

II

CONVERSATION
POEMS

Conversation Poems

PREFACE

THIS DISTINCTIVE GROUP of nine blank-verse poems has slowly emerged as one of Coleridge's greatest poetic achievements. They were largely written in his mid-twenties, and concern the circle of family, friends and children which formed round him in the West Country between 1794 and 1798. The imaginary "conversations" are all held with particular people, and written in a new, intimate poetic form which Coleridge invented for the purpose. They are halfway between the traditional eighteenth-century *verse-letter* or "epistle", and a more psychological form of Romantic meditation or autobiography.

Most of the circle are named, or can easily be identified, in the poems: his wife Sara Coleridge and their little son Hartley; his elder brother George Coleridge; Charles and Mary Lamb; his great supporter, Tom Poole, the tanner of Nether Stowey; William and Dorothy Wordsworth; and young William Hazlitt, who visited them in the spring of 1798. The last poem of the group, "To William Wordsworth" (No. 30) forms a sort of coda, looking wistfully back at the circle when Coleridge was thirty-five, separated from his wife, and temporarily living in Leicestershire.

The Conversation poems began purely by chance in 1794, when Coleridge was writing to Lamb to say how frustrated he felt with the "elaborate and swelling" formalities of epic verse (see No. 22). But by 1798, Coleridge was more conscious of composing a linked series, and first used the term "a Conversational Poem" (see No. 29). In his collection *Sibylline Leaves* of 1817, he changed this to "a Conversation poem" and deliberately grouped seven of the nine pieces under the generic title "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse".

It is now clear that the Conversation Poems can be read as a single sequence, exploring an extending pastoral vision of friendship and family life, rooted in the countryside. Contrary to Coleridge's

reputation for unfinished work, all the poems are beautifully polished and revised. Several exist in interesting early versions (see notes to Nos. 23, 27, and 30); some incorporate new material added as late as 1817. Altogether, the sequence runs to well over eight hundred lines of verse, the most substantial poetic structure that Coleridge ever created, larger even than "Christabel". It is nearly as long as the first two Books of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (begun in 1799 and addressed to Coleridge), which it partly inspired both in theme and style.

The pastoral vision is no longer an idealized or picturesque eighteenth-century one, a Claude Lorraine landscape of gods, nymphs and shepherds. The Conversation Poems are set in a recognizable English West Country, the North Somersetshire and Devon coastline between Bristol and Lynmouth, and the woods and moorlands of the Quantock hills. Coleridge recreates this landscape, with its weather and wild animals, as surely as the regional novelists of the later Victorian period. The whole pattern of his cottage life with Sara – walking, talking, lovemaking, baby-minding, meeting friends (especially the Wordsworths), sitting up at night writing – all appears as a recognizable domestic background. The poems constantly move out from this homely framework to explore long meditations on marriage (No. 23), work (No. 24), friendship and family (No. 25), life in the countryside (No. 26), childhood and memory (No. 27), public affairs (No. 28), or poetry itself (No. 29).

Filled with real people, Coleridge's poems are both psychologically acute and physically robust, at times even humorous (see the note to "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", No. 26). Wives complain, children cry, friends argue, husbands make a fuss, even nightingales get rowdy. The pastoral vision can sustain powerful outside forces: the demands of work and social duty (No. 24); the needs of children (Nos. 27, 29); the problems of politics and war (No. 28). It is a vision that reaches towards a consistent philosophy of man's harmonious place in Nature; the vision of a "One Life", in which people, children, animals and plants all share (see note to No. 23). Coleridge later wrote in a letter of 1802: "Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of its own, & that we are all *one Life*. A Poet's Heart & intellect should be *combined*, intimately combined & *unified*, with the great appearances in Nature – & not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similies." This is a central, and ultimately spiritual theme, of the Conversation Poems.

Coleridge developed his form from the blank verse of Mark

Akenside ("The Pleasures of the Imagination", 1744) and especially from William Cowper, whose poem "The Task" (1770) gave him a preliminary model for a domestic, conversational mode of autobiography – "the Divine Chit-Chat of Cowper". But he steadily transformed his eighteenth-century models throughout the sequence, his language growing rhythmically more colloquial, but visually more intense. It rises to those "quiet" epiphanies or revelations, when the whole landscape seems to radiate with transcendental power, as in the moonlit close of "Frost at Midnight" (No. 27).

Wordsworth himself went on to develop this form in "Tintern Abbey" (autumn 1798), and then in *The Prelude*, but in his more stately, monumental manner. Indeed it is the success of *The Prelude* which Coleridge celebrates in the last poem of the group (No. 30), while looking back at his own comparative failure to fulfil the promise of the time. But this "failure" (wholly contradicted by Coleridge's actual poetic output) is part of the dramatic structure of the Conversation Poems, in which the pastoral Paradise can never be recaptured, and thus becomes sacred: a Paradise Lost.

The poems often have a characteristic outward and return movement – starting at some specific location (the study, the garden arbour, Stowey wood), and performing some large physical or imaginative journey, before returning home. These home-comings, often accompanied by a moment of "blessing", have a kind of choral role in the sequence, which has attained great symbolic significance by the end, as the place of love. In this sense, Coleridge's outer landscapes move subtly to the condition of interior heartlands. The emphasis becomes increasingly psychological: with memory, meditation and prayer becoming dominant modes. Figuratively this is expressed by one remarkable transformation: the child of Nature, little Hartley Coleridge, who becomes the central channel of feelings in the early poems, is finally changed back into Coleridge himself as a child, even as a baby, in the closing passages of "To William Wordsworth" (No. 30). The Conversation sequence has performed a complete, symbolic life-cycle.

The Conversational mode, with its understated English style, was one of Coleridge's most fruitful creations (as against, say, the more rhetorical *Epistles* of Pope). Its influence can be variously traced in the intimate blank verse of Browning, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop.

To a Friend

[CHARLES LAMB]

TOGETHER WITH AN UNFINISHED POEM

Thus far my scanty brain hath built the rhyme
 Elaborate and swelling: yet the heart
 Not owns it. From thy spirit-breathing powers
 I ask not now, my friend! the aiding verse,
 Tedious to thee, and from thy anxious thought 5
 Of dissonant mood. In fancy (well I know)
 From business wandering far and local cares,
 Thou creepest round a dear-lov'd Sister's bed
 With noiseless step, and watchest the faint look,
 Soothing each pang with fond solicitude, 10
 And tenderest tones medicinal of love.
 I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister –
 She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
 To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows
 (As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms) 15
 And of the heart those hidden maladies
 That e'en from Friendship's eye will shrink asham'd.

O! I have wak'd at midnight, and have wept,
 Because she was not! – Cheerily, dear Charles!
 Thou thy best friend shalt cherish many a year: 20
 Such warm presages feel I of high Hope.
 For not uninterested the dear Maid
 I've view'd – her soul affectionate yet wise,
 Her polish'd wit as mild as lambent glories
 That play around a sainted infant's head. 25
 He knows (the Spirit that in secret sees,
 Of whose omniscient and all-spreading Love
 Aught to *implore* were impotence of mind)
 That my mute thoughts are sad before his throne,
 Prepar'd, when he his healing ray vouchsafes, 30
 Thanksgiving to pour forth with lifted heart,
 And praise Him Gracious with a Brother's Joy!

The Eolian Harp

COMPOSED AT CLEVEDON, SOMERSETSHIRE

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
 Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
 To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
 With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,
 (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!) 5
 And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
 Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
 Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
 Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents
 Snatch'd from yon bean-field! and the world so hush'd! 10
 The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
 Tells us of silence.

And that simplest Lute,
 Placed length-ways in the clasp'ing casement, hark!
 How by the desultory breeze caress'd,
 Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover, 15
 It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
 Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
 Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
 Over delicious surges sink and rise,
 Such a soft floating witchery of sound 20
 As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve
 Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,
 Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,
 Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
 Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing! 25
 O! the one Life within us and abroad,
 Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
 A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
 Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where –
 Methinks, it should have been impossible 30
 Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;
 Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
 Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon, 35
Whilst through my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle fitting phantasies, 40
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd, 45
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O belovéd Woman! nor such thoughts 50
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!
Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd
These shapings of the unregenerate mind; 55
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible! save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*; 60
Who with his saving mercies healéd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wilder'd and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honour'd Maid!

Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement

Sermoni propria. — HORACE

Low was our pretty Cot: our tallest Rose
 Peep'd at the chamber-window. We could hear
 At silent noon, and eve, and early morn,
 The Sea's faint murmur. In the open air
 Our Myrtles blossom'd; and across the porch 5
 Thick Jasmins twined: the little landscape round
 Was green and woody, and refresh'd the eye.
 It was a spot which you might aptly call
 The Valley of Seclusion: Once I saw
 (Hallowing his Sabbath-day by quietness) 10
 A wealthy son of Commerce saunter by,
 Bristow's citizen: methought, it calm'd
 His thirst of idle gold, and made him muse
 With wiser feelings: for he paus'd, and look'd
 With a pleas'd sadness, and gaz'd all around, 15
 Then eyed our Cottage, and gaz'd round again,
 And sigh'd, and said, it was a Bless'd Place.
 And we *were* bless'd. Oft with patient ear
 Long-listening to the viewless sky-lark's note
 (Viewless, or haply for a moment seen 20
 Gleaming on sunny wings) in whisper'd tones
 I've said to my Belov'd, "Such, sweet Girl!
 The inobtrusive song of Happiness,
 Unearthly minstrelsy! then only heard
 When the Soul seeks to hear; when all is hush'd, 25
 And the Heart listens!"

But the time, when first

From that low Dell, steep up the stony Mount
 I climb'd with perilous toil and reach'd the top,
 Oh! what a goodly scene! *Here* the bleak mount,
 The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with sheep; 30
 Grey clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny fields;
 And river, now with bushy rocks o'er-brow'd,

Now winding bright and full, with naked banks;
 And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,
 And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire; 35
 The Channel *there*, the Islands and white sails,
 Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless Ocean –
 It seem'd like Omnipresence! God, methought,
 Had built him there a Temple: the whole World
 Seem'd *imag'd* in its vast circumference: 40
 No *wish* profan'd my overwhelméd heart.
 Blest hour! It was a luxury, – to be!

Ah! quiet Dell! dear Cot, and Mount sublime!
 I was constrain'd to quit you. Was it right,
 While my unnumber'd brethren toil'd and bled, 45
 That I should dream away the entrusted hours
 On rose-leaf beds, pampering the coward heart
 With feelings all too delicate for use?
 Sweet is the tear that from some Howard's eye
 Drops on the cheek of one he lifts from earth: 50
 And he that works me good with unmov'd face,
 Does it but half: he chills me while he aids,
 My benefactor, not my brother man!
 Yet even this, this cold beneficence
 Praise, praise it, O my Soul! oft as thou scann'st 55
 The sluggard *Pity's* vision-weaving tribe!
 Who sigh for Wretchedness, yet shun the Wretched,
 Nursing in some delicious solitude
 Their slothful loves and dainty sympathies!
 I therefore go, and join head, heart, and hand, 60
 Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight
 Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ.

Yet oft when after honourable toil
 Rests the tir'd mind, and waking loves to dream,
 My spirit shall revisit thee, dear Cot! 65
 Thy Jasmin and thy window-peeping Rose,
 And Myrtles fearless of the mild sea-air.
 And I shall sigh fond wishes – sweet Abode!
 Ah! – had none greater! And that all had such!
 It might be so – but the time is not yet. 70
 Speed it, O Father! Let thy Kingdom come!

To the Rev. George Coleridge

OF OTTERY ST. MARY, DEVON.

With some Poems

Notus in fratres animi paterni.

— HORACE *Carm.* lib. II. 2.

A blesséd lot hath he, who having passed
 His youth and early manhood in the stir
 And turmoil of the world, retreats at length,
 With cares that move, not agitate the heart,
 To the same dwelling where his father dwelt; 5
 And haply views his tottering little ones
 Embrace those agéd knees and climb that lap,
 On which first kneeling his own infancy
 Lisp'd its brief prayer. Such, O my earliest Friend!
 Thy lot, and such thy brothers too enjoy. 10
 At distance did ye climb Life's upland road,
 Yet cheer'd and cheering: now fraternal love
 Hath drawn you to one centre. Be your days
 Holy, and blest and blessing may ye live!

To me the Eternal Wisdom hath dispens'd 15
 A different fortune and more different mind —
 Me from the spot where first I sprang to light
 Too soon transplanted, ere my soul had fix'd
 Its first domestic loves; and hence through life
 Chasing chance-started friendships. A brief while 20
 Some have preserv'd me from life's pelting ills;
 But, like a tree with leaves of feeble stem,
 If the clouds lasted, and a sudden breeze
 Ruffled the boughs, they on my head at once
 Dropped the collected shower; and some most false, 25
 False and fair-foliag'd as the Manchineel,
 Have tempted me to slumber in their shade
 E'en mid the storm; then breathing subtlest damps,
 Mix'd their own venom with the rain from Heaven,
 That I woke poison'd! But, all praise to Him 30
 Who gives us all things, more have yielded me

Permanent shelter; and beside one Friend,
Beneath the impervious covert of one oak,
I've rais'd a lowly shed, and know the names
Of Husband and of Father; not unhearing 35
Of that divine and nightly-whispering Voice,
Which from my childhood to maturer years
Spake to me of predestinated wreaths,
Bright with no fading colours!

Yet at times

My soul is sad, that I have roam'd through life 40
Still most a stranger, most with naked heart
At mine own home and birth-place: chiefly then,
When I remember thee, my earliest Friend!
Thee, who didst watch my boyhood and my youth;
Didst trace my wanderings with a father's eye; 45
And boding evil yet still hoping good,
Rebuk'd each fault, and over all my woes
Sorrow'd in silence! He who counts alone
The beatings of the solitary heart,
That Being knows, how I have lov'd thee ever, 50
Lov'd as a brother, as a son rever'd thee!
Oh! 'tis to me an ever new delight,
To talk of thee and thine: or when the blast
Of the shrill winter, rattling our rude sash,
Endears the cleanly hearth and social bowl; 55
Or when, as now, on some delicious eve,
We in our sweet sequester'd orchard-plot
Sit on the tree crook'd earth-ward; whose old boughs,
That hang above us in an arborous roof,
Stirr'd by the faint gale of departing May, 60
Send their loose blossoms slanting o'er our heads!

Nor dost not thou sometimes recall those hours,
When with the joy of hope thou gavest thine ear
To my wild firstling-lays. Since then my song
Hath sounded deeper notes, such as beseem 65
Or that sad wisdom folly leaves behind,
Or such as, tuned to these tumultuous times,
Cope with the tempest's swell!

These various strains,
Which I have fram'd in many a various mood,
Accept, my Brother! and (for some perchance
Will strike discordant on thy milder mind)
If aught of error or intemperate truth
Should meet thine ear, think thou that riper Age
Will calm it down, and let thy love forgive it!

70

This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

In the June of 1797 some long-expected friends paid a visit to the author's cottage; and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the garden-bower.

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
 This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
 Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
 Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
 Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile, 5
 Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
 On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
 Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
 To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
 The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep, 10
 And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
 Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
 Flings arching like a bridge; – that branchless ash,
 Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
 Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, 15
 Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends
 Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
 That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
 Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
 Of the blue clay-stone. 20

Now, my friends emerge
 Beneath the wide wide Heaven – and view again
 The many-steepled tract magnificent
 Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
 With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
 The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles 25

Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
 In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
 My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
 And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
 In the great City pent, winning thy way 30
 With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
 And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
 Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
 Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
 Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds! 35
 Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
 And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
 Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
 Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
 On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem 40
 Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
 As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
 Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
 As I myself were there! Nor in this bower, 45
 This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
 Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
 Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
 Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
 The shadow of the leaf and stem above 50
 Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
 Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
 Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
 Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
 Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue 55
 Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
 Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
 Yet still the solitary humble-bee
 Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
 That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure; 60
 No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
 No waste so vacant, but may well employ
 Each faculty of sense; and keep the heart
 Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes

'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good, 65
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing 70
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom 75
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

Frost at Midnight

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
 Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
 Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits 5
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
 And vexes meditation with its strange
 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood, 10
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
 With all the numberless goings-on of life,
 Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
 Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, 15
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
 Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
 Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
 Making it a companionable form,
 Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit 20
 By its own moods interprets, every where
 Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
 And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,

How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
 Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars, 25
 To watch that fluttering *stranger!* and as oft
 With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
 Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
 Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
 From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day, 30
 So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me

With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
 Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
 So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
 Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams! 35
 And so I brooded all the following morn,
 Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
 Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
 Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
 A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up, 40
 For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
 Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
 My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
 Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm, 45
 Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
 And momentary pauses of the thought!
 My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
 With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
 And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
 And in far other scenes! For I was reared, 50
 In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
 And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
 But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags 55
 Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
 Of that eternal language, which thy God 60
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee, 65
 Whether the summer clothe the general earth
 With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
 Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch

Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall 70
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Fears in Solitude

WRITTEN IN APRIL 1798,
DURING THE ALARM OF AN INVASION

A green and silent spot, amid the hills,
 A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
 No singing sky-lark ever poised himself:
 The hills are heathy, save that swelling slope,
 Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on, 5
 All golden with the never-bloomless furze,
 Which now blooms most profusely: but the dell,
 Bathed by the mist, is fresh and delicate
 As vernal corn-field, or the unripe flax,
 When, through its half-transparent stalks, at eve, 10
 The level sunshine glimmers with green light.
 Oh! 'tis a quiet spirit-healing nook!
 Which all, methinks, would love; but chiefly he,
 The humble man, who, in his youthful years,
 Knew just so much of folly, as had made 15
 His early manhood more securely wise!
 Here he might lie on fern or withered heath,
 While from the singing lark (that sings unseen
 The minstrelsy that solitude loves best),
 And from the sun, and from the breezy air, 20
 Sweet influences trembled o'er his frame;
 And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,
 Made up a meditative joy, and found
 Religious meanings in the forms of Nature!
 And so, his senses gradually wrapt 25
 In a half sleep, he dreams of better worlds,
 And dreaming hears thee still, O singing lark,
 That singest like an angel in the clouds!

My God! it is a melancholy thing 30
 For such a man, who would full fain preserve
 His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel
 For all his human brethren - O my God!

It weighs upon the heart, that he must think
 What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
 This way or that way o'er these silent hills— 35
 Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,
 And all the crash of onset; fear and rage,
 And undetermined conflict – even now,
 Even now, perchance, and in his native isle:
 Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun! 40
 We have offended, Oh! my countrymen!
 We have offended very grievously,
 And been most tyrannous. From east to west
 A groan of accusation pierces Heaven!
 The wretched plead against us; multitudes 45
 Countless and vehement, the sons of God,
 Our brethren! Like a cloud that travels on,
 Steamed up from Cairo's swamps of pestilence,
 Even so, my countrymen! have we gone forth
 And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs, 50
 And, deadlier far, our vices, whose deep taint
 With slow perdition murders the whole man,
 His body and his soul! Meanwhile, at home,
 All individual dignity and power
 Engulfed in Courts, Committees, Institutions, 55
 Associations and Societies,
 A vain, speech-mouthing, speech-reporting Guild,
 One Benefit-Club for mutual flattery,
 We have drunk up, demure as at a grace,
 Pollutions from the brimming cup of wealth; 60
 Contemptuous of all honourable rule,
 Yet bartering freedom and the poor man's life
 For gold, as at a market! The sweet words
 Of Christian promise, words that even yet
 Might stem destruction, were they wisely preached, 65
 Are muttered o'er by men, whose tones proclaim
 How flat and wearisome they feel their trade:
 Rank scoffers some, but most too indolent
 To deem them falsehoods or to know their truth.
 Oh! blasphemous! the Book of Life is made 70
 A superstitious instrument, on which
 We gabble o'er the oaths we mean to break;
 For all must swear – all and in every place,

College and wharf, council and justice-court;
 All, all must swear, the briber and the bribed, 75
 Merchant and lawyer, senator and priest,
 The rich, the poor, the old man and the young;
 All, all make up one scheme of perjury,
 That faith doth reel; the very name of God
 Sounds like a juggler's charm; and, bold with joy, 80
 Forth from his dark and lonely hiding-place,
 (Portentous sight!) the owlet Atheism,
 Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,
 Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,
 And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven, 85
 Cries out, "Where is it?"

Thankless too for peace,
 (Peace long preserved by fleets and perilous seas)
 Secure from actual warfare, we have loved
 To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war!
 Alas! for ages ignorant of all 90
 Its ghastlier workings, (famine or blue plague,
 Battle, or siege, or flight through wintry snows,)
 We, this whole people, have been clamorous
 For war and bloodshed; animating sports,
 The which we pay for as a thing to talk of, 95
 Spectators and not combatants! No guess
 Anticipative of a wrong unfelt,
 No speculation on contingency,
 However dim and vague, too vague and dim
 To yield a justifying cause; and forth, 100
 (Stuffed out with big preamble, holy names,
 And adjurations of the God in Heaven,)
 We send our mandates for the certain death
 Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,
 And women, that would groan to see a child 105
 Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
 The best amusement for our morning meal!
 The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
 From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
 To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father, 110
 Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
 And technical in victories and defeats,

And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
 Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
 Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which 115
 We join no feeling and attach no form!
 As if the soldier died without a wound;
 As if the fibres of this godlike frame
 Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,
 Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds, 120
 Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed;
 As though he had no wife to pine for him,
 No God to judge him! Therefore, evil days
 Are coming on us, O my countrymen!
 And what if all-avenging Providence, 125
 Strong and retributive, should make us know
 The meaning of our words, force us to feel
 The desolation and the agony
 Of our fierce doings?

Spare us yet awhile,
 Father and God! O! spare us yet awhile! 130
 Oh! let not English women drag their flight
 Fainting beneath the burthen of their babes,
 Of the sweet infants, that but yesterday
 Laughed at the breast! Sons, brothers, husbands, all
 Who ever gazed with fondness on the forms 135
 Which grew up with you round the same fire-side,
 And all who ever heard the sabbath-bells
 Without the infidel's scorn, make yourselves pure!
 Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe,
 Impious and false, a light yet cruel race, 140
 Who laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth
 With deeds of murder; and still promising
 Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free,
 Poison life's amities, and cheat the heart.
 Of faith and quiet hope, and all that soothes, 145
 And all that lifts the spirit! Stand we forth;
 Render them back upon the insulted ocean,
 And let them toss as idly on its waves
 As the vile sea-weed, which some mountain-blast
 Swept from our shores! And oh! may we return 150
 Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,

Repenting of the wrongs with which we stung
So fierce a foe to frenzy!

I have told,

O Britons! O my brethren! I have told
Most bitter truth, but without bitterness. 155

Nor deem my zeal or factious or mistimed;
For never can true courage dwell with them,

Who, playing tricks with conscience, dare not look
At their own vices. We have been too long

Dupes of a deep delusion! Some, belike, 160
Groaning with restless enmity, expect

All change from change of constituted power;
As if a Government had been a robe,

On which our vice and wretchedness were tagged
Like fancy-points and fringes, with the robe 165

Pulled off at pleasure. Fondly these attach
A radical causation to a few

Poor drudges of chastising Providence,
Who borrow all their hues and qualities

From our own folly and rank wickedness, 170
Which gave them birth and nursed them. Others, meanwhile,

Dote with a mad idolatry; and all
Who will not fall before their images,

And yield them worship, they are enemies
Even of their country!

Such have I been deemed. — 175

But, O dear Britain! O my Mother Isle!
Needs must thou prove a name most dear and holy

To me, a son, a brother, and a friend,
A husband, and a father! who revere

All bonds of natural love, and find them all 180
Within the limits of thy rocky shores.

O native Britain! O my Mother Isle!
How shouldst thou prove aught else but dear and holy

To me, who from thy lakes and mountain-hills,
Thy clouds, thy quiet dales, thy rocks and seas, 185

Have drunk in all my intellectual life,
All sweet sensations, all ennobling thoughts,

All adoration of the God in nature,

All lovely and all honourable things,
 Whatever makes this mortal spirit feel 190
 The joy and greatness of its future being?
 There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul
 Unborrowed from my country! O divine
 And beauteous island! thou hast been my sole
 And most magnificent temple, in the which 195
 I walk with awe, and sing my stately songs,
 Loving the God that made me! —

May my fears,
 My filial fears, be vain! and may the vaunts
 And menace of the vengeful enemy
 Pass like the gust, that roared and died away 200
 In the distant tree: which heard, and only heard
 In this low dell, bowed not the delicate grass.

But now the gentle dew-fall sends abroad
 The fruit-like perfume of the golden furze:
 The light has left the summit of the hill, 205
 Though still a sunny gleam lies beautiful,
 Aslant the ivied beacon. Now farewell,
 Farewell, awhile, O soft and silent spot!
 On the green sheep-track, up the heathy hill,
 Homeward I wind my way; and lo! recalled 210
 From bodings that have well-nigh wearied me,
 I find myself upon the brow, and pause
 Startled! And after lonely sojourning
 In such a quiet and surrounded nook,
 This burst of prospect, here the shadowy main, 215
 Dim-tinted, there the mighty majesty
 Of that huge amphitheatre of rich
 And elmy fields, seems like society —
 Conversing with the mind, and giving it
 A livelier impulse and a dance of thought! 220
 And now, beloved Stowey! I behold
 Thy church-tower, and, methinks, the four huge elms
 Clustering, which mark the mansion of my friend;
 And close behind them, hidden from my view;
 Is my own lowly cottage, where my babe 225
 And my babe's mother dwell in peace! With light

And quickened footsteps thitherward I tend,
Remembering thee, O green and silent dell!
And grateful, that by nature's quietness
And solitary musings, all my heart
Is softened, and made worthy to indulge
Love, and the thoughts that yearn for human kind.

230

The Nightingale

No cloud, no relique of the sunken day
 Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip
 Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.
 Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!
 You see the glimmer of the stream beneath, 5
 But hear no murmuring: it flows silently,
 O'er its soft bed of verdure. All is still,
 A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,
 Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
 That gladden the green earth, and we shall find 10
 A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.
 And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,
 "Most musical, most melancholy" bird!
 A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!
 In Nature there is nothing melancholy. 15
 But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
 With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
 Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
 (And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
 And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale 20
 Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
 First named these notes a melancholy strain.
 And many a poet echoes the conceit;
 Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
 When he had better far have stretched his limbs 25
 Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
 By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
 Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
 Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
 And of his fame forgetful! so his fame 30
 Should share in Nature's immortality,
 A venerable thing! and so his song
 Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself
 Be loved like Nature! But 'twill not be so;

And youths and maidens most poetical, 35
Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring
In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs
O'er Philomela's pity-pleading strains.

My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt 40
A different lore: we may not thus profane
Nature's sweet voices, always full of love
And joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes, 45
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music!

And I know a grove
Of large extent, hard by a castle huge, 50
Which the great lord inhabits not; and so
This grove is wild with tangling underwood,
And the trim walks are broken up, and grass,
Thin grass and king-cups grow within the paths.
But never elsewhere in one place I knew 55
So many nightingales; and far and near,
In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
They answer and provoke each other's song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug, 60
And one low piping sound more sweet than all –
Stirring the air with such a harmony,
That should you close your eyes, you might almost
Forget it was not day! On moonlight bushes,
Whose dewy leaflets are but half-disclosed, 65
You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,
Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
Lights up her love-torch.

A most gentle Maid,
Who dwelleth in her hospitable home 70

Hard by the castle, and at latest eve
 (Even like a Lady vowed and dedicate
 To something more than Nature in the grove)
 Glides through the pathways; she knows all their notes,
 That gentle Maid! and oft, a moment's space, 75
 What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
 Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
 Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
 With one sensation, and those wakeful birds
 Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy, 80
 As if some sudden gale had swept at once
 A hundred airy harps! And she hath watched
 Many a nightingale perch giddily
 On blossomy twig still swinging from the breeze,
 And to that motion tune his wanton song 85
 Like tippy Joy that reels with tossing head.

Farewell, O Warbler! till to-morrow eve,
 And you, my friends! farewell, a short farewell!
 We have been loitering long and pleasantly,
 And now for our dear homes. — That strain again! 90
 Full fain it would delay me! My dear babe,
 Who, capable of no articulate sound,
 Mars all things with his imitative lisp,
 How he would place his hand beside his ear,
 His little hand, the small forefinger up, 95
 And bid us listen! And I deem it wise
 To make him Nature's play-mate. He knows well
 The evening-star; and once, when he awoke
 In most distressful mood (some inward pain
 Had made up that strange thing, an infant's dream —) 100
 I hurried with him to our orchard-plot,
 And he beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,
 Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,
 While his fair eyes, that swam with undropped tears,
 Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam! Well! — 105
 It is a father's tale: But if that Heaven
 Should give me life, his childhood shall grow up
 Familiar with these songs, that with the night
 He may associate joy. — Once more, farewell,
 Sweet Nightingale! once more, my friends! farewell. 110

To William Wordsworth

Friend of the wise! and Teacher of the Good!
 Into my heart have I received that Lay
 More than historic, that prophetic Lay
 Wherein (high theme by thee first sung aright) 5
 Of the foundations and the building up
 Of a Human Spirit thou hast dared to tell
 What may be told, to the understanding mind
 Revealable; and what within the mind
 By vital breathings secret as the soul
 Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the heart 10
 Thoughts all too deep for words! —

Theme hard as high!

Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fears
 (The first-born they of Reason and twin-birth),
 Of tides obedient to external force,
 And currents self-determined, as might seem, 15
 Or by some inner Power; of moments awful,
 Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,
 When power streamed from thee, and thy soul received
 The light reflected, as a light bestowed —
 Of fancies fair, and milder hours of youth, 20
 Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought
 Industrious in its joy, in vales and glens
 Native or outland, lakes and famous hills!
 Or on the lonely high-road, when the stars
 Were rising; or by secret mountain-streams, 25
 The guides and the companions of thy way!
 Of more than Fancy, of the Social Sense
 Distending wide, and man beloved as man,
 Where France in all her towns lay vibrating
 Like some becalméd bark beneath the burst 30
 Of Heaven's immediate thunder, when no cloud

Is visible, or shadow on the main.
 For thou wert there, thine own brows garlanded,
 Amid the tremor of a realm aglow,
 Amid a mighty nation jubilant, 35
 When from the general heart of human kind
 Hope sprang forth like a full-born Deity!
 — Of that dear Hope afflicted and struck down,
 So summoned homeward, thenceforth calm and sure
 From the dread watch-tower of man's absolute self, 40
 With light unwaning on her eyes, to look
 Far on — herself a glory to behold,
 The Angel of the vision! Then (last strain)
 Of Duty, chosen Laws controlling choice,
 Action and joy! — An Orphic song indeed, 45
 A song divine of high and passionate thoughts
 To their own music chaunted!

O great Bard!

Ere yet that last strain dying awed the air,
 With stedfast eye I viewed thee in the choir
 Of ever-enduring men. The truly great 50
 Have all one age, and from one visible space
 Shed influence! They, both in power and act,
 Are permanent, and Time is not with them,
 Save as it worketh for them, they in it.
 Nor less a sacred Roll, than those of old, 55
 And to be placed, as they, with gradual fame
 Among the archives of mankind, thy work
 Makes audible a linked lay of Truth,
 Of Truth profound a sweet continuous lay,
 Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes! 60
 Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,
 The pulses of my being beat anew:
 And even as Life returns upon the drowned,
 Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains —
 Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe 65
 Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart;
 And fears self-willed, that shunned the eye of Hope;
 And Hope that scarce would know itself from Fear;
 Sense of past Youth, and Manhood come in vain,
 And Genius given, and Knowledge won in vain; 70

And all which I had culled in wood-walks wild,
And all which patient toil had reared, and all,
Commune with thee had opened out – but flowers
Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my bier,
In the same coffin, for the self-same grave! 75

That way no more! and ill beseems it me,
Who came a welcomer in herald's guise,
Singing of Glory, and Futurity,
To wander back on such unhealthful road,
Plucking the poisons of self-harm! And ill 80
Such intertwine beseems triumphal wreaths
Strew'd before thy advancing!

Nor do thou,
Sage Bard! impair the memory of that hour
Of thy communion with my nobler mind
By pity or grief, already felt too long! 85
Nor let my words import more blame than needs.
The tumult rose and ceased: for Peace is nigh
Where Wisdom's voice has found a listening heart.
Amid the howl of more than wintry storms,
The Halcyon hears the voice of vernal hours 90
Already on the wing.

Eve following eve,
Dear tranquil time, when the sweet sense of Home
Is sweetest! moments for their own sake hailed
And more desired, more precious, for thy song,
In silence listening, like a devout child, 95
My soul lay passive, by thy various strain
Driven as in surges now beneath the stars,
With momentary stars of my own birth,
Fair constellated foam, still darting off
Into the darkness; now a tranquil sea, 100
Outspread and bright, yet swelling to the moon.

And when – O Friend! my comforter and guide!
Strong in thyself, and powerful to give strength! –
Thy long sustained Song finally closed,
And thy deep voice had ceased – yet thou thyself 105

Wert still before my eyes, and round us both
That happy vision of beloved faces –
Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
I sate, my being blended in one thought
(Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)
Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound –
And when I rose, I found myself in prayer.

110