

Classic Poetry Series

George Santayana

- poems -

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A Toast

See this bowl of purple wine,
Life-blood of the lusty vine!
All the warmth of summer suns
In the vintage liquid runs,
All the glow of winter nights
Plays about its jewel lights,
Thoughts of time when love was young
Lurk its ruby drops among,
And its deepest depths are dyed
With delight of friendship tried.
Worthy offering, I ween,
For a god or for a queen,
Is the draught I pour to thee,--
Comfort of all misery,
Single friend of the forlorn,
Haven of all beings born,
Hope when trouble wakes at night,
And when naught delights, delight.
Holy Death, I drink to thee;
Do not part my friends and me.
Take this gift, which for a night
Puts dull leaden care to flight,
Thou who takest grief away
For a night and for a day.

George Santayana

As in the Midst of Battle there is Room

As in the midst of battle there is room
For thoughts of love, and in foul sin for mirth;
As gossips whisper of a trinket's worth
Spied by the death-bed's flickering candle-gloom;
As in the crevices of Caesar's tomb
The sweet herbs flourish on a little earth:
So in this great disaster of our birth
We can be happy, and forget our doom.

For morning, with a ray of tenderest joy
Gilding the iron heaven, hides the truth,
And evening gently woos us to employ
Our grief in idle catches. Such is youth;
Till from that summer's trance we wake, to find
Despair before us, vanity behind.

George Santayana

Decima

Silent daisies out of reach,
Maidens of the starry grass,
Gazing on me as I pass
With a look too wise for speech,
Teach me resignation,--teach
Patience to the barren clod,
As, above your happier sod,
Bending to the wind's caress,
You--unplucked, alas!--no less
Sweetly manifest the god.

George Santayana

I Would I Might Forget That I Am I

I would I might forget that I am I,
And break the heavy chain that binds me fast,
Whose links about myself my deeds have cast.
What in the body's tomb doth buried lie
Is boundless; 'tis the spirit of the sky,
Lord of the future, guardian of the past,
And soon must forth, to know his own at last.
In his large life to live, I fain would die.
Happy the dumb beast, hungering for food,
But calling not his suffering his own;
Blessed the angel, gazing on all good,
But knowing not he sits upon a throne;
Wretched the mortal, pondering his mood,
And doomed to know his aching heart alone.

George Santayana

Mont Brevent

O dweller in the valley, lift thine eyes
To where, above the drift of cloud, the stone
Endures in silence, and to God alone
Upturns its furrowed visage, and is wise.
There yet is being, far from all that dies,
And beauty where no mortal maketh moan,
Where larger planets swim the liquid zone,
And wider spaces stretch to calmer skies.
Only a little way above the plain
Is snow eternal. Round the mountain's knees
Hovers the fury of the wind and rain.
Look up, and teach thy noble heart to cease
From endless labour. There is perfect peace
Only a little way above thy pain.

George Santayana

Premonition

The muffled syllables that Nature speaks
Fill us with deeper longing for her word;
She hides a meaning that the spirit seeks,
She makes a sweeter music than is heard.

A hidden light illumines all our seeing,
An unknown love enchants our solitude.
We feel and know that from the depths of being
Exhales an infinite, a perfect good.

Though the heart wear the garment of its sorrow
And be not happy like a naked star,
Yet from the thought of peace some peace we borrow,
Some rapture from the rapture felt afar.

Our heart strings are too coarse for Nature's fingers
Deftly to quicken as she pulses on,
And the harsh tremor that among them lingers
Will into sweeter silence die anon.

We catch the broken prelude and suggestion
Of things unuttered, needing to be sung;
We know the burden of them, and their question
Lies heavy on the heart, nor finds a tongue.

Till haply, lightning through the storm of ages,
Our sullen secret flash from sky to sky,
Glowing in some diviner poet's pages
And swelling into rapture from this sigh.

George Santayana

Slow and Reluctant Was the Long Descent

Slow and reluctant was the long descent,
With many farewell pious looks behind,
And dumb misgivings where the path might wind,
And questionings of nature, as I went.
The greener branches that above me bent,
The broadening valleys, quieted by mind,
To the fair reasons of the Spring inclined
And to the Summer's tender argument.
But sometimes, as revolving night descended,
And in my childish heart the new song ended,
I lay down, full of longing, on the steep;
And, haunting still the lonely way I wended,
Into my dreams the ancient sorrow blended,
And with these holy echoes charmed my sleep.

George Santayana

Slowly the Black Earth Gains

Slowly the black earth gains upon the yellow,
And the caked hill-side is ribbed soft with furrows.
Turn now again, with voice and staff, my ploughman,
Guiding thy oxen.

Lift the great ploughshare, clear the stones and brambles,
Plant it the deeper, with thy foot upon it,
Uprooting all the flowering weeds that bring not
Food to thy children.

Patience is good for man and beast, and labour
Hardens to sorrow and the frost of winter.
Turn then again, in the brave hope of harvest,
Singing to heaven.

George Santayana

Sonnet III

O world, thou choosest not the better part!
It is not wisdom to be only wise,
And on the inward vision close the eyes,
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.
Columbus found a world, and had no chart,
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;
To trust the soul's invincible surmise
Was all his science and his only art.

Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
That lights the pathway but one step ahead
Across a void of mystery and dread.
Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
By which alone the mortal heart is led
Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

George Santayana

Sonnet V

Dreamt I today the dream of yesternight,
Sleep ever feigning one evolving theme -
Of my two lives which should I call the dream?
Which action vanity? Which vision sight?
Some greater waking must pronounce aright,
If aught abides still of the things that seem,
And with both currents swell the flooded stream
Into an ocean infinite of light.

Even such a dream I dream, and know full well
My waking passes like a midnight spell,
But know not if my dreaming could break through
Into the deeps of heaven and of hell.
I know but this of all I would I knew:
Truth is a dream, unless my dream is true.

George Santayana

Sonnet XLIII

The candor of the gods is in thy gaze,
The strength of Diane in thy virgin hand,
Commanding as the goddess might command,
And lead her lovers into higher ways.
Aye, the gods walk among us in these days,
Had we the docile soul to understand;
And me they visit in this joyless land,
To cheer mine exile and receive my praise.

For once, methinks, before the angels fell,
Thou, too, did follow the celestial seven
Threading in file the meads of asphodel.
And when thou comes here, lady, where I dwell,
The place is flooded with the light of heaven
And a lost music I remember well.

George Santayana

Sonnet XXV

As in the midst of battle there is room
For thoughts of love, and in foul sin for mirth;
As gossips whisper of a trinket's worth
Spied by the death-bed's flickering candle-gloom;
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George Santayana

The Poet's Testament

I give back to the earth what the earth gave,
All to the furrow, none to the grave,
The candle's out, the spirit's vigil spent;
Sight may not follow where the vision went.

I leave you but the sound of many a word
In mocking echoes haply overheard,
I sang to heaven. My exile made me free,
from world to world, from all worlds carried me.

Spared by the furies, for the Fates were kind,
I paced the pillared cloisters of the mind;
All times my present, everywhere my place,
Nor fear, nor hope, nor envy saw my face.

Blow what winds would, the ancient truth was mine,
And friendship mellowed in the flush of wine,
And heavenly laughter, shaking from its wings
Atoms of light and tears for mortal things.

To trembling harmonies of field and cloud,
Of flesh and spirit was my worship vowed.
Let form, let music, let all quickening air
Fulfil in beauty my imperfect prayer.

George Santayana

The Power of Art

Not human art, but living gods alone
Can fashion beauties that by changing live,--
Her buds to spring, his fruits to autumn give,
To earth her fountains in her heart of stone;
But these in their begetting are o'erthrown,
Nor may the sentenced minutes find reprieve;
And summer in the blush of joy must grieve
To shed his flaunting crown of petals blown.
We to our works may not impart our breath,
Nor them with shifting light of life array;
We show but what one happy moment saith;
Yet may our hands immortalize the day
When life was sweet, and save from utter death
The sacred past that should not pass away.

George Santayana

There May Be Chaos Still Around the World

There may be chaos still around the world,
This little world that in my thinking lies;
For mine own bosom is the paradise
Where all my life's fair visions are unfurled.
Within my nature's shell I slumber curled,
Unmindful of the changing outer skies,
Where now, perchance, some new-born Eros flies,
Or some old Cronos from his throne is hurled.
I heed them not; or if the subtle night
Haunt me with deities I never saw,
I soon mine eyelid's drowsy curtain draw
To hide their myriad faces from my sight.
They threat in vain; the whirlwind cannot awe
A happy snow-flake dancing in the flaw.

George Santayana

We needs must be divided in the Tomb

We needs must be divided in the tomb,
For I would die among the hills of Spain,
And o'er the treeless, melancholy plain
Await the coming of the final gloom.
But thou -- O pitiful! -- wilt find scant room
Among thy kindred by the northern main,
And fade into the drifting mist again,
The hemlocks' shadow, or the pines' perfume.

Let gallants lie beside their ladies' dust
In one cold grave, with mortal love inurned;
Let the sea part our ashes, if it must,
The souls fled thence which love immortal burned,
For they were wedded without bond of lust,
And nothing of our heart to earth returned.

George Santayana