep
A hundred years ago.

X

March

The Sun at noon to higher air,
Unharnessing the silver Pair
That late before his chariot swam,
Rides on the gold wool of the Ram.
So braver notes the storm-cock sings To start the rusted wheel of things,
And brutes in field and brutes in pen Leap that the world goes round again.
The boys are up the woods with day
To fetch the daffodils away,
And home at noonday from the hills
They bring no dearth of daffodils.
Afield for palms the girls repair,
And sure enough the palms are there,
And each will find by hedge or pond

Her waving silver-tufted wand.

In farm and field through all the shire The eye beholds the heart's desire;

Ah, let not only mine be vain,

For lovers should be loved again.

XI

On your midnight pallet lying,

Listen, and undo the door:

Lads that waste the light in sighing

In the dark should sigh no more;

Night should ease a lover's sorrow;

Therefore, since I go to-morrow,

Pity me before.

In the land to which I travel,

The far dwelling, let me say –

Once, if here the couch is gravel,

In a kinder bed I lay,

And the breast the danel smothers

Rested once upon another's

When it was not clay.

XII

When I watch the living meet,
And the moving pageant file
Warm and breathing through the street Where I lodge a little while,
If the heats of hate and lust
In the house of flesh are strong,
Let me mind the house of dust
Where my sojourn shall be long.
In the nation that is not
Nothing stands that stood before;
There revenges are forgot,
And the hater hates no more;
Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside,
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.

XIII

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
‘Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;

Give pearls away and rubies

But keep your fancy free.'

But I was one-and-twenty,

No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty

I heard him say again,

'The heart out of the bosom

Was never given in vain;

'Tis paid with sighs a plenty

And sold for endless rue.'

And I am two-and-twenty,

And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

XIV

There pass the careless people

That call their souls their own:

Here by the road I loiter,

How idle and alone.

Ah, past the plunge of plummet,

In seas I cannot sound,

My heart and soul and senses,

World without end, are drowned.
His folly has not fellow
Beneath the blue of day
That gives to man or woman
His heart and soul away.
There flowers no balm to sain him
From east of earth to west
That's lost for everlasting
The heart out of his breast.
Here by the labouring highway
With empty hands I stroll:
Sea-deep, till doomsday morning,
Lie lost my heart and soul.

XV

Look not in my eyes, for fear
They mirror true the sight I see,
And there you find your face too clear And love it and be lost like me.
One the long nights through must lie
Spent in star-defeated sighs,
But why should you as well as I

Perish? gaze not in my eyes.

A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,

One that many loved in vain,

Looked into a forest well

And never looked away again.

There, when the turf in springtime flowers, With downward eye and gazes sad,

Stands amid the glancing showers

A jonquil, not a Grecian lad.

XVI

It nods and curtseys and recovers

When the wind blows above,

The nettle on the graves of lovers

That hanged themselves for love.

The nettle nods, the wind blows over, The man, he does not move,

The lover of the grave, the lover

That hanged himself for love.

XVII

Twice a week the winter thorough

Here stood I to keep the goal:

Football then was fighting sorrow
For the young man's soul.
Now in Maytime to the wicket
Out I march with bat and pad:
See the son of grief at cricket
Trying to be glad.
Try I will; no harm in trying:
Wonder 'tis how little mirth
Keeps the bones of man from lying
On the bed of earth.

XVIII

Oh, when I was in love with you,
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well did I behave.
And now the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again.

XIX

To an Athlete Dying Young

The time you won your town the race

We chaired you through the market-place; Man and boy stood cheering by,

And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,

Shoulder-high we bring you home,

And set you at your threshold down,

Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away

From fields where glory does not stay And early though the laurel grows

It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut

Cannot see the record cut,

And silence sounds no worse than cheers After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout

Of lads that wore their honours out,

Runners whom renown outran

And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,

The fleet foot on the sill of shade,

And hold to the low lintel up

The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls

The garland briefer than a girl's.

XX

Oh fair enough are sky and plain,

But I know fairer far:

Those are as beautiful again

That in the water are;

The pools and rivers wash so clean

The trees and clouds and air,

The like on earth was never seen,

And oh that I were there.

These are the thoughts I often think As I stand gazing down

In act upon the cressy brink

To strip and dive and drown;

But in the golden-sanded brooks

And azure meres I spy

A silly lad that longs and looks

And wishes he were I.

XXI

Bredon* Hill

In summertime on Bredon

The bells they sound so clear;

Round both the shires they ring them

In steeples far and near,

A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning

My love and I would lie,

And see the coloured counties,

And hear the larks so high

About us in the sky.

The bells would ring to call her

In valleys miles away:

‘Come all to church, good people;

Good people, come and pray.’

But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer

Among the springing thyme,
‘Oh, peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to church in time.’
But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.
They tolled the one bell only, Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.
The bells they sound on Bredon,
And still the steeples hum.
‘Come all to church, good people,’ –
Oh, noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.

XXII

The street sounds to the soldiers’ tread, And out we troop to see:

A single redcoat turns his head,

He turns and looks at me.

My man, from sky to sky's so far,

We never crossed before;

Such leagues apart the world's ends are, We're like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I We cannot stop to tell;

But dead or living, drunk or dry,

Soldier, I wish you well.

XXIII

The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair, There's men from the barn and the forge and the mill and the fold, The lads for the girls and the lads for the liquor are there, And there with the rest are the lads that will never be old.

There's chaps from the town and the field and the till and the cart, And many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave, And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart, And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave.

I wish one could know them, I wish there were tokens to tell The fortunate fellows that now you can never discern; And then one could talk with them friendly and wish them farewell And watch them depart on the way that they will not return.

But now you may stare as you like and there's nothing to scan; And brushing your elbow unguessed-at and not to be told They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man, The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

XXIV

Say, lad, have you things to do?

Quick then, while your day's at prime.

Quick, and if 'tis work for two,

Here am I, man: now's your time.

Send me now, and I shall go;

Call me, I shall hear you call;

Use me ere they lay me low

Where a man's no use at all;

Ere the wholesome flesh decay,

And the willing nerve be numb,

And the lips lack breath to say,

'No, my lad, I cannot come.'

XXV

This time of year a twelvemonth past, When Fred and I would meet,

We needs must jangle, till at last

We fought and I was beat.

So then the summer fields about,

Till rainy days began,

Rose Harland on her Sundays out

Walked with the better man.

The better man she walks with still, Though now 'tis not with Fred:

A lad that lives and has his will

Is worth a dozen dead.

Fred keeps the house all kinds of weather, And clay's the house he keeps;

When Rose and I walk out together

Stock-still lies Fred and sleeps.

XXVI

Along the field as we came by

A year ago, my love and I,

The aspen over stile and stone

Was talking to itself alone.

'Oh who are these that kiss and pass?

A country lover and his lass;

Two lovers looking to be wed;

And time shall put them both to bed,

But she shall lie with earth above,

And he beside another love.'

And sure enough beneath the tree

There walks another love with me,

And overhead the aspen heaves
Its rainy-sounding silver leaves;
And I spell nothing in their stir,
But now perhaps they speak to her,
And plain for her to understand
They talk about a time at hand
When I shall sleep with clover clad,
And she beside another lad.

XXVII

‘Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?’
Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.
‘Is football playing
Along the river shore,
With lads to chase the leather,

Now I stand up no more?’

Ay, the ball is flying,

The lads play heart and soul;

The goal stands up, the keeper

Stands up to keep the goal.

‘Is my girl happy,

That I thought hard to leave,

And has she tired of weeping

As she lies down at eve?’

Ay, she lies down lightly,

She lies not down to weep:

Your girl is well contented.

Be still, my lad, and sleep.

‘Is my friend hearty,

Now I am thin and pine,

And has he found to sleep in

A better bed than mine?’

Yes, lad, I lie easy, I lie as lads would choose;

I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,

Never ask me whose.

XXVIII

The Welsh Marches

High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam

Islanded in Severn stream;

The bridges from the steepled crest

Cross the water east and west.

The flag of morn in conqueror's state Enters at the English gate:

The vanquished eve, as night prevails, Bleeds upon the road to Wales.

Ages since the vanquished bled

Round my mother's marriage-bed;

There the ravens feasted far

About the open house of war:

When Severn down to Buildwas ran

Coloured with the death of man,

Couched upon her brother's grave

The Saxon got me on the slave.

The sound of fight is silent long

That began the ancient wrong;

Long the voice of tears is still

That wept of old the endless ill.

In my heart it has not died,
The war that sleeps on Severn side;
They cease not fighting, east and west, On the marches of my breast.
Here the truceless armies yet Trample, rolled in blood and sweat;
They kill and kill and never die;
And I think that each is I.
None will part us, none undo
The knot that makes one flesh of two, Sick with hatred, sick with pain,
Strangling – When shall we be slain?
When shall I be dead and rid
Of the wrong my father did?
How long, how long, till spade and hearse Put to sleep my mother's curse?

XXIX

The Lent Lily

'Tis spring; come out to ramble
The hilly brakes around,
For under thorn and bramble
About the hollow ground
The primroses are found.
And there's the windflower chilly

With all the winds at play,
And there's the Lenten lily
That has not long to stay
And dies on Easter day.
And since till girls go maying
You find the primrose still,
And find the windflower playing
With every wind at will,
But not the daffodil,
Bring baskets now, and sally
Upon the spring's array,
And bear from hill and valley
The daffodil away
That dies on Easter day.

XXX

Others, I am not the first,
Have willed more mischief than they durst: If in the breathless night I too
Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.
More than I, if truth were told,
Have stood and sweated hot and cold,

And through their reins in ice and fire Fear contended with desire.

Agued once like me were they,

But I like them shall win my way

Lastly to the bed of mould

Where there's neither heat nor cold.

But from my grave across my brow

Plays no wind of healing now,

And fire and ice within me fight

Beneath the suffocating night.

XXXI

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble; His forest fleece the Wrekin
heaves; The gale, it plies the saplings double, And thick on Severn snow the
leaves.

'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger When Uricon the city stood:

'Tis the old wind in the old anger,

But then it threshed another wood.

Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman At yonder heaving hill would stare:

The blood that warms an English yeoman, The thoughts that hurt him, they
were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot, Through him the gale of life
blew high; The tree of man was never quiet:

Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double, It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble

Are ashes under Uricon.

XXXII

From far, from eve and morning

And yon twelve-winded sky,

The stuff of life to knit me

Blew hither: here am I.

Now – for a breath I tarry

Nor yet disperse apart –

Take my hand quick and tell me,

What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;

How shall I help you, say;

Ere to the wind's twelve quarters

I take my endless way.

XXXIII

If truth in hearts that perish

Could move the powers on high,

I think the love I bear you

Should make you not to die.
Sure, sure, if stedfast meaning,
If single thought could save,
The world might end to-morrow,
You should not see the grave.
This long and sure-set liking,
This boundless will to please,
– Oh, you should live for ever
If there were help in these.
But now, since all is idle,
To this lost heart be kind,
Ere to a town you journey
Where friends are ill to find.

XXXIV

The New Mistress

‘Oh, sick I am to see you, will you never let me be?
You may be good for something but you are not good for me.
Oh, go where you are wanted, for you are not wanted here.
And that was all the farewell when I parted from my dear.
‘I will go where I am wanted, to a lady born and bred Who will dress me
free for nothing in a uniform of red; She will not be sick to see me if I only

keep it clean: I will go where I am wanted for a soldier of the Queen.

‘I will go where I am wanted, for the sergeant does not mind; He may be sick to see me but he treats me very kind: He gives me beer and breakfast and a ribbon for my cap, And I never knew a sweetheart spend her money on a chap.

‘I will go where I am wanted, where there’s room for one or two, And the men are none too many for the work there is to do; Where the standing line wears thinner and the dropping dead lie thick; And the enemies of England they shall see me and be sick.’

XXXV

On the idle hill of summer,
Sleepy with the flow of streams,
Far I hear the steady drummer
Drumming like a noise in dreams.
Far and near and low and louder
On the roads of earth go by,
Dear to friends and food for powder,
Soldiers marching, all to die.
East and west on fields forgotten
Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
None that go return again.
Far the calling bugles hollo,

High the screaming fife replies,

Gay the files of scarlet follow:

Woman bore me, I will rise.

XXXVI

White in the moon the long road lies, The moon stands blank above;

White in the moon the long road lies

That leads me from my love.

Still hangs the hedge without a gust, Still, still the shadows stay:

My feet upon the moonlit dust

Pursue the ceaseless way.

The world is round, so travellers tell, And straight though reach the track,
Trudge on, trudge on, 'twill all be well, The way will guide one back.

But ere the circle homeward hies

Far, far must it remove:

White in the moon the long road lies

That leads me from my love.

XXXVII

As through the wild green hills of Wyre The train ran, changing sky and
shire, And far behind, a fading crest,

Low in the forsaken west

Sank the high-reared head of Clee,

My hand lay empty on my knee.

Aching on my knee it lay:

That morning half a shire away

So many an honest fellow's fist

Had well nigh wrung it from the wrist.

Hand, said I, since now we part

From fields and men we know by heart, For strangers' faces, strangers'
lands, – Hand, you have held true fellows' hands.

Be clean then; rot before you do

A thing they'd not believe of you.

You and I must keep from shame

In London streets the Shropshire name; On banks of Thames they must not
say

Severn breeds worse men than they;

And friends abroad must bear in mind

Friends at home they leave behind.

Oh, I shall be stiff and cold

When I forget you, hearts of gold;

The land where I shall mind you not

Is the land where all's forgot.

And if my foot returns no more

To Teme nor Corve nor Severn shore,
Luck, my lads, be with you still
By falling stream and standing hill,
By chiming tower and whispering tree, Men that made a man of me.
About your work in town and farm Still you'll keep my head from harm,
Still you'll help me, hands that gave A grasp to friend me to the grave.

XXXVIII

The winds out of the west land blow,
My friends have breathed them there; Warm with the blood of lads I know
Comes east the sighing air.
It fanned their temples, filled their lungs, Scattered their forelocks free;
My friends made words of it with tongues That talk no more to me.
Their voices, dying as they fly,
Loose on the wind are sown;
The names of men blow soundless by,
My fellows' and my own.
Oh lads, at home I heard you plain, But here your speech is still,
And down the sighing wind in vain
You hollo from the hill.
The wind and I, we both were there, But neither long abode;

Now through the friendless world we fare And sigh upon the road.

XXXIX

'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town

The golden broom should blow;

The hawthorn sprinkled up and down

Should charge the land with snow.

Spring will not wait the loiterer's time Who keeps so long away;

So others wear the broom and climb

The hedgerows heaped with may.

Oh tarnish late on Wenlock Edge,

Gold that I never see;

Lie long, high snowdrifts in the hedge That will not shower on me.

XL

Into my heart an air that kills

From yon far country blows:

What are those blue remembered hills, What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,

I see it shining plain,

The happy highways where I went

And cannot come again.

XLI

In my own shire, if I was sad,

Homely comforters I had:

The earth, because my heart was sore, Sorrowed for the son she bore;

And standing hills, long to remain,

Shared their short-lived comrade's pain.

And bound for the same bourn as I,

On every road I wandered by,

Trod beside me, close and dear,

The beautiful and death-struck year:

Whether in the woodland brown

I heard the beechnut rustle down,

And saw the purple crocus pale

Flower about the autumn dale;

Or littering far the fields of May

Lady-smocks a-bleaching lay,

And like a skylit water stood

The bluebells in the azured wood.

Yonder, lightening other loads,

The seasons range the country roads,

But here in London streets I ken
No such helpmates, only men;
And these are not in plight to bear,
If they would, another's care.
They have enough as 'tis: I see
In many an eye that measures me
The mortal sickness of a mind
Too unhappy to be kind.
Undone with misery, all they can
Is to hate their fellow man;
And till they drop they needs must still Look at you and wish you ill.

XLII

The Merry Guide

Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thymy wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.
There through the dews beside me
Behold a youth that trod,
With feathered cap on forehead,

And poised a golden rod.

With mien to match the morning

And gay delightful guise

And friendly brows and laughter

He looked me in the eyes.

Oh whence, I asked, and whither?

He smiled and would not say,

And looked at me and beckoned

And laughed and led the way.

And with kind looks and laughter

And nought to say beside

We two went on together,

I and my happy guide.

Across the glittering pastures

And empty upland still

And solitude of shepherds

High in the folded hill,

By hanging woods and hamlets That gaze through orchards down

On many a windmill turning

And far-discovered town,

With gay regards of promise
And sure unslackened stride
And smiles and nothing spoken
Led on my merry guide.
By blowing realms of woodland
With sunstruck vanes afield
And cloud-led shadows sailing
About the windy weald,
By valley-guarded granges
And silver waters wide,
Content at heart I followed
With my delightful guide.
And like the cloudy shadows
Across the country blown
We two fare on for ever,
But not we two alone.
With the great gale we journey
That breathes from gardens thinned,
Borne in the drift of blossoms
Whose petals throng the wind;

Buoyed on the heaven-heard whisper
Of dancing leaflets whirled
From all the woods that autumn
Bereaves in all the world.
And midst the fluttering legion Of all that ever died
I follow, and before us
Goes the delightful guide,
With lips that brim with laughter
But never once respond,
And feet that fly on feathers,
And serpent-circled wand.

XLIII

The Immortal Part

When I meet the morning beam
Or lay me down at night to dream,
I hear my bones within me say,
‘Another night, another day.
‘When shall this slough of sense be cast, This dust of thoughts be laid at
last, The man of flesh and soul be slain
And the man of bone remain?

‘This tongue that talks, these lungs that shout, These thews that hustle us about,

This brain that fills the skull with schemes, And its humming hive of dreams, – ‘These to-day are proud in power

And lord it in their little hour:

The immortal bones obey control

Of dying flesh and dying soul.

‘’Tis long till eve and morn are gone: Slow the endless night comes on,

And late to fulness grows the birth

That shall last as long as earth.

‘Wanderers eastward, wanderers west, Know you why you cannot rest?

’Tis that every mother’s son

Travails with a skeleton.

‘Lie down in the bed of dust; Bear the fruit that bear you must;

Bring the eternal seed to light,

And morn is all the same as night.

‘Rest you so from trouble sore,

Fear the heat o’ the sun no more,

Nor the snowing winter wild,

Now you labour not with child.

‘Empty vessel, garment cast,

We that wore you long shall last.

– Another night, another day.’

So my bones within me say.

Therefore they shall do my will

To-day while I am master still,

And flesh and soul, now both are strong, Shall hale the sullen slaves along,

Before this fire of sense decay,

This smoke of thought blow clean away, And leave with ancient night alone

The stedfast and enduring bone.

XLIV

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?

Oh that was right, lad, that was brave: Yours was not an ill for mending,

’Twas best to take it to the grave.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason, And saw your road and where it led,

And early wise and brave in season

Put the pistol to your head.

Oh soon, and better so than later

After long disgrace and scorn,

You shot dead the household traitor,

The soul that should not have been born.

Right you guessed the rising morrow And scorned to tread the mire you
must: Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,

But men may come to worse than dust.

Souls undone, undoing others, –

Long time since the tale began.

You would not live to wrong your brothers: Oh lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger With ruth and some with envy
come:

Undishonoured, clear of danger,

Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking; And here, man, here's the wreath
I've made: 'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking, But wear it and it will not
fade.

XLV

If it chance your eye offend you,

Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:

'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you, And many a balsam grows on
ground.

And if your hand or foot offend you, Cut it off, lad, and be whole;

But play the man, stand up and end you, When your sickness is your soul.

XLVI

Bring, in this timeless grave to throw, No cypress, sombre on the snow;
Snap not from the bitter yew
His leaves that live December through; Break no rosemary, bright with rime
And sparkling to the cruel clime;
Nor plod the winter land to look
For willows in the icy brook
To cast them leafless round him: bring No spray that ever buds in spring.
But if the Christmas field has kept Awns the last gleaner overstept,
Or shrivelled flax, whose flower is blue A single season, never two;
Or if one haulm whose year is o'er
Shivers on the upland frore,
– Oh, bring from hill and stream and plain Whatever will not flower again,
To give him comfort: he and those
Shall bide eternal bedfellows
Where low upon the couch he lies
Whence he never shall arise.

XLVII

The Carpenter's Son

'Here the hangman stops his cart:
Now the best of friends must part.

Fare you well, for ill fare I:

Live, lads, and I will die.

‘Oh, at home had I but stayed

’Prenticed to my father’s trade,

Had I stuck to plane and adze,

I had not been lost, my lads.

‘Then I might have built perhaps

Gallows-trees for other chaps,

Never dangled on my own,

Had I but left ill alone.

‘Now, you see, they hang me high,

And the people passing by

Stop to shake their fists and curse;

So ’tis come from ill to worse.

‘Here hang I, and right and left

Two poor fellows hang for theft:

All the same’s the luck we prove,

Though the midmost hangs for love.

‘Comrades all, that stand and gaze, Walk henceforth in other ways;

See my neck and save your own:

Comrades all, leave ill alone.

‘Make some day a decent end, Shrewder fellows than your friend.

Fare you well, for ill fare I:

Live, lads, and I will die.’

XLVIII

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle, Earth and high
heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.

Think rather, – call to thought, if now you grieve a little, The days when we
had rest, O soul, for they were long.

Men loved unkindness then, but lightless in the quarry I slept and saw not;
tears fell down, I did not mourn; Sweat ran and blood sprang out and I was
never sorry: Then it was well with me, in days ere I was born.

Now, and I muse for why and never find the reason, I pace the earth, and
drink the air, and feel the sun.

Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season: Let us endure an hour and
see injustice done.

Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation; All thoughts
to rive the heart are here, and all are vain: Horror and scorn and hate and
fear and indignation – Oh why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?

XLIX

Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly:

Why should men make haste to die?

Empty heads and tongues a-talking

Make the rough road easy walking,

And the feather pate of folly

Bears the falling sky.

Oh 'tis jesting, dancing, drinking

Spins the heavy world around.

If young hearts were not so clever,

Oh, they would be young for ever:

Think no more; 'tis only thinking

Lays lads underground.

L

Clunton and Clunbury,

Clungunford and Clun,

Are the quietest places

Under the sun.

In valleys of springs of rivers,

By Ony and Teme and Clun,

The country for easy livers,

The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,

One could not be always glad,

And lads knew trouble at Knighton
When I was a Knighton lad.
By bridges that Thames runs under,
In London, the town built ill,
'Tis sure small matter for wonder
If sorrow is with one still.
And if as a lad grows older
The troubles he bears are more,
He carries his griefs on a shoulder
That handselled them long before.
Where shall one halt to deliver
This luggage I'd lief set down?
Not Thames, not Teme is the river,
Nor London nor Knighton the town:
'Tis a long way further than Knighton, A quieter place than Clun,
Where doomsday may thunder and lighten And little 'twill matter to one.

LI

Loitering with a vacant eye
Along the Grecian gallery,
And brooding on my heavy ill,

I met a statue standing still.

Still in marble stone stood he,

And stedfastly he looked at me.

‘Well met,’ I thought the look would say, ‘We both were fashioned far away;

We neither knew, when we were young,

These Londoners we live among.’

Still he stood and eyed me hard,

An earnest and a grave regard:

‘What, lad, drooping with your lot?

I too would be where I am not.

I too survey that endless line

Of men whose thoughts are not as mine.

Years, ere you stood up from rest,

On my neck the collar prest;

Years, when you lay down your ill,

I shall stand and bear it still.

Courage, lad, ’tis not for long:

Stand, quit you like stone, be strong.’

So I thought his look would say;

And light on me my trouble lay,

And I stept out in flesh and bone
Manful like the man of stone.

LII

Far in a western brookland
That bred me long ago
The poplars stand and tremble
By pools I used to know.
There in the windless night-time,
The wanderer, marvelling why,
Halts on the bridge to hearken
How soft the poplars sigh.
He hears: no more remembered
In fields where I was known,
Here I lie down in London
And turn to rest alone.
There, by the starlit fences,
The wanderer halts and hears
My soul that lingers sighing
About the glimmering weirs.

LIII

The True Lover

The lad came to the door at night,
When lovers crown their vows,
And whistled soft and out of sight
In shadow of the boughs.

‘I shall not vex you with my face
Henceforth, my love, for aye;
So take me in your arms a space
Before the east is grey.

‘When I from hence away am past
I shall not find a bride,
And you shall be the first and last
I ever lay beside.’

She heard and went and knew not why; Her heart to his she laid;
Light was the air beneath the sky
But dark under the shade.

‘Oh do you breathe, lad, that your breast Seems not to rise and fall,
And here upon my bosom prest
There beats no heart at all?’

‘Oh loud, my girl, it once would knock, You should have felt it then;

But since for you I stopped the clock It never goes again.’

‘Oh lad, what is it, lad, that drips Wet from your neck on mine?

What is it falling on my lips,

My lad, that tastes of brine?’

‘Oh like enough ’tis blood, my dear, For when the knife has slit

The throat across from ear to ear

’Twill bleed because of it.’

Under the stars the air was light

But dark below the boughs,

The still air of the speechless night, When lovers crown their vows.

LIV

With rue my heart is laden

For golden friends I had,

For many a rose-lipt maiden

And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping

The lightfoot boys are laid;

The rose-lipt girls are sleeping

In fields where roses fade.

LV

Westward on the high-hilled plains

Where for me the world began,

Still, I think, in newer veins

Frets the changeless blood of man.

Now that other lads than I

Strip to bathe on Severn shore,

They, no help, for all they try,

Tread the mill I trod before.

There, when hueless is the west

And the darkness hushes wide,

Where the lad lies down to rest

Stands the troubled dream beside.

There, on thoughts that once were mine, Day looks down the eastern steep,

And the youth at morning shine

Makes the vow he will not keep.

LVI

The Day of Battle

‘Far I hear the bugle blow

To call me where I would not go,

And the guns begin the song,
“Soldier, fly or stay for long.”
‘Comrade, if to turn and fly
Made a soldier never die,
Fly I would, for who would not?
’Tis sure no pleasure to be shot.
‘But since the man that runs away
Lives to die another day,
And cowards’ funerals, when they come, Are not wept so well at home,
‘Therefore, though the best is bad, Stand and do the best, my lad;
Stand and fight and see your slain,
And take the bullet in your brain.’

LVII

You smile upon your friend to-day,
To-day his ills are over;
You hearken to the lover’s say,
And happy is the lover.
’Tis late to hearken, late to smile, But better late than never:
I shall have lived a little while
Before I die for ever.

LVIII

When I came last to Ludlow

Amidst the moonlight pale,

Two friends kept step beside me,

Two honest lads and hale.

Now Dick lies long in the churchyard, And Ned lies long in jail,

And I come home to Ludlow

Amidst the moonlight pale.

LIX

The Isle of Portland

The star-filled seas are smooth to-night From France to England strown;

Black towers above the Portland light The felon-quarried stone.

On yonder island, not to rise,

Never to stir forth free,

Far from his folk a dead lad lies

That once was friends with me.

Lie you easy, dream you light,

And sleep you fast for aye;

And luckier may you find the night

Than ever you found the day.

LX

Now hollow fires burn out to black,

And lights are guttering low:

Square your shoulders, lift your pack, And leave your friends and go.

Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread, Look not left nor right:

In all the endless road you tread

There's nothing but the night.

LXI

Hughley Steeple

The vane on Hughley steeple

Veers bright, a far-known sign,

And there lie Hughley people,

And there lie friends of mine.

Tall in their midst the tower

Divides the shade and sun,

And the clock strikes the hour

And tells the time to none.

To south the headstones cluster,

The sunny mounds lie thick;

The dead are more in muster

At Hughley than the quick.
North, for a soon-told number,
Chill graves the sexton delves,
And steeple-shadowed slumber
The slayers of themselves.
To north, to south, lie parted,
With Hughley tower above,
The kind, the single-hearted,
The lads I used to love.
And, south or north, 'tis only
A choice of friends one knows,
And I shall ne'er be lonely
Asleep with these or those.

LXII

'Terence, this is stupid stuff:
You eat your victuals fast enough;
There can't be much amiss, 'tis clear, To see the rate you drink your beer.
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make, It gives a chap the belly-ache.
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
It sleeps well, the horned head:

We poor lads, 'tis our turn now
To hear such tunes as killed the cow.
Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time Moping melancholy mad:
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.'
Why, if 'tis dancing you would be,
There's brisker pipes than poetry.
Say, for what were hop-yards meant,
Or why was Burton built on Trent?
Oh many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not.
And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past: The mischief is that 'twill not last.
Oh I have been to Ludlow fair
And left my necktie God knows where,

And carried half way home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:
Then the world seemed none so bad,
And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain, Happy till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky:
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet,
I was I, my things were wet,
And nothing now remained to do
But begin the game anew.
Therefore, since the world has still Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale Is not so brisk a brew as ale:
Out of a stem that scored the hand
I wrung it in a weary land.
But take it: if the smack is sour,
The better for the embittered hour;

It should do good to heart and head

When your soul is in my soul's stead; And I will friend you, if I may,

In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the east: There, when kings will sit to feast,

They get their fill before they think With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.

He gathered all that springs to birth From the many-venomed earth;

First a little, thence to more,

He sampled all her killing store;

And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,

Sate the king when healths went round.

They put arsenic in his meat

And stared aghast to watch him eat;

They poured strychnine in his cup And shook to see him drink it up:

They shook, they stared as white's their shirt: Them it was their poison hurt.

— I tell the tale that I heard told.

Mithridates, he died old.

LXIII

I hoed and trenched and weeded,

And took the flowers to fair:

I brought them home unheeded;

The hue was not the wear.
So up and down I sow them
For lads like me to find,
When I shall lie below them,
A dead man out of mind.
Some seed the birds devour,
And some the season mars,
But here and there will flower
The solitary stars,
And fields will yearly bear them
As light-leaved spring comes on,
And luckless lads will wear them
When I am dead and gone.

THE END

LAST POEMS

We'll to the woods no more, The laurels all are cut,

The bowers are bare of bay

That once the Muses wore;

The year draws in the day

And soon will evening shut:

The laurels all are cut,

We'll to the woods no more.

Oh we'll no more, no more

To the leafy woods away,

To the high wild woods of laurel

And the bowers of bay no more.

I

The West

Beyond the moor and mountain crest – Comrade, look not on the west –
The sun is down and drinks away

From air and land the lees of day.

The long cloud and the single pine Sentinel the ending line,

And out beyond it, clear and wan,

Reach the gulfs of evening on.

The son of woman turns his brow

West from forty counties now,

And, as the edge of heaven he eyes, Thinks eternal thoughts, and sighs.

Oh wide's the world, to rest or roam, With change abroad and cheer at home,
Fights and furloughs, talk and tale, Company and beef and ale.

But if I front the evening sky

Silent on the west look I,

And my comrade, stride for stride, Paces silent at my side.

Comrade, look not on the west:

'Twill have the heart out of your breast; 'Twill take your thoughts and sink them far,
Leagues beyond the sunset bar.

Oh lad, I fear that yon's the sea Where they fished for you and me,

And there, from whence we both were ta'en, You and I shall drown again.

Send not on your soul before

To dive from that beguiling shore, And let not yet the swimmer leave

His clothes upon the sands of eve.

Too fast to yonder strand forlorn We journey, to the sunken bourn,

To flush the fading tinges eyed

By other lads at eventide.

Wide is the world, to rest or roam, And early 'tis for turning home:

Plant your heel on earth and stand, And let's forget our native land.

When you and I are spilt on air
Long we shall be strangers there;
Friends of flesh and bone are best: Comrade, look not on the west.

II

As I gird on for fighting
My sword upon my thigh,
I think on old ill fortunes
Of better men than I.
Think I, the round world over,
What golden lads are low
With hurts not mine to mourn for
And shames I shall not know.
What evil luck soever
For me remains in store,
'Tis sure much finer fellows
Have fared much worse before.
So here are things to think on
That ought to make me brave,
As I strap on for fighting
My sword that will not save.

III

Her strong enchantments failing,

Her towers of fear in wreck,

Her limbecks dried of poisons

And the knife at her neck,

The Queen of air and darkness

Begins to shrill and cry,

‘O young man, O my slayer,

To-morrow you shall die.’

O Queen of air and darkness,

I think ’tis truth you say,

And I shall die to-morrow;

But you will die to-day.

IV

Illic Jacet

Oh hard is the bed they have made him, And common the blanket and cheap;
But there he will lie as they laid him: Where else could you trust him to sleep?

To sleep when the bugle is crying And cravens have heard and are brave,
When mothers and sweethearts are sighing And lads are in love with the grave.

Oh dark is the chamber and lonely, And lights and companions depart; But
lief will he lose them and only Behold the desire of his heart.

And low is the roof, but it covers A sleeper content to repose;

And far from his friends and his lovers He lies with the sweetheart he
chose.

V

Grenadier

The Queen she sent to look for me, The sergeant he did say,

‘Young man, a soldier will you be

For thirteen pence a day?’

For thirteen pence a day did I

Take off the things I wore,

And I have marched to where I lie, And I shall march no more.

My mouth is dry, my shirt is wet, My blood runs all away,

So now I shall not die in debt

For thirteen pence a day.

To-morrow after new young men

The sergeant he must see,

For things will all be over then

Between the Queen and me.

And I shall have to bate my price, For in the grave, they say,

Is neither knowledge nor device

Nor thirteen pence a day.

VI

Lancer

I 'listed at home for a lancer,

Oh who would not sleep with the brave?

I 'listed at home for a lancer

To ride on a horse to my grave.

And over the seas we were bidden A country to take and to keep;

And far with the brave I have ridden, And now with the brave I shall sleep.

For round me the men will be lying That learned me the way to behave,
And showed me my business of dying: *Oh who would not sleep with the
brave?*

They ask and there is not an answer; Says I, I will 'list for a lancer, *Oh who
would not sleep with the brave?*

And I with the brave shall be sleeping At ease on my mattress of loam,

When back from their taking and keeping The squadron is riding at home.

The wind with the plumes will be playing, The girls will stand watching
them wave, And eyeing my comrades and saying

Oh who would not sleep with the brave?

They ask and there is not an answer; Says you, I will 'list for a lancer, *Oh
who would not sleep with the brave?*

VII

In valleys green and still
Where lovers wander maying
They hear from over hill
A music playing.
Behind the drum and fife,
Past hawthornwood and hollow,
Through earth and out of life
The soldiers follow.
The soldier's is the trade:
In any wind or weather
He steals the heart of maid
And man together.
The lover and his lass
Beneath the hawthorn lying
Have heard the soldiers pass,
And both are sighing.
And down the distance they
With dying note and swelling
Walk the resounding way

To the still dwelling.

VIII

Soldier from the wars returning,

Spoiler of the taken town,

Here is ease that asks not earning; Turn you in and sit you down.

Peace is come and wars are over, Welcome you and welcome all,

While the charger crops the clover And his bridle hangs in stall.

Now no more of winters biting,

Filth in trench from fall to spring, Summers full of sweat and fighting For the Kesar or the King.

Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle; Kings and kesars, keep your pay;

Soldier, sit you down and idle

At the inn of night for aye.

IX

The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers Stream from the hawthorn on the wind away, The doors clap to, the pane is blind with showers.

Pass me the can, lad; there's an end of May.

There's one spoilt spring to scant our mortal lot, One season ruined of our little store.

May will be fine next year as like as not: Oh ay, but then we shall be twenty-four.

We for a certainty are not the first
Have sat in taverns while the tempest
hurled Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed Whatever brute and
blackguard made the world.

It is in truth iniquity on high

To cheat our sentenced souls of aught they crave, And mar the merriment as
you and I Fare on our long fool's-errand to the grave.

Iniquity it is; but pass the can.

My lad, no pair of kings our mothers bore; Our only portion is the estate of
man: We want the moon, but we shall get no more.

If here to-day the cloud of thunder lours To-morrow it will hie on far
behests; The flesh will grieve on other bones than ours Soon, and the soul
will mourn in other breasts.

The troubles of our proud and angry dust Are from eternity, and shall not
fail.

Bear them we can, and if we can we must.

Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

X

Could man be drunk for ever

With liquor, love, or fights,

Lief should I rouse at morning

And lief lie down of nights.

But men at whiles are sober

And think by fits and starts,

And if they think, they fasten
Their hands upon their hearts.

XI

Yonder see the morning blink:
The sun is up, and up must I,
To wash and dress and eat and drink And look at things and talk and think
And work, and God knows why.
Oh often have I washed and dressed And what's to show for all my pain?
Let me lie abed and rest:
Ten thousand times I've done my best And all's to do again.

XII

The laws of God, the laws of man,
He may keep that will and can;
Not I: let God and man decree
Laws for themselves and not for me; And if my ways are not as theirs
Let them mind their own affairs.
Their deeds I judge and much condemn, Yet when did I make laws for
them?
Please yourselves, say I, and they Need only look the other way.
But no, they will not; they must still Wrest their neighbour to their will, And
make me dance as they desire

With jail and gallows and hell-fire.

And how am I to face the odds

Of man's bedevilment and God's?

I, a stranger and afraid

In a world I never made.

They will be master, right or wrong; Though both are foolish, both are strong.

And since, my soul, we cannot fly

To Saturn nor to Mercury,

Keep we must, if keep we can,

These foreign laws of God and man.

XIII

The Deserter

'What sound awakened me, I wonder, For now 'tis dumb.'

'Wheels on the road most like, or thunder: Lie down; 'twas not the drum.'

Toil at sea and two in haven

And trouble far:

Fly, crow, away, and follow, raven, And all that croaks for war.

'Hark, I heard the bugle crying, And where am I?

My friends are up and dressed and dying, And I will dress and die.'

'Oh love is rare and trouble plenty And carrion cheap,

And daylight dear at four-and-twenty: Lie down again and sleep.'

'Reach me my belt and leave your prattle: Your hour is gone;

But my day is the day of battle,

And that comes dawning on.

'They mow the field of man in season: Farewell, my fair,

And, call it truth or call it treason, Farewell the vows that were.'

'Ay, false heart, forsake me lightly: 'Tis like the brave.

They find no bed to joy in rightly Before they find the grave.

'Their love is for their own undoing, And east and west

They scour about the world a-wooing The bullet to their breast.

'Sail away the ocean over,

Oh sail away,

And lie there with your leaden lover For ever and a day.'

XIV

The Culprit

The night my father got me

His mind was not on me;

He did not plague his fancy

To muse if I should be

The son you see.

The day my mother bore me
She was a fool and glad,
For all the pain I cost her,
That she had borne the lad
That borne she had.
My mother and my father
Out of the light they lie;
The warrant would not find them,
And here 'tis only I
Shall hang so high.
Oh let not man remember
The soul that God forgot,
But fetch the county kerchief
And noose me in the knot,
And I will rot.
For so the game is ended
That should not have begun.
My father and my mother
They had a likely son,
And I have none.

XV

Eight O'Clock

He stood, and heard the steeple

Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.

One, two, three, four, to market-place and people It tossed them down.

Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour, He stood and counted them and cursed his luck; And then the clock collected in the tower Its strength, and struck.

XVI

Spring Morning

Star and coronal and bell

April underfoot renews,

And the hope of man as well

Flowers among the morning dews.

Now the old come out to look,

Winter past and winter's pains,

How the sky in pool and brook

Glitters on the grassy plains.

Easily the gentle air

Wafts the turning season on;

Things to comfort them are there,

Though 'tis true the best are gone.

Now the scorned unlucky lad
Rousing from his pillow gnawn
Mans his heart and deep and glad
Drinks the valiant air of dawn.
Half the night he longed to die, Now are sown on hill and plain
Pleasures worth his while to try
Ere he longs to die again.
Blue the sky from east to west
Arches, and the world is wide,
Though the girl he loves the best
Rouses from another's side.

XVII

Astronomy

The Wain upon the northern steep
Descends and lifts away.
Oh I will sit me down and weep
For bones in Africa.
For pay and medals, name and rank, Things that he has not found,
He hove the Cross to heaven and sank The pole-star underground.
And now he does not even see

Signs of the nadir roll

At night over the ground where he

Is buried with the pole.

XVIII

The rain, it streams on stone and hillock, The boot clings to the clay.

Since all is done that's due and right Let's home; and now, my lad, good-night,
For I must turn away.

Good-night, my lad, for nought's eternal; No league of ours, for sure.

To-morrow I shall miss you less,

And ache of heart and heaviness

Are things that time should cure.

Over the hill the highway marches And what's beyond is wide:

Oh soon enough will pine to nought Remembrance and the faithful thought
That sits the grave beside.

The skies, they are not always raining Nor grey the twelvemonth through;
And I shall meet good days and mirth, And range the lovely lands of earth
With friends no worse than you.

But oh, my man, the house is fallen That none can build again;

My man, how full of joy and woe

Your mother bore you years ago

To-night to lie in the rain.

XIX

In midnights of November,
When Dead Man's Fair is nigh,
And danger in the valley,
And anger in the sky,
Around the huddling homesteads
The leafless timber roars,
And the dead call the dying
And finger at the doors.
Oh, yonder faltering fingers
Are hands I used to hold;
Their false companion drowns
And leaves them in the cold.
Oh, to the bed of ocean,
To Africk and to Ind,
I will arise and follow
Along the rainy wind.
The night goes out and under
With all its train forlorn;
Hues in the east assemble
And cocks crow up the morn.

The living are the living
And dead the dead will stay,
And I will sort with comrades
That face the beam of day.

XX

The night is freezing fast,
To-morrow comes December;
And winterfalls of old
Are with me from the past;
And chiefly I remember
How Dick would hate the cold.
Fall, winter, fall; for he,
Prompt hand and headpiece clever, Has woven a winter robe,
And made of earth and sea
His overcoat for ever,
And wears the turning globe.

XXI

The fairies break their dances
And leave the printed lawn,
And up from India glances

The silver sail of dawn.
The candles burn their sockets,
The blinds let through the day,
The young man feels his pockets
And wonders what's to pay.

XXII

The sloe was lost in flower,
The April elm was dim;
That was the lover's hour,
The hour for lies and him.
If thorns are all the bower,
If north winds freeze the fir,
Why, 'tis another's hour,
The hour for truth and her.

XXIII

In the morning, in the morning,
In the happy field of hay,
Oh they looked at one another
By the light of day.

In the blue and silver morning
On the haycock as they lay,
Oh they looked at one another
And they looked away.

XXIV

Epithalamium

He is here, Urania's son,
Hymen come from Helicon;
God that glads the lover's heart,
He is here to join and part.
So the groomsman quits your side
And the bridegroom seeks the bride: Friend and comrade yield you o'er
To her that hardly loves you more.
Now the sun his skyward beam
Has tilted from the Ocean stream.
Light the Indies, laggard sun:
Happy bridegroom, day is done,
And the star from Cæta's steep
Calls to bed but not to sleep.
Happy bridegroom, Hesper brings

All desired and timely things.

All whom morning sends to roam,

Hesper loves to lead them home.

Home return who him behold,

Child to mother, sheep to fold,

Bird to nest from wandering wide:

Happy bridegroom, seek your bride.

Pour it out, the golden cup

Given and guarded, brimming up,

Safe through jostling markets borne And the thicket of the thorn;

Folly spurned and danger past,

Pour it to the god at last.

Now, to smother noise and light, Is stolen abroad the wildering night, And
the blotting shades confuse

Path and meadow full of dews;

And the high heavens, that all control, Turn in silence round the pole.

Catch the starry beams they shed

Prospering the marriage bed,

And breed the land that reared your prime Sons to stay the rot of time.

All is quiet, no alarms;

Nothing fear of nightly harms.

Safe you sleep on guarded ground,

And in silent circle round

The thoughts of friends keep watch and ward, Harnessed angels, hand on sword.

XXV

The Oracles

'Tis mute, the word they went to hear on high Dodona mountain When winds were in the oakenshaws and all the cauldrons tolled, And mute's the midland navel-stone beside the singing fountain, And echoes list to silence now where gods told lies of old.

I took my question to the shrine that has not ceased from speaking, The heart within, that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain; And from the cave of oracles I heard the priestess shrieking That she and I should surely die and never live again.

Oh priestess, what you cry is clear, and sound good sense I think it; But let the screaming echoes rest, and froth your mouth no more.

'Tis true there's better boose than brine, but he that drowns must drink it; And oh, my lass, the news is news that men have heard before.

The King with half the East at heel is marched from lands of morning; Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air.

And he that stands will die for nought, and home there's no returning.

The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair.

XXVI

The half-moon westers low, my love, And the wind brings up the rain;

And wide apart lie we, my love,

And seas between the twain.

I know not if it rains, my love, In the land where you do lie;

And oh, so sound you sleep, my love, You know no more than I.

XXVII

The sigh that heaves the grasses

Whence thou wilt never rise

Is of the air that passes

And knows not if it sighs.

The diamond tears adorning

Thy low mound on the lea,

Those are the tears of morning,

That weeps, but not for thee.

XXVIII

Now dreary dawns the eastern light, And fall of eve is drear,

And cold the poor man lies at night, And so goes out the year.

Little is the luck I've had,

And oh, 'tis comfort small

To think that many another lad

Has had no luck at all.

XXIX

Wake not for the world-heard thunder Nor the chime that earthquakes toll.

Star may plot in heaven with planet, Lightning rive the rock of granite,
Tempest tread the oakwood under:

Fear not you for flesh nor soul.

Marching, fighting, victory past,

Stretch your limbs in peace at last.

Stir not for the soldiers drilling Nor the fever nothing cures:

Throb of drum and timbal's rattle

Call but man alive to battle,

And the fife with death-notes filling Screams for blood but not for yours.

Times enough you bled your best;

Sleep on now, and take your rest.

Sleep, my lad; the French are landed, London's burning, Windsor's down;
Clasp your cloak of earth about you, We must man the ditch without you,
March unled and fight short-handed, Charge to fall and swim to drown.

Duty, friendship, bravery o'er,

Sleep away, lad; wake no more.

XXX

Sinner's Rue

I walked alone and thinking,

And faint the nightwind blew
And stirred on mounds at crossways The flower of sinner's rue.
Where the roads part they bury
Him that his own hand slays,
And so the weed of sorrow
Springs at the four cross ways.
By night I plucked it hueless,
When morning broke 'twas blue:
Blue at my breast I fastened
The flower of sinner's rue.
It seemed a herb of healing,
A balsam and a sign,
Flower of a heart whose trouble
Must have been worse than mine.
Dead clay that did me kindness,
I can do none to you,
But only wear for breastknot
The flower of sinner's rue.

XXXI
Hell Gate

Onward led the road again
Through the sad uncoloured plain
Under twilight brooding dim,
And along the utmost rim
Wall and rampart risen to sight
Cast a shadow not of night,
And beyond them seemed to glow
Bonfires lighted long ago.
And my dark conductor broke
Silence at my side and spoke,
Saying, 'You conjecture well:
Yonder is the gate of hell.'
Ill as yet the eye could see
The eternal masonry,
But beneath it on the dark
To and fro there stirred a spark.
And again the sombre guide
Knew my question, and replied:
'At hell gate the damned in turn
Pace for sentinel and burn.'

Dully at the leaden sky
Staring, and with idle eye
Measuring the listless plain,
I began to think again.
Many things I thought of then,
Battle, and the loves of men,
Cities entered, oceans crossed,
Knowledge gained and virtue lost,
Cureless folly done and said,
And the lovely way that led
To the slimepit and the mire And the everlasting fire.
And against a smoulder dun
And a dawn without a sun
Did the nearing bastion loom,
And across the gate of gloom
Still one saw the sentry go,
Trim and burning, to and fro,
One for women to admire
In his finery of fire.
Something, as I watched him pace,

Minded me of time and place,
Soldiers of another corps
And a sentry known before.
Ever darker hell on high
Reared its strength upon the sky,
And our footfall on the track
Fetched the daunting echo back.
But the soldier pacing still
The insuperable sill,
Nursing his tormented pride,
Turned his head to neither side,
Sunk into himself apart
And the hell-fire of his heart.
But against our entering in
From the drawbridge Death and Sin
Rose to render key and sword
To their father and their lord.
And the portress foul to see
Lifted up her eyes on me
Smiling, and I made reply:

‘Met again, my lass,’ said I.
Then the sentry turned his head,
Looked, and knew me, and was Ned.
Once he looked, and halted straight, Set his back against the gate,
Caught his musket to his chin,
While the hive of hell within
Sent abroad a seething hum
As of towns whose king is come
Leading conquest home from far
And the captives of his war,
And the car of triumph waits,
And they open wide the gates.
But across the entry barred
Straddled the revolted guard,
Weaponed and accoutred well
From the arsenals of hell;
And beside him, sick and white,
Sin to left and Death to right
Turned a countenance of fear
On the flaming mutineer.

Over us the darkness bowed,
And the anger in the cloud
Clenched the lightning for the stroke; But the traitor musket spoke.
And the hollowness of hell
Sounded as its master fell,
And the mourning echo rolled
Ruin through his kingdom old.
Tyranny and terror flown
Left a pair of friends alone,
And beneath the nether sky
All that stirred was he and I.
Silent, nothing found to say, We began the backward way;
And the ebbing lustre died
From the soldier at my side,
As in all his spruce attire
Failed the everlasting fire.
Midmost of the homeward track
Once we listened and looked back;
But the city, dusk and mute,
Slept, and there was no pursuit.

XXXII

When I would muse in boyhood

The wild green woods among,

And nurse resolves and fancies

Because the world was young,

It was not foes to conquer,

Nor sweethearts to be kind,

But it was friends to die for

That I would seek and find.

I sought them far and found them, The sure, the straight, the brave, The
hearts I lost my own to,

The souls I could not save.

They braced their belts about them, They crossed in ships the sea,

They sought and found six feet of ground, And there they died for me.

XXXIII

When the eye of day is shut,

And the stars deny their beams,

And about the forest hut

Blows the roaring wind of dreams, From deep clay, from desert rock, From
the sunk sands of the main,

Come not at my door to knock,

Hearts that loved me not again.

Sleep, be still, turn to your rest In the lands where you are laid;

In far lodgings east and west

Lie down on the beds you made.

In gross marl, in blowing dust,

In the drowned ooze of the sea,

Where you would not, lie you must, Lie you must, and not with me.

XXXIV

The First of May

The orchards half the way

From home to Ludlow fair

Flowered on the first of May

In Mays when I was there;

And seen from stile or turning

The plume of smoke would show

Where fires were burning

That went out long ago.

The plum broke forth in green,

The pear stood high and snowed,

My friends and I between

Would take the Ludlow road;
Dressed to the nines and drinking
And light in heart and limb,
And each chap thinking
The fair was held for him.
Between the trees in flower
New friends at fairtime tread
The way where Ludlow tower
Stands planted on the dead.
Our thoughts, a long while after,
They think, our words they say;
Theirs now's the laughter,
The fair, the first of May.
Ay, yonder lads are yet The fools that we were then;
For oh, the sons we get
Are still the sons of men.
The sumless tale of sorrow
Is all unrolled in vain:
May comes to-morrow
And Ludlow fair again.

XXXV

When first my way to fair I took

Few pence in purse had I,

And long I used to stand and look

At things I could not buy.

Now times are altered: if I care To buy a thing, I can;

The pence are here and here's the fair, But where's the lost young man?

– To think that two and two are four And neither five nor three

The heart of man has long been sore And long 'tis like to be.

XXXVI

Revolution

West and away the wheels of darkness roll, Day's beamy banner up the east
is borne, Spectres and fears, the nightmare and her foal Drown in the golden
deluge of the morn.

But over sea and continent from sight Safe to the Indies has the earth
conveyed The vast and moon-eclipsing cone of night, Her towering
foolscap of eternal shade.

See, in mid heaven the sun is mounted; hark, The belfries tingle to the
noonday chime.

'Tis silent, and the subterranean dark Has crossed the nadir, and begins to
climb.

XXXVII

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries

These, in the day when heaven was falling, The hour when earth's
foundations fled, Followed their mercenary calling

And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended; They stood, and earth's
foundations stay; What God abandoned, these defended, And saved the sum
of things for pay.

XXXVIII

Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough The land and not the sea,

And leave the soldiers at their drill, And all about the idle hill

Shepherd your sheep with me.

Oh stay with company and mirth

And daylight and the air;

Too full already is the grave

Of fellows that were good and brave And died because they were.

XXXIX

When summer's end is nighing

And skies at evening cloud,

I muse on change and fortune

And all the feats I vowed

When I was young and proud.

The weathercock at sunset

Would lose the slanted ray,
And I would climb the beacon
That looked to Wales away
And saw the last of day.
From hill and cloud and heaven
The hues of evening died;
Night welled through lane and hollow And hushed the countryside,
But I had youth and pride.
And I with earth and nightfall
In converse high would stand,
Late, till the west was ashen
And darkness hard at hand,
And the eye lost the land.
The year might age, and cloudy
The lessening day might close,
But air of other summers
Breathed from beyond the snows,
And I had hope of those.
They came and were and are not
And come no more anew;

And all the years and seasons

That ever can ensue

Must now be worse and few.

So here's an end of roaming On eves when autumn nighs:

The ear too fondly listens

For summer's parting sighs,

And then the heart replies.

XL

Tell me not here, it needs not saying, What tune the enchantress plays

In aftermaths of soft September

Or under blanching mays,

For she and I were long acquainted And I knew all her ways.

On russet floors, by waters idle, The pine lets fall its cone;

The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing In leafy dells alone;

And traveller's joy beguiles in autumn Hearts that have lost their own.

On acres of the seeded grasses

The changing burnish heaves;

Or marshalled under moons of harvest Stand still all night the sheaves; Or
beeches strip in storms for winter And stain the wind with leaves.

Possess, as I possessed a season, The countries I resign,

Where over elmy plains the highway Would mount the hills and shine,
And full of shade the pillared forest Would murmur and be mine.
For nature, heartless, witless nature, Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.

XLI

Fancy's Knell

When lads were home from labour
At Abdon under Clee,
A man would call his neighbour
And both would send for me.
And where the light in lances
Across the mead was laid,
There to the dances
I fetched my flute and played.
Ours were idle pleasures,
Yet oh, content we were,
The young to wind the measures,
The old to heed the air;

And I to lift with playing
From tree and tower and steep
The light delaying,
And flute the sun to sleep.
The youth toward his fancy
Would turn his brow of tan,
And Tom would pair with Nancy
And Dick step off with Fan;
The girl would lift her glances
To his, and both be mute:
Well went the dances
At evening to the flute.
Wenlock Edge was umbered,
And bright was Abdon Burf,
And warm between them slumbered
The smooth green miles of turf;
Until from grass and clover The upshot beam would fade,
And England over
Advanced the lofty shade.
The lofty shade advances,

I fetch my flute and play:

Come, lads, and learn the dances

And praise the tune to-day.

To-morrow, more's the pity,

Away we both must hie,

To air the ditty,

And to earth I.

THE END

MORE POEMS

They say my verse is sad: no wonder.

Its narrow measure spans

[Rue for](#) eternity, and sorrow Not mine, but man's.

[This is for all ill-treated](#) fellows Unborn and unbegot,

For them to read when they're in trouble And I am not.

I

Easter Hymn

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain, You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright Ascends in smoke
and fire by day and night The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by, At the right hand of majesty
on high

You sit, and sitting so remember yet

Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat, Your cross and passion and the
life you gave, Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.

II

When Israel out of Egypt came

Safe in the sea they trod;

By day in cloud, by night in flame,

Went on before them God.

He brought them with a stretched out hand Dry-footed through the foam,

Past sword and famine, rock and sand, Lust and [rebellion](#), home.

I never over Horeb heard

The blast of [advent](#) blow; No fire-faced prophet brought me word Which way behoved me go.

Ascended is the cloudy flame,

The mount of thunder dumb;

The tokens that to Israel came,

To me they [are](#) not come.

I see the country far away

Where I shall never stand;

The heart goes where no footstep may

Into the promised land.

III

For these of old the trader

Unpearled the Indian seas,

The nations of the nadir

Were diamondless for these;

A people prone and haggard

Beheld their lightnings hurled:
All round, like Sinai, staggered
The sceptre-shaken world.
But now their coins are tarnished,
Their towers decayed away,
Their kingdom swept and garnished
For haler kings than they;
Their arms the rust hath eaten,
Their statutes none regard:
Arabia shall not sweeten
Their dust, with all her nard.
They cease from long vexation,
Their nights, their days are done,
The pale, the perished nation
That never see the sun;
From the old deep-dusted annals
The years erase their tale,
And round them race the channels
That take no second sail.

IV

The Sage to the Young Man

O youth whose heart is right,

Whose loins are girt to gain

The hell-defended height

Where Virtue beckons plain;

Who seest the stark array

And hast not stayed to count

But singly wilt assay

The many-cannoned mount;

Well is thy war begun;

Endure, be strong and strive;

But think not, O my son,

To save thy soul alive.

Wilt thou be true and just

And clean and kind and brave?

Well; but for all thou dost,

Be sure it shall not save.

Thou, when the night falls deep,

Thou, though the mount be won,

High heart, thou shalt but sleep
The sleep denied to none.
Others, or ever thou,
To scale those heights were sworn;
And some achieved, but now
They never see the morn.
How shouldst thou keep the prize?
Thou wast not born for aye.
Content thee if thine eyes
Behold it in thy day.
O youth that wilt attain,
On, for thine hour is short.
It may be thou shalt gain
The hell-defended fort.

V

Diffugere Nives

Horace: Odes iv 7

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws And grasses in the mead
renew their birth, The river to the river-bed withdraws, And altered is the
fashion of the earth.

The Nymphs and Graces three put off their fear And unapparelled in the
woodland play.

The swift hour and the brief prime of the year Say to the soul, *Thou wast not born for aye.*

Thaw follows frost; hard on the heel of spring Treads summer sure to die,
for hard on hers Comes autumn, with his apples scattering; Then back to
wintertide, when nothing stirs.

But oh, whate'er the sky-led seasons mar, Moon upon moon rebuilds it with
her beams: Come we where Tullus and where Ancus are, And good Aeneas,
we are dust and dreams.

Torquatus, if the gods in heaven shall add The morrow to the day, what
tongue has told?

Feast then thy heart, for what thy heart has had The fingers of no heir will
ever hold.

When thou descendest once the shades among, The stern assize and equal
judgment o'er, Not thy long lineage nor thy golden tongue, No, nor thy
righteousness, shall friend thee more.

Night holds Hippolytus the pure of stain, Diana steads him nothing, he must
stay; And Theseus leaves Pirithöus in the chain The love of comrades
cannot take away.

VI

I to my perils

Of cheat and charmer

Came clad in armour

By stars benign.

Hope lies to mortals

And most believe her,

But man's deceiver
Was never mine.
The thoughts of others
Were light and fleeting,
Of lovers' meeting
Or luck or fame.
Mine were of trouble,
And mine were steady;
So I was ready
When trouble came.

VII

Stars, I have seen them fall,
But when they drop and die
No star is [lost](#) at all From all the star-[sown](#) sky.
The toil of all that be
Helps not the primal fault;
It rains into the sea
And still the sea is salt.

VIIIA

Give me a land of boughs in leaf,

A land of trees that stand;

Where trees are fallen, there is grief; I love no leafless land.

VIIIB

Alas, the country whence I fare,

It is where I would stay;

And where I would not, it is there

That I shall be for aye.

VIIIC

And one [remembers](#), and one forgets, But 'tis not found again,

Not though they hale in crimsoned nets The sunset from the main.

IX

When green buds [hang](#) in the elm like dust And sprinkle the lime like rain,

Forth I wander, forth I must

And drink of life again.

Forth I must [by hedgerow bowers](#)

To look at the leaves uncurled

And stand in the [fields](#) where cuckoo-flowers Are lying about the world.

X

The weeping Pleiads wester,

And the moon is under seas;
From bourn to bourn of midnight
Far sighs the rainy breeze:
It sighs from [a lost country](#).
To a land I have not known;
The weeping Pleiads wester,
And I lie down alone.

XI

The rainy Pleiads wester,
Orion plunges prone,
The stroke of midnight ceases,
And I lie down alone.
The rainy Pleiads wester
And seek beyond the sea
The head that I shall dream of,
And 'twill not dream of me.

XII

I promise nothing: friends will part; All things may end, for all began;
And truth and singleness of heart
Are mortal even as is man.

But this unlucky love should last
When answered passions thin to air;
Eternal fate so deep has cast
Its sure foundation of despair.

XIII

I lay me down [and slumber](#)
And every morn revive.
Whose is the night-long breathing
That keeps a man alive?
[When](#) I was off to dreamland And left my limbs forgot,
Who stayed [at home](#) to mind them, And breathed when I did not?
[
]
For oh, 'twas never I.
If I were you, young fellow,
I'd save what breath I had,
For sleepers cut the waking:
Oh, spare your pains, my lad.
– I waste my time in talking,
No heed at all takes he,

My kind and foolish comrade
That breathes all night for me.

XIV

The farms of home lie lost in even, I see [far off the steeple stand](#); West and
away, from here to heaven,

Still is the land.

There if I go no girl will greet me, No comrade hollo from the hill,

No dog run down the yard to meet me:

The land is still.

The land is still by farm and steeple, And still for me the land may stay:

There I was friends with perished people, [[And](#)] there lie they.

XV

Tarry, delight; so seldom met,

So sure to perish, tarry still.

Forbear to cease or languish yet,

Though soon you must and will.

By Sestos town, in Hero's tower,

On Hero's heart Leander lies;

The signal torch has burned its hour

And sputters as it dies.

Beneath him, in the nighted firth,
Between two continents complain
The seas he swam from earth to earth
And he must swim again.

XVI

How clear, how lovely bright,
How beautiful to sight
Those beams of morning play,
How heaven laughs out with glee
Where, like a bird set free,
Up from the eastern sea
Soars the delightful day.
To-day I shall be strong,
No more shall yield to wrong,
Shall squander life no more;
Days lost I know not how,
I shall retrieve them now;
Now I shall keep the vow
I never kept before.
—Ensanguining the skies

How heavily it dies
Into the west away;
Past touch and sight and sound,
Not further to be found,
How hopeless under ground
Falls the remorseful day.

XVII

Bells in tower at evening toll,
And the day forsakes the soul;
Soon will evening's self be gone
And the whispering night come on.
Blame not thou the faulting light
Nor the whispers of the night:
Though the whispering night were still, Yet the heart would counsel ill.

XVIII

Delight it is in youth and May
To see the morn arise,
And more delight, [or so they say](#), To [read](#) in lovers' eyes.
Oh maiden, let your distaff be,
And [pace](#) the flowery meads with me, And I will tell you lies.

'Tis blithe to see the sunshine fail, And hear the land grow still

[And listen till](#) the nightingale [Is heard](#) beneath the hill.

Oh follow me where she is flown

Into the leafy woods alone,

And I will work you ill.

XIX

The mill-stream, now that noises cease, Is all that does not hold its peace;

Under the bridge it murmurs by,

And here are night and hell and I.

Who made the world I cannot tell:

'Tis made, and here am I in hell.

My hand, though now my knuckles bleed, I never [soiled](#) with such a deed.

And so, no doubt, in time gone by,

Some have suffered more than I,

Who only [spend](#) the night alone And strike my fist upon the stone.

XX

Like mine, the veins of these that slumber Leapt once with dancing fires divine; The blood of [all this noteless](#) number Ran red like mine.

How still, with every pulse in station, Frost in the founts that used to leap, The [thralls of night](#), the perished nation, How sound they sleep!

These too, these veins which life convulses, Wait but a while, shall cease to bound; [I with the](#) ice in all my pulses [Shall sleep as sound](#).

XXI

The world goes none the lamer,

For aught that I can see,

Because this cursed trouble

Has struck my days and me.

The stars of heaven are steady,

The founded hills remain,

Though I to earth and darkness

Return in blood and pain.

Farewell to all belongings

I won or bought or stole;

Farewell, my lusty carcass,

Farewell, my aery soul.

Oh worse remains for others

And worse to fear had I

Than [so](#) at four-and-twenty To lay me down and die.

XXII

Ho, everyone that thirsteth

And hath the price to give,
Come to the stolen waters,
Drink and your soul shall live.

Come to the stolen waters,
And leap the guarded pale,
And pull the flower in season
Before desire shall fail.

It shall not last for ever,
No more than earth and skies;
But he that drinks in season
Shall live before he dies.

June suns, you cannot store them
To warm the winter's cold,
The lad that hopes for heaven
Shall fill his mouth with mould.

XXIII

Crossing alone the nighted ferry
With the one coin for fee,
Whom, on the far quayside in waiting, [Count](#) you to find? not me.
The [fond lackey](#) to fetch and carry, The true, sick-hearted slave,

Expect him not in the just city
And free land of the grave.

XXIV

Stone, steel, dominions pass,
Faith too, no wonder;
So leave alone the grass
That I am under.
All knots that lovers tie
Are tied to sever.
Here shall your sweetheart lie
Untrue for ever.

XXV

Yon [flakes](#) that [fret](#) the eastern sky Lead back my day of birth;
The far, wide-wandered hour when I
Came crying upon earth.
Then came I crying, and to-day,
With heavier cause to plain,
Depart I into death away,
Not to be born again.

XXVI

I Counsel You Beware

Good creatures, do you love your lives And have you ears for sense?

Here is a knife like other knives,

That cost me eighteen pence.

I need but stick it in my heart

And down will come the sky,

And earth's foundations will depart

And all you folk will die.

XXVII

To stand up straight and tread the turning mill, To lie flat and know nothing
and be still, Are the two trades of man; and which is worse I know not, but I
know that both are ill.

XXVIII

He, standing hushed, a pace or two apart, Among the bluebells of the
listless plain, Thinks, and remembers how he cleansed his heart And
washed his hands in innocence in vain.

XXIX

From the wash the laundress sends

My collars home with ravelled ends:

I must fit, now these are frayed,

My neck with new ones, London-made.

Homespun collars, homespun hearts,

Wear to rags in foreign parts.

Mine at least's as good as done,

And I must get a London one.

XXX

Shake hands, [we shall never be friends; give over](#): I only vex you the more I try.

All's wrong that ever I've done [and](#) said, [And nought](#) to help it in this dull head: Shake hands, [goodnight](#), goodbye.

But if you come to a road where danger Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share, Be good to the [lad](#) that loves you true And the [soul](#) that was born to die for you, And whistle and I'll be there.

XXXI

Because I liked you better

Than suits a man to say,

It irked you, and I promised

I'd throw the thought away.

To put the world between us

We parted stiff and dry:

'Farewell,' said you, '[forget me](#).'

'Fare well, I will,' said I.

If e'er, where clover whitens

The dead man's knoll, you pass,
And no tall flower to meet you
Starts in the trefoiled grass,
Halt by the [headstone shading](#)
The [heart](#) you have not stirred, And say the lad that loved you
Was one that kept his word.

XXXII

Their [seed](#) the sowers scatter [Behind](#) them as they go.
Poor lads, 'tis little matter
How many sorts they sow,
For only one will grow.
The charlock on the fallow
Will take the traveller's eyes,
And gild the ploughland sallow
With flowers before it dies,
But twice 'twill not arise.
The stinging-nettle only
Will [aye](#) be found to stand: The numberless, the lonely,
The [filler](#) of the land, The leaf that hurts the hand.
That thrives, come sun, come showers; Blow east, blow west, it springs;

It peoples towns, [and towers](#)

About the courts of Kings,

And touch it and it stings.

XXXIII

On forelands high in heaven,

'Tis many a year gone by,

Amidst the fall of even

Would stand my friends and I.

Before our foolish faces

Lay lands we did not see;

Our eyes were in the places

Where we should never be.

'Oh, the pearl seas are yonder,

The gold and amber shore;

Shires where the girls are fonder,

Towns where the pots hold more.

And here fust we and moulder

By grange and rick and shed

And every moon are older,

And soon we shall be dead.'

Heigho, 'twas true and pity;

But there we lads must stay.

Troy was a steeped city,

But Troy was far away.

And [home](#) we turned lamenting [To plains](#) we longed to leave And [silent](#)
hills indenting The orange band of eve.

I see the air benighted

And all the dusking dales,

And lamps in England lighted,

And evening wrecked on Wales.

And starry darkness paces

The road from sea to sea,

And blots the foolish faces

Of my poor friends and me.

XXXIV

Young is the blood that yonder

Strides out the dusty mile

And breasts the hill-side highway

And whistles loud the while

And vaults the stile.

Yet backs, [I think](#), have burdens And shoulders carry care:

So fell to flesh its portion

When I and not my heir

Was young and there.

On miry meads in winter

The football sprang and fell,

May stuck the land with wickets:

For all the eye could tell

The world went well.

Yet well, God knows, it went not,

God knows, it went awry;

For me, one flowery Maytime,

It went so ill that I

Designed to die.

And if so long I carry

The lot that season marred,

'Tis that the sons of Adam

Are not so evil-starred

As they are hard.

Young is the blood that yonder

Succeeds to rick and fold,
Fresh are the form and favour
And new the minted mould:
The thoughts are old.

XXXV

Half-way, for one commandment broken, The woman made her endless
halt,
And she to-day, a glistening token,
Stands in the wilderness of salt.
Behind, the vats of judgment brewing
Thundered, and thick the brimstone snowed: He to the hill of his undoing
Pursued his road.

XXXVI

Here [dead lie we](#) because we did not choose To live and shame the land
from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose, But young men think it is, and we
were young.

XXXVII

I did not lose my heart in summer's even, When roses to the moonrise burst
apart: When plumes were under heel and lead was flying, In blood and
smoke and flame I lost my heart.

I lost it to a soldier and a foeman, A chap that did not kill me, but he tried;
That took the sabre straight and took it striking And laughed and kissed his
hand to me and died.

XXXVIII

By shores and woods and steeples

Rejoicing hearts receive

Poured on a hundred peoples

The far-shed alms of eve.

Her hands are filled with slumber

For world-wide labourers worn;

[Yet](#) those are more in number That know her not from morn.

Now who sees night for ever,

He sees no happier sight:

Night and no moon and never

A star upon the night.

XXXIX

My dreams are of a field afar

And blood and smoke and shot.

There in their graves my comrades are, In my grave I am not.

I too was taught the trade of man

And spelt my lesson plain;

But they, when I forgot and ran,
Remembered and remain.

XL

Farewell to a name and a number
[Resigned](#) again To darkness and silence and slumber
In blood and pain.

So [time coils round](#) in a ring [And home comes he](#)

A soldier cheap to the King

And dear to me;

So smothers in blood the burning

And flaming flight

Of valour and truth returning

To dust and night.

XLI

He looked at me with eyes I thought

I [was not like](#) to find, The voice he begged for pence with brought Another
man to mind.

Oh no, lad, never touch your cap;

It is not my half-crown:

You have it from a better chap

That long ago lay down.

Once he stepped out but now my friend Is not in [marching](#) trim And you must tramp to the world's end To touch your cap to him.

XLII

A. J. J.

When he's returned [I'll tell him](#) – oh, [Dear fellow](#), I forgot: Time was you would have cared to know, But now it matters not.

I mourn you, and you heed not how;

[Unsaid the word must stay; Last month was time enough, but now](#)

[The news must keep for aye.](#)

Oh, many a month [before I learn](#)

[Will](#) find me starting still And [listening](#), as the days return, For him that never will.

Strange, strange to think his blood is cold And mine flows easy on,

And that straight look, that heart of gold, That grace, that manhood, gone.

The word unsaid will stay unsaid

Though there was much to say;

Last month was time enough: he's dead, The news must keep for aye.

XLIII

I wake from dreams and turning

My vision on the height

I scan the beacons burning
About the fields of night.
Each in its steadfast station
Inflaming heaven they flare;
They sign with conflagration
The empty [moors](#) of air.
The signal-fires of warning
They blaze, but none regard;
And on through night to morning
The world runs ruinward.

XLIV

Far known to sea and shore,
Foursquare and founded well,
A thousand years it bore,
And then the belfry fell.
The steersman of Triest
Looked where his mark should be,
But empty was the west
And Venice under sea.
From dusty wreck dispersed

Its stature mounts amain;
On surer foot than first
The belfry stands again.
At to-fall of the day
Again its curfew tolls
And burdens far away
The green and sanguine shoals.
It looks to north and south,
It looks to east and west;
It guides to Lido mouth
The steersman of Triest.
Andrea, fare you well;
Venice, farewell to thee.
The tower that stood and fell
Is not rebuilt in me.

XLV

Smooth between sea and land
Is laid the yellow sand,
And here through summer days
The seed of Adam plays.

Here the child comes to found
His unremaining mound,
And the grown lad to score
Two names upon the shore.
Here, on the level sand,
Between the sea and land,
What shall I build or write
Against the fall of night?
Tell me of runes to grave
That hold the bursting wave,
Or bastions to design
For longer date than mine.
Shall it be Troy or Rome
I fence against the foam,
Or my own name, to stay
When I depart for aye?
Nothing: too near at hand,
Planing the figured sand,
Effacing clean and fast
Cities not built to last

And charms devised in vain,
Pours the confounding main.

XLVI

The Land of Biscay

Hearken, landsmen, hearken, seamen, to the tale of grief and me

Looking from the land of Biscay
on the waters of the sea.

Looking from the land of Biscay
over Ocean to the sky

On the far-beholding foreland
paced at even grief and I.

There, as warm the west was burning
and the east uncoloured cold,

Down the waterway of sunset
drove to shore a ship of gold.

Gold of mast and gold of cordage,
gold of sail to sight was she,

And she glassed her ensign golden
in the waters of the sea.

Oh, said I, my friend and lover,

take we now that ship and sail
Outward in the ebb of hues and
steer upon the sunset trail;
Leave the night to fall behind us
and the clouding countries leave:
Help for you and me is yonder,
in a haven west of eve.

Under hill she neared the harbour, [till](#) the gazer could behold
On the golden deck the steersman

standing at the helm of gold,
Man and ship and sky and water
burning in a single flame;
And the mariner of Ocean,
he was calling as he came:

From the [highway of the sunset](#)
he was shouting on the sea,
‘Landsman of the land of Biscay,
have you help for grief and me?’
When I heard I did not answer,
I stood mute and shook my head:
Son of earth and son of Ocean,

much we thought and nothing said.
Grief and I abode the nightfall,
to the sunset grief and he
Turned them from the land of Biscay
on the waters of the sea.

XLVII

O thou that from thy mansion,
Through time and place to roam,
Dost send abroad thy children,
And then dost call them home,
That men and tribes and nations
And all thy hand hath made
May shelter them from sunshine
In thine eternal shade.

We now to peace and darkness
And earth and thee restore
Thy creature that thou madest
And wilt cast forth no more.

XLVIII

Parta Quies

Good-night; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
Have these for yours,
While sea abides, and land,
And [earth's foundations stand](#), And heaven endures.
When earth's foundations flee,
Nor [sky](#) nor land nor sea At all is found,
Content you, let them burn:
It is not your concern;
Sleep on, sleep sound.

ADDITIONAL POEMS

I

Atys

‘Lydians, lords of Hermus river,
Sifters of the golden loam,
See you yet the lances quiver
And the hunt returning home?’
‘King, the star that shuts the even
Calls the sheep from Tmolus down;
Home return the doves from heaven,
And the prince to Sardis town.’
From the hunting heavy laden
Up the Mysian road they ride;
And the star that mates the maiden
Leads his son to Croesus’ side.
‘Lydians, under stream and fountain
Finders of the golden vein,
Riding from Olympus mountain,
Lydians, see you Atys plain?’

‘King, I see the Phrygian stranger

And the guards in hunter’s trim,

Saviours of thy son from danger;

Them I see. I see not him.’

‘Lydians, as the troop advances,

– It is eve and I am old –

Tell me why they trail their lances,

Washers of the sands of gold.

‘I am old and day is ending And the wildering night comes on;

Up the Mysian entry wending,

Lydians, Lydians, what is yon?’

Hounds behind their master whining,

Huntsmen pacing dumb beside,

On his breast the boar-spear shining,

Home they bear his father’s pride.

II

Oh were he and I together,

Shipmates on the fleeted main,

Sailing through the summer weather

To the spoil of France or Spain.

Oh were he and I together,
Locking hands and taking leave,
Low upon the trampled heather
In the battle lost at eve.
Now are he and I asunder
And asunder to remain;
Kingdoms are for others' plunder,
And content for other slain.

III

When Adam walked in Eden young
Happy, 'tis writ, was he,
While high the fruit of knowledge hung
Unbitten on the tree.
Happy was he the livelong day:
[I doubt](#) 'tis written wrong: The heart of man, for all they say,
Was never happy long.
And now my feet are tired of rest
And here [they will](#) not stay And the soul fevers in my breast
And [aches](#) to be away.

IV

It is no gift I tender,

[A loan is all I can](#); But do not scorn the lender;

[Man gets no more from man](#).

Oh, [mortal](#) man may borrow What mortal man can lend;

And 'twill not end tomorrow,

Though sure enough 'twill end.

If death and time are stronger

A love may yet be strong;

The world will last for longer,

But this will last for long.

V

Here are the skies, the planets seven, And all the starry train:

Content you with the mimic heaven,

And on the earth remain.*[_](#)

VI

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply; Others have held their tongues,
and so can I, Hundreds have died, and told no tale before: Ask me no more,
for fear I should reply – How one was true and one was clean of stain And
one was braver than the heavens are high, And one was [fond of me](#): and all
are slain.

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply.

VII

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?

He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.

I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder And went with half my life
about my ways.

VIII

Now to her [lap](#) the incestuous earth The son she bore has ta'en,

And other sons she brings to birth

But not my friend again.

IX

When the bells jumble in the tower

The hollow night amid,

[Then on](#) my tongue the taste is sour Of all I ever did.

X

Oh on my breast in days hereafter

Light the earth should lie,

Such weight to bear is now the air,

So heavy [hangs](#) the sky.

XI

Morning up the eastern stair

Marches, azuring the air,
And the foot of twilight still
Is stolen toward the western sill.
Blithe the maids go milking, blithe
Men in hayfields stone the scythe,
All the land's alive around
[Except](#) the churchyard's idle ground.

—There's [empty](#) acres west and east But aye 'tis God's that [bears](#) the least:
This hopeless garden that they sow
With the seeds that never grow.

XIA

—They shall have breath that never were, But he that was shall have it
ne'er;

The unconceived and unbegot
Shall look on heaven, but he shall not.

—The [heart](#) with many wildfires lit, Ice is not so cold as it.
The thirst that [rivers](#) could not lay A little dust has quenched for aye;
And in a fathom's compass lie
Thoughts much wider than the sky.

XII

Stay, if you [list](#), O passer by the way; Yet night approaches: better not to stay.

I never sigh, nor flush, nor knit the brow, Nor grieve to think how ill God made me, now.

Here, with one balm for many fevers found, [Whole](#) of an ancient evil, I sleep sound.

XIII

Oh turn not in from marching

To taverns on the way:

The drought and thirst and parching

A little dust will lay

And take desire away.

Oh waste no [words](#) a wooing The soft sleep to your bed;

She is not worth [pursuing](#), You will so soon be dead,

And death will serve instead.

XIV

‘Oh is it the jar of nations,

The noise of a world run mad,

The fleeing of earth’s foundations?’

Yes, yes; lie quiet, my lad.

‘Oh is it my country calling,

And whom will my country find
To shore up the sky from falling?’
My business; never you mind.
‘Oh is it the newsboys crying
Lost battle, retreat, despair,
And honour and England dying?’
Well, fighting cock, what if it were?
The devil this side of the darnels
Is having a dance with man,
And quarrelsome chaps in charnels
Must bear it as best they can.

XV

’Tis five years since, ‘[An end](#),’ said I, ‘[I’ll march no further](#), time to die.
All’s lost; no worse has heaven to give.’
Worse it has given, and yet I live.
I shall not die to-day, no fear:
I shall live yet for many a year,
And see worse ills and worse again,
And die of age and not of pain.
When God would rear from earth aloof

The blue height of the hollow roof

He sought him pillars sure and strong

And ere he found them sought them long.

The stark steel splintered from the thrust, The basalt mountain sprang to dust,

The blazing pier of diamond flawed

In shards of rainbows all abroad.

What found he, that the heavens stand fast?

What pillar proven firm at last

Bears up so light that world-seen span?

The heart of man, the heart of man.

XVI

Some can gaze and not be sick

But I could never learn the trick.

There's this to say for blood and breath, They give a man a taste for death.

XVII

The stars have not dealt me the worst they could do: My pleasures are plenty, my troubles are two.

But oh, my two troubles they reave me of rest, The brains in my head and the heart in my breast.

Oh, grant me the ease that is granted so free, The birthright of multitudes, give it to me, That relish their victuals and rest on their bed With flint in the

bosom and guts in the head.

XVIII

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?

And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?

And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?

Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his; In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is; Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade; But they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare, And they're haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat, And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.

XIX

The Defeated

In battles of no renown

My fellows and I fall down,

And over the dead men roar

The battles they lost before.

The thunderstruck flagstaffs fall,
The earthquake [breaches](#) the wall, The far-felled steeples resound,
And I lie under the ground.
O soldiers, saluted afar
By them that have seen your star,
In conquest and freedom and pride
Remember your friends that died.
Amidst [rejoicing](#) and song Remember, my lads, how long,
How deep the innocent trod
The grapes of the anger of God.

XX

I shall not die for you,
Another fellow may;
Good lads are left and true
Though one departs away.
But he departs to-day
And leaves his work to do,
For I was luckless aye
And shall not die for you.

XXI

New Year's Eve

The end of the year fell chilly
Between a moon and a moon;
Thorough the twilight shrilly
The bells rang, ringing no tune.
The windows stained with story,
The walls with miracle scored,
Were hidden for gloom and glory
Filling the house of the Lord.
Arch and aisle and rafter
And roof-tree dizzily high
Were full of weeping and laughter
And song and saying good-bye.
There stood in the holy places
A multitude none could name,
Ranks of dreadful faces
Flaming, transfigured in flame.
Crown and tiar and mitre
Were starry with gold and gem;

Christmas never was whiter
Than fear on the face of them.
In aisles that emperors vaulted
For a faith the world confessed,
Abasing the Host exalted,
They worshipped towards the west.
They brought with laughter oblation; They prayed, not bowing the head;
They made without tear lamentation,
And rendered me answer and said:
‘O thou that seest our sorrow,
It fares with us even thus:
To-day we are gods, to-morrow
Hell have mercy on us.
‘Lo, morning over our border
From out of the west comes cold;
Down ruins the ancient order
And empire builded of old.
‘Our house at even is queenly
With psalm and censers alight:
Look thou never so keenly

Thou shalt not find us to-night.

‘We are come to the end appointed

With sands not many to run:

Divinities disanointed

And kings whose kingdom is done.

‘The peoples knelt down at our portal, All kindreds under the sky;

We were gods and implored and immortal

Once; and to-day we die.’

They turned them again to their praying, They worshipped and took no rest

Singing old tunes and saying

‘We have seen his star in the west,’

Old tunes of the sacred psalters, Set to wild farewells;

And I left them there at their altars

Ringling their own dead knells.

XXII

R. L. S.

Home is the sailor, home from sea:

Her far-borne canvas furled,

The ship pours shining on the quay

The plunder of the world.

Home is the hunter from the hill:
Fast in the boundless snare
All flesh lies taken at his will
And every fowl of air.
'Tis evening on the moorland free,
The starlit wave is still:
Home is the sailor from the sea,
The hunter from the hill.

XXIII

The Olive

The olive in its orchard
Should now be rooted sure,
To cast abroad its branches
And flourish and endure.
Aloft amid the trenches
Its dressers dug and died
The olive in its orchard
Should prosper and abide.
Close should the fruit be clustered
And light the leaf should wave,

So deep the root is planted

In the corrupting grave.

TRANSLATIONS

Aeschylus, Septem Contra Thebas (lines 848–60)

Now do our eyes behold

The tidings which were told: Twin fallen kings, twin perished hopes to
mourn, The slayer, the slain,

The entangled doom forlorn

And ruinous end of twain.

Say, is not sorrow, is not sorrow's sum On home and hearthstone come?

O waft with sighs the sail from shore, O smite the bosom, cadencing the oar
That rows beyond the rueful stream for aye To the far strand,

The ship of souls, the dark, The unreturning bark

Whereon light never falls nor foot of Day, Ev'n to the bourne of all, to the
unbeholden land.

Sophocles, Oedipus Coloneus (lines 1211–48)

What man is he that yearneth For length unmeasured of days?

Folly mine eye discerneth

Encompassing all his ways.

For years over-running the measure Shall change thee in evil wise: Grief
draweth nigh thee; and pleasure, Behold, it is hid from thine eyes.

This to their wage have they Which overlive their day.

And He that looseth from labour Doth one with other befriend, Whom bride
nor bridesmen attend, Song, nor sound of the tabor, Death, that maketh an
end.

Thy portion esteem I highest, Who wast not ever begot;

Thine next, being born who diest And straightway again art not.

With follies light as the feather Doth Youth to man befall;

Then evils gather together,

There wants not one of them all – Wrath, envy, discord, strife, The sword
that seeketh life.

And sealing the sum of trouble Doth tottering Age draw nigh, Whom
friends and kinsfolk fly, Age, upon whom redouble

All sorrows under the sky.

This man, as me, even so, Have the evil days overtaken; And like as a cape
sea-shaken With tempest at earth's last verges And shock of all winds that
blow, His head the seas of woe,

The thunders of awful surges Ruining overflow;

Blown from the fall of even, Blown from the dayspring forth, Blown from
the noon in heaven, Blown from night and the North.

Euripides, Alcestis (lines 962–1005)

In heaven-high musings and many, Far seeking and deep debate, Of strong
things find I not any That is as the strength of Fate.

Help nor healing is told

In soothsayings uttered of old, In the Thracian runes, the verses Engraven of
Orpheus' pen;

No balm of virtue to save

Apollo aforetime gave,

Who stayeth with tender mercies The plagues of the children of men.

She hath not her habitation In temples that hands have wrought; Him that
bringeth oblation,

Behold, she heedeth him naught.

Be thou not wroth with us more, O mistress, than heretofore; For what God
willeth soever, That thou bringest to be;

Thou breakest in sunder the brand Far forged in the Iron Land; Thine heart
is cruel, and never Came pity anigh unto thee.

Thee too, O King, hath she taken And bound in her tenfold chain; Yet faint
not, neither complain: The dead thou wilt not awaken For all thy weeping
again.

They perish, whom gods begot; The night releaseth them not.

Beloved was she that died

And dear shall ever abide,

For this was the queen among women, Admetus, that lay by thy side.

Not as the multitude lowly Asleep in their sepulchres, Not as their grave be
hers, But like as the gods held holy, The worship of wayfarers.

Yea, all that travel the way Far off shall see it and say, *Lo, erst for her lord
she died, To-day she sitteth enskied;*

Hail, lady, be gracious to usward; that alway her honour abide.

THE NAME AND NATURE OF POETRY

The Leslie Stephen Lecture Delivered by A. E. Housman at Cambridge on 9 May 1933

The question should be fairly stated, how far a man can be an adequate, or even a good (so far as he goes) though inadequate critic of poetry, who is not a poet, at least *in posse*. Can he be an adequate, can he be a good critic, though not commensurate? But there is yet another distinction. Supposing he is not only not a poet, but is a bad poet! What then?

Coleridge, *Anima Poetae*, pp. 127f.

It is my first duty to acknowledge the honour done me by those who have in their hands the appointment of the Leslie Stephen Lecturer, and to thank them for this token of their good will. My second duty is to say that I condemn their judgement and deplore their choice. It is twenty-two years to-day since I last, and first, spoke in this Senate-House; and in delivering my inaugural lecture, and telling this University what it was *not* to expect from me, I used these words.

Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets, sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley's comet: literary critics are less common. And when, once in a century, or once in two centuries, the literary critic does appear – will someone in this home of mathematics tell me what are the chances that his appearance will be made among that small number of people who are called classical scholars? If this purely accidental conjunction occurred so lately as the eighteenth century in the person of Lessing, it ought to be a long while

before it occurs again; and if so early a century as the twentieth is to witness it in another person, all I know is that I am not he.

In these twenty-two years I have improved in some respects and deteriorated in others; but I have not so much improved as to become a literary critic, nor so much deteriorated as to fancy that I have become one. Therefore you are not about to be addressed in that tone of authority which is appropriate to those who are, and is assumed by some of those who conceive themselves to be, literary critics. In order to hear Jehovah thundering out of Zion, or Little Bethel, you must go elsewhere.

But all my life long the best literature of several languages has been my favourite recreation; and good literature continually read for pleasure must, let us hope, do some good to the reader: must quicken his perception though dull, and sharpen his discrimination though blunt, and mellow the rawness of his personal opinions. But personal opinions they remain, not truths to be imparted as such with the sureness of superior insight and knowledge. I hope however that for brevity's sake, and your own, you will accept the disclaimer once for all, and that when hereafter I may say that things are thus or thus, you will not insist on my saying instead that I humbly venture to conceive them so or that I diffidently offer the suggestion to your better judgement.

There is indeed one literary subject on which I think I could discourse with profit, because it is also scientific, so that a man of science can handle it without presumption, and indeed is fitter for the task than most men of letters. The Artifice of Versification, which I first thought of taking for my theme to-day, has underlying it a set of facts which are unknown to most of those who practise it; and their success, when they succeed, is owing to instinctive tact and a natural goodness of ear. This latent base, comprising natural laws by which all versification is conditioned, and the secret springs of the pleasure which good versification can give, is little explored by critics: a few pages of Coventry Patmore and a few of Frederic Myers contain all, so far as I know, or all of value, which has been written on such matters; [*](#) and to these pages I could add a few more. But they would not make a good lecture: first, because of their fewness; secondly, because of their dryness; and thirdly, because they might not be easy for listeners to

follow, and what I had to say would be more clearly communicated by writing than by speech. For these reasons I renounced my first intention, and chose instead a subject much less precise, and therefore less suitable to my capacity, but yet one which may be treated, as I hope to treat it, with some degree of precision.

When one begins to discuss the nature of poetry, the first impediment in the way is the inherent vagueness of the name, and the number of its legitimate senses. It is not bad English to speak of 'prose and poetry' in the sense of 'prose and verse'. But it is wasteful; it squanders a valuable word by stretching it to fit a meaning which is accurately expressed by a wider term. Verse may be, like 'The Tale of Sir Thopas' in the judgement of Our Host of the Tabard, 'rym dogerel'; and the name of poetry is generally restricted to verse which can at least be called literature, though it may differ from prose only in its metrical form, and be superior to prose only in the superior comeliness of that form itself, and the superior terseness which usually goes along with it. Then further there is verse which gives a positive and lively pleasure arising from the talent and accomplishment of its author.

Now Gilpin had a pleasant wit

And loved a timely joke,

And thus unto the Callender

In merry guise he spoke:

I came because your horse would come; And, if I well forbode,

My hat and wig will soon be here:

They are upon the road.

Capital: but no one, if asked for a typical example of poetry, would recite those verses in reply. A typical example need not be any less plain and simple and straightforward, but it would be a little raised.

Come, worthy Greek, Ulysses, come,

Possess these shores with me:

The winds and seas are troublesome,

And here we may be free.

Here may we sit and view their toil

That travail in the deep,

And joy the day in mirth the while,

And spend the night in sleep.

There we are ceasing to gallop with the Callender's horse and beginning to fly with Pegasus. Indeed a promising young poetaster could not do better than lay up that stanza in his memory, not necessarily as a pattern to set before him, but as a touchstone to keep at his side. Diction and movement alike, it is perfect. It is made out of the most ordinary words, yet it is pure from the least alloy of prose; and however much nearer heaven the art of poetry may have mounted, it has never flown on a surer or a lighter wing.

It is perfect, I say; and nothing more than perfection can be demanded of anything: yet poetry is capable of more than this, and more therefore is expected from it. There is a conception of poetry which is not fulfilled by pure language and liquid versification, with the simple and so to speak colourless pleasure which they afford, but involves the presence in them of something which moves and touches in a special and recognizable way. Set beside that stanza of Daniel's these lines from Bruce's or Logan's 'Cuckoo':
Sweet bird, thy bower is ever green, Thy sky is ever clear;

Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,

No winter in thy year.

There a new element has stolen in, a tinge of emotion. And I think that to transfuse emotion – not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer – is the peculiar function of poetry. Even where the verse is not thus beautiful and engaging in its external form, as in Johnson's lines, His virtues walked their narrow round,

Nor made a pause, nor left a void;

And sure the Eternal Master found

The single talent well employed,

it may yet possess the same virtue and elicit a like response.

Further than this I will not now ascend the stair of poetry. I have chosen these two examples because they may almost be called humble, and contain hardly more than the promise of what poetry attains to be. Here it is not lofty or magnificent or intense; it does not transport with rapture nor overwhelm with awe; it does not stab the heart nor shake the soul nor take the breath away. But it is poetry, though not in the highest, yet in the highest definable sense.

Duncan is in his grave;

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

Even for that poetry there is no other name.

I said that the legitimate meanings of the word poetry were themselves so many as to embarrass the discussion of its nature. All the more reason why we should not confound confusion worse by wresting the term to licentious use and affixing it either to dissimilar things already provided with names of their own, or to new things for which new names should be invented.

There was a whole age of English in which the place of poetry was usurped by something very different which possessed the proper and specific name of wit: wit not in its modern sense, but as defined by Johnson, 'a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'. Such discoveries are no more poetical than anagrams; such pleasure as they give is purely intellectual and is intellectually frivolous; but this was the pleasure principally sought and found in poems by the intelligentsia of fifty years and more of the seventeenth century. Some of the writers who purveyed it to their contemporaries were, by accident, considerable poets; and though their verse was generally inharmonious, and apparently cut into lengths and tied into faggots by deaf mathematicians, some little of their poetry was beautiful and even superb. But it was not by this that they captivated and sought to captivate. Simile and metaphor, things inessential to poetry, were their great engrossing preoccupation, and were prized the more in proportion as they were further fetched. They did not mean these accessories to be helpful, to make their sense clearer or their conceptions more vivid; they hardly even meant them for ornament, or cared whether an image had any independent power to please: their object was to startle by novelty and amuse by ingenuity a public whose one wish was to be so startled and amused. The pleasure, however luxurious, of hearing St Mary Magdalene's eyes described as Two walking baths, two weeping motions,

Portable and compendious oceans,

was not a poetic pleasure; and poetry, as a label for this particular commodity, is not appropriate.

Appropriateness is even more carefully to be considered when the thing which we so much admire that we wish to give it the noblest name we can lay our tongue to is a new thing. We should beware of treating the word poetry as chemists have treated the word salt. Salt is a crystalline substance recognized by its taste; its name is as old as the English language and is the possession of the English people, who know what it means: it is not the private property of a science less than three hundred years old, which, being in want of a term to embody a new conception, 'an acid having the whole or part of its hydrogen replaced by a metal', has lazily helped itself to the old and unsuitable word salt, instead of excogitating a new and therefore to that extent an apt one. The right model for imitation is that chemist who, when he encountered, or thought he had encountered, a hitherto nameless form of matter, did not purloin for it the name of something else, but invented out of his own head a name which should be proper to it, and enriched the vocabulary of modern man with the useful word *gas*. If we apply the word poetry to an object which does not resemble, either in form or content, anything which has heretofore been so called, not only are we maltreating and corrupting language, but we may be guilty of disrespect and blasphemy. Poetry may be too mean a name for the object in question: the object, being certainly something different, may possibly be something superior. When the Lord rained bread from heaven so that man did eat angels' food, and the children of Israel saw upon the face of the wilderness a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground, they did not call it quails: they rose to the occasion and said to one another 'it is manna'.

There is also such a thing as sham poetry, a counterfeit deliberately manufactured and offered as a substitute. In English the great historical example is certain verse produced abundantly and applauded by high and low in what for literary purposes is loosely called the eighteenth century: not a hundred years accidentally begun and ended by chronology, but a longer period which is a unity and a reality; the period lying between *Samson Agonistes* in 1671 and the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, and including as an integral part and indeed as its most potent influence the mature work of Dryden.

Matthew Arnold more than fifty years ago, in speaking of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's low estimate of the poetry of the eighteenth century, issued the warning 'there are many signs to show that the eighteenth century and its judgements are coming into favour again.' I remember thinking to myself that surely this could never be; but there you see what it is to be a literary critic. There has now for a good many years been a strong disposition to revise the verdict pronounced by the nineteenth century on the poetry of the eighteenth and to represent that its disparaging judgement was no more than an expression of distaste for a sort of poetry unlike its own. That is a misconception. It set a low value on the poetry of the eighteenth century, not because it differed in kind from its own, but because, even at its best, it differed in quality, as its own best poetry did not differ, from the poetry of all those ages, whether modern or ancient, English or foreign, which are acknowledged as the great ages of poetry. Tried by that standard the poetry of the eighteenth century, even when not vicious, even when sound and good, fell short.

The literature of the eighteenth century in England is an admirable and most enjoyable thing. It has a greater solidity of excellence than any before or after; and although the special task and characteristic achievement of the age was the invention and establishment of a healthy, workmanlike, athletic prose, to supersede the cumbrous and decorated and self-admiring prose of a Milton or a Jeremy Taylor, and to become a trustworthy implement for accurate thinking and the serious pursuit of truth, yet in verse also it created masterpieces, and perhaps no English poem of greater than lyric length, not even *The Nonne's Priest's Tale* or *The Ancient Mariner*, is quite so perfect as *The Rape of the Lock*. But the human faculty which dominated the eighteenth century and informed its literature was the intelligence, and that involved, as Arnold says, 'some repressing and silencing of poetry', 'some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul'. Man had ceased to live from the depths of his nature; he occupied himself for choice with thoughts which do not range beyond the sphere of the understanding; he lighted the candles and drew down the blind to shut out that patroness of poets, the moon. The writing of poetry proceeded, and much of the poetry written was excellent literature; but excellent literature which is also poetry is not therefore excellent poetry, and the poetry of the eighteenth century was most satisfactory when it did not try to be poetical. Eighteenth-century

poetry is in fact a name for two different things, which ought to be kept distinct. There was a good sound workaday article, efficiently discharging a worthy and honourable though not an exalted duty. Satire, controversy, and burlesque, to which the eighteenth century was drawn by the character of its genius, and in which its achievement was unrivalled, are forms of art in which high poetry is not at home, and to which, unless introduced with great parsimony and tact, it would be actually injurious and disfiguring. The conclusion of the *Dunciad* may fairly be called sublime; but such a tone was wisely reserved for the conclusion. The modicum of the poetical element which satire can easily accommodate is rather what we find in lines like these: Riches, like insects, when conceal'd they lie, Wait but for wings, and in their season fly.

Who sees pale Mammon pine amidst his store

Sees but a backward steward for the poor:

This year a reservoir, to keep and spare;

The next, a fountain, spouting through his heir, In lavish streams to quench a country's thirst, And men and dogs shall drink him till they burst.

And what sterling stuff they are! But such writing, which was their true glory and should have been their proper pride, did not content its writers. They felt that this, after all, did not rank as equal with the poetry of other ages, nor fulfil the conception of poetry which was obscurely present in their minds; and they aspired to something which should be less pedestrian. It was as though the ostrich should attempt to fly. The ostrich on her own element is the swiftest of created things; she scorneth the horse and his rider; and although we are also told that God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding, he has at any rate given her sense enough to know that she is not a lark or an eagle. To poets of the eighteenth century high and impassioned poetry did not come spontaneously, because the feelings which foster its birth were not then abundant and urgent in the inner man; but they girt up their loins and essayed a lofty strain at the bidding of ambition. The way to write real poetry, they thought, must be to write something as little like prose as possible; they devised for the purpose what was called a 'correct and

splendid diction', which consisted in always using the wrong word instead of the right, and plastered it as ornament, with no thought of propriety, on whatever they desired to dignify. It commanded notice and was not easy to mistake; so the public mind soon connected it with the notion of poetry and came in course of time to regard it as alone poetical.*

It was in truth at once pompous and poverty-stricken. It had a very limited, because supposedly choice, vocabulary, and was consequently unequal to the multitude and refinement of its duties. It could not describe natural objects with sensitive fidelity to nature; it could not express human feelings with a variety and delicacy answering to their own. A thick, stiff, unaccommodating medium was interposed between the writer and his work. And this deadening of language had a consequence beyond its own sphere: its effect worked inward, and deadened perception. That which could no longer be described was no longer noticed.

As one that for a weary space has lain
Lull'd by the song of Circe and her wine
In gardens near the pale of Proserpine,
Where that æean isle forgets the main,
And only the low lutes of love complain,
And only shadows of wan lovers pine—
As such an one were glad to know the brine
Salt on his lips, and the large air again ...

The atmosphere of the eighteenth century made much better poets write much worse.

Lo! where the rosy-bosom'd Hours,
Fair Venus' train, appear,

Disclose the long-expecting flowers

And wake the purple year!

The Attic warbler pours her throat

and so forth.

The features and formation of the style can be studied under a cruel light in Dryden's translations from Chaucer. *The Knight's Tale of Palamon and Arcite* is not one of Chaucer's most characteristic and successful poems: he is not perfectly at home, as in the Prologue and *The Tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote*, and his movement is a trifle languid. Dryden's translation shows Dryden in the maturity of his power and accomplishment, and much of it can be honestly and soberly admired. Nor was he insensible to all the peculiar excellence of Chaucer: he had the wit to keep unchanged such lines as 'Up rose the sun and up rose Emily' or 'The slayer of himself yet saw I there'; he understood that neither he nor anyone else could better them. But much too often in a like case he would try to improve, because he thought that he could. He believed, as he says himself, that he was 'turning some of the *Canterbury Tales* into our language, as it is now refined'; 'the words' he says again 'are given up as a post not to be defended in our poet, because he wanted the modern art of fortifying'; 'in some places' he tells us 'I have added somewhat of my own where I thought my author was deficient, and had not given his thoughts their true lustre, for want of words in the beginning of our language.'

Let us look at the consequences. Chaucer's vivid and memorable line The
smiler with the knife under the cloke

becomes these three:

Next stood Hypocrisy, with holy leer,

Soft smiling and demurely looking down,

But hid the dagger underneath the gown.

Again:

Alas, quod he, that day that I was bore.

So Chaucer, for want of words in the beginning of our language. Dryden comes to his assistance and gives his thoughts their true lustre thus: Cursed be the day when first I did appear;

Let it be blotted from the calendar,

Lest it pollute the month and poison all the year.

Or yet again:

The queen anon for very womanhead

Gan for to weep, and so did Emily

And all the ladies in the company.

If Homer or Dante had the same thing to say, would he wish to say it otherwise? But to Dryden Chaucer wanted the modern art of fortifying, which he thus applies: He said; dumb sorrow seized the standers-by.

The queen, above the rest, by nature good

(The pattern formed of perfect womanhood)

For tender pity wept: when she began

Through the bright quire the infectious virtue ran.

All dropped their tears, even the contended maid.

Had there not fallen upon England the curse out of Isaiah, ‘make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes’? That there should ever have existed an obtuseness which could mistake this impure verbiage for a correct and splendid diction is a dreadful thought. More dreadful is the experience of seeing it poured profusely, continually,

and with evident exultation, from the pen of a great and deservedly illustrious author. But most dreadful of all is the reflexion that he was himself its principal origin. The correctness of calling Emily ‘the contended maid’ is his correctness, and the splendour of ‘through the bright quire the infectious virtue ran’ is his own infectious vice. His disciple Pope admired this line so much that he put it twice into his *Iliad*.

Through all her train the soft infection ran.

The infectious softness through the heroes ran.

This same Dryden, when his self-corrupted taste and the false guidance of ambition would let him, could write in verse even better than he wrote in prose, dipping his bucket in the same well of pure, wholesome, racy English. What a joy it is to whistle correctness and splendour down the wind, and hear him speak out straight in the vernacular.

Till frowning skies began to change their cheer, And time turned up the wrong side of the year.

Bare bending times and moulting months may come, When lagging late they cannot reach their home.

Your benefices twinkled from afar;

They found the new Messiah by the star.

And not only in his domestic sphere of satire and controversy but in this very book of *Fables*, where he is venturing abroad. To his translation of *The Flower and the Leaf* he prefixed these nineteen lines of his own.

Now, turning from the wintry signs, the Sun

His course exalted through the Ram had run,

And whirling up the skies his chariot drove

Through Taurus and the lightsome realms of Love, Where Venus from her orb descends in showers

To glad the ground and paint the fields with flowers: When first the tender
blades of grass appear

And buds that yet the blast of Eurus fear

Stand at the door of life and doubt to clothe the year, Till gentle heat and
soft repeated rains

Make the green blood to dance within their veins.

Then at their call emboldened out they come

And swell the gems and burst the narrow room,

Broader and broader yet their blooms display, Salute the welcome sun and
entertain the day.

Then from their breathing souls the sweets repair To scent the skies and
purge the unwholesome air: Joy spreads the heart, and with a general song
Spring issues out and leads the jolly months along.

What exuberant beauty and vigour! and what nature! I believe that I admire
that passage more heartily and relish it more keenly than Pope or Johnson
or Dryden's own contemporaries could, because I live outside their
dungeon, the dungeon in which Dryden himself had shut them up; because
my ears are not contentedly attuned to the choir of captives singing hymns
in the prison chapel, but can listen to the wild music that burdens every
bough in the free world outside the wall.

Not that even this passage will quite sustain that comparison. When I am
drinking Barolo stravecchio in Turin, I am not disturbed, nor even visited,
by the reflexion that there is better wine in Dijon. But yet there is; and there
was better poetry, not reckoning Milton's, even in the perverse and crooked
generation preceding Dryden. Thinly scattered on that huge dross-heap, the
Caroline Parnassus, there were tiny gems of purer ray; and the most genuine
of Dryden's own poetry is to be found, never more than four lines at once,
seldom more than two, in his early, unshapely, and wearisome poem *Annus
Mirabilis*.

His great successor, whose *Iliad* was a more dazzling and seductive example of the false manner than any work of Dryden's own, and became, as Coleridge said, 'the main source of our pseudo-poetic diction' – Pope, though he threw open to others the wide gate, did not long keep them company on the broad way, which led them to destruction. He came to recognize, and for the last twenty years of his life he steadily followed, the true bent of his genius, in satire or disputation: into these he put no larger quantity and no rarer quality of poetry than they would assimilate, and he made no more ascents in the balloon. Pope had less of the poetic gift than Dryden; in common with his contemporaries he drew from a poorer vocabulary; and his versification, though more evenly good, did not reach the buoyant excellence of Dryden's at its best. What lifts him nearest to true poetry is sincere inward ardour. Pope had a soul in his body, an aery and fiery particle, where Dryden had nothing but a lump of clay, and he can be nobler than Dryden can. But not even in the *Elegy* to the memory of an unfortunate lady does the fire burn clear of smoke, and truth of emotion do itself full justice in naturalness and purity of diction.

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room, and the eighteenth century, except for a few malcontents, was satisfied with what its leading poets provided. 'It is surely superfluous' says Johnson 'to answer the question that has once been asked, whether Pope was a poet, otherwise than by asking in return, if Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?' It is to be found, Dr Johnson, in Dr Watts.

Soft and easy is thy cradle;

Coarse and hard thy Saviour lay,

When his birthplace was a stable

And his softest bed was hay.

That simple verse, bad rhyme and all, is poetry beyond Pope. It is to be found again, Samuel, in your namesake Benjamin, as tough a piece of timber as yourself.

What gentle ghost, besprent with April dew,

Hails me so solemnly to yonder yew,

And beckoning woos me, from the fatal tree,

To pluck a garland for herself or me?

When Pope imitated that, he got no nearer than this: What beck'ning ghost
along the moon-light shade Invites my steps and points to yonder glade?

'Tis she! – but why that bleeding bosom gor'd, etc.

When I hear anyone say, with defiant emphasis, that Pope was a poet, I suspect him of calling in ambiguity of language to promote confusion of thought. That Pope was a poet is true; but it is one of those truths which are beloved of liars, because they serve so well the cause of falsehood. That Pope was not a poet is false; but a righteous man, standing in awe of the last judgement and the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, might well prefer to say it.

It is impossible to admire such poetry as Pope's so wholeheartedly as Johnson did, and to rest in it with such perfect contentment, without losing the power to appreciate finer poetry or even to recognize it when met. Johnson's unlucky frankness in letting the world know how he was affected by *Lycidas* has earned his critical judgement discredit enough; but consider also his response to poetry which, though somehow written in the eighteenth century, is of an alien strain and worthy of other ages; consider his attitude to Collins. For Collins himself he felt esteem and liking, and his kind heart must have made him wish to speak well of his friend's poetry; but he was an honest man, and could not.

The first impediment, I said, to dealing with the subject of poetry is the native ambiguity of the term. But the course of these remarks has now brought us to a point where another and perhaps greater difficulty awaits us in determining the competence or incompetence of the judge, that is the sensibility or insensibility of the percipient. Am I capable of recognizing poetry if I come across it? Do I possess the organ by which poetry is perceived? The majority of civilized mankind notoriously and indisputably do not; who has certified me that I am one of the minority who do? I may

know what I like and admire, I may like and admire it intensely; but what makes me think that it is poetry? Is my reason for thinking so anything more than this: that poetry is generally esteemed the highest form of literature, and that my opinion of myself forbids me to believe that what I most like and admire is anything short of the highest? Yet why be unwilling to admit that perhaps you cannot perceive poetry? Why think it necessary to your self-respect that you should? How many of the good and great, how many saints and heroes have possessed this faculty? Can you hear the shriek of the bat? Probably not; but do you think the less of yourself on that account? Do you pretend to others, or even try to persuade yourself, that you can? Is it an unbearable thing, and crushing to self-conceit, to be in the majority?

If a man is insensible to poetry, it does not follow that he gets no pleasure from poems. Poems very seldom consist of poetry and nothing else; and pleasure can be derived also from their other ingredients. I am convinced that most readers, when they think that they are admiring poetry, are deceived by inability to analyse their sensations, and that they are really admiring, not the poetry of the passage before them, but something else in it, which they like better than poetry.

To begin with a very obvious instance. I have been told by devout women that to them the most beautiful poetry is Keble's. Keble is a poet; there are things in the *Christian Year* which can be admired by atheists; but what devout women most prize in it, as Keble himself would have wished, is not its poetry; and I much doubt whether any of them, if asked to pick out the best poem in the book, would turn at once to the *Second Sunday after Easter*. Good religious poetry, whether in Keble or Dante or Job, is likely to be most justly appreciated and most discriminatingly relished by the undevout.

Again, there existed in the last century a great body of Wordsworthians, as they were called. It is now much smaller; but true appreciation of Wordsworth's poetry has not diminished in proportion: I suspect that it has much increased. The Wordsworthians, as Matthew Arnold told them, were apt to praise their poet for the wrong things. They were most attracted by what may be called his philosophy; they accepted his belief in the morality

of the universe and the tendency of events to good; they were even willing to entertain his conception of nature as a living and sentient and benignant being, a conception as purely mythological as the Dryads and the Naiads. To that thrilling utterance which pierces the heart and brings tears to the eyes of thousands who care nothing for his opinions and beliefs they were not noticeably sensitive; and however justly they admired the depth of his insight into human nature and the nobility of his moral ideas, these things, with which his poetry was in close and harmonious alliance, are distinct from poetry itself.

When I examine my mind and try to discern clearly in the matter, I cannot satisfy myself that there are any such things as poetical ideas. No truth, it seems to me, is too precious, no observation too profound, and no sentiment too exalted to be expressed in prose. The utmost that I could admit is that some ideas do, while others do not, lend themselves kindly to poetical expression; and that these receive from poetry an enhancement which glorifies and almost transfigures them, and which is not perceived to be a separate thing except by analysis.

‘Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life shall find it.’ That is the most important truth which has ever been uttered, and the greatest discovery ever made in the moral world; but I do not find in it anything which I should call poetical. On the other hand, when Wisdom says in the Proverbs ‘He that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul; all they that hate me, love death’, that is to me poetry, because of the words in which the idea is clothed; and as for the seventh verse of the forty-ninth Psalm in the Book of Common Prayer, ‘But no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him’, that is to me poetry so moving that I can hardly keep my voice steady in reading it. And that this is the effect of language I can ascertain by experiment: the same thought in the Bible version, ‘None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him’, I can read without emotion.

Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it. Can it then be isolated and studied by itself? For the combination of language with its intellectual content, its meaning, is as close a union as can well be imagined. Is there such a thing as pure unmingled poetry, poetry independent of meaning?

Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out. 'Poetry gives most pleasure' said Coleridge 'when only generally and not perfectly understood'; and perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure. *The Haunted Palace* is one of Poe's best poems so long as we are content to swim in the sensations it evokes and only vaguely to apprehend the allegory. We are roused to discomfort, at least I am, when we begin to perceive how exact in detail the allegory is; when it dawns upon us that the fair palace door is Roderick Usher's mouth, the pearl and ruby his teeth and lips, the yellow banners his hair, the ramparts plumed and pallid his forehead, and when we are reduced to hoping, for it is no more than a hope, that the wingèd odours have no connexion with hair-oil.

Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not. If it were, the eighteenth century would have been able to write it better. As matters actually stand, who are the English poets of that age in whom pre-eminently one can hear and recognize the true poetic accent emerging clearly from the contemporary dialect? These four: Collins, Christopher Smart, Cowper, and Blake. And what other characteristic had these four in common? They were mad. Remember Plato: 'He who without the Muses' madness in his soul comes knocking at the door of poesy and thinks that art will make him anything fit to be called a poet, finds that the poetry which he indites in his sober senses is beaten hollow by the poetry of madmen.'

That the intellect is not the fount of poetry, that it may actually hinder its production, and that it cannot even be trusted to recognize poetry when produced, is best seen in the case of Smart. Neither the prize founded in this University by the Rev. Thomas Seaton nor the successive contemplation of five several attributes of the Supreme Being could incite him to good poetry while he was sane. The only poem by which he is remembered, a poem which came to its own in the kinder climate of the nineteenth century and has inspired one of the best poems of the twentieth, was written, if not, as tradition says, in actual confinement, at any rate very soon after release; and when the eighteenth century, the age of sanity and intelligence, collected his poetical works, it excluded this piece as 'bearing melancholy proofs of the recent estrangement of his mind'.

Collins and Cowper, though they saw the inside of madhouses, are not supposed to have written any of their poetry there; and Blake was never mad enough to be locked up. But elements of their nature were more or less insurgent against the centralized tyranny of the intellect, and their brains were not thrones on which the great usurper could sit secure. And so it strangely came to pass that in the eighteenth century, the age of prose and of unsound or unsatisfying poetry, there sprang up one well of the purest inspiration. For me the most poetical of all poets is Blake. I find his lyrical note as beautiful as Shakespeare's and more beautiful than anyone else's; and I call him more poetical than Shakespeare, even though Shakespeare has so much more poetry, because poetry in him preponderates more than in Shakespeare over everything else, and instead of being confounded in a great river can be drunk pure from a slender channel of its own. Shakespeare is rich in thought, and his meaning has power of itself to move us, even if the poetry were not there: Blake's meaning is often unimportant or virtually non-existent, so that we can listen with all our hearing to his celestial tune.

Even Shakespeare, who had so much to say, would sometimes pour out his loveliest poetry in saying nothing.

Take O take those lips away
That so sweetly were forsworn,
And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn;
But my kisses bring again,
bring again,
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,
seal'd in vain.

That is nonsense; but it is ravishing poetry. When Shakespeare fills such poetry with thought, and thought which is worthy of it, as in *Fear no more the heat o' the sun* or *O mistress mine, where art thou roaming?* those songs, the very summits of lyrical achievement, are indeed greater and more moving poems, but I hardly know how to call them more poetical.

Now Blake again and again, as Shakespeare now and then, gives us poetry neat, or adulterated with so little meaning that nothing except poetic emotion is perceived and matters.

Hear the voice of the Bard,

Who present, past, and future sees;

Whose ears have heard

The Holy Word

That walk'd among the ancient trees,

Calling the lapsèd soul

And weeping in the evening dew;

That might control

The starry pole,

And fallen, fallen light renew.

‘O Earth, O Earth, return!

Arise from out the dewy grass;

Night is worn,

And the morn

Rises from the slumberous mass.

‘Turn away no more;

Why wilt thou turn away?

The starry floor,

The watery shore

Is giv'n thee till the break of day.'

That mysterious grandeur would be less grand if it were less mysterious; if the embryo ideas which are all that it contains should endue form and outline, and suggestion condense itself into thought.

Memory, hither come

And tune your merry notes;

And while upon the wind

Your music floats

I'll pore upon the stream

Where sighing lovers dream,

And fish for fancies as they pass

Within the watery glass.

That answers to nothing real; memory's merry notes and the rest are empty phrases, not things to be imagined; the stanza does but entangle the reader in a net of thoughtless delight. The verses which I am now going to read probably possessed for Blake a meaning, and his students think that they have found it; but the meaning is a poor foolish disappointing thing in comparison with the verses themselves.

My Spectre around me night and day

Like a wild beast guards my way;

My Emanation far within

Weeps incessantly for my sin.

A fathomless and boundless deep,

There we wander, there we weep;

On the hungry craving wind
My Spectre follows thee behind.
He scents thy footsteps in the snow
Wheresoever thou dost go:
Through the wintry hail and rain
When wilt thou return again?
Dost thou not in pride and scorn
Fill with tempests all my morn,

And with jealousies and fears

Fill my pleasant nights with tears?

Seven of my sweet loves thy knife

Has bereavèd of their life.

Their marble tombs I built with tears

And with cold and shuddering fears.

Seven more loves weep night and day

Round the tombs where my loves lay,

And seven more loves attend each night

Around my couch with torches bright.

And seven more loves in my bed

Crown with wine my mournful head,

Pitying and forgiving all

Thy transgressions great and small.

When wilt thou return and view

My loves, and them to life renew?

When wilt thou return and live?

When wilt thou pity as I forgive?

I am not equal to framing definite ideas which would match that magnificent versification and correspond to the strong tremor of unreasonable excitement which those words set up in some region deeper than the mind. Lastly take this stanza, addressed 'to the Accuser who is the God of this World'.

Tho' thou art worship'd by the names divine

Of Jesus and Jehovah, thou art still

The Son of Morn in weary Night's decline,

The lost traveller's dream under the hill.

It purports to be theology: what theological sense, if any, it may have, I cannot imagine and feel no wish to learn: it is pure and self-existent poetry, which leaves no room in me for anything besides.

In most poets, as I said, poetry is less often found thus disengaged from its usual concomitants, from certain things with which it naturally unites itself and seems to blend indistinguishably. For instance: Sorrow, that is not sorrow, but delight;

And miserable love, that is not pain

To hear of, for the glory that redounds

Therefrom to human kind, and what we are.

The feeling with which those lines are read is composite, for one constituent is supplied by the depth and penetrating truth of the thought. Again: Though love repine and reason chafe,

There came a voice without reply,—

‘‘Tis man’s perdition to be safe,

When for the truth he ought to die.’

Much of the emotion kindled by that verse can be referred to the nobility of the sentiment. But in these six simple words of Milton – Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more –

what is it that can draw tears, as I know it can, to the eyes of more readers than one? What in the world is there to cry about? Why have the mere words the physical effect of pathos when the sense of the passage is blithe and gay? I can only say, because they are poetry, and find their way to something in man which is obscure and latent, something older than the present organization of his nature, like the patches of fen which still linger here and there in the drained lands of Cambridgeshire.

Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognized the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us. One of these symptoms was described in connexion with another object by Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up.’ Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keats’s last letters, where he

says, speaking of Fanny Brawne, 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.' The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.

My opinions on poetry are necessarily tinged, perhaps I should say tainted, by the circumstance that I have come into contact with it on two sides. We were saying a while ago that poetry is a very wide term, and inconveniently comprehensive: so comprehensive is it that it embraces two books, fortunately not large ones, of my own. I know how this stuff came into existence; and though I have no right to assume that any other poetry came into existence in the same way, yet I find reason to believe that some poetry, and quite good poetry, did. Wordsworth for instance says that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and Burns has left us this confession, 'I have two or three times in my life composed from the wish rather than the impulse, but I never succeeded to any purpose.' In short I think that the production of poetry, in its first stage, is less an active than a passive and involuntary process; and if I were obliged, not to define poetry, but to name the class of things to which it belongs, I should call it a secretion; whether a natural secretion, like turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster. I think that my own case, though I may not deal with the material so cleverly as the oyster does, is the latter; because I have seldom written poetry unless I was rather out of health, and the experience, though pleasurable, was generally agitating and exhausting. If only that you may know what to avoid, I will give some account of the process.

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon – beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life – I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so, then perhaps the spring would bubble up again. I say bubble up, because, so far as I could make out, the source of the suggestions thus proffered to the brain was an abyss which I have already had occasion to mention, the pit of the stomach. When I got home I wrote

them down, leaving gaps, and hoping that further inspiration might be forthcoming another day. Sometimes it was, if I took my walks in a receptive and expectant frame of mind; but sometimes the poem had to be taken in hand and completed by the brain, which was apt to be a matter of trouble and anxiety, involving trial and disappointment, and sometimes ending in failure. I happen to remember distinctly the genesis of the piece which stands last in my first volume. Two of the stanzas, I do not say which, came into my head, just as they are printed, while I was crossing the corner of Hampstead Heath between the Spaniard's Inn and the footpath to Temple Fortune. A third stanza came with a little coaxing after tea. One more was needed, but it did not come: I had to turn to and compose it myself, and that was a laborious business. I wrote it thirteen times, and it was more than a twelvemonth before I got it right.

By this time you must be sated with anatomy, pathology, and autobiography, and willing to let me retire from my incursion into the foreign territory of literary criticism. Farewell for ever. I will not say with Coleridge that I recentre my immortal mind in the deep sabbath of meek self-content; but I shall go back with relief and thankfulness to my proper job.

Notes on the Text

The text is that printed in the Oxford English Texts edition of *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, edited by Archie Burnett (1997). For *A Shropshire Lad*, the first edition (1896) is followed, but the two changes of wording Housman introduced in 1922 have been incorporated: 'Loose' for 'Thick' in XXXVIII, line 10, and 'no more remembered' for 'long since forgotten' in LII, line 9. For *Last Poems*, the text is that of the first edition (1922) with the addition of missing punctuation at the ends of the first two lines of XXVI, and with the title 'Revolution' for XXXVI, which Housman first gave in 1926 and which he authorized in 1928 for subsequent printings of the volume.

More Poems and *Additional Poems* were published posthumously by Housman's brother Laurence. The text of many poems was misrepresented: poems not completed by Housman were printed as though complete; versions he cancelled were reinstated; separate texts were conflated; and many poems were mistranscribed from the manuscripts. For a detailed account of the complexities, readers are referred to Burnett's introduction, textual notes, and apparatus in the Oxford English Texts edition.

Burnett's copy-text is followed for *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*. Where the latest version of a poem contains uncanceled alternative readings – and the poem was not completed by Housman, therefore – what appears to be the latest reading is chosen. The other uncanceled readings (and only those) from the latest text of the poem are recorded among the notes below. The text of *More Poems* XLVIII contains two readings not found in the surviving manuscripts but which were probably based on manuscripts that Laurence Housman had seen. In the case of *Additional Poems* IV, readings are supplied not only from autograph manuscripts but from a typescript circulated by Laurence Housman before the publication of *More Poems*; once again, he had probably seen manuscripts that do not survive.

In the record of variant text, editorial matter appears inside square brackets, for instance when the text is reconstructed from sources other than the

autograph manuscripts. Uncertain readings from the manuscripts are preceded by a question mark, and illegible readings are represented by a question mark alone. (The initial number refers to the line of the poem.)

MORE POEMS

They say my verse is sad

Laurence Housman printed this (in italic) as an epigraph to *More Poems*, though there is no indication that Housman himself would have wished this.

3: [Rue for](#)] Tears of *1st reading*

5: [This is for all ill-treated](#)] I make it for unhappy *1st reading*

II

Housman numbered the five verses printed here. Three additional verses exist in the Notebooks, but they stand in an indeterminate relation to the five.

8: [rebellion](#)] idolatry *1st reading*

10: [advent](#)] covenant *1st reading*

16: [are](#)] have [*alt.* will]

VII

3: [lost](#)] missed *1st reading*

4: [sown](#)] stuck *1st reading*

VIII

Laurence Housman printed this as a self-contained poem. Here it is presented as three unrelated quatrains.

VIIIC

1: [remembers,](#)] weeps long *1st reading*

IX

1: [hang](#)] cling *1st reading*

5: [by hedgerow bowers](#)] to the wild wood bowers *1st reading*

7: [fields](#)] field *1st reading*

X

5: [a lost country](#)] realms I see not *1st reading*

XIII

1: [and slumber](#)] at even *1st reading*

5: [When](#)] For *1st reading*

7: [at home](#)] awake *1st reading*; mind] guard *1st reading*

The brackets at lines 9–11 signify missing lines of a projected stanza which never progressed beyond the last line (12).

XIV

2: Descried [far off the steeples stand](#); *1st reading*

12: The first word looks to have been '[And](#)', but cutting at the bottom edge of the MS renders it not wholly legible.

XVIII

3: [or so they say](#)] to look all day [*alt.* the livelong day] *1st reading*

4: [read](#)] gaze *1st reading*

6: [pace](#)] roam *1st reading*

10: [And listen till](#)] And [*alt.* Till] after dark *1st reading*; Till nothing but *2nd reading*

11: [Is heard](#)] Begin [*alt.* Begins] *1st reading*

XIX

8: [soiled](#)] fouled *1st reading*

11: [spend](#)] pass *1st reading*

XX

3: [all this noteless](#)] this dissolving *1st reading*

7: [thralls of night](#)] put to death *1st reading*

11: [I with the](#)] Held fast with *1st reading*

12: [Shall sleep as sound](#)] I shall sleep sound *1st reading*

XXI

15: [so](#)] here *1st reading*

XXIII

4: [Count](#)] Think *1st reading*; Hope *2nd reading*

5: [fond lackey](#)] bound [*alts.* brisk and prim] vassal [*alt.* lackey] *1st reading*

XXV

1: [flakes](#)] morn *alt. reading*

[fret](#)] burns *alt. reading*

XXX

1: [we shall never be friends;_give over;](#)] all's over, I'll try no longer; *1st reading*

3: [and](#)] or *1st reading*

4: [And here's nought](#) better in [*alts.* I cannot mend it with *and* And [?] to mend it with] this dull head *1st reading*

5: [goodnight](#)] good [*alt.* here's] luck *1st reading*

8: [lad](#)] fellow *1st reading*

9: [soul](#)] lad *1st reading*

XXXI

7–8: 'Good-bye,' [said you,](#) '[forget me](#)'; [?] [?said] I [?Good-bye] [*alt.* illegible] *1st reading*

13: [headstone shading](#)] stone that[?'s] guarding (*alts.* [sign]ing and [shad]ing] *1st reading*

14: [heart](#)] sleep *1st reading*

XXXII

1–2: With [seed](#) [*alt.* I see] the sowers scatter / The fallows [*alt.* furrows] as they go *1st reading*; The s[owers stride and] scatter / The ploughlands as they go *2nd reading*

2: [Behind](#)] About *3rd reading*

12: [aye](#)] still *1st reading*; found] sure *1st reading*

14: [filler](#)] peopler *1st reading*

18–19: It throngs the earth [*alt.* streets] [and towers](#) / [?] About [*alts.* Against and Amongst and Above] the [?tombs] [*alts.* thrones and courts] of Kings *1st reading*

XXXIII

21: [home](#)] round *2nd reading*; we turned] went we *1st reading*

22: [To plains](#)] By fields *1st reading*; plains] homes *2nd reading*

23: [silent](#)] steadfast *1st and 2nd readings*

XXXIV

6: [I think](#)] 'tis like *1st reading*

XXXVI

1: [dead lie we](#)] we lie dead *1st reading*

XXXVIII

7: [Yet](#)] But *1st reading*

XL

2: [Resigned](#)] Returned [*alt. Recalled*] *1st reading*

5–6: [So ceases and turns to the thing](#) / He was born to be *1st reading*

5: [time coils round](#)] travels the road *2nd reading*

XLI

2: [was not like](#)] should [?not long] *1st reading*

10: [marching](#)] walking *1st reading*

XLII

1: [I'll tell him](#) that, 'twill please him – oh, *1st reading*; When he comes back I'll say – ah, no: *2nd reading*; I'll tell him, [?] ah, no *3rd reading*

2: Unsaid the word will stay: *1st reading*; [Dear fellow](#), [?] [*alt.* little fear:]
2nd reading

3: [Last month was time enough, but now](#) *1st reading*

4: [The news must keep for aye](#) *1st reading*

6: [Unsaid the word must stay](#) *1st reading*; But that I shall not say; [*alt* will stay unsaid]; *2nd reading*; And I had much to say *3rd reading*

9: And many springs [*alt.* a May] [before I learn](#), *1st reading*

10: [Will](#)] And *1st reading*

11: [listening](#)] hearkening *1st reading*

XLIII

8: [moors](#)] gulfs *1st reading*

XLVI

13: [till](#)] and *1st reading*

17: [highway of the sunset](#)] [?caravel of sunset] *1st reading*

XLVIII

4: While [earth's foundations stand](#) *More Poems* (1936) 5: And sea and [sky](#)
and land *More Poems* (1936) ADDITIONAL POEMS

III

6: [I doubt](#) they [?] *1st reading*

10: [They will](#)] I must *1st reading*

12: [aches](#)] frets *1st reading*

IV

1–2: It is no gift I offer / A loan is all I may *1st alt. version*; It is no gift I offer, / [A loan is all I can](#); *2nd alt. version*; Here, take the loan I offer – / The gift I dare not say – *3rd alt. version*

3–4: But take you yet the proffer, / Though 'tis not made for aye. *1st alt. version*; But do not scorn the proffer, / [Man gets no more from man](#). *2nd alt. version*; But scorn not you the proffer, / Man gets no more from man. *3rd alt. version*; The man will die, the proffer / Is mortal like the man. *4th alt. version*; And never scorn the proffer / Because 'tis not for aye. *5th alt. version*

4: Is not to keep for aye *6th reading*; Is [mortal](#) like the man *7th reading*

VI

7: [fond of me](#)] [*alt. kind to me*]

VIII

1: [lap](#)] bed *1st reading*

IX

3: Then in [*alts. to and on*] my thoughts [*alts. heart and tongue*] [the taste](#) [*alt. thought*] is sour X

4: [hangs](#)] seems *1st reading*

XI

8: [Except](#)] But *1st reading*

9: [empty](#)] barren *1st reading*

10: [bears](#)] yields *1st reading*

XIA

5: [heart](#)] flesh *1st reading*

7: [rivers](#)] ocean *1st reading*

XII

1: [list](#)] must *1st reading*

6: [Whole](#)] Cured *1st reading*

XIII

6: [words](#)] pains *1st reading*

8: [pursuing](#)] the suing *1st reading*

XV

1: [An end](#)] Lie down [*alts. Halt here and Ground arms*] *1st reading*

2: [I'll march no further](#)] Lie down, 'tis over *1st reading*

XIX

6: [breaches](#)] wrenches *1st reading*

13: [rejoicing](#)] thanksgiving *1st reading*

Index of First Lines

Alas, the country whence I fare, [147](#)

Along the field as we came by [34](#)

And one remembers, and one forgets, [148](#)

As I gird on for fighting [87](#)

As through the wild green hills of Wyre [47](#)

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply; [199](#)

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle, [63](#)

Because I liked you better [171](#)

Bells in tower at evening toll, [157](#)

Beyond the moor and mountain crest [85](#)

Bring, in this timeless grave to throw, [60](#)

By shores and woods and steeples [178](#)

Clunton and Clunbury, [65](#)

Could man be drunk for ever [95](#)

Crossing alone the nighted ferry [163](#)

Delight it is in youth and May [158](#)

‘Far I hear the bugle blow [72](#)

Far in a western brookland [67](#)

Far known to sea and shore, [184](#)

Farewell to a name and a number [180](#)

‘Farewell to barn and stack and tree, [13](#)

For these of old the trader [139](#)

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns, [3](#)

From far, from eve and morning [42](#)

From the wash the laundress sends [169](#)

Give me a land of boughs in leaf, [146](#)

Good creatures, do you love your lives [166](#)

Good-night; ensured release, [189](#)

Half-way, for one commandment broken, [175](#)

He, standing hushed, a pace or two apart, [168](#)

He is here, Urania’s son, [110](#)

He looked at me with eyes I thought [181](#)

He stood, and heard the steeple [101](#)

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder? [200](#)

Hearken, landsmen, hearken, seamen, [186](#)

Her strong enchantments failing, [88](#)

Here are the skies, the planets seven, [198](#)

Here dead lie we because we did not choose [176](#)

‘Here the hangman stops his cart: [61](#)

High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam [37](#)

Ho, everyone that thirsteth [162](#)

Home is the sailor, home from sea: [218](#)

How clear, how lovely bright, [156](#)

I did not lose my heart in summer’s even, [177](#)

I hoed and trenched and weeded, [81](#)

I lay me down and slumber [153](#)

I listed at home for a lancer, [91](#)

I promise nothing: friends will part; [152](#)

I shall not die for you, [214](#)

I to my perils [144](#)

I wake from dreams and turning [183](#)

I walked alone and thinking, [117](#)

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain, [137](#)

If it chance your eye offend you, [59](#)

If truth in hearts that perish [43](#)

In battles of no renown [213](#)

In heaven-high musings and many, [226](#)

In midnights of November, [105](#)

In my own shire, if I was sad, [52](#)

In summertime on Bredon [28](#)

In the morning, in the morning, [109](#)

In valleys green and still [92](#)

Into my heart an air that kills [51](#)

‘Is my team ploughing, [35](#)

It is no gift I tender, [197](#)

It nods and curtseys and recovers [22](#)

Leave your home behind, lad, [6](#)

Like mine, the veins of these that slumber [160](#)

Loitering with a vacant eye [66](#)

Look not in my eyes, for fear [21](#)

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now [5](#)

‘Lydians, lords of Hermus river, [193](#)

Morning up the eastern stair [204](#)

My dreams are of a field afar [179](#)

Now do our eyes behold [223](#)

Now dreary dawns the eastern light, [115](#)

Now hollow fires burn out to black, [76](#)

Now to her lap the incestuous earth [201](#)

O thou that from thy mansion [188](#)

O youth whose heart is right, [140](#)

‘Oh, sick I am to see you, will you never let me be? [44](#)

Oh, when I was in love with you, [24](#)

Oh fair enough are sky and plain, [27](#)

Oh hard is the bed they have made him, [89](#)

‘Oh is it the jar of nations, [208](#)

Oh on my breast in days hereafter [203](#)

Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers [9](#)

Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough [129](#)

Oh turn not in from marching [207](#)

Oh were he and I together, [195](#)

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists? [212](#)

On forelands high in heaven, [173](#)

On moonlit health and lonesome bank [14](#)

On the idle hill of summer, [45](#)

On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble; [41](#)

On your midnight pallet lying, [17](#)

Once in the wind of morning [53](#)

Onward led the road again [118](#)

Others, I am not the first, [40](#)

Say, lad, have you things to do? [32](#)

Shake hands, we shall never be friends; give over; [170](#)

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending? [58](#)

Smooth between sea and land [185](#)

Soldier from the wars returning, [93](#)

Some can gaze and not be sick [210](#)

Star and coronal and bell [102](#)

Stars, I have seen them fall, [145](#)

Stay, if you list, O passer by the way; [206](#)

Stone, steel, dominions pass, [164](#)

Tarry, delight; so seldom met, [155](#)

Tell me not here, it needs not saying, [132](#)

‘Terence, this is stupid stuff: [78](#)

The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers [94](#)

The end of the year fell chilly [215](#)

The fairies break their dances [107](#)

The farms of home lie lost in even, [154](#)

The half-moon westers low, my love, [113](#)

The lad came to the door at night, [68](#)

The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair, [31](#)

The laws of God, the laws of man, [97](#)

The mill-stream, now that noises cease, [159](#)

The night is freezing fast, [106](#)

The night my father got me [100](#)

The olive in its orchard [219](#)

The orchards half the way [124](#)

The Queen she sent to look for me, [90](#)

The rain, it streams on stone and hillock, [104](#)

The rainy Pleiads wester, [151](#)

The sigh that heaves the grasses [114](#)

The sloe was lost in flower, [108](#)

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws [142](#)

The star-filled seas are smooth to-night [75](#)

The stars have not dealt me the worst they could do: [211](#)

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread, [30](#)

The Sun at noon to higher air, [16](#)

The time you won your town the race [25](#)

The vane on Hughley steeple [77](#)

The Wain upon the northern steep [103](#)

The weeping Pleiads wester, [150](#)

The winds out of the west land blow, [49](#)

The world goes none the lamer, [161](#)

Their seed the sowers scatter [172](#)

There pass the careless people [20](#)

These, in the day when heaven was falling, [128](#)

They say my verse is sad: no wonder. [136](#)

—They shall have breath that never were, [205](#)

Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly: [64](#)

This time of year a twelvemonth past, [33](#)

'Tis five years since, 'An end,' said I, [209](#)

Tis mute, the word they went to hear on high Dodona mountain [112](#)

'Tis spring; come out to ramble [39](#)

'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town [50](#)

To stand up straight and tread the turning mill, [167](#)

Twice a week the winter thorough [23](#)

Wake: the silver dusk returning [8](#)

Wake not for the world-heard thunder [116](#)

We'll to the woods no more, [84](#)

West and away the wheels of darkness roll, [127](#)

Westward on the high-hilled plains [71](#)
What man is he that yearneth [224](#)
‘What sound awakened me, I wonder, [98](#)
When Adam walked in Eden young, [196](#)
When first my way to fair I took [126](#)
When green buds hang in the elm like dust [149](#)
When he’s returned I’ll tell him – oh, [182](#)
When I came last to Ludlow [74](#)
When I meet the morning beam [56](#)
When I was one-and-twenty [19](#)
When I watch the living meet, [18](#)
When I would muse in boyhood [122](#)
When Israel out of Egypt came [138](#)
When lads were home from labour [133](#)
When smoke stood up from Ludlow, [12](#)
When summer’s end is nighing [130](#)
When the bells jostle in the tower [202](#)
When the eye of day is shut, [123](#)
When the lad for longing sighs, [11](#)
White in the moon the long road lies, [46](#)

With rue my heart is laden [70](#)

Yon flakes that fret the eastern sky [165](#)

Yonder see the morning blink: [96](#)

You smile upon your friend to-day, [73](#)

Young is the blood that yonder [174](#)

Index of Titled Poems

A. J. J. [182](#)

Aeschylus, *Septem Contra Thebas* [223](#)

Astronomy [103](#)

Atys [193–4](#)

Bredon Hill [28–9](#)

Carpenter's Son, The [61–2](#)

Culprit, The [100](#)

Day of Battle, The [72](#)

Defeated, The [213](#)

Deserter, The [98–9](#)

Diffugere Nives. Horace: Odes iv 7 [142–3](#)

Easter Hymn [137](#)

Eight O'Clock [101](#)

1887 [3–4](#)

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries [128](#)

Epithalamium [110–11](#)

Euripides, *Alcestis* [226–7](#)

Fancy's Knell [133–4](#)

First of May, The [124–5](#)

Grenadier [90](#)

Hell Gate [118–21](#)

Hughley Steeple [77](#)

I Counsel You Beware [166](#)

Illic Jacet [89](#)

Immortal Part, the [56–7](#)

Isle of Portland, The [75](#)

Lancer [91](#)

Land of Biscay, The [186–7](#)

Lent Lily, The [39](#)

March [16](#)

Merry Guide, The [53–5](#)

New Mistress, The [44](#)

New Year's Eve [215–17](#)

Olive, The [219](#)

Oracles, The [112](#)

Parta Quies [189](#)

R. L. S. [218](#)

Recruit, The [6–7](#)

Reveille [8](#)

Revolution [127](#)

Sage to the Young Man, The [140–1](#)

Sinner's Rue [117](#)

Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus* [224–5](#)

Spring Morning [102](#)

To an Athlete Dying Young [25–6](#)

True Lover, The [68–9](#)

Welsh Marches, The [37–8](#)

West, The [85–6](#)

*Hanging in chains was called keeping sheep by moonlight.

*Pronounced Breedon.

*Written by A. E. H. on the flyleaf of a copy of *Manilius*, Book I, which he gave to Walter Headlam.

*I mean such matters as these: the existence in some metres, not in others, of an inherent alternation of stresses, stronger and weaker; the presence in verse of silent and invisible feet, like rests in music; the reason why some lines of different length will combine harmoniously while others can only be so combined by great skill or good luck; why, while blank verse can be written in lines of ten or six syllables, a series of octosyllables ceases to be verse if they are not rhymed; how Coleridge, in applying the new principle which he announced in the preface to *Christabel*, has fallen between two stools; the necessary limit to inversion of stress, which Milton understood and Bridges overstepped; why, of two pairs of rhymes, equally correct and both consisting of the same vowels and consonants, one is richer to the mental ear and the other poorer; the office of alliteration in verse, and how its definition must be narrowed if it is to be something which can perform that office and not fail of its effect or actually defeat its purpose.

*It is now customary to say that the nineteenth century had a similar lingo of its own. A lingo it had, or came to have, and in the seventies and eighties the minor poets and poetasters were all using the same supposedly poetic diction. It was imitative and sapless, but not preposterous: its leading characteristic was a stale and faded prettiness.