

Classic Poetry Series

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

- poems -

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Brother and Sister

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

Count That Day Lost

If you sit down at set of sun
And count the acts that you have done,
And, counting, find
One self-denying deed, one word
That eased the heart of him who heard,
One glance most kind
That fell like sunshine where it went --
Then you may count that day well spent.

But if, through all the livelong day,
You've cheered no heart, by yea or nay --
If, through it all
You've nothing done that you can trace
That brought the sunshine to one face--
No act most small
That helped some soul and nothing cost --
Then count that day as worse than lost.

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

God Needs Antonio

Your soul was lifted by the wings today
Hearing the master of the violin:
You praised him, praised the great Sabastian too
Who made that fine Chaconne; but did you think
Of old Antonio Stradivari? -him
Who a good century and a half ago
Put his true work in that brown instrument
And by the nice adjustment of its frame
Gave it responsive life, continuous
With the master's finger-tips and perfected
Like them by delicate rectitude of use.
That plain white-aproned man, who stood at work
Patient and accurate full fourscore years,
Cherished his sight and touch by temperance,
And since keen sense is love of perfectness
Made perfect violins, the needed paths
For inspiration and high mastery.

No simpler man than he; he never cried,
"why was I born to this monotonous task
Of making violins?" or flung them down
To suit with hurling act well-hurled curse
At labor on such perishable stuff.
Hence neighbors in Cremona held him dull,
Called him a slave, a mill-horse, a machine.

Naldo, a painter of eclectic school,
Knowing all tricks of style at thirty-one,
And weary of them, while Antonio
At sixty-nine wrought placidly his best,
Making the violin you heard today -
Naldo would tease him oft to tell his aims.
"Perhaps thou hast some pleasant vice to feed -
the love of louis d'ors in heaps of four,
Each violin a heap - I've naught to blame;
My vices waste such heaps. But then, why work
With painful nicety?"

Antonio then:
"I like the gold - well, yes - but not for meals.
And as my stomach, so my eye and hand,
And inward sense that works along with both,
Have hunger that can never feed on coin.
Who draws a line and satisfies his soul,
Making it crooked where it should be straight?
Antonio Stradivari has an eye
That winces at false work and loves the true."
Then Naldo: "'Tis a petty kind of fame
At best, that comes of making violins;
And saves no masses, either. Thou wilt go
To purgatory none the less."

But he:
"Twere purgatory here to make them ill;
And for my fame - when any master holds
'Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,
He will be glad that Stradivari lived,
Made violins, and made them of the best.
The masters only know whose work is good:
They will choose mine, and while God gives them skill
I give them instruments to play upon,
God choosing me to help him.

"What! Were God
at fault for violins, thou absent?"

"Yes;
He were at fault for Stradivari's work."

"Why, many hold Giuseppe's violins
As good as thine."

"May be: they are different.
His quality declines: he spoils his hand
With over-drinking. But were his the best,
He could not work for two. My work is mine,
And, heresy or not, if my hand slacked
I should rob God - since his is fullest good -
Leaving a blank instead of violins.
I say, not God himself can make man's best
Without best men to help him.

'Tis God gives skill,
But not without men's hands: he could not make
Antonio Stradivari's violins
Without Antonio. Get thee to thy easel."

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

I Grant You Ample Leave

"I grant you ample leave
To use the hoary formula 'I am'
Naming the emptiness where thought is not;
But fill the void with definition, 'I'
Will be no more a datum than the words
You link false inference with, the 'Since' & 'so'
That, true or not, make up the atom-whirl.
Resolve your 'Ego', it is all one web
With vibrant ether clotted into worlds:
Your subject, self, or self-assertive 'I'
Turns nought but object, melts to molecules,
Is stripped from naked Being with the rest
Of those rag-garments named the Universe.
Or if, in strife to keep your 'Ego' strong
You make it weaver of the etherial light,
Space, motion, solids & the dream of Time --
Why, still 'tis Being looking from the dark,
The core, the centre of your consciousness,
That notes your bubble-world: sense, pleasure, pain,
What are they but a shifting otherness,
Phantasmal flux of moments? --"

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

In a London Drawingroom

The sky is cloudy, yellowed by the smoke.
For view there are the houses opposite
Cutting the sky with one long line of wall
Like solid fog: far as the eye can stretch
Monotony of surface & of form
Without a break to hang a guess upon.
No bird can make a shadow as it flies,
For all is shadow, as in ways o'erhung
By thickest canvass, where the golden rays
Are clothed in hemp. No figure lingering
Pauses to feed the hunger of the eye
Or rest a little on the lap of life.
All hurry on & look upon the ground,
Or glance unmarking at the passers by
The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages
All closed, in multiplied identity.
The world seems one huge prison-house & court
Where men are punished at the slightest cost,
With lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

Mid My Gold-Brown Curls

'Mid my gold-brown curls
 There twined a silver hair:
I plucked it idly out
And scarcely knew 'twas there.
Coiled in my velvet sleeve it lay
And like a serpent hissed:
"Me thou canst pluck & fling away,
 One hair is lightly missed;
But how on that near day
When all the wintry army muster in array?"

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

Roses

You love the roses - so do I. I wish
The sky would rain down roses, as they rain
From off the shaken bush. Why will it not?
Then all the valley would be pink and white
And soft to tread on. They would fall as light
As feathers, smelling sweet; and it would be
Like sleeping and like waking, all at once!

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

Sweet Endings Come and Go, Love

"La noche buena se viene,
La noche buena se va,
Y nosotros nos iremos
Y no volveremos mas."
-- Old Villancico.

Sweet evenings come and go, love,
They came and went of yore:
This evening of our life, love,
Shall go and come no more.

When we have passed away, love,
All things will keep their name;
But yet no life on earth, love,
With ours will be the same.

The daisies will be there, love,
The stars in heaven will shine:
I shall not feel thy wish, love,
Nor thou my hand in thine.

A better time will come, love,
And better souls be born:
I would not be the best, love,
To leave thee now forlorn.

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

The Choir Invisible

Oh, may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence; live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge men's search
To vaster issues. So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
Breathing a beauteous order that controls
With growing sway the growing life of man.
So we inherit that sweet purity
For which we struggled, failed, and agonized
With widening retrospect that bred despair.
Rebellious flesh that would not be subdued,
A vicious parent shaming still its child,
Poor anxious penitence, is quick dissolved;
Its discords, quenched by meeting harmonies,
Die in the large and charitable air,
And all our rarer, better, truer self
That sobbed religiously in yearning song,
That watched to ease the burden of the world,
Laboriously tracing what must be,
And what may yet be better, -- saw within
A worthier image for the sanctuary,
And shaped it forth before the multitude,
Divinely human, raising worship so
To higher reverence more mixed with love, --
That better self shall live till human Time
Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky
Be gathered like a scroll within the tomb
Unread forever. This is life to come, --
Which martyred men have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow. May I reach
That purest heaven, -- be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense!
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)

Two Lovers

Two lovers by a moss-grown spring:
They leaned soft cheeks together there,
Mingled the dark and sunny hair,
And heard the wooing thrushes sing.
O budding time!
O love's blest prime!

Two wedded from the portal stept:
The bells made happy carolings,
The air was soft as fanning wings,
White petals on the pathway slept.
O pure-eyed bride!
O tender pride!

Two faces o'er a cradle bent:
Two hands above the head were locked:
These pressed each other while they rocked,
Those watched a life that love had sent.
O solemn hour!
O hidden power!

Two parents by the evening fire:
The red light fell about their knees
On heads that rose by slow degrees
Like buds upon the lily spire.
O patient life!
O tender strife!

The two still sat together there,
The red light shone about their knees;
But all the heads by slow degrees
Had gone and left that lonely pair.
O voyage fast!
O vanished past!

The red light shone upon the floor
And made the space between them wide;
They drew their chairs up side by side,
Their pale cheeks joined, and said, "Once more!"
O memories!
O past that is!

George Eliot(Mary Ann Evans)