

E. B. BROWNING

A VISION OF POETS

O Sacred Essence, lighting me this hour,
How may I lightly stile thy great power?
Echo. Power! but of whence? under the greenwood spraye?
Or liv'st in Heaven? saye.

Echo. In Heavens aye.
In Heavens aye! tell, may I it obtayne
By alms, by fasting, prayer,—by paine?

Echo. By paine.
Show me the paine, it shall be undergone:
I to mine end will still go on.

Echo. Go on.

Britannia's Pastorals.

A POET could not sleep aright,
For his soul kept up too much light
Under his eyelids for the night.

And thus he rose disquieted
With sweet rimes ringing through his
head,
And in the forest wandered,

Where, sloping up the darkest glades,
The moon had drawn long colonnades,
Upon whose floor the verdure fades

To a faint silver,—pavement fair
The antique wood-nymphs scarce would
dare

To footprint o'er, had such been there,

And rather sit by breathlessly,
With fear in their large eyes, to see
The consecrated sight. But HE

The poet, who with spirit-kiss
Familiar, had long claimed for his
Whatever earthly beauty is,—

Who also in his spirit bore
A Beauty passing the earth's store,
Walked calmly onward evermore.

His aimless thoughts in metre went,
Like a babe's hand without intent
Drawn down a seven-stringed instru-
ment.

Nor jarred it with his humour as,
With a faint stirring of the grass,
An apparition fair did pass.

He might have feared another time,
But all things fair and strange did chime
With his thoughts then, as rime to
rime.

An angel had not startled him,
Alighted from Heaven's burning rim
To breathe from glory in the Dim ;

Much less a lady riding slow
Upon a palfrey white as snow,
And smooth as a snow-cloud could go.

Full upon his she turned her face,—
'What, ho, sir poet! dost thou pace
Our woods at night, in ghostly chace

'Of some fair Dryad of old tales,
Who chaunts between the nightingales,
And over sleep by song prevails?'

She smiled ; but he could see arise
Her soul from far adown her eyes,
Prepared as if for sacrifice.

She looked a queen who seemeth gay
From royal grace alone. 'Now, nay,'
He answered,—'slumber passed away

'Compelled by instincts in my head
That I should see to-night, instead
Of a fair nymph, some fairer Dread.'

She looked up quickly to the sky
And spake:—'The moon's regality
Will hear no praise! she is as I.

'She is in heaven, and I on earth ;
This is my kingdom—I come forth
To crown all poets to their worth.'

He brake in with a voice that mourned :
'To their worth, lady? They are scorned
By men they sing for, till inurned.

'To their worth! Beauty in the mind
Leaves the hearth cold,—and love-refined
Ambitions make the world unkind.

'The boor who ploughs the daisy down,
The chief whose mortgage of renown
Fixed upon graves, has bought a crown—

'Both these are happier, more approved
Than poets!—why should I be moved
In saying . . . both are more beloved?'

'The south can judge not of the north,
She resumed calmly; 'I come forth
To crown all poets to their worth.

'Yea, verily, to anoint them all
With blessed oils which surely shall
Smell sweeter as the ages fall.'

'As sweet,' the poet said, and rung
A low sad laugh, 'as flowers are, sprung
Out of their graves when they die young.

'As sweet as window eglantine,
Some bough of which, as they decline,
The hired nurse gathers at their sign.

'As sweet, in short, as perfumed shroud
Which the gay Roman maidens sewed
For English Keats, singing aloud.'

The lady answered, 'Yea, as sweet!
The things thou namest, being complete
In fragrance as I measure it.

'Since sweet the death-clothes and the
knell
Of him who having lived, dies well,—
And holy sweet the asphodel

'Stirred softly by that foot of his,
When he treads brave on all that is,
Into the world of souls, from this.

'Since sweet the tears, dropped at the
door
Of tearless Death,—and even before.
Sweet, consecrated evermore.

'What, dost thou judge it a strange thing,
That poets, crowned for vanquishing,
Should bear some dust from out the ring?

'Come on with me, come on with me,
And learn in coming! let me free
Thy spirit into verity.'

She ceased: her palfrey's paces sent
No separate noises as she went;
'Twas a bee's hum, a little spent.

And while the poet seemed to tread
Along the drowsy noise so made,
The forest heaved up overhead

Its billowy foliage through the air,
And the calm stars did far and spare
O'erswim the masses everywhere;

Save when the overtopping pines
Did bar their tremulous light with lines
All fixed and black. Now the moon shines

A broader glory. You may see
The trees grow rarer presently:
The air blows up more fresh and free.

Until they come from dark to light,
And from the forest to the sight
Of the large Heaven-heart, bare with
night,—

A fiery throb in every star,
Those burning arteries that are
The conduits of God's life afar!

A wild brown moorland underneath,
And four pools breaking up the heath
With white low gleamings, blank as
death.

Beside the first pool, near the wood,
A dead tree in set horror stood,
Peened and disjointed, stark as rood,

Since thunder-stricken, years ago,
Fixed in the spectral strain and throe
Wherewith it struggled from the blow:

A monumental tree, alone,
That will not bend in storms, nor groan,
But break off sudden like a stone.

Its lifeless shadow lies oblique
Upon the pool,—where, javelin-like,
The star-rays quiver while they strike.

'Drink,' said the lady, very still—
'Be holy and cold.' He did her will,
And drank the starry water chill.

The next pool they came near unto
Was bare of trees: there, only grew
Straight flags and lilies, just a few,

Which sullen on the water sate
And leant their faces on the flat,
As weary of the starlight-state.

'Drink,' said the lady, grave and slow,
'World's use behoveth thee to know.'
He drank the bitter wave below.

The third pool, girt with thorny bushes,
And flaunting weeds, and reeds and
rushes
That winds sang through in mournful
gushes,

Was whitely smeared in many a round
By a slow slime: the starlight swound
Over the ghastly light it found.

'Drink,' said the lady, sad and slow,
'World's love behoveth thee to know.'
He looked to her, commanding so.

Her brow was troubled, but her eye
Struck clear to his soul. For all reply
He drank the water suddenly,—

Then, with a deathly sickness, passed
Beside the fourth pool and the last,
Where weights of shadow were down-
cast

From yew and alder, and rank trails
Of nightshade clasping the trunk-scales,
And flung across the intervals

From yew to yew. Who dares to stoop
Where those dank branches overdroop,
Into his heart the chill strikes up;

He hears a silent gliding coil,
The snakes strain hard against the soil,
His foot slips in their slimy oil,

And toads seem crawling on his hand,
And clinging bats, but dimly scanned,
Full in his face their wings expand.

A paleness took the poet's cheek:
'Must I drink here?' he seemed to seek
The lady's will with utterance meek.

'Aye, aye,' she said, 'it so must be'
(And this time she spake cheerfully)
'Behoves thee know World's cruelty.'

He bowed his forehead till his mouth
Curved in the wave, and drank unloath,
As if from rivers of the south.

His lips sobbed through the water rank,
His heart paused in him while he drank,
His brain beat heart-like, rose and sank,

And he swooned backward to a dream,
Wherein he lay 'twixt gloom and gleam,
With Death and Life at each extreme.

And spiritual thunders, born of soul
Not cloud, did leap from mystic pole
And o'er him roll and counter-roll,

Crushing their echoes reboant
With their own wheels. Did Heaven
so grant
His spirit a sign of covenant?

At last came silence. A slow kiss
Did crown his forehead after this:
His eyelids flew back for the bliss.

The lady stood beside his head,
Smiling a thought, with hair dispread.
The moonshine seemed dishevelled

In her sleek tresses manifold,
Like Danae's in the rain of old,
That dripped with melancholy gold.

But she was holy, pale, and high,
As one who saw an ecstasy
Beyond a foretold agony.

'Rise up!' said she, with voice where
song
Eddied through speech—'rise up! be
strong!

And learn how right avenges wrong.'

The poet rose up on his feet:
He stood before an altar set
For sacrament, with vessels meet;

And mystic altar-lights which shine
As if their flames were crystalline
Carved flames, that would not shrink or
pine.

The altar filled the central place
Of a great church, and toward its face
Long aisles did shoot and interlace,

And from it a continuous mist
Of incense (round the edges kissed
By a yellow light of amethyst)

Wound upward slowly and throbbingly,
 Cloud within cloud, right silverly,
 Cloud above cloud, victoriously,—
 Broke full against the archèd roof,
 And, thence refracting, eddied off,
 And floated through the marble woof
 Of many a fine-wrought architrave,
 Then, poising its white masses brave,
 Swept solemnly down aisle and nave ;
 Where now in dark, and now in light,
 The countless columns, glimmering
 white,
 Seemed leading out to the Infinite.
 Plunged half-way up the shaft they
 showed,
 In that pale shifting incense-cloud,
 Which flowed them by, and overflowed,
 Till mist and marble seemed to blend,
 And the whole temple, at the end,
 With its own incense to distend,—
 The arches, like a giant's bow,
 To bend and slacken,—and below,
 The nichèd saints to come and go.
 Alone, amid the shifting scene,
 That central altar stood serene
 In its clear steadfast taper-sheen.
 Then first, the poet was aware
 Of a chief angel standing there
 Before that altar, in the glare.
 His eyes were dreadful, for you saw
 That *they* saw God—his lips and jaw,
 Grand-made and strong, as Sinai's Law
 They could enunciate and refrain
 From vibratory after-pain,
 And his brow's height was sovereign.
 On the vast background of his wings
 Rises his image, and he flings,
 From each plumed arc, pale glitterings
 And fiery flakes (as beateth more
 Or less, the angel-heart) before
 And round him, upon roof and floor,
 Edging with fire the shifting fumes ;
 While at his side, 'twixt lights and
 glooms,
 The phantasm of an organ booms.

Extending from which instrument
 And angel, right and left-way bent,
 The poet's sight grew sentient
 Of a strange company around
 And toward the altar,—pale and bound
 With bay above the eyes profound.
 Deathful their faces were, and yet
 The power of life was in them set—
 Never forgot, nor to forget.
 Sublime significance of mouth,
 Dilated nostril full of youth,
 And forehead royal with the truth.
 These faces were not multiplied
 Beyond your count, but side by side
 Did front the altar, glorified.
 Still as a vision, yet exprest
 Full as an action—look and geste
 Of buried saint in risen rest.
 The poet knew them. Faint and dim
 His spirits seemed to sink in him,
 Then, like a dolphin, change and swim
 The current. These were poets true,
 Who died for Beauty, as martyrs do
 For Truth—the ends being scarcely two.
 God's prophets of the Beautiful
 These poets were ; of iron rule,
 The rugged cilix, serge of wool.
 Here, Homer, with the broad suspense
 Of thunderous brows, and lips intense
 Of garrulous god-innocence.
 There, Shakespeare, on whose forehead
 climb
 The crowns o' the world. Oh, eyes
 sublime,
 With tears and laughers for all time !
 Here, Aeschylus, the women swooned
 To see so awful, when he frowned
 As the gods did !—he standeth crowned.
 Euripides, with close and mild
 Scholastic lips,—that could be wild,
 And laugh or sob out like a child
 Even in the classes. Sophocles,
 With that king's look which, down the
 trees,
 Followed the dark effigies

Of the lost Theban. Hesiod old,
 Who, somewhat blind and deaf and cold,
 Cared most for gods and bulls. And bold

Electric Pindar, quick as fear,
 With race-dust on his cheeks, and clear
 Slant startled eyes that seem to hear

The chariot rounding the last goal,
 To hurtle past it in his soul.
 And Sappho, with that gloriole

Of ebon hair on calmèd brows.
 O poet-woman ! none forgoes
 The leap, attaining the repose !

Theocritus, with glittering locks
 Dropt sideways, as betwixt the rocks
 He watched the visionary flocks.

And Aristophanes, who took
 The world with mirth, and laughter-
 struck

The hollow caves of Thought and woke
 The infinite echoes hid in each.
 And Virgil : shade of Mantuan beech
 Did help the shade of bay to reach

And knit around his forehead high :
 For his gods wore less majesty
 Than his brown bees hummed death-
 lessly.

Lucretius—nobler than his mood ;
 Who dropped his plummet down the
 broad
 Deep universe, and said ' No God,'

Finding no bottom : he denied
 Divinely the divine, and died
 Chief poet on the Tiber-side

By grace of God ! his face is stern,
 As one compelled, in spite of scorn,
 To teach a truth he would not learn.

And Ossian, dimly seen or guessed :
 Once counted greater than the rest,
 When mountain-winds blew out his vest.

And Spenser drooped his dreaming head
 (With languid sleep-smile you had said
 From his own verse engenderèd)

On Ariosto's, till they ran
 Their curls in one.—The Italian
 Shot nimbler heat of bolder man

From his fine lids. And Dante stern
 And sweet, whose spirit was an urn
 For wine and milk poured out in turn.

Hard-souled Alfieri ; and fancy-willed
 Boiardo,—who with laughter filled
 The pauses of the jostled shield.

And Berni, with a hand stretched out
 To sleek that storm. And, not without
 The wreath he died in, and the doubt

He died by, Tasso ! hard and lover,
 Whose visions were too thin to cover
 The face of a false woman over.

And soft Racine,—and grave Corneille,
 The orator of rimes, whose wail
 Scarce shook his purple. And Petrarch
 pale,

From whose brainlighted heart were
 thrown
 A thousand thoughts beneath the sun,
 Each lucid with the name of One.

And Camoens, with that look he had,
 Compelling India's Genius sad
 From the wave through the Lusiad,—

The murmurs of the storm-cape ocean
 Indrawn in vibrative emotion
 Along the verse. And, while devotion

In his wild eyes fantastic shone
 Under the tonsure blown upon
 By airs celestial,—Calderon.

And bold De Vega,—who breathed quick
 Verse after verse, till death's old trick
 Put pause to life and rhetoric.

And Goethe—with that reaching eye
 His soul reached out from, far and high,
 And fell from inner entity.

And Schiller, with heroic front,
 Worthy of Plutarch's kiss upon 't,
 Too large for wreath of modern wont.

And Chaucer, with his infantine
 Familiar clasp oft hinges divine :
 That mark upon his lip is wine.

Here, Milton's eyes strike piercing-dim :
 The shapes of suns and stars did swim
 Like clouds from them, and granted him

God for sole vision. Cowley, there ;
Whose active fancy debonair
Drew straws like amber—foul to fair.

Drayton and Browne,—with smiles they
drew
From outward nature, still kept new
From their own inward nature true.

And Marlowe, Webster, Fletcher, Ben—
Whose fire-hearts sowed our furrows
when
The world was worthy of such men.

And Burns, with pungent passionings
Set in his eyes. Deep lyric springs
Are of the fire-mount's issuings.

And Shelley, in his white ideal,
All statue-blind ! And Keats the real
Adonis, with the hymeneal

Fresh vernal buds half sunk between
His youthful curls, kissed straight and
sheen

In his Rome-grave, by Venus queen.

And poor, proud Byron,—sad as grave,
And salt as life : forlornly brave,
And quivering with the dart he drave.

And visionary Coleridge, who
Did sweep his thoughts as angels do
Their wings, with cadence up the Blue.

These poets faced, and many more,
The lighted altar looming o'er
The clouds of incense dim and hoar :

And all their faces, in the lull
Of natural things, looked wonderful
With life and death and deathless rule.

All, still as stone, and yet intense ;
As if by spirit's vehemence
That stone were carved, and not by sense.

But where the heart of each should beat,
There seemed a wound instead of it,
From whence the blood dropped to their
feet,

Drop after drop—dropped heavily,
As century follows century
Into the deep eternity.

Then said the lady—and her word
Came distant, as wide waves were stirred
Between her and the ear that heard,

' *World's use* is cold, *world's love* is vain,
World's cruelty is bitter bane,
But pain is not the fruit of pain.

' Hearken, O poet, whom I led
From the dark wood. Dismissing dread,
Now hear this angel in my stead.

' His organ's clavier strikes along
These poets' hearts, sonorous, strong,
They gave him without count of wrong,—

' A diapason whence to guide
Up to God's feet, from these who died,
An anthem fully glorified.

' Whereat God's blessing . . . IBARAK
(יְבָרַךְ)

Breathes back this music—folds it back
About the earth in vapoury rack,

' And men walk in it, crying "Lo,
The world is wider, and we know
The very heavens look brighter so.

' The stars move statelier round the edge
Of the silver spheres, and give in pledge
Their light for nobler privilege.

" No little flower but joys or grieves,
Full life is rustling in the sheaves,
Full spirit sweeps the forest-leaves."

' So works this music on the earth,
God so admits it, sends it forth,
To add another worth to worth—

' A new creation-bloom that rounds
The old creation, and expounds
His Beautiful in tuneful sounds.

' Now hearken !' Then the poet gazed
Upon the angel glorious-faced,
Whose hand, majestically raised,

Floated across the organ-keys,
Like a pale moon o'er murmuring seas,
With no touch but with influences.

Then rose and fell (with swell and sround
Of shapeless noises wandering round
A concord which at last they found)

Those mystic keys—the tones were
mixed,
Dim, faint, and thrilled and throbbed
betwixt

The incomplete and the unfixed :

And therein mighty minds were heard
In mighty musings, inly stirred,
And struggling outward for a word.

Until these surges, having run
This way and that, gave out as one
An Aphroditè of sweet tune,—

A Harmony, that, finding vent,
Upward in grand ascension went,
Winged to a heavenly argument—

Up, upward ! like a saint who strips
The shroud back from his eyes and lips,
And rises in apocalypse.

A harmony sublime and plain,
Which cleft (as flying swan, the rain,—
Throwing the drops off with a strain

Of her white wing) those undertones
Of perplex chords, and soared at once
And struck out from the starry thrones

Their several silver octaves as
It passed to God. The music was
Of divine stature—strong to pass.

And those who heard it, understood
Something of life in spirit and blood—
Something of nature's fair and good.

And while it sounded, those great souls
Did thrill as racers at the goals,
And burn in all their aureoles.

But she, the lady, as vapour-bound,
Stood calmly in the joy of sound,—
Like Nature with the showers around.

And when it ceased, the blood which fell,
Again, alone grew audible,
Tolling the silence as a bell.

The sovran angel lifted high
His hand, and spake out sovranly :
' Tried poets, hearken and reply !

' Give me true answers. If we grant
That not to suffer, is to want
The conscience of the jubilant,—

' If ignorance of anguish is
But ignorance,—and mortals miss
Far prospects, by a level bliss,—

' If, as two colours must be viewed
In a visible image, mortals should
Need good and evil, to see good,—

' If to speak nobly, comprehends
To feel profoundly—if the ends
Of power and suffering, Nature blends,—

' If poets on the tripod must
Writhe like the Pythian, to make just
Their oracles, and merit trust,—

' If every vatic word that sweeps
To change the world, must pale their lips,
And leave their own souls in eclipse,—

' If to search deep the universe
Must pierce the searcher with the curse,—
Because that bolt (in man's reverse)

' Was shot to the heart o' the wood, and
lies
Wedged deepest in the best,—if eyes
That look for visions and surprise

' From influent angels, must shut down
Their lids first, upon sun and moon,
The head asleep upon a stone,—

' If ONE who did redeem you back,
By His own loss, from final wrack,
Did consecrate by touch and track

' Those temporal sorrows, till the taste
Of brackish waters of the waste
Is salt with tears He dropt too fast,—

' If all the crowns of earth must wound
With priekings of the thorns He found,—
If saddest sighs swell sweetest sound,—

' What say ye unto this ?—refuse
This baptism in salt water ?—choose
Calm breasts, mute lips, and labour loose ?

' Or, oh ye gifted givers ! ye
Who give your liberal hearts to me,
To make the world this harmony,

' Are ye resigned that they be spent
To such world's help ?—

The Spirits bent

Their awful brows and said—' Content.'

Content ! it sounded like *amen*,
Said by a choir of mourning men ;
An affirmation full of pain

And patience,—aye, of glorying
And adoration,—as a king
Might seal an oath for governing.

Then said the angel—and his face
Lightened abroad, until the place
Grew larger for a moment's space,—

The long aisles flashing out in light,
And nave and transept, columns white
And arches crossed, being clear to sight

As if the roof were off, and all
Stood in the noon-sun,—'Lo! I call
To other hearts as liberal.

'This pedal strikes out in the air:
My instrument has room to bear
Still fuller strains and perfecter.

'Herein is room, and shall be room
While Time lasts, for new hearts to come
Consummating while they consume.

'What living man will bring a gift
Of his own heart, and help to lift
The tune!—The race is to the swift.'

So asked the angel. Straight the while,
A company came up the aisle
With measured step and sorted smile;

Cleaving the incense-clouds that rise,
With winking unaccustomed eyes,
And love-locks smelling sweet of spice.

One bore his head above the rest,
As if the world were dispossessed;
And One did pillow chin on breast,

Right languid—an as he should faint.
One shook his curls across his paint,
And moralized on worldly taint.

One, slanting up his face, did wink
The salt rheum to the eyelid's brink,
To think—O gods! or—not to think!

Some trod out stealthily and slow,
As if the sun would fall in snow
If they walked to instead of fro.

And some, with conscious ambling free,
Did shake their bells right daintily
On hand and foot, for harmony.

And some, composing sudden sighs
In attitudes of point-device,
Rehearsed impromptu agonies.

And when this company drew near
The spirits crowned, it might appear,
Submitted to a ghastly fear.

As a sane eye in master-passion
Constrains a maniac to the fashion
Of hideous maniac imitation

In the least geste—the dropping low
O' the lid, the wrinkling of the brow,
Exaggerate with mock and mow,—

So mastered was that company
By the crowned vision utterly,
Swayed to a maniac mockery.

One dulled his eyeballs, as they ached
With Homer's forehead, though he lacked
An inch of any. And one racked

His lower lip with restless tooth,
As Pindar's rushing words forsooth
Were pent behind it. One, his smooth

Pink cheeks, did rumple passionate,
Like Aeschylus—and tried to prate
On trolling tongue, of fate and fate.

One set her eyes like Sappho's—or
Any light woman's! one forbore
Like Dante, or any man as poor

In mirth, to let a smile undo
His hard-shut lips. And one that drew
Sour humours from his mother, blew

His sunken cheeks out to the size
Of most unnatural jollities,
Because Anacreon looked jest-wise.

So with the rest.—It was a sight
A great world-laughter would requite,
Or great world-wrath, with equal right.

Out came a speaker from that crowd
To speak for all—in sleek and proud
Exordial periods, while he bowed

His knee before the angel.—'Thus,
O angel who hast called for us,
We bring thee service emulous,—

'Fit service from sufficient soul,
Hand-service, to receive world's dole,
Lip-service, in world's ear to roll

'Adjusted concords—soft enow
To hear the wine-cups passing, through,
And not too grave to spoil the show.

'Thou, certes, when thou askest more,
O sapient angel, leanest o'er
The window-sill of metaphor.

'To give our hearts up! fie!—that rage
Barbaric antedates the age:
It is not done on any stage.

'Because your scald or gleeman went
With seven or nine-stringed instrument
Upon his back—must ours be bent?

'We are not pilgrims, by your leave;
No, nor yet martyrs! if we grieve,
It is to rime to . . . summer eve.

'And if we labour, it shall be,
As suiteth best with our degree,
In after-dinner reverie.'

More yet that speaker would have said,
Poising, between his smiles fair-fed,
Each separate phrase till finished.

But all the foreheads of those born
And dead true poets flashed with scorn
Betwixt the bay leaves round them
worn—

Aye, jettted such brave fire, that they,
The new-come, shrank and paled away,
Like leaden ashes when the day

Strikes on the hearth. A spirit-blast,
A presence known by power, at last
Took them up mutely—they had passed.

And *he*, our pilgrim-poet, saw
Only their places, in deep awe,—
What time the angel's smile did draw

His gazing upward. Smiling on,
The angel in the angel shone,
Revealing glory in benison.

Till, ripened in the light which shut
The poet in, his spirit mute
Dropped sudden, as a perfect fruit.

He fell before the angel's feet,
Saying—'If what is true is sweet,
In something I may compass it.

'For, where my worthiness is poor,
My will stands richly at the door,
To pay shortcomings evermore.

'Accept me therefore. Not for price,
And not for pride, my sacrifice
Is tendered! for my soul is nice

'And will beat down those dusty seeds
Of bearded corn, if she succeeds
In soaring while the covey feeds.

'I soar—I am drawn up like the lark
To its white cloud. So high my mark,
Albeit my wing is small and dark.

'I ask no wages—seek no fame.
Sew me, for shroud round face and name,
God's banner of the oriflamme.

'I only would have leave to loose
(In tears and blood, if so He choose)
Mine inward music out to use,

'I only would be spent—in pain
And loss, perchance—but not in vain,
Upon the sweetness of that strain!

'Only project, beyond the bound
Of mine own life, so lost and found,
My voice, and live on in its sound!

'Only embrace and be embraced
By fiery ends,—whereby to waste,
And light God's future with my past.'

The angel's smile grew more divine,
The mortal speaking—aye, its shine
Swelled fuller, like a choir-note fine,

Till the broad glory round his brow
Did vibrate with the light below;
But what he said, I do not know.

Nor know I if the man who prayed,
Rose up accepted, unforbade,
From the church-floor where he was
laid,—

Nor if a listening life did run
Through the king-poets, one by one
Rejoicing in a worthy son.

My soul, which might have seen, grew
blind

By what it looked on: I can find
No certain count of things behind.

I saw alone, dim, white, and grand
As in a dream, the angel's hand
Stretched forth in gesture of command

Straight through the haze. And so, as
erst,

A strain more noble than the first
Mused in the organ, and outburst.

With giant march, from floor to roof
Rose the full notes,—now parted off
In pauses massively aloof

Like measured thunders,—now rejoined
In concords of mysterious kind
Which fused together sense and mind,—

Now flashing sharp on sharp along
Exultant, in a mounting throng,—
Now dying off to a low song

Fed upon minors!—wavelike sounds
Re-eddying into silver rounds,
Enlarging liberty with bounds.

And every rhythm that seemed to close
Survived in confluent underflows
Symphonious with the next that rose.

Thus the whole strain being multiplied
And greated,—with its glorified
Wings shot abroad from side to side,—

Waved backward (as a wind might wave
A Brocken mist, and with as brave
Wild roaring) arch and architrave,

Aisle, transept, column, marble wall,—
Then swelling outward, prodigal
Of aspiration beyond thrall,

Soared,—and drew up with it the whole
Of this said vision—as a soul
Is raised by a thought. And as a scroll

Of bright devices is unrolled
Still upward, with a gradual gold,—
So rose the vision manifold,

Angel and organ, and the round
Of spirits, solemnized and crowned,—
While the freed clouds of incense wound

Ascending, following in their track,
And glimmering faintly, like the rack
O' the moon in her own light cast back.

And as that solemn Dream withdrew,
The lady's kiss did fall anew
Cold on the poet's brow as dew.

And that same kiss which bound him
first

Beyond the senses, now reversed
Its own law, and most subtly pierced

His spirit with the sense of things
Sensual and present. Vanishings
Of glory, with Aeolian wings

Struck him and passed: the lady's face
Did melt back in the chrysoptas
Of the orient morning sky that was

Yet clear of lark,—and there and so
She melted, as a star might do,
Still smiling as she melted—slow.

Smiling so slow, he seemed to see
Her smile the last thing, gloriously,
Beyond her—far as memory.

Then he looked round: he was alone.
He lay before the breaking sun,
As Jacob at the Bethel stone.

And thought's entangled skein being
wound,
He knew the moorland of his swound,
And the pale pools that smeared the
ground;

The far wood-pines, like offing ships—
The fourth pool's yew anear him drips,
World's cruelty attaints his lips,

And still he tastes it—bitter still—
Through all that glorious possible
He had the sight of present ill.

Yet rising calmly up and slowly
With such a cheer as scorneth folly,
A mild delightsome melancholy,

He journeyed homeward through the
wood,

And prayed along the solitude,
Betwixt the pines,—‘O God, my God!’

The golden morning's open flowings
Did sway the trees to murmurous bow-
ings,
In metric chant of blessed poems.

And passing homeward through the
wood,

He prayed along the solitude,—
‘Thou, Poet-God, art great and good!’

‘And though we must have, and have had
Right reason to be earthly sad,—
Thou, Poet-God, art great and glad!’

CONCLUSION

Life treads on life, and heart on heart:
We press too close in church and mart
To keep a dream or grave apart.

And I was 'ware of walking down
That same green forest where had gone
The poet-pilgrim. One by one

I traced his footsteps. From the east
A red and tender radiance pressed
Through the near trees, until I guessed

The sun behind shone full and round;
While up the leafiness profound
A wind scarce old enough for sound

Stood ready to blow on me when
I turned that way; and now and then
The birds sang and brake off again

To shake their pretty feathers dry
Of the dew sliding droppingly
From the leaf-edges, and apply

Back to their song. 'Twixt dew and
bird

So sweet a silence ministered,
God seemed to use it for a word.

Yet morning souls did leap and run
In all things, as the least had won
A joyous insight of the sun.

And no one looking round the wood
Could help confessing as he stood,
This Poet-God is glad and good.

But hark! a distant sound that grows!
A heaving, sinking of the boughs—
A rustling murmur, not of those!

A breezy noise, which is not breeze!
And white-clad children by degrees
Steal out in troops among the trees,

Fair little children, morning-bright,
With faces grave, yet soft to sight,
Expressive of restrained delight.

Some plucked the palm-boughs within
reach,
And others leapt up high to catch
The upper boughs, and shake from each

A rain of dew, till, wetted so,
The child who held the branch let go,
And it swang backward with a flow

Of faster drippings. Then I knew
The children laughed—but the laugh flew
From its own chirrup, as might do

A frightened song-bird; and a child
Who seemed the chief, said very mild,
‘Hush! keep this morning undefiled.’

His eyes rebuked them from calm
spheres;

His soul upon his brow appears
In waiting for more holy years.

I called the child to me, and said,
‘What are your palms for?’—‘To be
spread,’
He answered, ‘on a poet dead.

‘The poet died last month, and now
The world which had been somewhat
slow
In honouring his living brow,

‘Commands the palms—they must be
strown

On his new marble very soon,
In a procession of the town.’

I sighed and said, ‘Did he foresee
Any such honour?’ ‘Verily
I cannot tell you,’ answered he.

‘But this I know,—I fain would lay
Mine own head down, another day,
As he did,—with the fame away.

‘A lily, a friend's hand had plucked,
Lay by his death-bed, which he looked
As deep down as a bee had sucked,

‘Then, turning to the lattice, gazed
O'er hill and river, and upraised
His eyes illumined and amazed

‘With the world's beauty, up to God,
Re-offering on their iris broad
The images of things bestowed

‘By the chief Poet.—“God!” he cried,
“Be praised for anguish, which has
tried;

For beauty, which has satisfied:—

"For this world's presence, half within
And half without me—thought and
scene—
This sense of Being and Having been.

"I thank Thee that my soul hath room
For Thy grand world. Both guests
may come—
Beauty, to soul—Body, to tomb.

"I am content to be so weak :
Put strength into the words I speak,
And I am strong in what I seek.

"I am content to be so bare
Before the archers, everywhere
My wounds being stroked by heavenly
air.

"I laid my soul before Thy feet,
That Images of fair and sweet
Should walk to other men on it.

"I am content to feel the step
Of each pure Image!—let those keep
To mandragore who care to sleep.

"I am content to touch the brink
Of the other goblet, and I think
My bitter drink a wholesome drink.

"Because my portion was assigned
Wholesome and bitter—Thou art kind,
And I am blessed to my mind.

"Gifted for giving, I receive
The maythorn, and its scent outgive :
I grieve not that I once did grieve.

"In my large joy of sight and touch
Beyond what others count for such,
I am content to suffer much.

"I know—is all the mourner saith,
Knowledge by suffering entereth ;
And Life is perfected by Death."

The child spake nobly. Strange to hear,
His infantine soft accents clear
Charged with high meanings, did appear ;

And fair to see, his form and face,
Winged out with whiteness and pure
grace

From the green darkness of the place.

Behind his head a palm-tree grew :
An orient beam which pierced it through
Transversely on his forehead drew

The figure of a palm-branch brown
Traced on its brightness up and down
In fine fair lines,—a shadow-crown.

Guido might paint his angels so—
A little angel, taught to go
With holy words to saints below.

Such innocence of action yet
Significance of object met
In his whole bearing strong and sweet.

And all the children, the whole band,
Did round in rosy reverence stand,
Each with a palm-bough in his hand.

"And so he died," I whispered.—"Nay,
Not so," the childish voice did say—
"That poet turned him, first, to pray

"In silence, and God heard the rest
'Twixt the sun's footsteps down the west.
Then he called one who loved him best,

"Yea, he called softly through the room
(His voice was weak yet tender)—
"Come,"

He said, "come nearer! Let the bloom

"Of Life grow over, undenied,
This bridge of Death, which is not wide—
I shall be soon at the other side.

"Come, kiss me!" So the one in truth
Who loved him best—in love, not ruth,
Bowed down and kissed him mouth to
mouth.

"And, in that kiss of Love, was won
Life's manumission. All was done—
The mouth that kissed last, kissed *alone*.

"But in the former, confluent kiss,
The same was sealed, I think, by His,
To words of truth and uprightness."

The child's voice trembled—his lips shook
Like a rose leaning o'er a brook,
Which vibrates though it is not struck.

"And who," I asked, a little moved
Yet curious-eyed, "was this that loved
And kissed him last, as it behoved?"

"I," softly said the child; and then,
"I," said he louder, once again ;
"His son,—my rank is among men.

"And now that men exalt his name
I come to gather palms with them,
That holy Love may hallow Fame.

"He did not die alone, nor should
His memory live so, 'mid these rude
World-praisers—a worse solitude.

"Me, a voice calleth to that tomb
Where these are strewing branch and
bloom,
Saying, *come nearer!*—and I come.

"Glory to God!" resumed he,
And his eyes smiled for victory
O'er their own tears which I could see

Fallen on the palm, down cheek and
chin—

"That poet now has entered in
The place of rest which is not sin.

"And while he rests, his songs in troops
Walk up and down our earthly slopes,
Companioned by diviner Hopes."

"But *thou*," I murmured,—to engage
The child's speech farther—"hast an age
Too tender for this orphanage."

"Glory to God—to God!" he saith,
"KNOWLEDGE BY SUFFERING ENTERETH,
AND LIFE IS PERFECTED BY DEATH."

THE POET'S VOW

O be wiser thou,
Instructed that true knowledge leads to love.—WORDSWORTH.

PART THE FIRST

SHOWING WHEREFORE THE VOW WAS MADE

I

EVE is a twofold mystery ;
The stillness Earth doth keep,—
The motion wherewith human hearts
Do each to either leap,
As if all souls between the poles,
Felt 'Parting comes in sleep.'

II

The rowers lift their oars to view
Each other in the sea ;
The landsmen watch the rocking boats
In a pleasant company ;
While up the hill go gladlier still
Dear friends by two and three.

III

The peasant's wife hath looked without
Her cottage door and smiled,
For there the peasant drops his spade
To clasp his youngest child
Which hath no speech, but its hands
can reach
And stroke his forehead mild.

IV

A poet sate that eventide
Within his hall alone,
As silent as its ancient lords
In the confined place of stone,
When the bat hath shrunk from the
praying monk,
And the praying monk is gone.

V

Nor wore the dead a stiller face
Beneath the cerement's roll :
His lips refusing out in words
Their mystic thoughts to dole,
His steadfast eye burnt inwardly,
As burning out his soul.

VI

You would not think that brow could
e'er
Ungentle moods express,
Yet seemed it, in this troubled world,
Too calm for gentleness ;
When the very star that shines from
far
Shines trembling ne'ertheless.