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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IRRADIATIONS; SAND AND SPRAY ***

IRRADIATIONS SAND AND SPRAY BY JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

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TO

AMY LOWELL

BEST OF FRIENDS AND POETS

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PREFACE

The art of poetry as practised in the English-speaking countries to-day, is in a greatly backward state. Among the reading public there are exactly three opinions generally held about it. The first, and by far the most popular, view is that all poets are fools and that poetry is absurd. The second is that poetry is an agreeable after-dinner entertainment, and that a poet is great because he has written quotable lines. The last and worst is that which strives to press the poet into the service of some philosophical dogma, ism, or fad.

For these views the poets themselves, and no others, are largely responsible. With their exaggerated vanity, they have attempted to make of their craft a Masonic secret, iterating that a poet composes by ear alone; that rhythm is not to be analyzed, that rhyme is sacrosanct; that

poets, by some special dispensation of Providence, write by inspiration, being born with more insight than other men; and so forth. Is it any wonder that the public is indifferent, hostile, or befooled when poets themselves disdain to explain clearly what they are trying to do, and refuse to admit the public into the privacy of their carefully guarded workrooms?

It was Theophile Gautier, I think, who offered to teach any one how to write poetry in twenty-five lessons. Now this view has in it some exaggeration, but, at the same time, much truth. No amount of lessoning will turn an idiot into a wise man, or enable a man to say something when he is naturally one who has nothing to say. Nevertheless, I believe that there would have been fewer mute inglorious Miltons, greater respect paid to poetry, and many better poets, if the poets themselves had stopped working through sheer instinct and set themselves the task of considering some elementary principles in their craft. In this belief, and in the hope of enlightening some one as to the aim and purpose of my work, I am writing this preface.

To begin with, the basis of English poetry is rhythm, or, as some would prefer to call it, cadence. This rhythm is obtained by mingling stressed and unstressed syllables. Stress may be produced by accent. It may—and often is—produced by what is known as quantity, the breath required to pronounce certain syllables being more than is required on certain others. However it be produced, it is precisely this insistence upon cadence, upon the rhythm of the line when spoken, which sets poetry apart from prose, and not—be it said at the outset—a certain way of printing, with a capital letter at the beginning of each line, or an insistence upon end-rhymes.

Now this rhythm can be made the same in every line of the poem. This was the aim of Alexander Pope, for instance. My objection to this method is that it is both artificial and unmusical. In the case of the eighteenth century men, it gave the effect of a perfectly balanced pattern, like a minuet or fugue. In the case of the modern imitator of Kipling or Masfield, it gives the effect of monotonous rag-time. In neither case does it offer full scope for emotional development.

I maintain that poetry is capable of as many gradations in cadence as music is in time. We can have a rapid group of syllables—what is called a line—succeeded by a slow heavy one; like the swift, scurrying-up of the wave and the sullen dragging of itself away. Or we can gradually increase or decrease our *tempo*, creating *accelerando* and *rallentando* effects. Or we can follow a group of rapid lines with a group of slow ones, or a single slow, or *vice versa*. Finally, we can have a perfectly even and unaltered movement throughout if we desire to be monotonous.

The good poem is that in which all these effects are properly used to convey the underlying emotions of its author, and that which welds all these emotions into a work of art by the use of dominant *motif*, subordinate themes proportionate treatment, repetition, variation,—what in music is called development, reversal of roles, and return. In short, the good poem fixes a free emotion, or a free range of emotions, into an inevitable and artistic whole. The real secret of the greatest English poets lies not in their views on life,—which were, naturally, only those which every sane man is obliged to hold,—but in their profound knowledge of their craft, whereby they were enabled to put forth their views in perfect form. Each era of man has its unique and self-sufficing range of expression and experience, and therefore every poet must seek anew for himself, out of the language-medium at his disposal, rhythms which are adequate and forms which are expressive of his own unique personality.

As regards the length of the lines themselves, that depends altogether upon the apparatus which Nature has given us, to enable us to breathe and to speak. Each line of a poem, however many or few its stresses, represents a single breath, and therefore a single perception. The relation between breath and perception is a commonplace of Oriental philosophy. As we breathe so do we know the universe, whether by sudden, powerful gusts of inspiration, or through the calmer—but rarer—gradual ascent into the hidden mysteries of knowledge, and slow falling away therefrom into darkness.

So much for the question of metre. The second range of problems with which we are immediately concerned, when we examine the poetic craft, is that which is generally expressed under the name of rhyme.

Now rhyme is undoubtedly an element of poetry, but it is neither an indissoluble element, nor is it, in every case, an inevitable one. In the main, the instinct which makes for rhyme is sound. Poetry is an art which demands—though not invariably—the utmost richness and fulness of musical effect. When rhyme is considered as an additional instrument of what may be called the poetic orchestra, it both loses and gains in importance. It loses because it becomes of no greater import than assonance, consonance, alliteration, and a host of similar devices. It gains because it is used intelligently as a device for adding richness of effect, instead of blindly as a mere tag at the end of a line.

The system which demands that the end of every line of poetry must rhyme with the end of some one preceding or following it, has not even the merit of high antiquity or of civilized adherence. In its essence it is barbarous; it derives from the stamping of feet, clapping of hands, pounding of drums, or like devices of savage peoples to mark the rhythms in their dances and songs. And its introduction into European poetry, as a rule to be invariably followed, dates precisely from the time of the break-up of the Latin civilization, and the approach of what the historians know as the Dark Ages. Since it has come into common use among European peoples, every poet of eminence has tried to avoid its fatiguing monotony, by constructing new stanza-forms. Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Spenser, all these were innovators or developers of what may be known as formal metre. But let us not forget that the greatest of all, Shakespeare, used rhyme in his plays, only as

additional decoration to a lyric, or in a perfectly legitimate fashion as marking the necessary pause at the close of a scene. Let us also remember that, as he advanced in thought and expression, he gradually abandoned rhyme for the only reason that an artist abandons anything; because it was no longer adequate.

The process that began with the *Pervigilium Veneris*, the mediæval hymn-writers, and the Provençal troubadours, and which culminated in the orchestral blank verse of Shakespeare, has now passed through all the stages of reduction to formula, eclecticism, archaistic reaction, vulgarization, gramophone popularity, and death. Milton—Gibbon among poets—reduced it to his too-monotonous organ-roll. Dryden, Pope and his followers, endlessly repeated a formula. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, attempted a return to the Elizabethan and to the even earlier ballad forms. In the later nineteenth century we come back to still earlier forms. Ballades, rondeaus, even *sestinas* appear. Gradually we find the public attention dropping away from these juggling feats performed with stale form, and turning to what may be called the new balladist—the street singer who is content to doggerelize and make strident a once noble form. We have our Masefields, our Kiplings, and worse. Rag-time has at last made its appearance in poetry. Let us be grateful to the man who invented it—Nicholas Vachel Lindsay—but let us admit that the force of nature can no further go.

It is time to create something new. It is time to strip poetry of meaningless tatters of form, and to clothe her in new, suitable garments. Portents and precursors there have been in plenty. We already have Blake, Matthew Arnold, Whitman, Samuel Butler, and I know not how many more. Every one is talking—many poets, poeticules, and poetasters are writing—what they call "free verse." Let there be no mistake about one thing. Free verse that is flabby, in-organic, shapelessly obvious, is as much of a crime against poetry as the cheapest echo of a Masefield that any doggerel scribbler ever strummed. Let poets drop their formulas—"free" or otherwise—and determine to discipline themselves through experiment. There is much to be learned from the precursors I have mentioned. There is a great deal to be learned from the French poets—Parnassians, Symbolists, Whitmanites, Fantaisistes—who have, in the years 1860 to 1900, created a new Renaissance under our noses. But above all, what will teach us the most is our language and life. Never was life lived more richly, more fully, with more terrible blind intensity than it is being lived at this instant. Never was the noble language which is ours surpassed either in richness or in concision. We have the material with which to work, and the tools to do the work with. It is America's opportunity to lay the foundations for a new flowering of English verse, and to lay them as broad as they are strong.

January, 1915.

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IRRADIATIONS

I

The spattering of the rain upon pale terraces
Of afternoon is like the passing of a dream

Amid the roses shuddering 'gainst the wet green stalks
Of the streaming trees—the passing of the wind
Upon the pale lower terraces of my dream
Is like the crinkling of the wet grey robes
Of the hours that come to turn over the urn
Of the day and spill its rainy dream.
Vague movement over the puddled terraces:
Heavy gold pennons—a pomp of solemn gardens
Half hidden under the liquid veil of spring:
Far trumpets like a vague rout of faded roses
Burst 'gainst the wet green silence of distant forests:
A clash of cymbals—then the swift swaying footsteps
Of the wind that undulates along the languid terraces.
Pools of rain—the vacant terraces
Wet, chill and glistening
Towards the sunset beyond the broken doors of to-day.

II

Gaunt sails—bronze boats of the evening—
Float along the river where aloft
Like dim swans the clouds die
Softly.

I am afraid to traverse the long still streets of evening;
For I fear to see the ghosts that stare at me
From the shadows.
I will stay indoors instead and await my wandering dream.

She is about me, fluid yet, and formless;
The wind in her hair whispers like dim violins:
And the faint glint of her eyes shifts like a sudden movement
Over the surface of a dark pool.

She comes to me slowly down the lost streets of the evening,
And their immutable silence is in her feet.
Let no lamps flare—be still, my heart—hands, stay:
For I would touch the lips of my new love with my lips.

III

In the grey skirts of the fog seamews skirl desolately,
And flick like bits of paper propelled by a wind
About the flabby sails of a departing ship
Crawling slowly down the low reaches
Of the river.
About the keel there is a bubbling and gurgling
Of grumpy water;
And as the prow noses out a way for itself,
It seems to weave a dream of bubbles and flashing foam,
A dream of strange islands whereto it is bound:
Pear-islands drenched with the dawn.
The palms flash under the immense dark sky,
Down which the sun dives to embrace the earth:
Drums boom and conches bray,
And with a crash of crimson cymbals
Suddenly appears above the polished backs of slaves
A king in a breastplate of gold
Gigantic
Amid tossed roses and swaying dancers
That melt into pale undulations and muffled echoes
'Mid the bubbling of the muddy lumpy water,
And the swirling of the seamews above the sullen river.

IV

The iridescent vibrations of midsummer light
Dancing, dancing, suddenly flickering and quivering
Like little feet or the movement of quick hands clapping,
Or the rustle of furbelows or the clash of polished gems.
The palpitant mosaic of the midday light
Colliding, sliding, leaping and lingering:

O, I could lie on my back all day,
And mark the mad ballet of the midsummer sky.

V

Over the roof-tops race the shadows of clouds;
Like horses the shadows of clouds charge down the street.

Whirlpools of purple and gold,
Winds from the mountains of cinnabar,
Lacquered mandarin moments, palanquins swaying and balancing
Amid the vermilion pavilions, against the jade balustrades.
Glint of the glittering wings of dragon-flies in the light:
Silver filaments, golden flakes settling downwards,
Rippling, quivering flutters, repulse and surrender,
The sun brodered upon the rain,
The rain rustling with the sun.

Over the roof-tops race the shadows of clouds;
Like horses the shadows of clouds charge down the street.

VI

The balancing of gaudy broad pavilions
Of summer against the insolent breeze:
The bellying of the sides of striped tents,
Swelling taut, shuddering in quick collapse,
Silent under the silence of the sky.

Earth is streaked and spotted
With great splashes and dapples of sunlight:
The sun throws an immense circle of hot light upon the world,
Rolling slowly in ponderous rhythm
Darkly, musically forward.

All is silent under the steep cone of afternoon:
The sky is imperturbably profound.
The ultimate divine union seems about to be accomplished,
All is troubled at the attainment
Of the inexhaustible infinite.

The rolling and the tossing of the sides of immense pavilions
Under the whirling wind that screams up the cloudless sky.

VII

Flickering of incessant rain
On flashing pavements:
Sudden scurry of umbrellas:
Bending, recurved blossoms of the storm.

The winds came clanging and clattering
From long white highroads whipping in ribbons up summits:
They strew upon the city gusty wafts of appleblossom,
And the rustling of innumerable translucent leaves.

Uneven tinkling, the lazy rain
Dripping from the eaves.

VIII

The fountain blows its breathless spray
From me to you and back to me.

Whipped, tossed, curdled,
Crashing, quivering:
I hurl kisses like blows upon your lips.
The dance of a bee drunken with sunlight:
Irradiant ecstasies, white and gold,
Sigh and relapse.

The fountain tosses pallid spray
Far in the sorrowful, silent sky.

IX

The houses of the city no longer hum and play:
They lie like careless drowsy giants, dumb, estranged.

One presses to his breast his toy, a lighted pane:
One stirs uneasily: one is cold in death.

And the late moon, fearfully peering over an immense shoulder,
Sees, in the shadow below, the unpeopled hush of a street.

X

The trees, like great jade elephants,
Chained, stamp and shake 'neath the gadflies of the breeze
The trees lunge and plunge, unruly elephants:
The clouds are their crimson howdah-canopies,
The sunlight glints like the golden robe of a Shah.
Would I were tossed on the wrinkled backs of those trees

XI

The clouds are like a sombre sea:
On shining screens of ebony
Are carven marvels of my heart.

'Gainst crimson placques of cinnabar
Shrills, like a diamond, dawn's last star.

The gardens of my heart are green:
The rain drips off the glistening leaves.
In the humid gardens of my soul,
The crimson peonies explode.

I am like a drop of rose-flushed rain,
Clinging to crimson petals of love.

In the afternoon, over gold screens,
I will brush the blue dust of my dreams.

XII

The pine, rough-bearded Pan of the woods
Whispered in my ear his sleepy-sweet song.
Like liquid fire it ran through my veins.
Thus he piped: Sad, lonely son of the woods,
Lie down in the long still grass and sleep,
Ere the dawn has hidden her swelling breasts,
Ere the morning has covered her massive flanks,
With the flame-coloured mantle of noon.
Lie down in the dewless grass nor awake
To see whether afternoon has hurried in
From the rim of her purple robe dropping dim flowers
Golden flowers with pollen-dusty cups,
Flowers of silence. Heed not though eve
Should sail, a grey swan, in the pool of the sky,
Spreading low ripples. Heed these not!
Only awake when slim twilight
Plunges her body in the last blown spray of the sun!
Awake, then, for twilight and dawn are your day:
Therefore lie down in the long dim grass and sleep,
And I will blow my low pipes over you.

XIII

As I went through the city by day
I saw shadows in sunlight:

But in the night I saw everywhere
Stars within the darkness.

(A coldly fluting breeze:
Dark Pan under the trees.
Low laughter: up the sky
A star like a street-lamp left on high.)

As I went through the city by day
I was hustled by jostling people.
But in the night, the wind of the darkness
Whispered, "Hush!" to my soul.

XIV

Brown bed of earth, still fresh and warm with love,
Now hold me tight:
Broad field of sky, where the clouds laughing move,
Fill up my pores with light:
You trees, now talk to me, chatter and scold or weep,
Or drowsing stand:
You winds, now play with me, you wild things creep,
You boulders, bruise my hand!
I now am yours and you are mine: it matters not
What Gods herein I see:
You grow in me, I am rooted to this spot,
We drink and pass the cup, immortally.

XV

O seeded grass, you army of little men
Crawling up the long slope with quivering, quick blades of steel:
You who storm millions of graves, tiny green tentacles of Earth,
Interlace yourselves tightly over my heart,
And do not let me go:
For I would lie here forever and watch with one eye
The pilgrimagings ants in your dull, savage jungles,
The while with the other I see the stiff lines of the slope
Break in mid-air, a wave surprisingly arrested,
And above them, wavering, dancing, bodiless, colourless, unreal,
The long thin lazy fingers of the heat.

XVI

An ant crawling up a grass-blade,
And above it, the sky.
I shall remember these when I die:
An ant and a butterfly
And the sky.

The grass is full of forget-me-nots and poppies:
Through the air darts many a fly.
The ant toils up its grass-blade,
The careless hours go by.

The grass-blades bow to the feet of the lazy hours:
They walk out of the wood, showering shadows on flowers.
Their robes flutter vaguely far off there in the clearing:
I see them sometimes from the corner of my eye.

XVII

The wind that drives the fine dry sand
Across the strand:
The sad wind spinning arabesques
With a wrinkled hand.

Labyrinths of shifting sand,
The dancing dunes!

I will arise and run with the sand,

And gather it greedily in my hand:
I will wriggle like a long yellow snake over the beaches.
I will lie curled up, sleeping,
And the wind shall chase me
Far inland.

My breath is the music of the mad wind;
Shrill piping, stamping of drunken feet,
The fluttering, tattered broidery flung
Over the dunes' steep escarpments.

The fine dry sand that whistles
Down the long low beaches.

XVIII

Blue, brown, blue: sky, sand, sea:
I swell to your immensity.
I will run over the endless beach,
I will shout to the breaking spray,
I will touch the sky with my fingers.
My happiness is like this sand:
I let it run out of my hand.

XIX

The clouds pass
Over the polished mirror of the sky:
The clouds pass, puffs of grey,
There is no star.

The clouds pass slowly:
Suddenly a disengaged star flashes.
The night is cold and the clouds
Roll slowly over the sky.

XX

I dance:
I exist in motion:
A wind-shaken flower spilling my drops in the sunlight.

I feel the muscles bending, relaxing beneath me;
I direct the rippling sweep of the lines of my body;
Its impact crashes through the thin walls of the atmosphere,
I dance.

About me whirls
The sombre hall, the gaudy stage, the harsh glare of the footlights,
And in the brains of thousands watching
Little flames leap quivering to the music of my effort.

I have danced:
I have expressed my soul
In unbroken rhythm,
Sorrow, and flame.
I am tired: I would be extinguished beneath your beating hands.

XXI

Not noisily, but solemnly and pale,
In a meditative ecstasy you entered life:
As performing some strange rite, to which you alone held the clue.
Child, life did not give rude strength to you;
from the beginning, you would seem to have thrown away,
As something cold and cumbersome, that armour men use against
death.
You would perhaps look on him face to face, and so learn the secret
Whether that face wears oftenest a smile or no?
Strange, old, and silent being, there is something
Infinitely vast in your intense tininess:

I think you could point out, with a smile, some curious star
Far off in the heavens, which no man has seen before.

XXII

The morning is clean and blue and the wind blows up the clouds:
Now my thoughts gathered from afar
Once again in their patched armour, with rusty plumes and blunted
swords,
Move out to war.

Smoking our morning pipes we shall ride two and two
Through the woods.
For our old cause keeps us together,
And our hatred is so precious not death or defeat can break it.

God willing, we shall this day meet that old enemy
Who has given us so many a good beating.
Thank God we have a cause worth fighting for,
And a cause worth losing and a good song to sing.

XXIII

Torridly the moon rolls upward
Against the smooth immensity of midsummer sky,
Changeless, inexhaustible:
The city beneath is still:
Heaven and Earth are clasped together,
Momently life grows as careless
As the life of the intense stars.
Out of the houses climbing,
Fuming up windows, flickering from every roof-top,
Rigid on sonorous pinnacles,
Silently swirl aloft
Love's infinite flamelets.

XXIV

O all you stars up yonder,
Do you hear me? Beautiful, winking, sullen eyes,
I am tired of seeing you in the same old places,
Night after night in the sky.
I hoped you would dance—but after twenty-six years,
I find you are determined to stay as you are.
So I make it known to you, stars clustered or solitary,
That I want you to fall into my lap to-night.
Come down, little stars, let me play with you:
I will string you like beads, and shovel you together,
And wear you in my ears, and scatter you over people—
And toss you back, like apples, if I choose.

XXV

As I wandered over the city through the night,
I saw many strange things:
But I have forgotten all
Except one painted face.
Gaudy, shameless night-orchid,
Heavy, flushed, sticky with narcotic perfume,
There was something in you which made me prefer you
Above all the feeble forget-me-nots of the world.
You were neither burnt out nor pallid,
There was plain, coarse, vulgar meaning in every line of you
And no make-believe:
You were at least alive,
When all the rest were but puppets of the night.

XXVI

Slowly along the lamp-emblazoned street,

Amid the last sad drifting crowds of midnight
Like lost souls wandering,
Comes marching by solemnly
As for some gem-bedecked ritual of old,
A monotonous procession of black carts
Full crowded with blood-red blossom:
Scarlet geraniums
Unfolding their fiery globes upon the night.
These are the memories of day moulded in jagged flame:
Lust, joy, blood, and death.
With crushed hands, weary eyes, and hoarse clamour,
We consecrate and acclaim them tumultuously
Ere they pass, contemptuous, beyond the unpierced veil of silence.

XXVII

I think there was an hour in which God laughed at me,
For as I passed along the street,
saw that all the women—although their bodies were dexterously
concealed—
Were thinking with all their might what men were like:
And the men, mechanically correct, cigars at lips,
Were wanting to rush at the women,
But were restrained by respectability or timidity,
Or fear of the consequences or vanity or some puerile dream
Of a pale ideal lost in the vast grey sky.
So I said to myself, it is time to end all this:
I will take the first woman that comes along.
And then God laughed at me—and I too smiled
To see that He was in such good humour and that the sun was
shining.

XXVIII

I remember, there was a day
During which I did not write a line of verse:
Nor did I speak a word to any woman,
Nor did I meet with death.

Yet all that day I was fully occupied:
My eyes saw trees, clouds, streets, houses, people;
My lungs breathed air;
My mouth swallowed food and drink;
My hands seized things, my feet touched earth,
Or spurned it at my desire.

On that day I know I would have been sufficiently happy,
If I could have kept my brain from bothering at all
About my next trite poem;
About the tedious necessities of sex;
And about the day on which I would at last meet death.

XXIX

It is evening, and the earth
Wraps her shoulders in an old blue shawl.
Afar off there clink the polychrome points of the stars,
Indefatigable, after all these years!
Here upon earth there is life, and then death,
Dawn, and later nightfall,
Fire, and the quenching of embers:
But why should I not remember that my night is dawn in another
part of
 the world,
If the idea fits my fancy?
Dawns of marvellous light, wakeful, sleepy, weary, dancing dawns,
You are rose petals settling through the blue of my evening:
I light my pipe to salute you,
And sit puffing smoke in the air and never say a word.

XXX

I have seemed often feeble and useless to myself,
And many times I have wished that the tedium of my life
Lay at last dissolved in the cold acid of death:
Yet I have not forgotten
The sparkling of waters in the sunlight,
The sound of a woman's voice,
Gliding dancers,
Chanting worshippers,
A child crying,
The wind amid the hills.
These I can remember,
And I think they are more of me
Than the wrinkles on my face and the hungry ache at my heart.

XXXI

My stiff-spread arms
Break into sudden gesture;
My feet seize upon the rhythm;
My hands drag it upwards:
Thus I create the dance.

I drink of the red bowl of the sunlight:
I swim through seas of rain:
I dig my toes into earth:
I taste the smack of the wind:
I am myself:
I live.

The temples of the gods are forgotten or in ruins:
Professors are still arguing about the past and the future:
I am sick of reading marginal notes on life,
I am weary of following false banners:
I desire nothing more intensely or completely than this present;
There is nothing about me you are more likely to notice than my
being:
Let me therefore rejoice silently,
A golden butterfly glancing against an unflecked wall.

XXXII

Today you shall have but little song from me,
For I belong to the sunlight.
This I would not barter for any kingdom.

I am a wheeling swallow,
Blue all over is my delight.
I am a drowsy grass-blade
In the greenest shadow.

XXXIII

My desire goes bristling and growling like an angry leopard;
My ribs are a hollow grating, my hair is coarse and hard,
My flanks are like sharp iron wedges, my eyes glitter as chill glass;
Down below there are the meadows where my famished hopes are
feeding,
I will waylay them to windward, stalking in watchful patience,
I will pounce upon them, plunging my muzzle in the hot spurt of
their
blood.

XXXIV

The flag let loose for a day of festivity;
Free desperate symbol of battle and desire,
Leaping, lunging, tossing up the halyards;
Below it a tumult of music,
Above it the streaming wastes of the sky,
Pinnacles of clouds, pyres of dawn,

Infinite effort, everlasting day.
The immense flag waving
Aloft in glory:
Over seas and hilltops
Transmitting its lightnings.

XXXV

What weave you, what spin you,
What wonder win you,
You looms of desire?
Sin that is splendour,
Love that is shameless,
Life that is glory,
Life that is all.

XXXVI

Like cataracts that crash from a crumbling crag
Into the dull-blue smouldering gulf of a lake below,
Landlocked amid the mountains, so my soul
Was a gorge that was filled with the warring echoes of song.

Of old, they wore
Shining armour, and banners of broad gold they bore:
Now they drift, like a wild bird's cry,
Downwards from chill summits of the sky.
Fountains of flashing joy were their source afar;
Now they lie still, to mirror every star.
In circles of opal, ruby, blue, out-thrown,
They drift down to a dull, dark monotone.

Pluck the loose strings, singer,
Thrum the strings;
For the wind brings distant, drowsy bells of song.
Loose the plucked string, poet,
Spurn the strings,
For the echoes of memory float through the gulf for long.

My songs seem now one humming note afar:
Light as ether, quivering 'twixt star and star,
But yet, so still
I know not whence they come, if mine they are.
Yet that low note
Increases in force as if it said, "I will":
Kindled by God's fierce breath, it would the whole world fill.
Till steadily outwards thrown,
By trumpets blazoned, from the sky downblown,
It grows a vast march, massive, monotonous, known
Of old gold trumpeteers
Through infinite years:
Bursting the white, thronged vaults of the cool sky.
Till hurtling down there falls one mad black hammer-blow:
Then the chained echoes in their maniac woe
Are loosed against the silence, to shriek uncannily.

The strings shiver faintly, poet:
Strike the strings,
Speed the song:
Tremulous upward rush of wheeling, whirling wings.

EPILOGUE

The barking of little dogs in the night is more remembered than
the shining of the stars:
Only those who watch for long may see the moon rise:
And they are mad ever after and go with blind eyes
Nosing hungrily in the gutter for the scraps that men throw to the
dogs;
Few heed their babblings.

SAND AND SPRAY

A SEA-SYMPHONY

PART I. THE GALE

Allegro furioso.

Pale green-white, in a gallop across the sky,
The clouds retreating from a perilous affray
Carry the moon with them, a heavy sack of gold;
Sharp arrows, stars between them shoot and play.

The wind, as it strikes the sand,
Clutches with rigid hands
And tears from them
Thin ribbons of pallid sleet,
Long stinging hissing drift,
Which it trails up inland.

I lean against the bitter wind:
My body plunges like a ship.
Out there I see grey breakers rise,
Their ravelled beards are white,
And foam is in their eyes.
My heart is blown from me tonight
To be transfixed by all the stars.

Steadily the wind
Rages up the shore:
In the trees it roars and battles,
With rattling drums
And heavy spears,
Towards the housefronts on it comes.

The village, a loose mass outflung,
Breaks its path.
Between the walls
It bounces, tosses in its wrath.
It is broken, it is lost.

With green-grey eyes,
With whirling arms,
With clashing feet,
With bellowing lungs,
Pale green-white in a gallop across the sky,
The wind comes.

The great gale of the winter flings himself flat upon earth.

He hurriedly scribbles on the sand
His transient tragic destiny.

PART II. VARIATIONS

(1) SAILBOATS

Scherzando.

Light as thin-winged swallows pirouetting and gyrating,
The sails dance in the estuary:
Now heeling to the gust, now cantering,
Bobbing as shuttles back and forth from each other.
I They scorn the black steamers that steadily near them
I On a course direct, with white spume of smoke from their bows,

With snapping crash of breakers they fling themselves forward:
Black on the wing-tips, white on the underside.
These are the birds of the land breeze,
Nesting on green waves in the gold sunlight:
These are the sailships
Heeling and tossing about in the estuary.

(2) THE TIDE

Con moto ondeggiante

The tide makes music
At the foot of the beach;
The waves sing together
Rumble of breakers.
Ships there are swaying,
Into the distance,
Thrum of the cordage,
Slap of the sails.

The tide makes music
At the foot of the beach;
Low notes of an organ
'Gainst the dull clang of bells.
The tide's tense purple
On the untrodden sand:
Its throat is blue,
Its hands are gold.

The tide makes music:
The tide all day
Catches light from the clouds
That float over the sky.

Ocean, old serpent,
Coils up and uncoils;
With sinuous motion,
With rustle of scales.

(3) THE SANDS

Lento.

Shallow pools of water
Are drinking up the sky;
Chasms of cool blue-white
In the brown of the sands.
The clouds are in them,
The houses on the shore,
The winds rumple the even
Glimmer of the reflection.

Appassionato.

I dash across those shallow pools:
Starring their gauzy surface:
A plopping rush of bubbles:
I turn and watch my boot-tracks
Oozing upwards slowly in the dark wind-wrinkled sand.

(4) THE GULLS

Molto Allegro.

White stars scattering,
Pale rain of spray-drops,

Delicate flash of smoke wind-drifted low and high,
Silver upon dark purple,
The gulls quiver
In a noiseless flight, far out across the sky.

(5) STEAMERS

Maestoso.

Like black plunging dolphins with red bellies,
The steamers in herds
Swim through the choppy breakers
On this day of winds and clouds.
Wallowing and plunging,
They seek their path,
The smoke of their snorting
Hangs in the sky.

Like black plunging dolphins with red bellies,
The steamers pass,
Flapping their propellers
Salt with the spray.
Their iron sides glisten,
Their stays thrash:
Their funnels quiver
With the heat from beneath.

Like black plunging dolphins with red bellies,
The steamers together
Dive and roll through the tumult
Of green hissing water.

These are the avid of spoil,
Gleaners of the seas,
They loom on their adventure
Up purple and chrome horizons.

(6) NIGHT OF STARS

Allegro brillante.

The sky immense, bejewelled with rain of stars,
Hangs over us:
The stars like a sudden explosion powder the zenith
With green and gold;
North-east, south-west the Milky Way's pale streamers
Flash past in flame;
The sky is a swirling cataract
Of fire, on high.

Over us the sky up to the zenith
Palpitates with tense glitter:
About our keel the foam bubbles and curdles
In phosphorescent joy.
Flame boils up to meet down-rushing flame
In the blue stillness.
Aloft a single orange meteor
Crashes down the sky.

PART III. VARIATIONS

(1) THE GROUNDSWELL

Marcia Funebre.

With heavy doleful clamour, hour on hour, and day on day,
The muddy groundswell lifts and breaks and falls and slides away.

The cold and naked wind runs shivering over the sands,
Salt are its eyes, open its mouth, its brow wet, blue its hands.

It finds naught but a starving gull whose wings trail at its side,
And the dull battered wreckage, grey jetsam of the tide.

The lifeless chilly slaty sky with no blue hope is lit,
A rusty waddling steamer plants a smudge of smoke on it.

Stupidly stand the factory chimneys staring over all,
The grey grows ever denser, and soon the night will fall:

The wind runs sobbing over the beach and touches with its hands
Straw, chaff, old bottles, broken crates, the litter of the sands.

Sometimes the bloated carcase of a dog or fish is found,
Sometimes the rumpled feathers of a sea-gull shot or drowned.

Last year it was an unknown man who came up from the sea,
There is his grave hard by the dunes under a stunted tree.

With heavy doleful clamour, hour on hour, and day on day,
The muddy groundswell lifts and breaks and falls and slides away.

(2) SNOW AT SEA

Andante.

Silently fell
The snow on the waters
In the grey dusk
Of the winter evening:
Swirling and falling,
Sucked into the oily
Blue-black surface
Of the sea.

We pounded on slowly;
From our bows sheeted
A shuddering mass of heavy foam:
Night closed about us,
But ere we were darkened,
We saw close in
A great gaunt schooner
Beating to southward.

Silently fell
The snow on the waters,
As we pounded north
In the winter evening.

(3) THE NIGHT WIND

Adagio lamentoso.

Wind of the night, wind of the long cool shadows,
Wind from the garden gate stealing up the avenue,
Wind caressing my cool pale cheek completely,
All my happiness goes out to you.

Wind flapping aimlessly at my yellow window curtain,
Wind suddenly insisting on your way down to the sea,
Buoyant wind, sobbing wind, wind shuddering and plaintive,
Why come you from beyond through the night's blue mystery?

Wind of my dream, wind of the delicate beauty,
Wind strumming idly at the harp-strings of my heart:
Wind of the autumn—O melancholy beauty,
Touch me once—one instant—you and I shall never part!

Wind of the night, wind that has fallen silent,
Wind from the dark beyond crying suddenly, eerily,
What terrible news have you shrieked out there in the stillness?
The night is cool and quiet and the wind has crept to sea.

(4) THE WRECK

Grave: triste.

Its huge red prow
Uplifted in a tragic attitude,
It waits out there; the seas around
Bubble and hiss with moaning sound:
In sight of port at the gates of the sea,
It waits upreared expectantly.

It has known the joy of battle,
It has known the shock of wreck:
The spray coated its planking,
The sands swallow its deck:
Monument of the sea,
That knows and that forgets eternally.

It heaves its scarred brow towards the city:
The city pays it little heed:
Indifferent, brutal, without pity,
Stern cargo-steamers trudge and speed;
The sun glares on it and the gulls wheel and flash,
The rain beats on its deck, the winds pass silently;
It is out there alone with the immense sea:
Alone with its forgotten tragedy.

(5) TIDE OF STORMS

Allegro con fuoco.

Crooked, crawling tide with long wet fingers
Clutching at the gritty beach in the roar and spurt of spray,
Tide of gales, drunken tide, lava-burst of breakers,
Black ships plunge upon you from sea to sea away.

Shattering tide, tide of winds, tide of the long still winter,
What matter though ships fail, men sink, there vanish glory?
War-clouds shall hurl their stinging sleet upon our last adventure,
Night-winds shall brokenly whisper our bitter, tragic story.

PART IV. THE CALM

Largo.

In the morning I saw three great ships
Almost motionless
Becalmed on an infinite horizon.

The clatter of waves up the beach,
The grating rush of wet pebbles,
The loud monotonous song of the surf,
All these have soothed me
And have given
My soul to rest.

At noon I shall see waves flashing,
White power of spray.

The steamers, stately,
Kick up white puffs of spray behind them.
The boiling wake
Merges in the blue-black mirror of the sea.

One eye of the sun sees all:
The world, the wave, my heart.
I am content.

In the afternoon I shall dream a dream
Of islands beyond the horizon.

White clouds drift over the sky,
Frigates on a long voyage.

In the evening a mute blue stillness
Clutches at my heart.
Stars sparkle upon the tips of my fingers.

Mystical hush,
Fire in the darkness;
The breaking of dreams.

But in the morning I shall see three great
Almost motionless
Becalmed on an infinite horizon.

THE END

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