

## Poetry on Poetry

“To One Who Loved Not Poetry”

Sappho (tr. Edwin Arnold)

Thou liest dead, and there will be no memory left behind  
Of thee or thine in all the earth, for never didst thou bind  
The roses of Pierian streams upon thy brow; thy doom  
Is now to flit with unknown ghosts in cold and nameless gloom.

### Sonnet 65

*William Shakespeare*

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea  
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out  
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?  
O fearful meditation! where, alack,  
Shall time's best jewel from time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
O, none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

### Jordan (I)

*George Herbert*

Who says that fictions only and false hair  
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?  
Is all good structure in a winding stair?  
May no lines pass, except they do their duty  
Not to a true, but painted chair?

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves  
And sudden arbours shadow coarse-spun lines?  
Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?  
Must all be veil'd, while he that reads, divines,  
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing;  
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for prime;  
I envy no man's nightingale or spring;  
Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme,  
Who plainly say, *my God, my King.*

### Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room

*William Wordsworth*

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
And hermits are contented with their cells;  
And students with their pensive citadels;  
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,  
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:  
In truth the prison, into which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,  
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;  
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

### If By Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chain'd

*John Keats*

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of poesy;  
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd  
By ear industrious, and attention meet:  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

## Ode to the West Wind

*Percy Bysshe Shelley*

### I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

### II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread  
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,  
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge  
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night  
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,  
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere  
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!

### III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams  
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,  
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou  
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below  
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

### IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even  
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,  
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed  
Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

### V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

## A Musical Instrument

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

### I.

WHAT was he doing, the great god Pan,  
Down in the reeds by the river ?  
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,  
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,  
And breaking the golden lilies afloat  
With the dragon-fly on the river.

### II.

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,  
From the deep cool bed of the river :  
The limpid water turbidly ran,  
And the broken lilies a-dying lay,  
And the dragon-fly had fled away,  
Ere he brought it out of the river.

### III.

High on the shore sate the great god Pan,  
While turbidly flowed the river ;  
And hacked and hewed as a great god can,  
With his hard bleak steel at the patient reed,  
Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed  
To prove it fresh from the river.

### IV.

He cut it short, did the great god Pan,  
(How tall it stood in the river !)  
Then drew the pith, like the heart of a man,  
Steadily from the outside ring,

And notched the poor dry empty thing  
In holes, as he sate by the river.

### V.

This is the way,' laughed the great god Pan,  
Laughed while he sate by the river,)  
The only way, since gods began  
To make sweet music, they could succeed.'  
Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,  
He blew in power by the river.

### VI.

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan !  
Piercing sweet by the river !  
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan !  
The sun on the hill forgot to die,  
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly  
Came back to dream on the river.

### VII.

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,  
To laugh as he sits by the river,  
Making a poet out of a man :  
The true gods sigh for the cost and pain, —  
For the reed which grows nevermore again  
As a reed with the reeds in the river.

## Poetry

*Marianne Moore*

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes  
that can dilate, hair that can rise  
if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we do not admire what we cannot understand: the bat, holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the baseball fan, the statistician -- nor is it valid to discriminate against "business documents and

school-books": all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry, nor till the poets among us can be "literalists of the imagination" -- above insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand, the raw material of poetry in all its rawness and that which is on the other hand genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

## In Memory Of W.B. Yeats

*W.H. Auden*

### I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
The snow disfigured the public statues;  
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness  
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable  
quays;  
By mourning tongues  
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,  
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;  
The provinces of his body revolted,  
The squares of his mind were empty,  
Silence invaded the suburbs,  
The current of his feeling failed; he became his  
admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow  
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of  
the Bourse,  
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are  
fairly accustomed,  
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of  
his freedom,  
A few thousand will think of this day  
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly  
unusual.

What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

### II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:  
The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives

In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

### III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.

Time that is intolerant  
Of the brave and the innocent,  
And indifferent in a week  
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives  
Everyone by whom it lives;  
Pardons cowardice, conceit,  
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse  
Pardoned Kipling and his views,  
And will pardon Paul Claudel,  
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountains start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

## **kitchenette building**

*Gwendolyn Brooks*

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound,  
not strong

Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!  
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,  
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

## **Ars Poetica**

*Archibald MacLeish*

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit,

Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.

\*

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs.

\*

A poem should be equal to:  
Not true.

For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean  
But be.

## A Letter from Brooklyn

*Derek Walcott*

An old lady writes me in a spidery style,  
Each character trembling, and I see a veined hand  
Pellucid as paper, travelling on a skein  
Of such frail thoughts its thread is often broken;  
Or else the filament from which a phrase is hung  
Dims to my sense, but caught, it shines like steel,  
As touch a line and the whole web will feel.  
She describes my father, yet I forget her face  
More easily than my father's yearly dying;  
Of her I remember small, buttoned boots and the place  
She kept in our wooden church on those Sundays  
Whenever her strength allowed;  
Grey-haired, thin-voiced, perpetually bowed.

"I am Mable Rawlins," she writes, "and know both your parents";

He is dead, Miss Rawlins, but God bless your tense:

"Your father was a dutiful, honest,

Faithful, and useful person.

"For such plain praise what fame is recompense?

"A horn-painter, he painted delicately on horn,

He used to sit around the table and paint pictures.

"The peace of God needs nothing to adorn

It, nor glory nor ambition.

"He is twenty-eight years buried," she writes, "he was called home,

And is, I am sure, doing greater work."

The strength of one frail hand in a dim room

Somewhere in Brooklyn, patient and assured,

Restores my sacred duty to the Word.

"Home, home," she can write, with such short time to live,

Alone as she spins the blessings of her years;

Not withered of beauty if she can bring such tears,

Nor withdrawn from the world that breaks its lovers so;

Heaven is to her the place where painters go,

All who bring beauty on frail shell or horn,

There was all made, thence their lux-mundi drawn,

Drawn, drawn, till the thread is resilient steel,

Lost though it seems in darkening periods,

And there they return to do work that is God's.

So this old lady writes, and again I believe.

I believe it all, and for no man's death I grieve.