

From *Verses* (1896)

ERNEST DOWSON

“In Preface: For Adelaide”

To you, who are my verses, as on some very future day, if you ever care to read them, you will understand, would it not be somewhat trivial to dedicate any one verse, as I may do, in all humility, to my friends? Trivial, too, perhaps, only to name you even here? Trivial, presumptuous? For I need not write your name for you at least to know that this and all my work is made for you in the first place, and I need not to be reminded by my critics that I have no silver tongue such as were fit to praise you. So for once you shall go indedicate, if not quite anonymous; and I will only commend my little book to you in sentences far beyond my poor compass which will help you perhaps to be kind to it:

“Votre personne, vos moindres mouvements me semblaient avoir dans le monde une importance extra-humaine. Mon coeur comme de la poussière se soulevait derrière vos pas. Vous me faisiez l’effet d’un clair-de-lune par une nuit d’été, quand tout est parfums, ombres douces, blancheurs, infini; et les délices de la chair et de l’âme étaient contenues pour moi dans votre nom que je me répétais en tachant de le baiser sur mes lèvres.

“Quelqufois vos paroles me reviennent comme un écho lointain, comme le son d’une cloche apporté par le vent; et il me semble que vous êtes là quand je lis des passages de l’amour dans les livres. . . . Tout ce qu’on y blâme d’exagéré, vous me l’avez fait ressentir.”

PONT-AVEN, FINISTÈRE, 1896.

[The passage quoted in French above is from *L’Education Sentimentale* by Gustave Flaubert, one of Dowson’s favorite authors. In it the hero Frédéric addresses the woman he has always loved but who has never been his lover. They have now both grown old, and he is shocked to see that her hair has grown white. In a rare moment of self-knowledge, Frédéric realizes that perhaps all along he has been more in love with love itself, and it would not be right for him to make love to her now, as he fears feeling some repulsion and the tarnishing of his ideal. The passage Dowson quotes is when the two face each other for the last time and Frédéric says the following [here

translated] as a valediction to their love,

“Your person, your least movements, seemed to me to have an extra-human importance in the world. My heart of dust raised behind your steps. You were the clair-de-lune of one summer night when all is perfume, shade, soft, whitenesses, infinite; and the delicateness of the flesh and the heart were contained for me in your name, which I repeat to myself by staining kisses on my lips. Sometimes your words return to me as a remote echo, like the sound of a bell brought by the wind; and it seems to me that you are here when I read passages of th love in the books . . . All at once, you ‘made me feel.’”]

ERNEST DOWSON

“Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam”

[Life's brief span forbids long-enduring hope] (1896)

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate:
I think they have no portion in us after
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Coronal” (1890)

With His songs and Her days to His Lady and to Love

Violets and leaves of vine,
 Into a frail, fair wreath
We gather and entwine:
 A wreath for Love to wear,
Fragrant as his own breath,
 To crown his brow divine,
All day till night is near.
 Violets and leaves of vine
We gather and entwine.

Violets and leaves a vine
 For Love that lives a day,
We gather and entwine.
 All day till Love is dead,
 Till eve falls, cold and gray,
These blossoms, yours and mine,
 Love wears upon his head.
Violets and leaves of vine
We gather and entwine.

Violets and leaves of vine,
 For Love when poor Love dies
We gather and entwine.
 This wreath that lives a day
 Over his pale, cold eyes,
Kissed shut by Proserpine,
 At set of sun we lay:
Violets and leaves of vine
We gather and entwine.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration” (1891)

Calm, sad, secure; behind high convent walls.
 These watch the sacred lamp, these watch and pray:
And it is one with them when evening falls,
 And one with them the cold return of day,

These heed not time; their nights and days they make
 Into a long, returning rosary,
Whereon their lives are threaded for Christ's sake:
 Meekness and vigilance and chastity.

A vowed patrol, in silent companies,
 Life-long they keep before the living Christ:
In the dim church, their prayers and penances
 Are fragrant incense to the Sacrificed.

Outside, the world is wild and passionate;
 Man's weary laughter and his sick despair
Entreat at their impenetrable gate:
 They heed no voices in their dream of prayer.

They saw the glory of the world displayed;
 They saw the bitter of it, and the sweet;
They knew the roses of the world should fade,
 And be trod under by the hurrying feet.

Therefore they rather put away desire,
 And crossed their hands and came to sanctuary;
And veiled their heads and put on coarse attire:
 Because their comeliness was vanity.

And there they rest; they have serene insight
 Of the illuminating dawn to be;
Mary's sweet Star dispels for them the night,
 The proper darkness of humanity.

Calm, sad, secure; with faces worn and mild:
 Surely their choice of vigil is the best?
Yea! for our roses fade, the world is wild;
 But there, beside the altar, there, is rest.

ERNEST DOWSON

“My Lady April” (1888)

Dew on her robe and on her tangled hair;
Twin dewdrops for her eyes; behold her pass,
With dainty step brushing the young, green grass,
The while she trills some high, fantastic air,
Full of all feathered sweetness: she is fair,
And all her flower-like beauty, as a glass,
Mirrors out hope and love: and still, alas!
Traces of tears her languid lashes wear.
Say, doth she weep for very wantonness?
Or is it that she dimly doth foresee
Across her youth the joys grow less and less,
The burden of the days that are to be:
Autumn and withered leaves and vanity,
And winter bringing end in barrenness.

ERNEST DOWSON

“To One in Bedlam” (1892)

With delicate, mad hands, behind his sordid bars,
Surely he hath his posies, which they tear and twine;
Those scentless wisps of straw, that miserably line
His strait, caged universe, whereat the dull world stares.

Pedant and pitiful. O, how his rapt gaze wars
With their stupidity! Know they what dreams divine
Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars?

O lamentable brother! if those pity thee,
Am I not fain of all thy lone eyes promise me;
Half a fool's kingdom, far from men who sow and reap,
All their days, vanity? Better than mortal flowers,
Thy moon-kissed roses seem: better than love or sleep,
The star-crowned solitude of thine oblivious hours!

ERNEST DOWSON

“Ad Domnulam Suam” [To His Dear Little Lady] (1890)

Little lady of my heart!
Just a little longer,
Love me: we will pass and part,
Ere this love grow stronger.

I have loved the, Child! too well,
To do aught but love thee:
Nay! my lips should never tell
Any tale, to grieve thee.

Little lady of my heart!
Just a little longer,
I may love thee: we will part,
Ere my love grow stronger.

Soon they'll leave list fairy-land;
Darker grow thy tresses:
Soon no more of hand in hand;
Soon no more caresses!

Little lady of my heart!
Just a little longer,
Be a child: then, we will part,
Ere this love grow stronger.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Yvonne of Brittany” (1896?)

In your mother's apple-orchard,
 Just a year ago, last spring:
Do you remember, Yvonne!
 The dear trees lavishing
Rain of their starry blossoms
 To make you a coronet?
Do you ever remember, Yvonne?
 As I remember yet.

In your mother's apple-orchard,
 When the world was left behind:
You were shy, so shy, Yvonne!
 But your eyes were calm and kind.
We spoke of the apple harvest,
 When the cider press is set,
And such-like trifles, Yvonne!
 That doubtless you forget.

In the still, soft Breton twilight,
 We were silent; words were few,
Till your mother came out chiding,
 For the grass was bright with dew:
But I know your heart was beating,
 Like a fluttered, frightened dove.
Do you ever remember, Yvonne?
 That first faint flush of love?

In the fulness of midsummer,
 When the apple-bloom was shed,
Oh, brave was your surrender,
 Though shy the words you said.
I was glad, so glad, Yvonne!
 To have led you home at last;
Do you ever remember, Yvonne!
 How swiftly the days passed?

In your mother's apple-orchard

It is grown too dark to stray,
There is none to chide you, Yvonne!
You are over far away.
There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne!
But your feet it shall not wet:
No, you never remember, Yvonne!
And I shall soon forget.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Benedictio Domini” [Blessing of God] (1893)

Without, the sullen noises of the street!
The voice of London, inarticulate,
Hoarse and blaspheming, surges in to meet
The silent blessing of the Immaculate.

Dark is the church, and dim the worshipers,
Hushed the bowed heads as though by some old spell,
While through the incense-laden air there stirs
The admonition of a silver bell.

Dark is this church, save where the altars stands,
Dressed like a bride, illustrious with light,
Where one old priest exults with tremulous hands
The one true solace of man's fallen plight.

Strange silence here: without, the sounding street
Heralds the world's swift passage to the fire:
O Benediction, perfect and complete!
When shall men cease to suffer and desire?

ERNEST DOWSON

“Growth” (1893)

I watched the glory of her childhood change,
Half-sorrowful to find the child I knew,
 (Loved long ago in lily-time)
Become a maid, mysterious and strange,
With fair calm purer eyes—dear eyes, but not the eyes I knew
 Of old, in the olden time!

Till on my doubting soul the ancient good
Of her dear childhood in new disguise
 Dawned, and I hastened to adore
The glory of her waking maidenhood,
And found the old tenderness within her deepening eyes,
 But kinder than before.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Ad Manus Puellae” [To a Girl’s Hands] (1893)

I was always a lover of ladies’ hands!
Or ever mine heart came here to tryst,
For the sake of your carved white hands’ commands;
The tapering fingers, the dainty wrist;
The hands of a girl were what I kissed.

I remember an hand like a *fleur-de-lys*
When it slid from its silken cheese, her glove;
With its odours passing ambergris:
And that was the empty husk of a love.
Oh, how shall I kiss your hands enough?

They are pale with the pallor of ivories;
But they blush to the tips like a curled sea-shell:
What treasure, in kingly treasures,
Of gold, and spice for the thurible,
Is sweet as her hands to hoard and tell?

I know not the way from your finger-tips,
Nor how I shall gain the higher lands,
The citadel of your sacred lips:
I am captive still of my pleasant bands,
The hands of a girl, and most your hands.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Flos Lunae” [Flower of the Moon] (1891)

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
Nor trouble the calm fount of speech
With aught of passion or surprise.
The heart of thee I cannot reach:
I would not alter thy cold eyes!

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
Nor have the smile, nor make thee weep:
Though all my life droops down and dies,
Desiring thee, desiring sleep,
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
I would not change thee if I might,
To whom my prayers for incense rise,
Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
With trouble of the human heart:
Within their glance my spirit lies,
A frozen thing, alone, apart;
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae”

[I am not what I once was under kind Cynara's reign] (1891)

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,

Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,

When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,

Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine:
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,

Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

ERNEST DOWSON

*“O Mors! Quam Amara Est Memoria Tue Homini Pacem
Habenti in Substantiis Suis”*

[O death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee to a man
that liveth at rest in his possessions] (1891)

Exceeding sorrow
Consumeth my sad heart!
Because to-morrow
We must depart,
Now is exceeding sorrow
All my part!

Give overplaying,
Cast by a mile away:
Merely laying
Thine head my way:
Prithee, give over playing,
Grave or gay.

Be no word spoken;
Weep nothing: let a pale
Silence, unbroken
Silence prevailed!
Prithee, be no word spoken,
Lest I fail!

Forget to-morrow!
We nothing: only lay
In silence sorrow
Thine head my way:
Let us forget to-morrow,
This one day!

ERNEST DOWSON

*“Ah, dans ces mornes séjours
Les jamais sont les toujours.”*

[In these gloomy sojourns, nevers are evermore] (1891)

You would have understood me, had you waited;
I could have loved you, dear! as well as he:
Had we not been impatient, dear! and fated
Always to disagree.

What is the use of speech? Silence were fitter:
Lest we should still be wishing things unsaid.
Though all the words we ever spake were bitter,
Shall I reproach you dead?

Nay, we let this earth, your portion, likewise cover
All the old anger, setting us apart:
Always, in all, in truth was I your lover;
Always, I held your heart.

I have met other women who were tender,
As you were cold, dear! with a grace as rare.
Think you, I turned to them, or made surrender,
I who had found you fair?

Had we been patient, dear! ah, had you waited,
I had fought death for you, better than he:
But from the very first, dear! we were fated
Always to disagree.

Late, late, I come to you, now death discloses
Love that in life was not to be our part:
On your low lying mound between the roses,
Sadly I cast my heart.

I would not waken you: nay! this is fitter;
Death and the darkness give you unto me;
Here we who loved so, were so cold and bitter,
Hardly can disagree.

ERNEST DOWSON

“April Love” (1893?)

We have walked in and Love's land a little way,
 We have learnt his lesson a little while,
And shall we not part at the end of day,
 With a sigh, a smile?

A little while in the shine of the sun,
 We were twined together, joined lips, forgot
How the shadows fall when the day is done,
 And when Love is not.

We have made no vows—there will none be broke,
 Our love was free as the wind on the hill,
There was no word said we need wish unspoke,
 We have wrought no ill.

So shall we not part at the end of day,
 Who have loved and lingered a little while,
Join lips for the last time, go our way,
 With a sigh, a smile?

ERNEST DOWSON

“Vain Hope” (1891)

Sometimes, to solace my sad heart, I say,
 Though late it be, though lily-time be past,
 Though all the summer skies be overcast,
Haply I will go down to her, some day,
 And cast my rests of life before her feet,
That she may have her will of me, being so sweet,
 And none gainsay!

So might she look on me with pitying eyes,
 And lay calm hands of healing on my head:
 *“Because of thy long pains be comforted;
For, I, even I, am love: sad soul, arise!”*
 So, for the graciousness, I might at last
Gaze on the very face of Love, and hold him fast
 In no disguise.

Haply, I said, she will take pity on me,
 Though late I come, long after lily-time,
 With burden of waste days and drifted rhyme:
Her kind, calm eyes, down drooping maidenly,
 Shall change, grow soft: there yet is time, meseems,
I said, for solace; though I know these things are dreams
 And may not be!

ERNEST DOWSON

“Vain Resolves” (1891)

I said: “There is an end of my desire:
 Now have I soon, and I have harvested,
And these are ashes of an ancient fire,
 Which, verily, shall not be quickened.
Now will I take me to a place of peace,
 Forget mine heart’s desire;
In solitude and prayer, work out my soul’s release.

“I shall forget her eyes, how cold they were;
 Forget her voice, how soft it was and low,
With all my singing that she did not hear,
 And all my service that she did not know.
I shall not hold the merest memory
 Of any days that were,
Within those solitudes where I will fasten me.”

And once she passed, and once she raised her eyes,
 And smiled for courtesy, and nothing said:
And suddenly the old flame did uprise,
 And all my old desire was quickened.
Yea! as it hath been, it shall ever be,
 Most passionless, purer eyes!
Which never shall grow soft, nor change, nor pity me.

ERNEST DOWSON

“A Requiem” (1893)

Neobule, being tired,
Far too tired to laugh or weep,
From the hours, rosy and gray,
Hid her golden face away.
Neobule, fain of sleep,
Slept at last as she desired!

Neobule! is it well,
That you haunt the hollow lands,
Where the poor, dead people stray,
Ghostly, pitiful and gray,
plucking, with their spectral hands,
Scentless blooms of asphodel?

Neobule, tired to death
Of the flowers that I threw
On her flower-like, fair feet,
Sighed for blossoms not so sweet,
Lunar roses pale and blue,
Lilies of the world beneath.

Neobule! ah, too tired
Of the dreams and days above!
Where the poor, dead people stray,
Ghostly, pitiful and gray,
Out of life and out of love,
Sleeps the sleep which she desired.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Beata Solitudo” [Blessed Solitude] (1893)

What land of Silence,
Where pale stars shine
On apple-blossom
And dew-drenched vine,
Is your and mine?

The silent valley
That we will find,
Where all the voices
Of humankind
Are left behind.

There all forgetting,
Forgotten quite,
We will repose us,
With our delight
Hide out of sight.

The world forsaken,
And out of mind
Honour and labour,
We shall not find
The stars unkind.

And men shall travail,
And laugh and weep;
But we have vistas
Of gods asleep,
With dreams as deep.

A land of Silence,
Where pale stars shine
On apple-blossoms
And dew-drenched vine,
Be yours and mine!

ERNEST DOWSON

“Terre Promise” (1893)

Even now the fragrant darkness of her hair
Had brushed my cheek; and once, in passing by,
Her hand upon my hand lay tranquility:
What things unspoken trembled in the air!

Always I know, how little severs me
From mine heart's country, that is yet so far;
And must I lean and long across a bar,
That half a word would shatter utterly?

I might it be, that just by touch of hand,
Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall;
And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,
But droop into mine arms, and understand!

ERNEST DOWSON

“Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasures” (1893?)

I took her dainty eyes, as well
 As silken tendrils of her hair:
And so I made a Villanelle!

I took her voice, a silver bell,
 As clear as song, as soft as prayer;
I took her dainty eyes as well.

It may be, said I, who can tell,
 These things shall be my less despair?
And so I made a Villanelle!

I took her whiteness virginal
 And from her cheek two roses rare:
I took her dainty eyes as well.

I said: “It may be possible
 Her image from my heart to tear!”
And so I made a Villanelle.

I stole her laugh, most musical:
 I wrought it in with artful care:
I took her dainty eyes as well;
And so I made a Villanelle.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Vesperal” (1895?)

Strange grows the river on the sunless evenings!
The river comforts me, grown spectral, vague and dumb:
Long was the day; at last the consoling shadows come:
Sufficient for the day are the day's evil things!

Labour and longing and despair the long day brings;
Patient till evening men watch the sun go west; Deferred, expected
night at last bring sleep and rest:
Sufficient for the day are the day's evil things!

At last the tranquil Angelus of evening rings
Night's curtain down for comfort and oblivion
Of all the vanities observèd by the sun:
Sufficient for the day are the day's evil things!

So, some time, when the last of all our evenings
Crowneth memorially the last of all our days,
Not loth to take his poppies man goes down and says,
Sufficient for the day are the day's evil things!

ERNEST DOWSON

“The Garden of Shadow” (1893)

Love heeds no more the siding of the wind
Against the perfect flowers: by Gardens close
Is grown a wilderness, where none shall find
One strayed, last battle of one last years Rose.

O bright, bright hair! O mouth like a ripe fruit!
Can famine be so nigh to harvesting?
Love, that was songful, with a broken lute
In grass of graveyards go with murmuring.

Let the wind blow against the perfect flowers,
And all thy garden change and glow with spring:
Love is grown blind with no more count of ours,
Nor part in seed-time nor in harvesting.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Extreme Unction” (1893)

Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,
 On all the passages of sense,
The atoning oil is spread with sweet
 Renewal of lost innocence.

The feet, that lately ran so fast
 To meet desire, are soothly sealed;
The eyes, that were so often cast
 On vanity, are touched and healed.

From troublous sights and sounds set free;
 In such a twilight hour of breath,
Shall one retrace his life, or see,
 Through shadows, the true face of death?

Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!
 I know not where nor when I come,
Nor through what wanderings and toils,
 To crave of you Viaticum.

Yet, when the walls of flesh grow weak,
 In such an hour, it well may be,
Through mist and darkness, light will break,
 And each of anointed sense will see.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Amantium Irae” [Lovers’ Quarrels] (1894)

When this, our roses, is faded,
 And these, our days, are done,
In lands profoundly shaded
 From tempest and from sun:
Ah, once more come together,
 Shall we forgive the past,
And safe from worldly weather
 Possess our souls at last?

Or in our place of shadows
 Shall still we stretch an hand
To green, remembered meadows,
 Of that old pleasant land?
And vainly there foregathered,
 Shall we regret the sun?
The rose of love, ungathered?
 The bay, we have not won?

Ah, child! the world’s dark margins
 May lead to Nevermore,
The stately funeral barges
 Sail for unknown shore,
And love we vowed to-morrow,
 And pride we serve to-day:
What if they both should borrow
 Sad hues of yesterday?

Our pride! Ah, should we miss it,
 Or will it serve at last?
Our anger, if we kiss it,
 Is like a sorrow past.
While roses deck the garden,
 While yet the sun is high,
Doff sorry pride for pardon,
 Or ever love go by.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Impenitentia Ultima” [Final Unrepentance] (1895)

Before my light goes out forever if God should give me a choice of graces,
I would not reck of length of days, nor crave for things to be;
But cry: “One day of the great lost days, one face of all the faces,
Grant me to see and touch once more and nothing more to see.

“For, Lord, I was free of all Thy flowers, but I chose the world’s sad roses,
And that is why my feet are torn and mine eyes are blind with sweat,
But at Thy terrible judgment-seat, when this my tired life closes,
I am ready to reap whereof I sowed, and pay my righteous debt.

“But once before the sand is run and the silvers thread is broken,
Give me grace and cast aside the veil of dolorous years,
Grant me one hour of all mine hours, and let me see for a token
Her pure and pitiful eyes shine out, and bathe her feet with tears.”

Her pitiful hand should calm, and her hair stream down and blind me,
Out of the sight of night, and out of the reach of fear,
And her eyes should be my light whilst the sun went out behind me,
And the viols of her voice be the last sound in mine ear.

Before the ruining waters fall and my life be carried under,
And Thine anger cleave me through as a child cuts down a flower,
I will praise Thee, Lord, in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder,
For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour.

ERNEST DOWSON

“A Valediction”

If we must part,
 Then let it be like this'
Not heart on heart,
 Nor with the useless anguish of a kiss;
But touch mine hand and say;
“*Until to-morrow or some other day,*
 If we must part.”

Words are so weak
 When love hath been so strong:
Let silence speak:
 “*Life is a little while, and love is long;*
 A time to sow and reap,
 And after harvest a long time to sleep,
 But words are weak.”

ERNEST DOWSON

“Dum nos Fata Sinunt, Oculos Satiemus Amore” (1893?)
[While the fates allow us, let us satisfy our eyes with love]

Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad
Here in the silence, under the wan moon;
Sweet are thine eyes, but how can I be glad,
Knowing they change so soon?

For love's sake, Dear, be silent! Cover me
In the deep darkness of thy falling hair:
Fear is upon me and the memory
Of what is all men's share.

O could this moment be perpetuate!
Must we grow old, and leaden-eyed and gray,
And taste no more the wild and passionate
Love sorrows of to-day?

Grown old, and faded, Sweet! and past desire,
Let memory die, lest there be too much ruth,
Remembering the old, extinguished fire
Of our divine, lost youth.

O red pomegranate of thy perfect mouth!
My lips' life fruitage, might I taste and die,
Here in thy garden, where the scented south
Wind chastens agony;

Reap death from thy live lips in one long kiss,
And look my last into thine eyes and rest:
What sweets had life to me sweeter than this
Swift dying on thy breast?

Or, if that may not be, for love's sake, Dear!
Keep silence still, and dream that we shall lie,
Red mouth to mouth, entwined, and always hear
Thy south wind's melody,

Here in thy garden, through the sighing boughs,
Beyond the reach of time and chance and change,
And bitter life and death, and broken vows,
That sadden and estrange.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Epigram” (1894)

Because I am idolatrous and have besought,
With grievous supplication and consuming prayer,
The admirable image that my dreams have wrought
Out of her swan’s neck and her dark, abundant hair:
The jealous gods, who brook no worship save their own,
Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone.

From *Decorations* (1899)

ERNEST DOWSON

“Beyond” (1889)

Love's aftermath! I think the time is now
That we must gather in, alone, apart
The saddest crop of all the crops that grow,
 Love's aftermath.

Ah, sweet,—sweet yesterday, the tears that start,
Can not put back the dial; this is, I trow,
Our harvesting! Thy kisses chill my heart,
Our lips are cold; averted eyes avow
The twilight of poor love: we can but part,
Dumbly and sadly, reaping as we sow,
 Love's aftermath.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Carthusians” (1891)

Through what long heaviness, assayed in what strange fire,
Have these white monks been brought into the way
of peace,
Despising the world's wisdom and the world's desire,
Which from the body of this death bring no release?

Within their austere walls no voices penetrate;
A sacred silence only, as of death, obtains;
Nothing finds entry here of loud or passionate;
This quiet is the exceeding profit of their pains.

From many lands they came, in divers fiery ways;
Each knew at last the vanity of earthly joys;
And one was crowned with thorns, and one was crowned
with bays,
And each was tired at last of the world's foolish noise.

It was not theirs with Dominic to preach God's holy wrath,
They were too stern to bear sweet Francis' gentle sway;
Theirs was a higher calling and a steeper path,
To dwell alone with Christ, to meditate and pray.

A cloistered company, they were companionless,
None knoweth here the secret of his brother's heart:
They are but come together for more loneliness,
Whose bond is solitude and silence all their part.

O beatific life! Who is there shall gainsay,
Your great refusal's victory, your little loss,
Deserting vanity for the more perfect way,
The sweeter service of the most dolorous Cross.

You shall prevail at last! Surely ye shall prevail!
Your silence and austerity shall when at last:
Desire and mirth, the world's ephemeral lights shall fail,
The sweet star of your queen is never overcast.

(continued)

We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine;
 With wine we dull our souls and careful strains of art;
Our cups are polished skulls around which the roses twine:
 None dares look to Death who leers and lurks apart.

Move on, white company, whom that has not sufficed!
 Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail:
Pray for our heedlessness, O dwellers with the Christ!
 Though the world fall apart, surely ye shall prevail.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Saint Germain-En-Laye (1887–95)” (1895)

Through the green boughs I hardly saw thy face,
 They twined so close: the sun was in mine eyes;
And now the sullen trees in sombre lace
 Stand bare beneath the sinister, sad skies.

O sun and summer! Say in what far night,
 The gold and green, the glory of thine head,
Of bough and branch have fallen? Oh, the white
 Gaunt ghosts that flutter where thy feet have sped,

Across the terrace that is desolate,
 And rang then with thy laughter, ghost of thee,
That holds its shroud up with most delicate,
 Dead fingers, and behind the ghost of me,

Tripping fantastic with a mouth that jeers
 At roseal flowers of youth the turbid streams
Toss in derision down the barren years
 To death the host of all our golden dreams.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Dregs” (1897?)

The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof,
(This is the end of every song man sings!)
The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,
Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;
And health and hope have gone the way of love
Into the drear oblivion of lost things.
Ghosts go along with us until the end;
This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:
This is the end of all the songs man sings.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Venite Descendamus” [Let Us Go Down] (1896)

Let be at last; give over words and sighing,
 Vainly were all things said:
Better at last to find a place for lying,
 Only dead.

Silence were best, with songs and sighing over;
 Now be the music mute;
Now let the dead, red leaves of autumn cover
 A vain lute.

Silence is best: for ever and for ever,
 We will go down and sleep,
Somewhere beyond her ken, where she need never
 Come to weep.

Let be at last: colder she grows and colder;
 Sleep and the night were best;
Lying at last where we can not behold her,
 We may rest.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Transition” (1890)

A little while to walk with me, dear child;
 To lean on thee my weak and weary head;
Then evening comes: the winter sky is wild,
 The leafless trees are black, red leaves long dead.

A little while to hold the hand to stand,
 By harvest-field of bending golden corn:
Then the predestined silence, and thine hand,
 Lost in the night, long and weary and forlorn.

A little while to love thee, scarcely time
 To love thee well enough; then time to part,
To fair through wintry fields alone and climb
 The frozen hills, not knowing where thou art.

Short summer-time and then, my heart's desire,
 The winter and the darkness: one by one
The roses fall, the pale roses expire
 Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.

ERNEST DOWSON

“Exchanges” (1899)

All that I had I brought,
 Little enough I know;
A poor rhyme roughly wrought,
 A rose to match thy snow:
All that I had brought.

Little enough I sought:
 But a word compassionate coal,
A passing glance, or thought,
 For me outside the gate:
Little enough I sought.

Little enough I found:
 All that you had, perchance!
With the dead leaves on the ground,
 I danced the devil’s dance.
All that you had I found.

ERNEST DOWSON

“A Last Word” (1886)

Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;
The day is overworn, the birds all flown;
And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;
Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land,
Broods like an owl; we cannot understand
Laughter or tears, for we have only known
Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
Have driven our perverse and aimless band.
Let us go hence, somewhither strange and cold,
To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust
Find end of labour, where's rest for the old,
Freedom to all from love and fear and lust.
Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.