

## PROEM

Where the stately poplars quiver  
In the sinuous Seine river,  
Winding slow through popped ridges,  
Underneath old Paris' bridges —  
'T is of mediæval time  
This my rhyme —  
Dwelt a youth of clerkly ways  
    Delving days,  
And many a weary night  
By the taper's flickering light  
    Over monkish Latin lore,  
    Volumes hoar.  
Dry and musty was the quaint old  
Knowledge saint-told,  
Stored within the books unscanned  
    'Neath his hand.  
He was weary of the query  
    Of the schoolmen's mind;  
And his thought bent in its yearning  
To the learning  
    Of the world long years behind,  
For his brain seethed with the dreaming  
    And the teeming  
Thoughts which faster, vaster,  
    From the master  
Minds of eld unto him came.

## THE POEM

It came, what time I dwelt in fair Lutèce,  
In student fellowship — O cloistered place  
Of high renown and sweet illusionments,  
Sorbonne, how dear and beautiful thy face.

### II

A voice came crying to me on the wind:  
"Shut to thy books, nor suffer thou thy mind  
To be distraught by vain philosophers,  
For they be all blind leaders of the blind.

### III

"All vision has become a book that's sealed  
To those who ever plough that sterile field.  
Write thou this vision, for in days to come  
Thy spirit's fruit an hundred fold shall yield."

### IV

The wind that through the keyhole blew said: "Lo,  
Thy teachers have no wisdom to bestow;  
Those hooded monks tell all their thoughts like beads."  
Untouched the door sprang wide and bade me "Go."

V

The time of any man is little space  
 Methinks; his spot of sojourn but a place  
 Apart, and history an ocean marge  
 Whence mightiest waves retreat without a trace.

VI

Days, seasons, places, heroes and events  
 Fade and dissolve, and leave no lineaments.  
 The granite piles of Carnac and the Sphinx —  
 Tell me, O sage, whose are these monuments?

VII

Beneath the weight of Egypt's pyramid  
 The sombre chambers of the dead are hid;  
 Vast galleries and funeral rooms of rock —  
 Whose silence human footsteps never thrid.

VIII

Unconscious monuments of vanished might  
 Frown from the gloom there and the night affright;  
 Pride, kingdom, power in every one of those  
 Grim visages of carven diorite.

IX

Who of those bones proprietaries were?  
 Whose frames those ashes formed? Canst thou aver?  
 Or when the persons of those relics there  
 Entered the fastness of that sepulchre?

X

As soon find Moses' tomb on Beth-peor;  
Tell me, what name, when hid, Achilles bore;  
Which of the isles blind Homer's birth-place was;  
What sang the temptress sirens from the shore.

XI

How futile is that awful pomp of death  
Even for a day to stretch the vanished breath!  
The mystery of death is doubly veiled  
Where Egypt's hoary grandeur slumbereth.

XII

Long lasting memory, how few do find;  
Oblivion scatters poppy as though blind.  
The epitaph of Hadrian's horse survives  
That purple Cæsar's fame among mankind.

XIII

Whether the best of men be known or not,  
Or if there be not greater names forgot  
Than those emblazoned on the walls of time —  
This is a riddle none can solve, I wot.

XIV

Cyrus and Alexander, Cæsar — three  
Who held the homage of the world in fee  
Were fain to part with their own lives at last:  
How mightier than mightiest are we?

XV

How many men innumerable — think!—  
Journeyed aforetime to that selfsame brink  
    Before and since those great ones trod the earth?  
Think you that *you* shall float while others sink?

XVI

*Sic transit gloria mundi*: those long dead  
And those late passed all sleep in the same bed.  
    The years of many generations blend  
Pope, peasant, prince, when buried.

XVII

The years seem long when they from us are far;  
But come, they vanish swiftly as a star  
    That rends the veil of darkness in the night  
Like flash of some bright angel's scimitar.

XVIII

The fame men prize is oft oblivion;  
Kings are but shadows on a spectre-throne;  
    Sceptre and crown are baubles of an hour.  
Is there, to human life, a corner-stone?

XIX

The beautiful is oft untimely gone;  
The rose dies with the day that bloomed at dawn.  
    And yet, what difference to thee or me  
In the immensity of time out-drawn?

XX

Life is an archway through whose aperture  
Into illimitable lands obscure  
The endless files of mankind ceaselessly  
Do march. Whence? Whither? Why? Ah, who is sure?

XXI

Go, pace the sand beside Atlantic's surge,  
And see the sun sink slowly 'neath the verge,  
Out on the luminous horizon far  
Where sky and watery waste together merge.

XXII

So sinks the soul. But does *it* rise once more  
In some new East? Upon some other shore?  
Like amarant, immortal in the dark,  
Or kneel eternally by some barred door?

XXIII

Far inland from the sea the rosy shell  
Harbors the lingering sound of ocean swell;  
No still small voice within my inmost heart  
To me of past or future life doth tell.

XXIV

Man's life is of man's life the whole, not part.  
Eternity is long, life short. Thou art  
A mere mote swimming in the deeps of space.  
Men die, gods die, the soul dies with the heart.

XXV

What boots it all at last when we are done?  
What boots the day when sunken is the sun?  
What then remains of man's much vaunted power,  
When all the water in the glass is run?

XXVI

The world's face has grown grey in quest of truth.  
More time has been consumed than Rome, in sooth,  
To conquer and to rule the world required;  
And still the riddle riddles age and youth.

XXVII

What was I ere my life began? None knows.  
Where was I? Was I any where? Where goes  
The soul at death? Is birth a waking dream  
And death a swoon? Alas, the riddle grows.

XXVIII

No one can answer where or whither, what  
Or how or why. We are — and then are not.  
The world's wheel like a potter's disk revolves,  
Moulding our clay into some jar or pot,

XXIX

Or vase, or thick flat plate, or bowl —  
Mankind is fashioned as the seasons roll:  
Some clean and bright and shining chalices,  
Some vessels of dishonour without soul.

XXX

Who is the masterful Artificer?  
Where is the pit from which we diggéd were,  
That He might mould us from that neutral clay?  
Did life on ocean's fertile floor first stir?

XXXI

Life's an uncharted sea, whose shore  
All we, in vain, from East to West explore,  
Pacing a few stades off in yearly course:  
Of the great sea of life we know no more.

XXXII

What of that unknown and mysterious tract  
Of life environing material fact?  
Where God forever walks across the deep?  
Blind, blind are we, each in his puny act

XXXIII

Absorbed. What will it profit us, the world  
With all its sordid goods to have unfurled,  
And forfeit of life's richest birthright make?  
To dig for dross where full life lies imperaled?

XXXIV

Our years are but an interval, of long  
Or shorter time, which some men spend in wrong,  
And some in listlessness, and some for wealth:  
The wise alone seek truth and art and song.

XXXV

I've read somewhere that Gregory the Great —  
Or was it Augustine?— deplored the fate  
    (Because, forsooth, the heathen all are damned)  
That Trajan barred from the celestial gate.

XXXVI

Dear God! Those ancient faiths once suckled souls  
As great as those the Lateran controls.  
    Aye, greater. Deep of stream those spirits were:  
We puny creatures cling unto the shoals,

XXXVII

Afraid to launch out to the deeps which call  
Because the terrors of the church appall,  
    By self-authoritative priests imposed;  
The bishops have made cowards of us all.

XXXVIII

Deaf with mortality's loud-clanking chain,  
They only rouse my fierce wrath and disdain,  
    With saints' excess-of-good-works, or with gifts,  
Who commerce make of souls, heaven to attain.

XXXIX

Alas, that mankind, searching for the right,  
Scarce in the wide world finds a glimmering light.  
    Shame on those shameless ones who summon Hell  
Out of the gulf of shadows and of night.

XL

Life is a struggle in the dark to hosts  
 Of men, who fight mere shadows and the ghosts  
 Of their imaginations. They are like  
 Scared sailors wrecked upon barbarian coasts.

XLI

There is an inward sky within the mind  
 Wider than measurement of sense defined,  
 Whose stars are thoughts transcending far and free  
 The grovelling mysteries of priestly kind.

XLII

The open mind is born of God, but these  
 Who vaunt the power of ghostly mysteries  
 To bind and loose and thrall the mind, are false  
 Hierophants of fabled destinies.

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XLIII

'T is strange to me, as here I write, to think  
 That most among my friends—*par Dieu!*—would shrink  
 From me as heretic, if they but knew,  
 And deem my soul as vile as this black ink.

XLIV

They each and all belong to Holy Church.  
 My touch is foul and would their garments smirch,  
 Did they but know. . . . I wonder: Are they right?  
 If they are right my soul is in the lurch.

XLV

Well, souls of most men narrow houses are;  
Thin tenements whose mud walls bear the scar  
Of sordid, wretched, noisome lives that crawl  
Thereon like flies. My soul would be a star.

XLVI

Man's life is from man's world a thing apart.  
Do you the riddle guess? Within his heart  
Abides his own real life. Abroad, he grants  
The world's demands, with superficial art.

XLVII

The tide of time is at the ebb, and slack;  
Stagnant is thought; the taste of life is brack.  
The prayer of Samson was for light — my cry:  
“Would that Time's ancient tide were surging back.”

XLVIII

As soon expect to sow the sea with oats,  
Or sail the ripened fields in keeléd boats,  
Find fish on land or camels in the stars,  
Round to be square, kids lambs, that iron floats.

XLIX

Why does the church harass a driven leaf?  
Or feed men thorns when corn is in the sheaf?  
Give stones for bread and water for red wine?  
The way to God is long and life is brief.

## L

Proverbs of ashes, pious words of old,  
 Dark sayings of the fathers slimed with mould,  
 Lives of saints, silly miracles and cant  
 Daily to us for nourishment are doled.

## LI

Olympus' gods, thou Rome, hast seen retire;  
 Zeus and Adonis like a dream expire;  
 Glory depart from Ida; Dian's fane  
 In ruin fall, and perish Vesta's fire;

## LII

The high gods die like butterflies in frost;  
 The glorious lore of Greece for ages lost.  
 What wilt thou say before the bar of God?  
 O Christian Rome, dear to mankind thy cost.

## LIII

Charlatan and masquer! Sorceress!  
 Base trickster of humanity's distress!  
 Avenging Time shall yet take toll of thee,  
 And shrink thy terrors into nothingness.

## LIV

Age after age's cumulated wrong  
 Like a dread storm on thee shall break ere long.  
*Orbis ecclesiarum caput* — Rome,  
 Thou shalt yet be like some long vanished song.

LV

Temples and churches close beside the mart,  
 Rondured by exercise of every art —  
     Groined arches, chancels, painted glass, attest  
 The yearning hunger of the human heart.

LVI

Yet will I not their god adore until  
 The sky looks down on ruined wall and sill,  
     On empty courts and grey cathedral aisles —  
*Ecclesia dum fuerit — Nihil.*

LVII

When desolation strikes their thresholds bare,  
 And wild birds lodge in broken chapter,  
     When wolves howl in the hollow vaults below —  
 When Holy Church is dead, I shall go there.

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LVIII

Men's thoughts alternate, moon-like wax and wane;  
 Life swims in circles; heart-tides, like the main,  
     Though wandered far in split and tortuous streams,  
 Shoreward recurrent yet shall turn again.

LIX

Basil and Julian be both now dead;  
 Hypatia and Cyrillus buriéd;  
     The Golden-Mouthed and Diocletian —  
 Victor and vanquished in the selfsame bed.

LX

Poor work it is to jeer a fallen foe.  
The pagan seers have vanished long ago  
    Into the arms of that great silence which  
Forbids us all its mysteries to know.

LXI

Are we more certain of the soul than they?  
Is bishop better than a flamen? Say  
    Whether the quality of life be raised,  
Or if the world be happier to-day.

LXII

For me Aurelius' austere atmosphere  
Breathes the idea of deity more clear  
    Than sensuous emotion, mummery,  
Or gorgeous ritual to church so dear.

LXIII

Religion was the worship of the soul  
With him; entire surrender to control  
    By what man's highest reason can divine:  
"He saw life steadily and saw it whole."

LXIV

*He* built religion on a noble scheme  
Of perfect consecration and the dream;  
    Philosophy and poetry he loved:  
The magic and the beauty of the theme

LXV

Are lost with us to-day, who whine our plaints,  
Prayers, orisons, petitions, to the saints  
More than to God, and reverence their bones,  
And counterfeit their countenance with paints.

LXVI

*Procul profani!* . . . God is spirit, saith  
The Book, in spirit worshipt and in faith,  
Not in material guise, but spirit pure:  
So was He worshipt when the world was rathe.

LXVII

Plato, the Stagirite and Socrates,  
Zeno, Lucretius, Epicurus — these  
Darkened not counsel with scholastic wit,  
And shame us petty moderns to our knees.

LXVIII

Those ancient pagan cults, behind the veil  
Of figure, symbol, allegory, tale —  
How pregnant they with beautiful surprise!  
Ruddy, like sunrise on a fisher's sail.

LXIX

For myths are intimations deep and vast  
(Born of the race's immemorial past,  
Still with the dawn-dreams of creation drenched)  
That earliest man the thought of God held fast.

## LXX

Wine from those altars old give me to drain;  
 Forget religious tyranny, the stain  
 Of bitter creeds and darkened mysteries,  
 And dream the grey earth is renewed again;

## LXXI

When gods called unto gods in high abodes;  
 Muse answered muse in odes and palinodes.  
 Religion then was life and art and song,  
 And not a thing of creeds and priestly codes.

## LXXII

How singular and strange the heart of man!  
 Apt both to lag behind or lead the van;  
 Hugging false gods . . . and then, Prometheus-like,  
 Snatching the fire from heaven to fan.

## LXXIII

Sometimes at sunset, gazing at the cloud,  
 Enrapt, I seem to feel that God has bowed  
 And come to earth to walk and talk with me,  
 And with a holy flame I seem endowed.

## LXXIV

That orderly procession of the sky,  
 Marching in serried columns there on high  
 Brings me the sense of God pervading all  
 Not in the sacramental mystery.

LXXV

I can hold glad communion with the stars.  
In life's fierce turmoil and the world's rude jars  
How good to know that realm inviolate  
Which no priest enters and no dogma mars.

LXXVI

Within his own soul each one finds his creed,  
Springing responsive to his spirit's need;  
Or golden grain or chaff before the wind,  
Religion is of man's own heart the seed:

LXXVII

Hopes, aspirations, faintings sore,  
Triumphs, defeats, wild strivings evermore,  
Born of the eager hunger after God  
In mankind Edenless outside the door.

LXXVIII

The Iliad of the Soul were nobler tale  
Than Troy's far flaming ramparts, or the sail  
That bore Ulysses to the Western Sea.  
Not like unstable water, they prevail

LXXIX

Who bind their hearts to God's own chariot wheel,  
Who march the planetary road, and steal  
The alchemy of starlight and of sun —  
On these alone God sets his crimson seal.

LXXX

“There is no wealth but life.” Resolve to be  
Attuned to its sublime and serious key;  
To wrest from out the dark of here and now  
The great, the good, the true philosophy.

LXXXI

Not length of life, but clean, deep life avails.  
There is no power whenso the impulse fails.  
Corn grows of God’s good bounty, but for bread  
Thou needs must beat the golden grain with flails.

LXXXII

Eternity is long, life short. The while  
Thou liv’st a passing shadow on the dial,  
Yet worth eternity’s whole self to thee.  
Beware! It may be all thy chance of trial.

LXXXIII

True piety is not with measured pace,  
With outstretched hands and melancholy face  
To kneel before dead altars built with hands,  
And to the lifted Host thy soul abase.

LXXXIV

To contemplate the world with open mind;  
To do that duty which we nearest find —  
Philosophy and creed this is to men  
By sterile teachings not yet made purblind.

LXXXV

The poet word by word upbuilds his line;  
By unseen stages climbs the towering pine;  
    With steadfast purpose, painfully and slow,  
Thou needs must form that character of thine.

LXXXVI

“To seek, to strive, to find, and not to yield,”  
To clear the sight of those whose eyes are sealed,  
    This righteousness alone exalteth man;  
Not good imputed, of Elysian Field

LXXXVII

Dreaming, with hope of recompense therefor,  
Or paltry fear lest shut may be the door.  
    Virtue, how frail it is, when men there be  
Who traffic even with the Conqueror.

LXXXVIII

Death is the ultimate keen edge of things;  
Death is the highway of the King of Kings.  
    He weeps who walks along that road with dread;  
He who that highway walks intrepid, sings.

LXXXIX

And was it not to set forth this high claim  
That saint and martyr, poet, prophet came?  
    Some to be crowned with laurel wreath, and some  
To sanctify their message in the flame.

XC

When roars the lion, who may lie asleep?  
Not the awed shepherd crouched among his sheep.  
Whether in still small voice or trumpet blast,  
When God hath spoken who dare silence keep?

XCI

High poetry, high art, high truth, high God,  
Are reached by paths the crowd has never trod,  
That ignorantly gropes and stumbles on,  
To all high aspiration but a clod.

XCII

As far as knowledge and clear reason show,  
By their austere direction I will go;  
And when, at utmost edge of thought they fail,  
Like Hugo of St. Victor, in the glow

XCIII

Of far-off vision and of dim surmise,  
To inner voices listing of surprise,  
I still will climb, till o'er some summit far  
The rose of God's own wondrous dawn shall rise.

They are conquered, they break, they are stricken,  
Whose magic made the whole world pale;  
They are dust that shall rise not nor quicken,  
Though the world for their death's sake wail.

SWINBURNE, *The Last Oracle* [A.D. 361].

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Schöne Welt, wo bist Du? Kehre wieder  
Holdes Blütenalter der Natur.  
Ach, nur in dem Feenland der Lieder  
Lebt noch deine fabelhafte Spur.  
Ausgestorben trauert das Gefilde,  
Keine Gottheit zeigt sich meinem Blick;  
Ach, von jenem lebenswarmen Bilde  
Blieb der Schatten nur zurück.

GOETHE.