

Classic Poetry Series

George Darley
- poems -

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George Darley(1795 - 1846)

George Darley was an Irish poet, novelist, and critic.

Life

Associating only with a small, select number of friends, George Darley passed his life in a solitary world largely of his own making. When he is discussed in the surveys of English Romanticism, he is inevitably described as a "minor poet," but even that designation is more than he expected. In a 20 September 1822 letter to Marianne Neail, a family friend, he wrote of his frustrations and expectations:

I have done nothing in the Literary way--want of funds, of introductions, of speech & address, of worldly knowledge & dexterity--of (last but not least) brains, has kept me & will keep me, a poor author--in faculties, appearance, & life.... I confide this secret to you first because you are a woman--and secondly because you are one in whose affections the confession will not injure me, tho it may in your respect. Keep my secret, however, as close as you would sigh for the youth of your heart--lock it up, as you'd put his love-letter under your bodice--for if it once gets abroad into the atmosphere, tho I sing like a dying swan no one would hear me. </i>Such was Darley's own estimate of his gifts and achievement, and, while he is still sometimes described as the "Irish Keats," only advanced students of Romanticism now read any of his poetry. At some time before his final illness, Darley destroyed all the correspondence and manuscripts in his possession, including many notebooks which contained rough drafts of his various literary projects. Yet he spent his life in search of a reputation as poet, playwright, and man of letters. His work was praised by notable authors such as Charles Lamb and Thomas Carlyle and Alfred, Lord Tennyson was said to have been a great admirer of Darley's poetry. Yet the literary reviews of his day offered little praise in their cursory notices of his achievement.

Now often compared to John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Darley was critical of those poets, and of much of the poetry popular in his time. He once dismissed William Wordsworth as insipid and professed nothing but contempt for <a

<http://www.poemhunter.com/george-gordon-lord-byron/>>George Gordon, Lord Byron, whom he once addressed in one of his "Letters to the Dramatists of the Day" (1823) as "Lord Lucifer." Indeed, Darley thought that Byron's influence on the poetry and tastes of his time was the most pernicious ever to beset English literature. His efforts to write and inspire a type of poetry that was different from the "Byronism" of his time received only limited recognition, briefly summed up in a friend's tribute to his "noble spirit."

George Darley was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1795, to Arthur and Mary Darley. He was the eldest of seven children. Shortly after his birth, his parents went to America on some unspecified business venture, not returning until George was nearly four. The child was raised in the home of his paternal grandfather, George Darley. When the parents returned, they discovered that the child had developed a severe stammer. Darley likened his speech impediment to John Milton's blindness in its disastrous effects on his social life. For most of his life Darley was afraid to cultivate friends. He seemed unusually shy with his fellow students at Trinity College, Dublin, where he matriculated in July 1815. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1820, and in 1821 he went to London to make a career as a writer. He explained his move in his 20 September 1822 letter to Marianne Neail:

Distant as it is my fate to be from the home of my affections, the interval has not been sufficient to break the ties of family-union & friendship which bind me to my native land.... Then what should I do in Ireland? Why degenerate into one of those nameless characters, one of those useless appendages to the living world, who walk about in a threadbare coat & a slouched hat, with nothing but their insignificance to secure them from the attempts of malice and nothing but their silence to recommend them to the toleration of society....

He soon began writing for the recently founded London Magazine, edited by John Taylor, and was often asked to serve as a reviewer of the London plays. When the London Magazine changed ownership in 1825, Darley continued to write for Taylor's publishing firm, which published seven books by Darley, including five textbooks, during the years 1826-1830. He made enough money to travel on the Continent for most of the period from late 1830 until early 1835. While in Italy he acquired a taste for Italian painting and became a correspondent for the Athenæum. He continued to write for that magazine until his death in 1846, during his first visit to Ireland since his leaving for London in 1821.

In spite of his chronic dislike for London, Darley believed that he must live there because he could not make a living in Ireland. With his friends and associates there, including Charles Lamb, Darley maintained somewhat strained

relationships. Because of his chronic stammer, he seldom accepted invitations and avoided conversation. His two ventures beyond his self-imposed solitude were both disastrous. In 1827 he tried to obtain a professorship of English literature at London University and was rejected, and in 1844 he tried unsuccessfully to become a member of one of London's most exclusive men's clubs, the Athenæum.

Darley's first volume of poetry, *The Errors of Ecstasie: A Dramatic Poem. With Other Pieces*, was published in 1822. Apart from the title poem, most of the book's contents are lyrics on subjects such as nature, love, wine, and flowers. The author was twenty-seven, but much of the poetry appears to have been written earlier. As much as in any of his later work, one can sense the vivid melancholy that had settled upon the poet and his efforts to escape, via poetry, to a happier place and time.

Beginning in July 1823 Darley published "Letters to the Dramatists of the Day," six review-essays, in *The London Magazine* under the pseudonym John Lacy. The "letters" are distinguished by their vigor of style and clarity of exposition. Darley had imbibed fully the spirit and tone of his contemporaries and was severe in his reviews of the tragic dramatists of his time. In those days duels were fought and men killed over literary arguments and rivalries. It is not true that a bad review brought on the death of John Keats, but that "myth," enshrined by Byron and Shelley, embodied an important fact. Reviews of books and plays were often harsh. Darley's judgments in his review-essays appear to have been more just than otherwise, however, since none of the tragedians of the Romantic era has survived in reputation. Their plays, in general, are filled with bombastic speeches and lifeless characters. Darley's attack on these playwrights earned him the nickname "Ajax Flagillifer," given to him by Barry Cornwall (Bryan Walter Procter), one of the offended playwrights.

Many of the prose-poems collected in *The Labours of Idleness, or a Seven Nights Entertainment* (1826) are set in that land of romance, Darley's native Ireland. It is not quite accurate to describe *Labours of Idleness* as a collection of short stories, though the sketches are definitely fiction. Darley was most successful with the lyric love poems scattered throughout the sketches, for his principal subject was youthful love, with the various women in the *Labours of Idleness* cast in the role of long-suffering women who rescue their often worthless lovers in distress. *Labours of Idleness* did nothing for Darley's reputation as a writer or as a poet, but it confirmed the general perception of him as a full-blown Romantic in the style of Shelley and Keats.

Darley's first play, *Sylvia: or, The May Queen*, was published the following year.

In spite of its Christian overtones, it is set in pre-Christian times. A pastoral masque (a form that was quite popular throughout most of the nineteenth century), it relies almost exclusively on dialogue, and little in *Sylvia* will sustain the modern reader's interest, but even the more celebrated excursions in that genre, notably those of Ben Jonson and John Milton, are today read mainly by scholars. Darley hoped that the play would be adapted as a lyric opera, a move that might well have saved the play, since so much of its dialogue is unrealistic but suited for conversion into music. Despite the failure of *Sylvia*, Darley's determination to write a successful play was unshaken. In 1840 he published an edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, and his last two published works, *Thomas à Becket* (1840) and *Ethelstan* (1841), are both plays, though neither was apparently intended for stage production. It is impossible to determine why Darley was so concerned to succeed with the popular audience, since he often condemned it for its bad taste, but he never succeeded.

As he was working on his plays, Darley continued to write lyric poems. In 1835 he privately published two cantos of his long poem *Nepenthe*. Though a third canto was promised, the poem was never completed. By this time in his life Darley seems to have abandoned any hope for serious consideration by his contemporaries. Convinced that the subject and the language of poetry ought to assist the reader to escape the trials of the moment, Darley owed his rich metaphorical language to William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton. He did not share Wordsworth's opinion that poetry ought to be written in "common language," but he certainly agreed with Wordsworth's idea that poetry should represent the overflowing of passion. The title of the poem was probably taken from book 4 of *The Faerie Queene*: "Nepenthe is a drink of souerayne grace, / Deuized by the Gods, for to assuage / Harts grief, and bitter gall away to chace." In Darley's version *nepenthe* is given a far greater power than the simple curing of melancholy. The drink may be said to restore life, and is perhaps a symbol of the ultimate power of poetry. The distinct note of escapism that characterizes most of Darley's poetry is especially present in *Nepenthe*.

As Harold Bloom has observed, Darley "is very nearly the popular archetype of a Romantic poet in his deliberate rejection of a harsh actuality and his desperate adherence to more ideal realms than experience." Darley was an escapist. His letters are silent on the economic and social problems, as well as the religious controversies, confronting Victorian England. Keats and Shelley expressed the need to transcend and escape from religious, social, and political conventions by creating a new mythology for their times, but Darley's poetry shows no inclination to create a new religion. Yet the impulse to create a new truth and a new beauty is as evident in his writing as in that of his more gifted contemporaries. Like Keats, Shelley, and perhaps John Keble, but in his own

independent way, Darley sought escape from the horrors of the present by an invocation of seemingly more innocent and happier times in history. His poetic creed may be summed up in his introduction to *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*: "Every true poet has a song in his mind, the notes of which, little as they precede his thought--so little as to seem simultaneous with them--do precede, suggest and inspire many of these, modify, and beautify them." *Nepenthe* reflects just that spirit and is for many critics Darley's greatest poem. Its rich, sonorous diction tends toward exaggeration and is a choice example of what C. S. Lewis called the "Golden" tradition of English poetry. The poem's greatest weakness is its frequently obscure allegory, of which the poet was acutely aware. In a letter to R. Monckton Milnes, Darley explained that "Canto I means to shew the deleterious effects of ultra-natural joy, tho' imbibed from heaven itself; Canto II, those of ultra-natural melancholy, imbibed from the regions whose comfort is darkness & consolation bewailment." He went on to describe the never-completed third canto as "exhibiting the advantageous results of the mingled joy and melancholy imbibed the native fountain of humanity." In an essay written in 1906 and later revised for inclusion in volume 4 of his *Collected Essays, Papers &c.* (1930), Robert Bridges contrasted the "excessive joy of the more animal sphere" depicted in the first canto with the "ideal pleasure ... the ecstasy of mental life" described in the second.

In early 1834 Darley began to write art criticism for the *Athenæum*. His principles of art criticism were derived from Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* (1769-1791). William Blake, William Hazlitt, and others had attacked some of the principles in the *Discourses*, and Darley's first essay (written in Rome and dated January 1834), and subsequent essays as well, were, in effect, answers to such critics. Darley believed Samuel Johnson in his insistence that all art ought to present the ideal in every subject. As Darley said, "the primary law of the Fine Arts consists in Beauty" (*Athenæum*, 8 October 1836). Only by a deliberate invocation of the ideal present in each subject could the artist achieve his desired end. Intellect was necessary for the technical advancement of the artist, but what mattered most was the blend of passion with intellect in the painter.

Darley's enthusiasm for the Italian painters of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance masters anticipates the work of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds. Darley's greatest praise was bestowed on the works of acknowledged masters such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Da Vinci, according to Darley, was the greatest intellect who had ever lived. No painter had ever succeeded so well as he, said Darley, at "painting the soul upon the face under its various modifications." As might be expected, Darley was the sworn and inveterate enemy of facile imitation of other painters, a quality that he found in most of the English painters of his time. He never mentioned the

paintings of John Constable, and his judgments of other contemporaries may have been somewhat unfair. Yet, Darley's essays on art and artists for the Athenæum formed an important element in the development and the profession of art criticism in England.

Almost all that has been written about George Darley begins and ends with somber observation that he was ultimately a failure, a conclusion with which Darley himself agreed. He often remarked in letters on his failure to achieve recognition, and his poetical works frequently include characters who are engaged in quests that invariably end with failure and death. Despite the obscurity of Darley's poems, they often reveal a fine lyrical style, akin to that of poets such as Thomas Carew. In fact one of his best poems, "It is not beautie I demand," is an imitation of Carew and was attributed to that poet when it was first published in the April 1828 issue of *Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*. Notwithstanding his apparent failure, Darley did enrich the canon of British lyric poetry with several nearly perfect contributions, most notably "Beauty's Triomphe (An Olden Song)" and "It is not beautie I demand." Though he was often critical of the major Romantic poets, Darley-with his concern for love, nature, death, and loneliness-has a significant but minor place among them.

Dirge

Prayer unsaid, and mass unsung, Deadman's dirge must still be rung:
Dingle-dong, the dead-bells sound! Mermen chant his dirge around!

Wash him bloodless, smooth him fair, Stretch his limbs, and sleek his hair
Dingle-dong, the dead-bells go! Mermen swing them to and fro!

In the wormless sand shall he Feast for no foul glutton be:
Dingle-dong, the dead-bells chime! Mermen keep the tone and time!

We must with a tombstone brave Shut the shark out from his grave
Dingle-dong, the dead-bells toll! Mermen dirgers ring his knoll!

Such a slab will we lay o'er him All the dead shall rise before him!
Dingle-dong, the dead-bells boom! Mermen lay him in his tomb!

George Darley

It Is Not Beauty I Demand

It is not Beauty I demand,
A crystal brow, the moon's despair,
Nor the snow's daughter, a white hand,
Nor mermaid's yellow pride of hair.

Tell me not of your starry eyes,
Your lips that seem on roses fed,
Your breasts where Cupid trembling lies,
Nor sleeps for kissing of his bed.

A bloomy pair of vermeil cheeks,
Like Hebe's in her ruddiest hours,
A breath that softer music speaks
Than summer winds a-wooing flowers.

These are but gauds; nay, what are lips?
Coral beneath the ocean-stream,
Whose brink when your adventurer sips
Full oft he perisheth on them.

And what are cheeks but ensigns oft
That wave hot youth to fields of blood?
Did Helen's breast though ne'er so soft,
Do Greece or Ilium any good?

Eyes can with baleful ardor burn,
Poison can breath that erst perfumed,
There's many a white hand holds an urn
With lovers' hearts to dust consumed.

For crystal brows--there's naught within,
They are but empty cells for pride;
He who the Syren's hair would win
Is mostly strangled in the tide.

Give me, instead of beauty's bust,
A tender heart, a loyal mind,
Which with temptation I could trust,
Yet never linked with error find.

One in whose gentle bosom I
Could pour my secret heart of woes.
Like the care-burdened honey-fly
That hides his murmurs in the rose.

My earthly comforter! whose love
So indefeasible might be,
That when my spirit won above
Hers could not stay for sympathy.

George Darley

Nepenthe

O BLEST unfabled Incense Tree,
That burns in glorious Araby,
With red scent chaliceing the air,
Till earth-life grow Elysian there!

Half buried to her flaming breast
In this bright tree she makes her nest,
Hundred-sunned Phœnix! when she must
Crumble at length to hoary dust;

Her gorgeous death-bed, her rich pyre
Burnt up with aromatic fire;
Her urn, sight-high from spoiler men,
Her birthplace when self-born again.

The mountainless green wilds among,
Here ends she her unechoing song:
With amber tears and odorous sighs
Mourned by the desert where she dies.

George Darley

Song

Sweet in her green dell the flower of beauty slumbers,
Lull'd by the faint breezes sighing through her hair;
Sleeps she and hears not the melancholy numbers
Breathed to my sad lute 'mid the lonely air.

Down from the high cliffs the rivulet is teeming
To wind round the willow banks that lure him from above:
O that in tears, from my rocky prison streaming,
I too could glide to the bower of my love!

Ah! where the woodbines with sleepy arms have wound her,
Opes she her eyelids at the dream of my lay,
Listening, like the dove, while the fountains echo round her,
To her lost mate's call in the forests far away.

Come then, my bird! For the peace thou ever bearest,
Still Heaven's messenger of comfort to me—
Come—this fond bosom, O faithfullest and fairest,
Bleeds with its death-wound, its wound of love for thee!

George Darley

The Anonymous Poet

You, the choice minions of the proud-lipped nine
Who warble at the great Apollo's knee,
Why do you laugh at these rude lays of mine?
I seek not of your brotherhood to be:
I do not play the public swan, nor try
To curve my proud neck on your vocal streams.
In my own little isle retreated, I
Lost myself in my waters and my dreams:
Forgetful of the world, forgotten too,
The cygnet of my own secluded wave
I sing, whilst dashing up their silver dew
For joy, the petty billows try to rave:
There is a still applause in solitude,
Fitting alike my merits and my mood.

George Darley

The Fallen Star

A star is gone! a star is gone!
There is a blank in Heaven;
One of the cherub choir has done
His airy course this even.

He sat upon the orb of fire
That hung for ages there,
And lent his music to the choir
That haunts the nightly air.

But when his thousand years are pass'd,
With a cherubic sigh
He vanish'd with his car at last,
For even cherubs die!

Hear how his angel-brothers mourn -
The minstrels of the spheres -
Each chiming sadly in his turn
And dropping splendid tears.

The planetary sisters all
Join in the fatal song,
And weep this hapless brother's fall,
Who sang with them so long.

But deepest of the choral band
The Lunar Spirit sings,
And with a bass-according hand
Sweeps all her sullen strings.

From the deep chambers of the dome
Where sleepless Uriel lies,
His rude harmonic thunders come
Mingled with mighty sighs.

The thousand car-bourne cherubim,
The wandering eleven,
All join to chant the dirge of him
Who fell just now from Heaven.

George Darley

The Gambols Of Children

DOWN the dimpled greensward dancing,□
Bursts a flaxen-headed bevy,—□
Bud-lipt boys and girls advancing,□
Love's irregular little levy.□

Rows of liquid eyes in laughter,□
How they glimmer, how they quiver!□
Sparkling one another after,□
Like bright ripples on a river.□

Tipsy band of rubious faces,□
Flushed with Joy's ethereal spirit,□
Make your mocks and sly grimaces□
At Love's self, and do not fear it.

George Darley

The Joy Of Childhood

Down the dimpled green-sward dancing
Bursts a flaxen-headed bevy,
Bud-lipt boys and girls advancing
Love's irregular little levy.

Rows of liquid eyes in laughter,
How they glimmer, how they quiver!
Sparkling one another after,
Like bright ripples on a river.

Tipsy band of rubious faces,
Flushed with joy's ethereal spirit,
Make your mocks and sly grimaces
At Love's self, and do not fear it!

George Darley

The Mermaidens' Vesper-Hymn

Troop home to silents grots and caves!
Troop home! And mimic as you go
The mournful winding of the waves
Which to their dark abysses flow!

At this sweet hour, all things beside
In amorous pairs to covert creep;
The swans that brush the evening tide
Homeward and snowy couples keep;

In his green den the murmuring seal
Close by his sleek companion lies;
While singly we to bedward steal,
And close in fruitless sleep our eyes.

In bowers of love men take their rest,
In loveless bowers we sigh alone!
With busom-friends are others blessed, -
But we have none! But we have none!

George Darley

The Moon And Sea

Whilst the moon decks herself in Neptune's glass
And ponders over her image in the sea,
Her cloudy locks smoothing from off her face
That she may all as bright as beauty be;
It is my wont to sit upon the shore
And mark with what an even grace she glides
Her two concurrent paths of azure o'er,
One in the heavens, the other in the tides:
Now with a transient veil her face she hides
And ocean blackens with a human frown;
Now her fine screen of vapour she divides
And looks with all her light of beauty down;
Her splendid smile over-silvering the main
Spreads her the glass she looks into again.

George Darley

The Phoenix

O Blest unfabled Incense Tree,
That burns in glorious Araby,
With red scent chalice the air,
Till earth-life grow Elysian there!

Half buried to her flaming breast
In this bright tree, she makes her nest,
Hundred sunn'd Phoenix! When she must
Crumble at length to hoary dust!

Her gorgous death-bed! Her rich pyre
Burnt up with aromatic fire!
Her urn, sight high from spoiler men!
Her birthplace when self-born again!

The mountainless green wilds among,
Here ends she her unechoing song!
With amber tears and oderous sighs
Mourn'd by the desert where she dies!

Laid like the young fawn mossily
In sun-green vales of Araby,
I woke hard by the Phoenix tree
That with shadeless boughs flamed over me,

And upward call'd for a dumb cry
With moonbread orbs of wonder I
Beheld the immortal Bird on high
Glassing the great Sun in her eye.

Stedfast she gazed upon his fire,
Still her destroyer and her sire!
As if to his her soul of flame
Had flown already whence it came;

Like those that sit and glare so still,
Intense with their death struggle, till
We touch, and curdle at their chill!

But breathing yet while she doth burn
The deathless Daughter of the Sun!

Slowly to crimson embers turn
The beauties of the brightsome one.
O'er the broad nest her silver wings
Shook down their wasteful glitterings;

Her brinded neck high arch'd in air
Like a small rainbow faded there;
But brighter glow'd her plummy crown
Mouldering to golden ashes down;

With fume of sweet woods, to the skies,
Pure as a Saint's adoring sighs,
Warm as a prayer in Paradise,
Her life-breath rose in sacrifice!

The while with shrill triumphant tone
Sounding aloud, aloft, alone,
Ceaseless her joyful deathwail she
Sang to departing Araby!

George Darley

The Solitary Lyre

Wherefore, unlaurell'd Boy,
Whom the contemptuous Muse will not inspire,
With a sad kind of joy
Still sing'st thou to thy solitary lyre?

The melancholy winds
Pour through unnumber'd reeds their idle woes,
And every Naiad finds
A stream to weep her sorrow as it flows.

Her sighs unto the air
The Wood-maid's native oak doth broadly tell,
And Echo's fond despair
Intelligible rocks re-syllable.

Wherefore then should not I,
Albeit no haughty Muse my heart inspire,
Fated of grief to die,
Impart it to my solitary lyre?

George Darley

To Helene

I sent a ring—a little band
Of emerald and ruby stone,
And bade it, sparkling on thy hand,
Tell thee sweet tales of one
Whose constant memory
Was full of loveliness, and thee.

A shell was graven on its gold,—
'Twas Cupid fix'd without his wings—
To Helene once it would have told
More than was ever told by rings:
But now all 's past and gone,
Her love is buried with that stone.

Thou shalt not see the tears that start
From eyes by thoughts like these beguiled;
Thou shalt not know the beating heart,
Ever a victim and a child:
Yet Helene, love, believe
The heart that never could deceive.

I'll hear thy voice of melody
In the sweet whispers of the air;
I'll see the brightness of thine eye
In the blue evening's dewy star;
In crystal streams thy purity;
And look on Heaven to look on thee.

George Darley