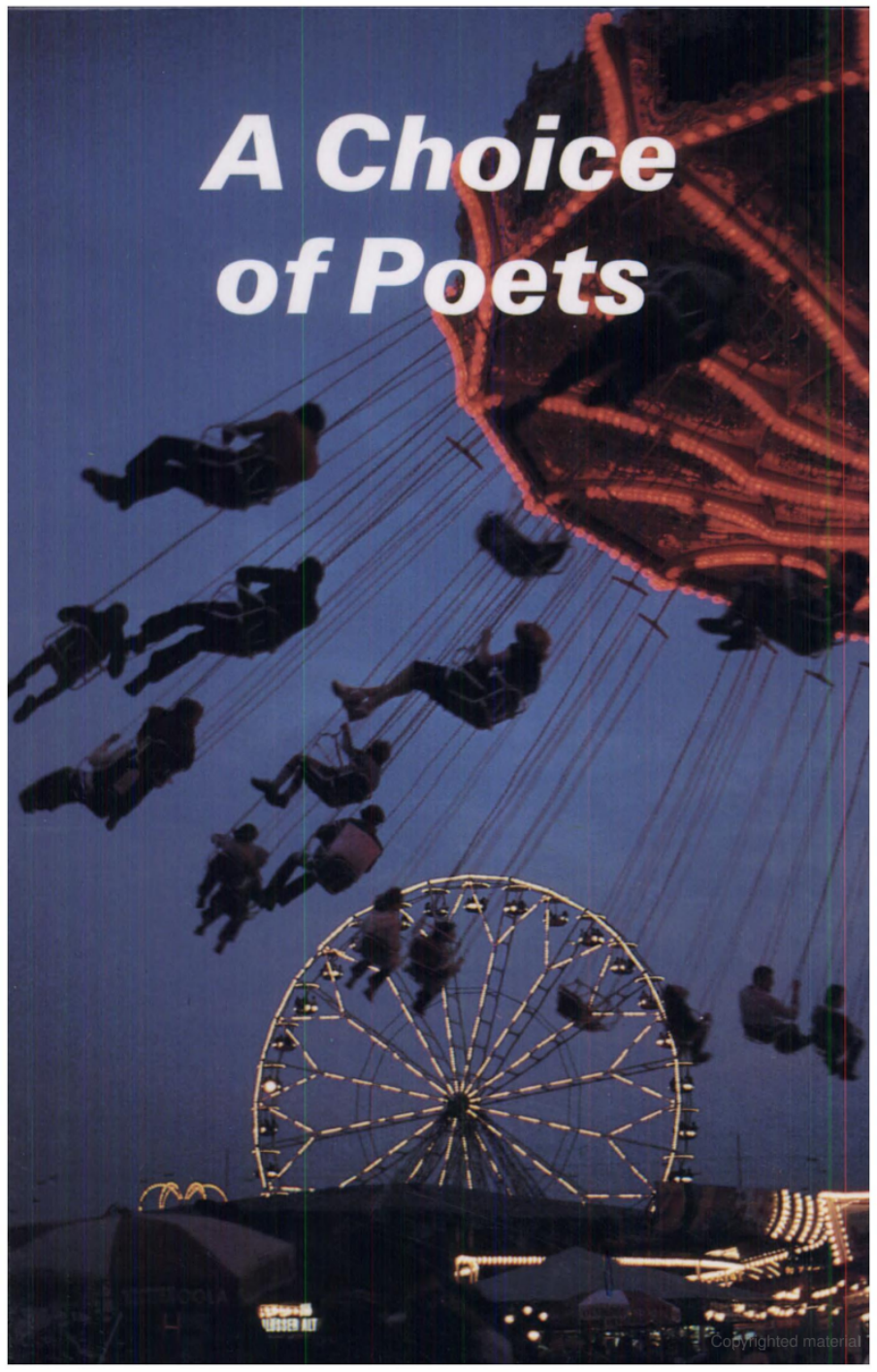
A Choice of Poets



A CHOICE OF POETS

An anthology of poets from Wordsworth to the present day

chosen and edited by

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Nelson

Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd
Nelson House Mayfield Road
Walton-on-Thames Surrey
KT12 5PL UK

Thomas Nelson Australia
102 Dodds Street
South Melbourne
Victoria 3205 Australia

Nelson Canada
1120 Birchmount Road
Scarborough Ontario
M1K 5G4 Canada

First published by George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd 1968

This edition published by Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd 1989

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Thomson Publishing Company

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ISBN 0-17-444112-6
NPN 20

Printed in China

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William Wordsworth

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland, 1770, the son of a lawyer. He was educated at Hawkshead among mountains, and at St John's College, Cambridge. He spent the year 1791–2 in France, and at that time was a warm admirer of the French Revolution, but was recalled to England. In 1795, as the result of a legacy, he moved with his sister Dorothy, first to Dorset, then to Somerset, as a near neighbour of the poet Coleridge; these two had a tremendous influence on him, and he and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Before this he started writing *The Prelude*, a record of his childhood and imaginative development, and by far his greatest single achievement. Next year he settled with Dorothy at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, in the Lake District; in 1813 he moved to Rydal Mount and spent the rest of his life there. He married a childhood friend in 1802. He finished the first draft of *The Prelude* in 1805, but went on revising it throughout his life. He led a rather uneventful life, but made a series of tours into Europe. He became Poet Laureate in 1843, and died in 1850.

Wordsworth was one of the first of the 'romantic' poets. His early experiences in France and his support for the Revolution, together with his conviction that much of the poetry of his time was conventional, over-literary and 'dead', resulted in his contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he aimed to use "a selection of the language really used by men"; thus he initiated a revolt against the conventional language and even subject-matter of poetry. The colloquial simplicity of his language produced at his best a new intensity, though sometimes it became flat and prosaic, and his subjects at this stage were often simple ballad tales of country people—an idiot boy, a beggar, a betrayed woman. This volume was added to and republished several times from 1800 to 1805, and its important

preface challenges the conventions of the day. "They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness." He went on to write in a wider variety of styles, but his greatest achievement was during the period of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* (1814). After this time much of his poetry was mechanical, deliberate, and relatively uninspired; he had long been disillusioned with the French Revolution, and became reactionary in his general outlook.

In his great creative period he is above all the poet of man and nature—the emotions inspired by his early experience of nature as an unfailing source of "joy and purest passion" combined with his warm sense of human characters following their natural activities—Michael the old shepherd building his sheepfold, the old leech-gatherer on the moors, the Scottish girl reaping corn; and he remained, in spite of changes in political outlook, a champion of the poor and humble. He thought of his own poetry as originating in "emotion recollected in tranquillity", and though he has often a splendid eye for natural appearances, for him the feelings were primary—even his memories are memories of feelings. Perhaps his most fundamental belief was that the imagination can reach truths beyond the grasp of reason, and his most fundamental contribution to poetry the demonstration that its language must be alive, and therefore come from living people, and that a special 'poetical' vocabulary can only result in the death of poetry.

The Solitary Reaper

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

What'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,

And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

from *The Prelude* (I)

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; for above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and
huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,

And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

from *The Prelude* (II)

And in the frosty season, when the sun
Was set, and visible for many a mile
The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
I heeded not their summons: happy time
It was indeed for all of us—for me
It was a time of rapture! Clear and loud
The village clock tolled six,—I wheeled about,
Proud and exulting like an untired horse
That cares not for his home. All shod with steel,
We hissed along the polished ice in games

Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
Of harmony, with instinct more divine;
Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!

Nutting

It seems a day
(I speak of one from many singled out)
One of those heavenly days that cannot die;
When, in the eagerness of boyish hope,
I left our cottage-threshold, sallying forth
With a huge wallet o'er my shoulder slung,
A nutting-crook in hand; and turned my steps
Tow'rd some far-distant wood, a Figure quaint,
Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds
Which for that service had been husbanded,
By exhortation of my frugal Dame—
Motley accoutrement, of power to smile
At thorns, and brakes, and brambles,—and in truth
More ragged than need was! O'er pathless rocks,
Through beds of matted fern, and tangled thickets,
Forcing my way, I came to one dear nook
Unvisited, where not a broken bough
Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign
Of devastation; but the hazels rose
Tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung,
A virgin scene!—A little while I stood,
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in; and with wise restraint
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed
The banquet; or beneath the trees I sate
Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played;

A temper known to those who, after long
And weary expectation, have been blest
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.
Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves
The violets of five seasons re-appear
And fade, unseen by any human eye;
Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on
For ever; and I saw the sparkling foam,
And—with my cheek on one of those green stones,
That, fleeced with moss, under the shady trees,
Lay round me, scattered like a flock of sheep—
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,
Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air. Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.—
Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods.

Composed upon Westminster Bridge

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

'*Lucy Poems*'

I

I travelled among unknown men,
In lands beyond the sea;
Nor, England! did I know till then
What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!
Nor will I quit thy shore
A second time; for still I seem
To love thee more and more.

Among thy mountains did I feel
  The joy of my desire;
And she I cherished turned her wheel
  Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed,
  The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine too is the last green field
  That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

II

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
  Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
  And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
  Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
  Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
  When Lucy ceased to be:
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
  The difference to me!

III

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

it (as it describes a happy and exhilarating experience skating on a lake) and to echo it, since the experience has something in common with the first one.

l. 26 *reflex:* here, reflection.

l. 36 *diurnal:* daily.

l. 37 *train:* procession.

(A) What 'summons' did the lit windows of the cottages make (l. 4), and why did the boy not 'heed' it? Where is this idea repeated? Where is the image of the 'untired horse' (l. 8) picked up and developed? Describe in your own words what kind of game the children played while skating (ll. 10–25). Which lines describe the sound of their shouting, and how do the words and rhythms contribute to the effect? Where is an echo described? Why should the stars be brightest in the east (ll. 20–21)? Where do we learn that the young Wordsworth loved solitude? What is meant by l. 26 and why does the 'reflex' 'fly still' before him (l. 27)? What picture do you get from l. 29, and what effect is described in ll. 30–32? Why is it that the cliffs still 'wheeled by me' though he had 'stopped short' (ll. 34 and 35), what sensation of slowing down is described in ll. 37–39, and what effect is achieved by the last line?

(B) Write about an exhilarating experience of action (skating, cycling, at a fair) and the sensations it gave you.

The World is Too Much With Us (*p. 25*)

This famous sonnet embodies one of the central ideas of the Romantic movement in poetry, of which Wordsworth was a founder—that in our daily life, especially living in towns, we have lost touch with the renewing powers of nature.

If you have read the Hopkins sonnets in this anthology (pp. 114–19) you will recognize the division here between the exposition in the octave (first eight lines, though Wordsworth uses eight and half) and the conclusion in the sestet (last six lines).

l. 4 *boon:* gift.

l. 13 *Proteus:* Greek sea-god. *Triton:* one of a race of minor sea-gods in Greek mythology, with a man's form but the

tail of a fish, often depicted as carrying a shell-trumpet.

(A) What 'world' is spoken of in the opening phrase, and is it fair to say that in this 'world' we use most of our time 'getting' (earning) and 'spending' (l. 2)? What do you think the poet means by saying that this 'lays waste our powers'—what powers? In what sense are we no longer part of nature (l. 3), and in what sense have we 'given our hearts away'—to whom or what? With what two great powers of nature are we 'out of tune', and what does this expression mean (ll. 5–8)? How can the winds be 'up-gathered' like 'sleeping flowers' (l. 7)? What change of mood or emphasis occurs in l. 9? Suggest what is meant by 'suckled in a creed outworn' (T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, p. 219, has a similar idea). If he was a pagan he would believe in the old gods: why would belief in such gods as these bring him closer into contact with *nature*? Why only 'glimpses' (l. 12) and why '*wreathèd* horn' (l. 14)? Summarize finally why Wordsworth feels that he might have been happier as a pagan.

To a Skylark (p. 25)

l. 1 *ethereal:* heavenly.

l. 3 *aspire:* aim upwards.

(A) Why is the skylark a 'minstrel' and a 'pilgrim' (l. 1)? What sort of cares abound on the earth (l. 2)? Does the poem imply that the skylark *does* despise the earth? In what sense might 'heart and eye' be 'both with thy nest' (l. 4)? Why is the ground 'dewy'—*i.e.*, when especially do skylarks sing? Where does it imply that skylarks sing only in flight? What contrast is shown between nightingale and skylark in ll. 7–8 and which two words bring out this contrast? (Refer to Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, p. 67, for the surroundings in which the bird usually sings). Why 'privacy' (l. 8)? Is this word what you would expect for the sky, and how does it fit? The last couplet of the poem gives it a 'moral' and says that the skylark is typical or representative of a certain wisdom: say carefully what this wisdom is, why 'Heaven' and 'Home' are 'kindred points' and bring out the contrast between 'soar' and 'never roam' (ll. 11 and 12).

Nutting (p. 26)

Another poem, written when Wordsworth was in his late twenties, in which he draws on the rich memories of his childhood, as he did through much of his best poetry, and fulfils his own definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity".

l. 6 *wallet:* bag, haversack.

l. 7 *nutting-crook:* a crooked stick to pull down the hazel branches.

l. 9 *tricked out:* dressed.

l. 11 *frugal:* economical.

l. 12 *motley accoutrement:* incongruous equipment, trappings.

l. 30 *bower:* here, a place closed in with foliage.

l. 45 *ravage:* devastation, damage.

(A) Describe the boy's appearance when he left his 'cottage-threshold', and explain why he was dressed thus (ll. 6–13). Which lines suggest that he has difficulty in finding the spot, and that it is seldom visited? What would a 'broken bough' show (l. 17)? What is implied by 'a virgin scene' (l. 21)? How could he be both 'restrained' and 'voluptuous' in his attitude to the 'tempting clusters' (ll. 23–24)? Describe the 'bower' (ll. 30–32) and the stream (ll. 33–34) in your own words. Why were the stones green and how were they disposed (ll. 35–37)? Describe the 'sweet mood' when one's activities are suspended (ll. 39–43). Where does his mood change, and which words and phrases show the violence of this change (ll. 44–48)? Point out three words which show that he feels now that he has harmed the peaceful scene, and where does he express a doubt that he felt it at the time?

In what sense was he also 'rich beyond the wealth of kings' (l. 52)? What advice does he give to the 'dearest Maiden' and why? What exactly does the last phrase of the poem mean? Relate the 'sense of pain' he feels to Hopkins's *Binsey Poplars* (p. 116).

(B) If you have ever felt that you have damaged something natural (when, for example, bird-nesting, digging up wild plants, or climbing trees) write about the experience and your feelings.

Composed upon Westminster Bridge (p. 28)

This magnificent sonnet shows Wordsworth appreciating and indeed demonstrating the beauty of a great city—though perhaps it is characteristic of his love for solitude that it is set in the early morning, when there is no bustle and noise.

l. 9 *steep:* soak.

(A) What powerful claim is made by the first line? What contrast is there between 'touching' and 'majesty' in l. 3 and how do you think it is resolved? In what sense are the buildings 'open unto the fields' as well as to the sky? (Remember that this is 1800!) Why would the buildings be particularly 'bright and glittering' (l. 8) at this time, rather than later in the day, and which adjective confirms this?

Why does he say 'in *his* first splendour' about the sun and 'at *his* own sweet will' about the river (ll. 10 and 12)? From what you know of Wordsworth so far, what is remarkable about the implied comparison of ll. 9–11? What does he mean in the last line by 'that mighty heart'? Which words in the poem suggest calmness and motionlessness?

(B) Write freely in prose or verse about a town or city in the early morning.

'Lucy Poems' (pp. 28–29)

These three poems are taken from a sequence of five lyrics about love, usually known as the 'Lucy poems'. We do not know the identity of Lucy, but it seems probable that the poems are based on a real experience of young love for a girl who died suddenly. They express with great tenderness and sensitivity the sense of loss he felt, and the simplicity of language should not be mistaken for naïvety.

I. This poem was written after a tour of Germany in the winter of 1799, and shows the isolation and homesickness the poet felt.

(A) What is meant by ll. 3 and 4? What 'melancholy dream' is past (l. 5) and what decision does he express as a result?

What do you think 'turning her wheel' means (l. 11) and what do the words 'they' and 'thine' refer to (ll. 9, 13 and 15)? Show how the idea of England remembered when abroad is linked to his love for Lucy (verses 3 and 4). Refer back to the extracts from *The Prelude* (p. 22-24) and explain ll. 9 and 10. Why is the 'green field' (l. 15) especially dear to the poet?

II. This poem expresses the isolation and apparent unimportance of Lucy, and the indifference of the world when she died, in contrast to its shattering impact on the young Wordsworth.

l. 2 *the springs of Dove:* the Dove river.

(A) What is the significance of 'untrodden' (l. 1)? Which lines suggest that Lucy was neglected and isolated? In what sense is Lucy like the violet (and where in this selection have you previously met 'a violet by a mossy stone?)? What compliment to her beauty is made in ll. 7–8? Why was it that 'few could know' (l. 9) when Lucy died? What weight can be attached to the word 'difference'?

III. This is by far the greatest poem of this sequence, and deserves the closest study.

(A) Try to explain what the opening line means: consider especially the word 'seal'. What sort of fears are 'human fears' (l. 2)? What is meant by 'the touch of earthly years'? Do we have this feeling about all the people whom we love? What has 'happened' between the two verses? What is the poet facing in its full truth in ll. 5–6? What comfort or compensation is there in the last couplet? (See l. 36 of the second extract from *The Prelude*, p. 24, for 'diurnal'.) How has the girl who 'lived unknown' now become a part of the nature that Wordsworth loved so deeply, and in what sense is she 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course'?

(B) Write freely about the death, or imagined death, of any person you love.

FURTHER READING

Michael (perhaps the finest of the narrative poems, too long to be printed here); *The Old Cumberland Beggar*; *Resolution and*

each page and subsequently coloured delicately in water-colour; *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience* were first produced in this way. *The Songs of Innocence* are simple in language and tender in feeling and contrast strongly with the corresponding *Songs of Experience* (there are, for example, two *Holy Thursdays*, two *Chimney Sweepers*, an *Infant Love* and an *Infant Sorrow*, and *The Lamb* contrasts with *The Tiger*). The *Songs of Experience* show the inhumanity and cruelty under the surface of civilization and the spirit and imagination of man struggling against the 'mind-forged manacles' of convention, 'reason', and law. His later 'prophetic books' are well beyond the scope of this anthology, and all we can say here about them is that they contain passages of magnificent poetry; but all his work shows the power of his vision, which for him was reality. He was never interested in fantasy for its own sake; he was aware of a reality beyond what we can perceive through the senses. He once said about his drawings, "Nature has no outlines, but imagination has"; and this applies to the way in which the artist and the poet gives form to a vision of truth beyond that of appearance. Even if we limit our attention to the short and relatively simple lyrical poems represented here, we are aware of an imaginative power under an apparent simplicity and naïvety of form which is unique in English poetry.

On Another's Sorrow

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small bird's grief and care,
Hear the woes that infants bear,

And not sit beside the nest,
Pouring pity in their breast;
And not sit the cradle near,
Weeping tear on infant's tear;

And not sit both night and day,
Wiping all our tears away?
O, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

He doth give His joy to all;
He becomes an infant small;
He becomes a man of woe;
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by;
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

O! He gives to us His joy
That our grief He may destroy;
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

The Divine Image

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our Father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

A Divine Image

Cruelty has a human heart,
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress.

The human dress is forgèd iron,
The human form a fiery forge,
The human face a furnace seal'd,
The human heart its hungry gorge.

The Tiger

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The Clod and the Pebble

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

He Who Bends . . .

He who bends to himself a Joy
Doth the wingèd life destroy;
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

London

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning church appalls;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

Never Seek to Tell thy Love

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears,
Ah! she doth depart.

Soon as she was gone from me,
A traveller came by,
Silently, invisibly:
He took her with a sigh.

from *Auguries of Innocence*

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.
A robin redbreast in a cage
Puts all Heaven in a rage.
A dove-house fill'd with doves and pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
A dog starv'd at his master's gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
A horse misus'd upon the road
Calls to Heaven for human blood.

Each outcry of the hunted hare
A fibre from the brain does tear.
A skylark wounded in the wing,
A cherubim does cease to sing.
The game-cock clipt and arm'd for fight
Does the rising sun affright.
Every wolf's and lion's howl
Raises from Hell a human soul.
The wild deer, wandering here and there,
Keeps the human soul from care.
The lamb misus'd breeds public strife,
And yet forgives the butcher's knife.
The bat that flits at close of eve
Has left the brain that won't believe.
The owl that calls upon the night
Speaks the unbeliever's fright.
He who shall hurt the little wren
Shall never be belov'd by men.
He who the ox to wrath hath mov'd
Shall never be by woman lov'd.
The wanton boy that kills the fly
Shall feel the spider's enmity.
He who torments the chafer's sprite
Weaves a bower in endless night.
The caterpillar on the leaf
Repeats to thee thy mother's grief.
Kill not the moth or butterfly,
For the Last Judgement draweth nigh.

A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunnèd it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright;
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil'd the pole:
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

Notes

On Another's Sorrow (p. 41)

This poem is characteristic of the early poems of Blake, and one of the *Songs of Innocence*. Like nearly all of the poems selected here, it has an apparently naïve and simple movement, language, and rhythm, which conceals profound ideas. It insists that sympathy and pity are both human and divine.

(A) Having read the poem through carefully, show how it divides into three sections, and say what the main subjects of these three sections are. What role is played by the 'chorus' ending verses 3 and 6? Why does the poem start with a series of questions, and where are they answered? The poem starts in the first person: does this stand for the poet alone, and where does it change to the third person? What do the father and mother represent in relation to the child (verses 2 and 3)? How is this relationship extended in verse 4? In what sense does Blake think of God 'smiling on all' (l. 13) and why should the wren's sorrows be 'small' (l. 15)? How are the two couplets of verse 4 linked with those of verse 5? What relationship is parallel to that of God's with the wren and the child? Suggest two meanings for ll. 25 and 26. What word might we use now instead of 'And' in ll. 30 and 32? What, then, is the general point of the poem—if God is intimately concerned with our sorrow, in what sense is this inevitable for each of us, and how is the parents' involvement in their children's sorrow a model?

The Divine Image and *A Divine Image (p. 42–43)*

These poems both contrast and 'cross-fertilize' each other: the first belongs to *Songs of Innocence* and the second to a manuscript (not published in the poet's lifetime) of *Songs of Experience*. When reading them, think of them as belonging to these two aspects of human life, innocence

The original illustration shows cattle coming to drink from the brook in which the pebble 'lives'.

l. 8 *metres meet:* suitable lines of verse.

l. 11 *joys in:* enjoys.

l. 12 *in Heaven's despite:* by injuring Heaven.

(A) What kind of love is described in the first verse, and what is the result of such love? Why is it appropriate that this should be the song of the 'Clod of Clay/Trodden with the cattle's feet' (ll. 5–6)? What qualities of a pebble make it suit its own song? Can the pebble's song be described as about love or is it *mere* selfishness? Where is this love shown as selfish, sadistic, harmful, destructive? Do you feel that these aspects of human love exist?

Holy Thursday (p. 45)

The Charity Schools of Blake's time held annual services of commemoration for their children, from 1782 onwards in St Paul's; the services were arranged by the Society of Patrons of these schools. Holy Thursday is Maundy Thursday, when Christ washed the feet of the disciples and when it was traditional to serve the poor and give alms.

At the time this poem was written Blake was closely associated with a group of British revolutionaries, and about ten years later was tried for sedition. The original edition of the poem shows a woman looking at a baby exposed in open country. The mood of the poem is one of strong indignation that children in a wealthy country like Britain should have so wretched a life, and worse, that we should feel smug about such charity.

(A) Why does he start by asking 'Is this a *holy* thing to see?' What picture of the patrons of these schools do you get from l. 4? The children are supposed to be singing: what does Blake hear their song as? What is meant by l. 8, in view of l. 2? What do the three metaphorical lines 9–11 mean in terms of the children's lives? With which line do ll. 13–14 contrast, and what sort of society does Blake wish for in the last three lines?

The Garden of Love (p. 46)

This powerful poem is typical of Blake's attitude to organized religion. He was an intensely religious man, but his religion was a private revelation, and he saw the Church as a repressive force destroying human qualities and the power of love.

(A) Suggest why the child's experience of the Garden of Love was a place where 'I used to play on the green' and in what sense the 'Chapel' has spoiled it. What aspect of organized Christianity is stressed in l. 6, and does this seem fair to you? When did the garden bear 'sweet flowers' (l. 8) in the experience of the narrator? What do the 'graves and tombstones' symbolize (ll. 9–10)? How do the rhymes work in the last two lines? What is the significance of the priests' 'black gowns' and their 'walking their rounds'? What characteristics of 'briars' (l. 12) are implied and what is the effect of 'binding' my 'joys and desires'?

Infant Sorrow (p. 46)

This poem re-creates the experience of birth as a protest by the child, having to face danger and restraint. It might be compared with King Lear's famous lines:

> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.

(A) Why did my mother groan, and for what was my father weeping? Why does Blake see the baby's first experience of the world as 'dangerous' (l. 2)? Is the human child notably helpless at birth? What do you think 'piping' means (see the lines from *King Lear* above), and what does the nurse do if the child *doesn't* cry? What picture do you get from the mysterious l. 4? Where is the father seen as inevitably a tyrant, and is he necessarily meaning to be so? Children were wrapped in 'swaddling-bands' (l. 6) as in the Bible; what does this symbolize? (Compare it also with the last line of the previous poem.) Where is the child reluctantly submissive, and is it so out of love or thwarted rage? Does this poem seem to you to give a new insight into the great moment of birth?

He who Bends . . . (p. 47)

This quatrain embodies a profound truth—that if you try to force experience or demand happiness you will destroy it, whereas if you 'go with' it you will find fulfilment.

London (p. 47)

The illustration for this poem in the original version of *Songs of Experience* shows a crippled beggar led by a child. It draws an appalling picture of the life of London's people, especially of the poor.

ll. 1 & 2 *charter'd:* privileged, by right of royal charter; but with the contrary implication in l. 2 of 'restricted'.

l. 8 *mind-forg'd manacles:* the chains or restrictions made by the mind of authority—the laws, religion, and customs of the time, which, as we have seen, Blake thinks of as restrictive, and as ultimately responsible for prisons and brothels.

l. 16 *marriage hearse:* the funeral of married love.

(A) What sort of people might one expect in a great and privileged city like London, and what sort of people are in fact seen? Can you see such faces in a modern city? What does 'ban' mean in l. 7, and how does he 'hear' the 'mind-forg'd manacles' (l. 8)? Blake wrote a number of poems about the dreadful conditions of the child chimney-sweepers (see, if you can, the chapter on this subject in E. S. Turner's *The Shocking History of Social Reform*); how does the cruelty he hears in the sweeper's cry ('he cried "Weep, weep,"' according to another poem) 'appall' the Church, and what two senses do you detect in the word 'black'ning' (remember that this is the centre of London)? The soldier here typifies the evil of war; in what sense does his 'sigh' 'run in blood' and what is the connexion with the palace? The third evil is lust; the harlot is a prostitute; how does her existence 'blast' the baby's 'tear', and how does it blight with plagues the 'marriage hearse' (l. 16)?

Never Seek to Tell thy Love (p. 48)

This is a mysterious poem, which implies that the man in love tries to establish verbally the nature of his love, but the woman finds this unendurable, and some agent, perhaps death itself or the destructive force of time, steals her away. Perhaps the poem means that love should be lived but not analysed, perhaps that there is a destructive principle in love, perhaps merely that man should never 'bend to himself a joy'. Many interpretations have been offered but the symbols are not fully worked out, in spite of the undeniable power and beauty of the poem.

from *Auguries of Innocence (p. 48)*

This is part of a longer poem, in which Blake writes with horror about the cruelty of man and prophesies various evils to those who are cruel to even the smallest and most insignificant creature. It is worth remembering that Blake's period was notably callous about animal suffering, and his protest challenges the general indifference; but the poem is more than this—as the first four lines suggest, he sees 'a World in a grain of sand' and therefore cruelty, even to an ant, could shake the fabric of the universe, being contrary to the natural law which respects all life equally.

l. 7 The dove-house is presumably used for providing food—in any case the birds are 'imprisoned', like the robin of l. 5.

l. 17 *game-cock:* used in cock-fighting; they were equipped with metal spurs.

ll. 25–26 A strange couplet; *can* it refer to 'bats in the belfry'?

l. 33 Perhaps a reference to Gloucester's words in *King Lear*: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport.'

l. 35 *chafer:* cockchafer, a kind of beetle.

A Poison Tree (p. 49)

Blake first wrote the opening verse as an epigram on its own, and then expanded it into a kind of fable. It shows the poet's conviction, which we have already seen in

several poems, that a natural impulse, even of anger, should never be thwarted or it will promote a destructive hate. Modern psychological theories about the harm of certain repressions seem to endorse this; in any case it remains a brilliant image of the growth of suppressed anger, which in the end poisons a relationship.

(A) Why was he able to tell his friend of his anger but not his foe? (Consider your own definition of friendship.) Where does his wrath begin to be a tree? How did he tend it, and what does this mean in psychological terms ('nursing a grievance' is the popular phrase)? What does the apple symbolize, and what other story about an apple is it reminiscent of? Where does he, as it were, tempt his foe? What is his foe's object in stealing 'into my garden', what is meant by 'when the night had veil'd the pole' (l. 14), and what is his fate? Do you find that this poem embodies a truth in your own experience?

FURTHER READING

Poems of Innocence and Experience. Try if you can to see facsimiles of some of the original plates.

Poetical Works of William Blake, ed. J. Sampson (Oxford). Most of Blake's longer poems are well beyond the scope of this anthology, and present very great difficulties, but you might be interested in 'sampling' some of them.

CRITICAL WRITING

D. W. Harding. "William Blake" (a valuable but difficult short essay in the *Pelican Guide to English Literature,* Vol. 5).

J. Bronowski. *A Man Without a Mask.* A detailed treatment of Blake's life and works: only for reference.

XXVII

So the two brothers and their murder'd man
  Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream
Gurgles through straiten'd banks, and still doth fan
  Itself with dancing bulrush, and the bream
Keeps head against the freshets. Sick and wan
  The brothers' faces in the ford did seem,
Lorenzo's flush with love.—They pass'd the water
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

XXVIII

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,
  There in that forest did his great love cease;
Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom win,
  It aches in loneliness—is ill at peace
As the break-covert blood-hounds of such sin:
  They dipp'd their swords in the water, and did tease
Their horses homeward, with convulsèd spur,
Each richer by his being a murderer.

from *Lamia*

As men talk in a dream, so Corinth all,
Throughout her palaces imperial,
And all her populous streets and temples lewd,
Mutter'd, like tempest in the distance brew'd,
To the wide-spreaded night above her towers.
Men, women, rich and poor, in the cool hours,
Shuffled their sandals o'er the pavement white,
Companion'd or alone; while many a light
Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,
And threw their moving shadows on the walls,
Or found them cluster'd in the corniced shade
Of some arch'd temple door, or dusky colonnade.

from *The Eve of St Agnes*

(i)

I

St Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

II

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

III

Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue
Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor;
But no—already had his deathbell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St Agnes' Eve:
Another way he went, and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve. . . .

* * * *

(ii)

XXIII

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;

As though a tongueless nightingale should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

XXIV

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.

XXV

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. . . .

* * * *

(iii)

XL

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,
For there were sleeping dragons all around,
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—

Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found.—
In all the house was heard no human sound.
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;
The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

XLI

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

XLII

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

4

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Through the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
  Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
  Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
  White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
    Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
      And mid-May's eldest child,
  The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
    The murmurous haunt of flies on summer
      eaves.

6

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
  I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
  To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
  To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
    While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
      In such an ecstasy!
  Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
    To thy high requiem become a sod.

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
  No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
  In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
  Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for
    home,
    She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Notes

from *Isabella (p. 61)*

This is a small extract from a long poem which Keats based on a story of Boccaccio (author of a fine collection of Italian stories called *The Decameron*). It is not necessary to know the whole story to understand this short fragment; all we need say here is that Isabella, the only daughter of a mercantile family, has fallen in love with a poor 'clerk' called Lorenzo, and her two evil brothers, wishing her to marry someone of wealth, trick Lorenzo into going on a journey with them, murder him and bury him secretly in a forest. The poem is written in an Italian verse-pattern called *ottava* (eight-lined) *rima*, and you can work out how the rhymes are arranged from this sample.

l. 1 *murder'd:* a strange poetic device called *prolepsis*, in which an adjective is applied to a noun as a kind of prophecy (he is as good as murdered).

l. 2 *Arno:* the great river which flows through Florence.

l. 3 *straiten'd:* narrowed.

ll. 4–5 *bream:* a fresh-water fish; *freshets:* streams of fresh water.

ll. 12–13 When the soul (Lorenzo's) wins its freedom by murder it is as lonely as the murderers themselves.

l. 13 *break-covert blood-hounds:* the murderers are as fierce and ruthless as blood-hounds breaking out from cover, perhaps to track down a murderer; both are compared with the restless soul of the victim.

(A) What is the effect of 'murder'd' in l. 1? With what is the freshness of the river contrasted? What contrast is there between the appearance of the murderers and their victim-to-be, and where exactly do we see their faces? Why is the forest 'quiet' and in what sense 'quiet for the slaughter' (l. 8)? What happens between the end of the first verse and the beginning of the second? How did the

brothers conceal their crime? Why were their spurs 'convulsed' and in what sense are we to take the last line?

from *Lamia (p. 62)*

A short extract from another long narrative poem, the subject of which need not be described here, except to say that it is set in the ancient world. It is written throughout in rhyming ('heroic') couplets.

l. 3 *lewd:* ignorant.

(A) What features in the opening sentence suggest that rumours or news are passing round the city of Corinth? Describe in your own words the 'muttering'. Which line suggests the sound as well as the sight of the citizens' movements? What might the 'wealthy festivals' be, and what sorts of lights do you imagine coming from them? Why were the shadows moving (l. 10)? Suggest or find out the meaning of the two architectural words 'corniced' and 'colonnade'.

from *The Eve of St Agnes (p. 62)*

There are three substantial extracts here from this fine narrative poem, and as it is probably by far the best of the three poems, it is suggested that you read the whole if possible. The title refers to a medieval legend that girls who obeyed certain rituals would dream of their lover on St Agnes' Eve in January. The verse-pattern is a very demanding one called the Spenserian stanza, as it was first used by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, and the rhyme scheme, which is elaborately interlocked, is worth studying; a major feature is that the last line of each verse (called the Alexandrine) is longer by two syllables than the other lines.

(i) The first three stanzas establish an atmosphere of bitter cold and old age, in a great medieval castle.

l. 5 *Beadsman:* person employed to say prayers on behalf of the castle's owner.

l. 6 *rosary:* prayer-beads; to 'tell' them is to pass them through the fingers with a prayer for each.

hound in contrast, 'wakeful'? What characteristics of a bloodhound make 'shook his hide' and 'his sagacious eye' appropriate, and what is meant by 'an inmate owns' (l. 15)? What chains are referred to in l. 17? What is the effect, after all the loving detail of the two previous verses, of the opening two lines of the last verse? Suggest why the Baron and his guests had nightmares and why old Angela should die (in terms of the story). What is significant about the poem finishing with the Beadsman, in view of your study of the first three verses of the poem? Suggest, finally, how the poet makes a contrast between the old, poor, and miserable on the one hand, and the happy and young on the other.

(B) Tell the three story-fragments in your own words, adding freely any further details you imagine.

Ode to Autumn (p. 66)

This magnificent ode is justly famous, and is often regarded as the most perfect of Keats's poems. Its structure is quite complex, but after a couple of readings it will not be difficult to see that the first verse describes the 'positive' side of autumn—the side that looks back to summer and brings it to fruition, while the third verse describes the 'negative' side—a suggestion of chilliness, a series of thin sounds, and the sadness of the approaching winter. The middle verse balances these two with four glimpses of a figure representing both the spirit of autumn and a farm-worker engaged in a series of typical autumnal activities.

l. 7 *gourd:* here, any member of the cucumber family with lush watery fruits—marrows, pumpkins, squashes, etc.

l. 15 *winnowing:* literally, blowing the lighter chaff from the heavier grain.

l. 18 *swathe:* a small ridge of corn or grass lying after being cut by hook or scythe; thus the amount cut by the sweep of the implement.

l. 26 *stubble-plain:* field after the corn is cut.

l. 28 *sallows:* willow-trees.

l. 30 *bourn:* here perhaps, enclosure.

l. 31 *hedge-cricket:* grasshopper.

l. 32 *croft:* enclosed piece of land (compare 'crofter').

(A) Which words and expressions in the first verse suggest fruition and abundance? Are these images of taste and touch as well as sight? Why might the cottage-trees be 'moss'd' (l. 5)? What do the bees think about the season, and why are their cells 'clammy' (ll. 10–11)? Make a list of the verbs which suggest weighing down and filling up with ripeness and sweetness.

In verse 2 suggest another meaning for 'store' except the modern one ('storehouse', hence 'shop'). Make a careful list of the four autumn tasks in the verse; then consider what the four figures have in common and what links them together. Why is 'winnowing' appropriate in l. 15 and what *should* the breeze from the doorway be doing? Why should the 'fume of poppies' be smelled by the reaper, and why should it make him 'drows'd' (l. 17)? In what sense has he 'spared' the next swathe, and what would make the small weeds and flowers twining among the cornstalks especially visible? In ll. 19–20, what is a gleaner, what is 'laden' on his head, in what sense is he 'across a brook' and how does the break between 'keep' and 'steady' imply his stillness? The cider-press squashes apples; what else does 'the *last* oozings' mean? In verse 3 he starts by comparing the many poems and songs of spring with the neglect of autumn; which words or phrases in the rest of the verse pick up 'music' in l. 24, and what have these words in common? Explain in your own words the visual effect of ll. 25–26. What are the gnats doing among the 'river sallows', what is the effect of the wind on them, how are they like a 'choir', and what are they mourning (ll. 27–29)? Why are the swallows 'gathering', how do they contrast with the robin, and what makes the image a sad one?

(B) Write freely in verse or prose about autumn and your attitude to it.

Ode to a Nightingale (p. 67)

This elaborate and beautiful ode needs close and continuous reading before it yields its full meaning. Some writers have emphasized its treatment of the nightingale's song as one leading towards 'the supreme ecstasy of

death', others have found in it a contrary movement rejecting death as a luxury, and instead asserting a love for life. It seems that both feelings are present, playing against each other, and the final decision as to which dominates must be for the individual reader. The elaborate verse-form and rhyme-scheme is worth close study, especially the varying effect of the short eighth line in each stanza.

v. 1 The nightingale's song has already begun, and the poet is drugged by its beauty into a state half painful, half delicious.

l. 2 *hemlock:* a poison.

l. 3 *opiate:* a drug easing pain or inducing sleep.

l. 4 *Lethe-wards:* towards Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Hades.

l. 7 *Dryad:* literally, a wood-nymph; here the nightingale, which nests in woods.

v. 2 The poet longs for a glass of some splendid wine, perfumed and evoking love and happiness and fulfilment; with such a wine he could escape with the nightingale.

l. 13 *Flora:* goddess of flowers.

l. 14 *Provençal:* from the French wine-producing district of Provence.

l. 16 *Hippocrene:* a spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the Muses, and thus to poetry.

v. 3 He longs to forget the misery of human beings—the anxiety, illness, poverty, old age, and the young dying prematurely (his brother Tom had died recently and he expected to die soon), and beauty cannot survive for long or the love it stimulates.

l. 25 *palsy:* a shaking disease; here the personification of sickness and old age.

l. 26 a perfect one-line description of a death from tuberculosis

l. 29 *lustrous:* bright, brilliant.

v. 4 He rejects wine in favour of poetry, and as he sits in his garden listening to the bird in the gathering darkness he feels that he is joining it.

l. 32 Bacchus is the god of wine; his chariot was drawn by leopards.

l. 33 *viewless:* invisible; *Poesy:* poetry.

ll. 37–38 The moon is imagined as Queen of the Night with the stars as her attendants.

ll. 39–40 As the wind parts the branches a little moonlight is cast on him from the sky.

l. 40 *verdurous:* green.

v. 5 He is aware of the late spring flowers that surround him only through their perfume, and imagines them in the darkness.

l. 42 *incense:* sweet-smelling flowers.

l. 43 *embalmed:* again a suggestion of perfume, like 'sweet'.

l. 44 Which comes into bloom at its appropriate season.

l. 46 *eglantine:* sweet-briar.

l. 47 As the violets fade the leaves grow larger and cover the blossom.

l. 49 *musk-rose:* various kinds of perfumed rose.

v. 6 He listens in the dark and half-longs for death to take him; perhaps it would be a fulfilment to die at this moment of beauty, but then he would no longer hear the nightingale's song.

l. 51 *Darkling:* in the dark (see also *The Eve of St Agnes*, p. 65).

l. 60 *requiem:* musical setting for a mass sung for the repose of the soul of the dead; *sod:* mere unfeeling earth.

v. 7 He feels that the bird is, in a sense, immortal—a succession of nightingales all with the same song; its song has been heard in ancient days, perhaps was heard by Ruth in exile, and has often opened magic windows into a world of romance and myth.

l. 61 Men always compete against one another, and the bird is immune from this.

l. 64 *clown:* probably peasant.

ll. 65–67 *Ruth:* the story of Ruth, who exiled herself for love of Naomi from Moab, and worked in the fields near Bethlehem, is told in the Biblical *Book of Ruth.*

ll. 68–70 As the song dies and the enchantment wears off, the imagination begins to fade, and his vision of vague figures from romances of the past hearing the bird's song ends with the word 'forlorn'. *Faery:* magic, mythical.

v. 8 The word 'forlorn' brings him back to his 'sad self'; fancy cannot for long cheat us, the song fades away and the poet is left wondering whether he has dreamed it—or perhaps whether *that* was reality and he is now asleep.

l. 75 *plaintive anthem:* melancholy song.

(A) Suggest how the sounds reinforce the sense in ll. 1–4 and by contrast in ll. 7–9. Why is 'full-throated' especially suitable in l. 10? (Compare also stanza XXIII of *The Eve of St Agnes.*) Where has the wine been kept 'for a long age' (l. 12); how could it taste of all the things in ll. 13–14? In what sense could a beaker (vessel) be full of 'the warm South' (l. 15)? Describe in your own words what the wine in its glass looks like. What picture of mankind's life is given in verse 3 (remember that Keats writes this poem in Hampstead, looking out, perhaps, to the countryside, but with the great heart of London behind him)? How does the rhythm of ll. 25 and 26 help the meaning? What is contrasted with 'leaden-eyed' (l. 28)? Describe what picture you get from ll. 39–40. Which flowers are dying, and which coming into bloom? Consider how the sound of l. 50 helps the meaning. Put into your own words l. 56. What is suggested by the phrase 'emperor and clown' (l. 64)? Having read the relevant passages in the Bible, comment on the lines about Ruth (consider 'found a path', and why should so familiar a thing as corn be 'alien' to her (l. 67)?)

Find words in the first two lines of the last verse that suggest the sound of a bell. What is happening to the bird in ll. 75–78, do you think? What is the mood of the last two lines?

When you have finished the detailed work on this poem, it is essential, especially with so complex a structure, that you should 'put it together' again, *i.e.*, read it aloud or at least hear it as a whole.

FURTHER READING

The whole of *The Eve of St Agnes.*

The other 'great' odes: *To a Grecian Urn, To Melancholy, To Psyche.*

Ode to Fancy.

Sample passages from *Endymion* and *Hyperion.*

Some of the sonnets (especially "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", "To Fanny", "When I have Fears").

is a sturdy sympathy and warmth in a dialect poem like *Northern Farmer: Old Style* (p. 88). His love of nature took the form of patiently recording natural effects (he kept notebooks in which he would write down, for example, that growing corn in the wind is like italics), and this makes at its best for great vividness and concreteness (the 'blacken'd moss' on the flowerpots, the waterfall 'like a downward smoke', the window at dawn which 'slowly grows a glimmering square'). Above all, perhaps, he was a devoted craftsman of poetic effect and had an exquisite ear. This can act negatively in hiding poverty of thought or feeling, but is at its best a source of great strength. The often-quoted lines from *Morte d'Arthur* illustrate the way in which sound and rhythm *enact* the effect of climbing down a rocky path in armour to a smooth lake:

> Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves
> And barren chasms, and all to left and right
> The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based
> His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
> Sharp-smitten with the din of armed heels—
> And on a sudden, lo! the level lake
> And the long glories of the winter moon.

The careful relationship of sound, movement, and vocabulary shown here (though this example is perhaps overselfconscious) is characteristic, and will be found in many of the poems which follow.

TWO SONGS FROM 'THE PRINCESS'

(I) *The Splendour Falls*

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story:
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying,
dying.

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying,
dying.

O love, they die in yon rich sky,
They faint on hill or field or river:
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
And grow for ever and for ever.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying,
dying.

(II) *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake:
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

Mariana

With blackest moss the flower-pots
  Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
  That held the pear to the garden-wall.
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:
  Unlifted was the clinking latch;
  Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.

She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

Her tears fell with the dews at even;
Her tears fell ere the dews were dried;
She could not look on the sweet heaven,
Either at morn or eventide.
After the flitting of the bats,
When thickest dark did trance the sky,
She drew her casement-curtain by,
And glanced athwart the glooming flats.
She only said, "The night is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

Upon the middle of the night,
Waking she heard the night-fowl crow:
The cock sung out an hour ere light:
From the dark fen the oxen's low
Came to her: without hope of change,
In sleep she seem'd to walk forlorn,
Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn
About the lonely moated grange.
She only said, "The day is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

About a stone-cast from the wall
A sluice with blacken'd waters slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
The cluster'd marish-mosses crept.

Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All silver-green with gnarlèd bark:
For leagues no other tree did mark
The level waste, the rounding gray.
She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said:
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

And ever when the moon was low,
And the shrill winds were up and away,
In the white curtain, to and fro,
She saw the gusty shadow sway.
But when the moon was very low,
And wild winds bound within their cell,
The shadow of the poplar fell
Upon her bed, across her brow.
She only said, "The night is dreary,
He cometh not," she said:
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

All day within the dreamy house,
The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
Or from the crevice peer'd about.
Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,
Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
Old voices called her from without.
She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

V

An' I hallus comed to 's choorch afoor moy Sally wur deäd,
An' 'eerd un a bummin' awaäy loike a buzzard-clock ower my yeäd,
An' I niver knaw'd whot a meän'd but I thowt a 'ad summ:t to saäy,
An I thowt a said whot a owt to 'a said an' I comed awaäy.

VI

Bessy Marris's barn! tha knaws she laäid it to meä.
Mowt 'a beän, mayhap, for she wur a bad un, sheä.
'Siver, I kep un, I kep un, my lass, tha mun understond;
I done my duty by un as I 'a done by the lond.

VII

But Parson a comes an' a goos, an' a says it eäsy an' freeä
"The amoighty's a taäkin' o' you to 'issén, my friend," says 'eä.
I weänt saäy men be loiars, thof summun said it in 'aäste:
But a reäds wonn sarmin a weeäk, an' I 'a stubb'd Thornaby waäste.

VIII

D'ya moind the waäste, my lass? naw, naw, tha was not born then;
Theer wur a boggle in it, I often 'eerd un mysen;
Moäst loike a butter-bump, for I 'eerd un aboot an' aboot,
But I stubb'd un oop wi' the lot, an' raäved an rembled un oot.

IX

Keäper's it wur; fo' they fun un theer a-laäid on 'is faäce
Doon i' the woild 'enemies afoor I comed to the plaäce.
Noäks or Thimbleby—toner 'ed shot un as deäd as a naäil.
Noäks wur 'ang'd for it oop at 'soize—but git ma my yaäle.

X

Dubbut looäk at the waäste: theer warn't not feäd for a cow:
Nowt at all but bracken an' fuzz, an' looäk at it now—
Warnt worth nowt a haäcre, an' now theer's lots o' feäd,
Fourscore yows upon it an' some on it doon in seäd.

XI

Nobbut a bit on it's left, an' I meän'd to 'a stubb'd it at fall,
Done it ta-year I meän'd, an' runn'd plow thruff it an' all,
If godamoighty an' parson 'ud nobbut let me aloän,
Meä, wi' haäte oonderd haäcre o' Squoire's, an' lond o' my oän.

XII

Do godamoighty knaw what a's doing a-taäkin' o'meä?
I beänt wonn as saws 'ere a beän an' yonder a peä;
An Squoire 'ull be sa mad an' all—a' dear a' dear!
And I 'a monaged for Squoire come Michaelmas thirty year.

XIII

A mowt 'a taäken Joänes, as 'ant a 'aäpoth o' sense,
Or a mowt 'a taäken Robins—a niver mended a fence:
But godamoighty a moost taäke meä an' taäke ma now
Wi 'auf the cows to cauve an' Thornaby holms to plow!

XIV

Looäk 'ow quoloty smoiles when they sees ma a passin' by,
Says to thessén naw doot "what a mon a beä sewer-ly!"
For they knaws what I beän to Squoire sin fust a comed to the 'All;
I done my duty by Squoire an' I done my duty by all.

XV

Squoire's in Lunnon, an' summun I reckons 'ull 'a to wroite,
For who's to howd the lond ater meä thot muddles ma quoit;
Sartin-sewer I beä, thot a weänt niver give it to Joänes,
Noither a moänt to Robins—a niver rembles the stoäns.

XVI

But summun 'ull come ater meä mayhap wi' 'is kittle o' steäm
Huzzin' an' maäzin' the blessed feälds wi' the Divil's oän teäm.
Gin I mun doy I mun doy, an' loife they says is sweet,
But gin I mun doy I mun doy, for I couldn abear to see it.

XVII

What atta stannin' theer for, an' doesn bring ma the yaäle?
Doctor's a 'tottler, lass, an a 's hallus i' the owd taäle;
I weänt breäk rules for Doctor, a knaws naw moor nor a floy;
Git ma my yaäle I tell tha, an' gin I mun doy I mun doy.

Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
  This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.
  There lies the port: the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me–
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
In days far-off, and with what other eyes
I used to watch—if I be he that watch'd—
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood
Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd
Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

from *In Memoriam*

VII

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

CXIV

Now fades the last long streak of snow,
Now burgeons every maze of quick
About the flowering squares, and thick
By ashen roots the violets blow.

Now rings the woodland loud and long,
The distance takes a lovelier hue,
And drown'd in yonder living blue
The lark becomes a sightless song.

Now dance the lights on lawn and lea,
The flocks are whiter down the vale,
And milkier every milky sail
On winding stream or distant sea;

Where now the seamew pipes, or dives
In yonder greening gleam, and fly
The happy birds, that change their sky
To build and brood; that live their lives

From land to land; and in my breast
Spring wakens too; and my regret
Becomes an April violet,
And buds and blossoms like the rest.

Notes

Two Songs from 'The Princess' (p. 83)

The Princess is a long discursive poem first published in 1847 and subtitled 'A Medley', which became very popular and ran into seventeen editions in twenty years. The six 'songs' were added in 1853, and these can be read independently of the rest of the poem. They illustrate, perhaps chiefly, Tennyson's mastery of sound; and even those who don't respond to the tone of much of his poetry concede that he has a fine ear.

(I) *The Splendour Falls (p. 83)*

The castle walls and the bugles evoke a vaguely medieval landscape, but it is as a study and 'enactment' of sound-echoes that the poem stands.

l. 4 *cataract:* waterfall.

l. 9 *scar:* steep craggy part of mountain-side.

(A) What is 'the splendour' in l. 1, where is the idea repeated in the first verse, and what is meant by calling the mountain-tops 'old in story' (l. 2)? What visual effect is described in l. 3, and how and why does the rhythm of l. 4 contrast with it? Consider the last two lines of each verse, and show in detail how they describe and also 'enact' the effect of echoes of the bugle-notes. What is meant by 'the horns of Elfland' (l. 10), how does it fit the echoes being described, and what is appropriate about the words 'thin', 'clear , 'far', 'sweet', 'faintly' (ll. 7–9)? Why the change from 'thin and clear' to 'thinner, clearer, farther' (ll. 7 and 8)? Why are the glens 'purple' and in what sense do they 'reply' (l. 11)? In verse 3, why is the sky 'rich' (refer back to the opening) and what is 'they' (ll. 13 and 14)? What word does 'faint' (l. 14) pick up, and what does it mean here? What generalization beyond the particular sound-effect is touched on in ll. 15–16? Show where there are internal rhymes within

I(T)P

ISBN 0-17-444112-6