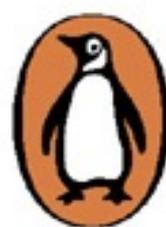
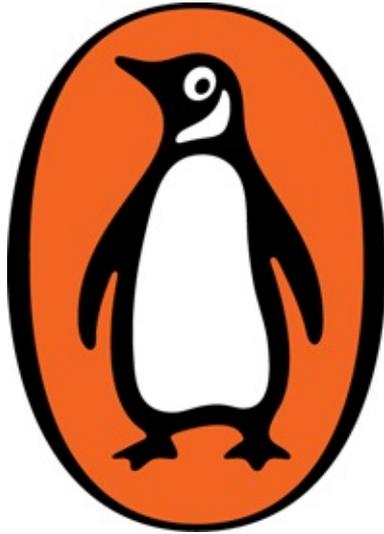


Robert Browning

Selected Poems





Robert Browning

selected poems

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Daniel Karlin



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ROBERT BROWNING: SELECTED POEMS

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, in south-east London, in 1812. The major influences on his early development came from his father's large and eccentric library, his mother's deep Nonconformist piety, and his adolescent encounter with Romantic poetry (especially Shelley). After education at local schools and at home, he enrolled at the newly founded University of London in 1828, but left the following year. He travelled widely on the Continent in the 1830s and 1840s. He published *Pauline* anonymously and without success in 1833; *Paracelsus* (1835) made him known to the London literary society. However, *Sordello* (1840), derided for its obscurity, blighted his career for over twenty years. He published a series of plays and collections of shorter poems, *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841–6). In January 1845 he began corresponding with Elizabeth Barrett; he met her in May 1845, and they were married in September 1846 after a clandestine courtship (because of Mr Barrett's implacable opposition to the idea of any of his children marrying). The Brownings lived in Italy until Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861. Browning published *Men and Women* (1855), which contains some of his finest poems, but still did not restore his reputation (or his sales). After his wife's death, Browning returned to England with their only son, and settled in London. He published *Dramatis Personae* (1864), a collection which began to repair his critical fortunes; this process was accomplished by the appearance of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9). Among the works of his later years, *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), *La Saisiaz* (1878), *Dramatic Idyls* (1879), *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887) and *Asolando* (1889) are outstanding. Browning died in Venice on 12 December 1889, and was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

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Introduction

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, in south-east London, on 7 May 1812. He was the son of Robert Browning, a clerk in the Bank of England, a mild, diffident man who was also an ardent book-lover and collector, and Sarah Anna Wiedemann, a woman of stronger character than her husband, and whose fervent Nonconformist piety was one of the abiding influences on her son's development. What we know of Browning in his early years suggests intellectual precocity, an excess of nervous energy (he is recorded as gnawing the edge of his pew during a long sermon) and a passionate attachment to home. He was not to leave until his marriage at the age of thirty-four, and remained until then financially dependent on his father, who paid for the publication of his poems. He was educated at home, mainly through the resources of his father's vast library. As a dissenter Browning could not go to Oxford or Cambridge; in 1828 he enrolled in London's new University College, but after a year became its most distinguished drop-out. He consistently refused to take up a career, and, overcoming his parents' opposition, formally dedicated himself to becoming a poet. As a young man he travelled extensively: in 1834 to Russia with a British diplomatic mission, in 1838 to Italy, returning through Germany and the Low Countries, in 1844, to Italy again. His literary career began in 1833 with the publication of *Pauline*, an anonymous poem which sank without trace and left Browning so ashamed of having written it that he suppressed it for over thirty years until the threat of piracy forced him to acknowledge it. Then came critical success with the appearance of *Paracelsus*, a long poem ostensibly about the sixteenth-century physician and alchemist, but in reality about the splendours and miseries of (Browning's) genius. *Paracelsus* established Browning on the London literary scene (friendships followed with John Forster, Harriet Martineau, Carlyle, Landor, Dickens) and brought him to the attention of the actor-manager William Charles Macready, at whose prompting he wrote his first play *Strafford*, produced at Covent Garden in 1837. It did not flop, and Browning was encouraged to try again. He wrote eight plays in all, of which only *Pippa Passes* (1841) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846) are other than mediocre. A disastrous production of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* (1843), during which Browning broke with Macready, and the subsequent failure of his negotiations with Macready's great rival, Charles Kean, put an end to Browning's theatrical ambitions. In the meantime a failure of a longer-lasting kind had afflicted his career with the publication of *Sordello* in 1840. This great poem, one of the most daring experiments with narrative structure since *Paradise Lost*, and the most radical (in politics and aesthetics) since *Prometheus Unbound*, was received with universal derision for its sublime difficulties of form and language. Tennyson said that there were only two lines in it that he understood, the first – 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told' – and the last – 'Who would, has heard Sordello's story told' – and that both were lies. Carlyle claimed that his wife had read through the poem without being able to discover whether Sordello was a man, a city, or a book. Browning's reputation was not to recover for a quarter of a century; the publication of two collections of shorter poems, *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), which between them contain some of his finest poems in the genre he was to make his own, the dramatic monologue, raised barely a whisper of recognition. Frustration with London literary life was at its height when he began his correspondence with the reclusive invalid, Elizabeth Barrett, prompted by a complimentary

allusion to him in one of her recently published *Poems* (1844). She, six years older than he, had given herself up for lost in human and social terms; whatever the exaggerations and distortions of the legend, there is no doubt that Browning did, as she said, 'lift me from the ground and carry me into life and the sunshine'. In September 1846, after a clandestine courtship in the shadow of Elizabeth Barrett's domineering and disagreeable (rather than monstrous) father, they married and left England for Italy. There, first at Pisa and then at Florence, and with occasional trips to France and England, they remained until Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861. Their only child, Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning ('Pen') was born in 1849. Italy was congenial to Browning's poetry; he was not spared the rebuke of English critics (among them Charles Kingsley) for his unpatriotic liking for the landscapes and characters of 'abroad' (so different from the home life of their own dear Tennyson). *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), a pair of poems on religious subjects, is of interest to Browning specialists; of interest to everyone is *Men and Women* (1855), the collection generally held to be his masterpiece. I would personally prefer the claim of his next volume, *Dramatis Personae* (1864), the first to be published after his wife's death, but there is no doubt that together, and with the addition of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9), they make up the core of Browning's enduring presence in the canon of English poetry. *The Ring and the Book*, twenty-one thousand lines long, consists of a series of interlocking dramatic monologues all telling the same story, that of an obscure seventeenth-century *cause célèbre*, the murder by Count Guido Franceschini of his wife, Pompilia, and his subsequent trial and execution. The element of sensation and melodrama is mixed with social satire, religious and philosophical meditation, and acute psychological probing: the whole represents Browning's heroic attempt to fuse Milton with Dickens, the modern novel with the epic poem. *The Ring and the Book* also marked the decisive advent of critical and popular acclaim: living in London, Browning re-entered the literary and social scene from which he had been an exile; he was lionized, and eventually canonized with the formation of the Browning Society in 1881. (His attitude to the Society was one of guarded appreciation.) A long overdue reassessment of his writings after *The Ring and the Book* has taken place in recent years, though it must be accepted that, because of the established fame of the earlier works and the fact that many of the later ones are lengthy and recondite, they are unlikely to achieve the same standing in the tradition. Among the finest of the later works are *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), whose central character is Don Juan; *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875); *La Saisiaz* (1878), a philosophical elegy; the two volumes of *Dramatic Idylls* (1879, 1880; the spelling was chosen to differentiate them from Tennyson's 'English Idylls' and *Idylls of the King*); *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887), an oblique intellectual autobiography; and his last volume, *Asolando*, published on the day of his death. Browning died in Venice on 12 December 1889. He is buried in Westminster Abbey. 'A good many oddities and a good many great writers have been entombed in the Abbey,' wrote Henry James, 'but none of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones so odd.'

In the same piece ('Browning in Westminster Abbey', later included in *English Hours*) James gave the best summary critical judgement of Browning when he called him 'a tremendous and incomparable modern'. James, of course, meant by 'modern' what we now call 'Victorian'; but the 'all-touching, all-trying spirit of his work, permeated with accumulations and playing with knowledge' connects Browning as much with our century as with his own. It is as a contemporary that

Browning strikes us, not as the funereal grammarian of a past culture. I do not deny that Browning is poet of his period, but I do deny that he is a period poet. The author of the lines ‘God’s in his heaven / All’s right with the world’ has been praised and blamed for being a breezy Victorian optimist, even though the lines are spoken by a young girl outside a house where an adulterous couple are quarrelling over the recent murder of the lady’s husband. Such misconceptions haunt Browning’s work – ironically perhaps, for he was a poet of misconceptions (the title of one of his poems), of failures, of abortive lives and loves, of the just-missed and the nearly fulfilled: a poet, in other words, of desire, perhaps the greatest in our language. The rapid colloquial energy of his style, his gift for the memorable phrase (especially in the vivid openings of poems: ‘Just for a handful of silver he left us’ / ‘It was roses, roses, all the way’, ‘Stop! Let me have the truth of that’), are not the concomitants of uplift and robust optimism: the three poems I have just cited are all about disillusion and disenchantment. The experience of reading Browning’s poems is far from depressing, yet fall and loss are closely woven into their design. They witness to a double vision, famously put in the closing line of ‘Two in the Campagna’: ‘The old trick! Only I discern / Infinite passion, and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn.’ The poems dramatize the recognition that fulfilment lies beyond reach (as in Fra Lippo Lippi’s anticipation that the painters who *succeed* him will also *succeed* where he has failed), but this aftermath is never represented, only gestured towards, and sometimes not even then: ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ is absolutely *stopped* by the indecipherable enigma of its last line, which repeats the title and, disallowing the question ‘what happened next’, throws the poem back on itself.

Desire, then, is the keynote of Browning’s poetry, its ruling spirit, that which rescues it from Matthew Arnold’s charge of ‘confused multitudinousness’. Yet the impression of multitudinousness undeniably there, seized in this early tribute from Walter Savage Landor:

Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
No man hath walked along our road with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse.

(‘To Robert Browning’, 1845)

The varied discourse of Browning’s poetry is perhaps its most immediate attraction; the title of *Men and Women*, as democratic in its way as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (published the same year), opens the gates of poetry to the common people and to everyday things. High and low rub shoulders; the landscape is as likely to be suburban as sublime; Browning’s kingdom, like the kingdom of heaven, is as homely as well as a glorious place. In part we can see here the influence of both drama (especially Shakespeare) and the contemporary novel on Browning’s conception of poetry; but it is also a matter of temperament, of native wit. Writing to Elizabeth Barrett in 1845, Browning expressed his dislike of Mary Shelley’s *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, and in doing so revealed the focus and bent of his own imagination:

And then that way, when she and the like of her are put in a new place, with new flowers, new stones, faces, walls, all new – of looking wisely up at the sun, clouds, evening star, or mountain top and wisely saying ‘who shall describe *that* sight!’ – Not *you*, we very well see – but why dont you tell us that at Rome they eat roasted chestnuts, and put the shells into their aprons, the women do, and calmly empty the whole on the heads of the passengers in the street below; and that at Padua when a man drives his waggon up to a house and stops, all the mouse-coloured oxen that pull it from a beam against their foreheads sit down in a heap and rest ... Her remarks on art ... are amazing. Fra Angelico, for instance, only painted

Martyrs, Virgins &c – she had no eyes for the divine *bon-bourgeoisie* of his pictures; the dear common folk of his crowds, those who sit and listen (spectacle at nose and bent into a comfortable heap to hear better) at the sermon of the Saint – and the children, and women, – divinely pure they all are, but fresh from the streets & market place ...

Sun, clouds, evening star, mountain top: these are the traditional props of Romantic lyric, beloved of Browning's early idol, Shelley, now rejected in the prose of Shelley's widow – rejected in favour of the 'streets & market place', closely observed and concretely rendered. The passage brings us close to the aesthetic of 'Fra Lippo Lippi', but it would be a mistake to assume that Browning is advocating, or practised himself, a naïve, literal-minded realism. For one thing, the style is too sophisticated, the detail too ordered: the oxen sitting down in a heap to rest are echoed by the people 'bent into a comfortable heap to hear better'; Mary Shelley has no eyes for those who sit 'spectacle at nose'; the 'common folk' are 'fresh from the streets & market place' in the sense that they have just come from there, and also because they have the freshness, the immediacy of the actual life from which they are drawn. Still they are there for 'the sermon of the Saint'; the transcendental is shifted from its unreal, ineffable plane ('who shall describe *that* sight!') to the plane of the human. You have to look *up* in order to see clouds and mountain tops; you look directly *at* flowers, stones, and above all faces – they are on your level.

Just as Browning's observation takes in the 'common folk' as well as the 'Saint', so his style insists on the full human scale, on the demotic as well as the learned, the prosaic as well as the lyric. 'You have taken a great range,' Elizabeth Barrett wrote to him, '– from those high faint notes of the mystic which are beyond personality . . . * to dramatic impersonations, gruff with nature.' She goes on to cite, as one of these gruffnesses, the last words of *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, 'Gr-r-r – you swine!' Browning was to scandalize the gentleman's club atmosphere of English poetry with other snorts, coughs, grunts, and onomatopoeic noises. '*Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle the fife,*' says the speaker of 'Up at a Villa – Down in the City' (and he 'an Italian person of quality'!). 'Fol-lol-the-rido-liddle-iddle-ol!' sings Mr Sludge, embarking on the story of his impudent and irrepressible life. But here again we should not forget the artistry with which such effects are created and controlled. Browning's speakers, from the racy, chatty Fra Lippo Lippi to the melancholy Andrea del Sarto, from Caliban's grotesque primitivism to Cleon's over-refined eloquence, from the colloquial urbanity of the speaker in 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' to the grave plainsong of St John in 'A Death in the Desert', never miss a step in the metrical dance which Browning has choreographed for them. That exclamation of Mr Sludge is, at second glance, a perfectly allowable iambic pentameter. The Duke in 'My Last Duchess', that arch manipulator, is manipulated by the couplets into which his lofty and condescending cadences unknowingly fall. The 'speaking subject' whom the dramatic monologue evokes is also, inevitably, subjected to the poem's imaginative design.

A brief word about the selection and order of poems for this volume. I have tried to strike a balance between the poems for which Browning is best known (but which are not always his best) and those of my own taste leads me to recommend; at times the choice has been hard, nowhere more so than in the exclusion of 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' to make way for 'A Death in the Desert'. With two exceptions I have chosen only complete poems; Browning's long poems are not easily broken up, and they are too long to print in their entirety. Readers should be aware of the imbalance this will cause in their impressions of Browning's work; I can only urge them to try the long poems (especially *The Ring and the Book*) for themselves. The two exceptions are the song from *Pippa Passes* containing Browning's best-known lines, which it seemed perverse to omit; and (prompted by Kenneth Allott's inclusion of it in his selection, Oxford University Press, 1967) a scene from the same work which does stand up on its own, and is interesting as a rare example of successful dramatic dialogue in Browning.

The poems are printed in the order of their first publication, except for 'Spring Song', which seemed to me the right note (of elegy, of triumph) on which to end.

DANIEL KARR

Note on the Text

The text is that of the two-volume edition of Browning's poems edited by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins in the Penguin English Poets series (Harmondsworth, 1981). The copy-text used (with minor emendations and corrections) by Pettigrew and Collins is that of the last collected edition which appeared in Browning's lifetime, the *Poetical Works* of 1888–9. The poems (except for the last one) are printed in order of publication; the volumes in which they first appeared are identified in the Notes.

Porphyria's Lover

The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
[10] Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
[20] And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me – she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
[30] So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise

Made my heart swell, and still it grew

While I debated what to do.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,

Perfectly pure and good: I found

A thing to do, and all her hair

In one long yellow string I wound

[40] Three times her little throat around,

And strangled her. No pain felt she;

I am quite sure she felt no pain.

As a shut bud that holds a bee,

I warily oped her lids: again

Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.

And I untightened next the tress

About her neck; her cheek once more

Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:

I propped her head up as before,

[50] Only, this time my shoulder bore

Her head, which droops upon it still:

The smiling rosy little head,

So glad it has its utmost will,

That all it scorned at once is fled,

And I, its love, am gained instead!

Porphyria's love: she guessed not how

Her darling one wish would be heard.

And thus we sit together now,

And all night long we have not stirred,

[60] And yet God has not said a word!

Johannes Agricola in Meditation

There's heaven above, and night by night
I look right through its gorgeous roof;
No suns and moons though e'er so bright
Avail to stop me; splendour-proof
I keep the broods of stars aloof:
For I intend to get to God,
For 'tis to God I speed so fast,
For in God's breast, my own abode,
Those shoals of dazzling glory passed,
[10] I lay my spirit down at last.
I lie where I have always lain,
God smiles as he has always smiled;
Ere suns and moons could wax and wane,
Ere stars were thundergirt, or piled
The heavens, God thought on me his child;
Ordained a life for me, arrayed
Its circumstances every one
To the minutest; ay, God said
This head this hand should rest upon
[20] Thus, ere he fashioned star or sun.
And having thus created me,
Thus rooted me, he bade me grow,
Guiltless for ever, like a tree
That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know
The law by which it prospers so:
But sure that thought and word and deed
All go to swell his love for me,
Me, made because that love had need
Of something irreversibly
[30] Pledged solely its content to be.
Yes, yes, a tree which must ascend,
No poison-gourd foredoomed to stoop!
I have God's warrant, could I blend

All hideous sins, as in a cup,

To drink the mingled venoms up;

Secure my nature will convert

The draught to blossoming gladness fast:

While sweet dews turn to the gourd's hurt,

And bloat, and while they bloat it, blast,

[40] As from the first its lot was cast.

For as I lie, smiled on, full-fed

By unexhausted power to bless,

I gaze below on hell's fierce bed,

And those its waves of flame oppress,

Swarming in ghastly wretchedness;

Whose life on earth aspired to be

One altar-smoke, so pure! – to win

If not love like God's love for me,

At least to keep his anger in;

[50] And all their striving turned to sin.

Priest, doctor, hermit, monk grown white

With prayer, the broken-hearted nun,

The martyr, the wan acolyte,

The incense-swinging child, – undone

Before God fashioned star or sun!

God, whom I praise; how could I praise,

If such as I might understand,

Make out and reckon on his ways,

And bargain for his love, and stand,

[60] Paying a price, at his right hand?

Song from Pippa Passes

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven –
All's right with the world!

Scene from Pippa Passes

FIRST GIRL: There goes a swallow to Venice – the stout seafarer!

Seeing those birds fly, makes one wish for wings.

Let us all wish; you wish first!

SECOND GIRL: I? This sunset

To finish.

THIRD GIRL: That old – somebody I know,

Greyer and older than my grandfather,

To give me the same treat he gave last week –

Feeding me on his knee with fig-peckers,

Lampreys and red Breganze-wine, and mumbling

The while some folly about how well I fare,

[10] Let sit and eat my supper quietly:

Since had he not himself been late this morning

Detained at – never mind where, – had he not ...

‘Eh, baggage, had I not!’ –

SECOND GIRL: How she can lie!

THIRD GIRL: Look there – by the nails!

SECOND GIRL: What makes your fingers red?

THIRD GIRL: Dipping them into wine to write bad words with

On the bright table: how he laughed!

FIRST GIRL: My turn.

Spring’s come and summer’s coming. I would wear

A long loose gown, down to the feet and hands,

With plaits here, close about the throat, all day;

[20] And all night lie, the cool long nights, in bed;

And have new milk to drink, apples to eat,

Deuzans and junetings, leather-coats ... ah, I should say,

This is away in the fields – miles!

THIRD GIRL: Say at once

You’d be at home: she’d always be at home!

Now comes the story of the farm among

The cherry orchards, and how April snowed

White blossoms on her as she ran. Why, fool,

They've rubbed the chalk-mark out, how tall you were,
Twisted your starling's neck, broken his cage,
Made a dung-hill of your garden!

FIRST GIRL: [30] They, destroy

My garden since I left them? well – perhaps!
I would have done so: so I hope they have!
A fig-tree curled out of our cottage wall;
They called it mine, I have forgotten why,
It must have been there long ere I was born:
Cric – cric – I think I hear the wasps o'erhead
Pricking the papers strung to flutter there
And keep off birds in fruit-time – coarse long papers,
And the wasps eat them, prick them through and through.

THIRD GIRL: [40] How her mouth twitches! Where was I? – before

She broke in with her wishes and long gowns
And wasps – would I be such a fool! – Oh, here!
This is my way: I answer every one
Who asks me why I make so much of him –
(If you say, 'you love him' – straight 'he'll not be gulled!')
'He that seduced me when I was a girl
Thus high – had eyes like yours, or hair like yours,
Brown, red, white,' – as the case may be: that pleases!
See how that beetle burnishes in the path!
[50] There sparkles he along the dust: and, there –
Your journey to that maize-tuft spoiled at least!

FIRST GIRL: When I was young, they said if you killed one

Of those sunshiny beetles, that his friend
Up there, would shine no more that day nor next.

SECOND GIRL: When you were young? Nor are you young, that's true.

How your plump arms, that were, have dropped away!
Why, I can span them. Cecco beats you still?
No matter, so you keep your curious hair.
I wish they'd find a way to dye our hair
[60] Your colour – any lighter tint, indeed,
Than black: the men say they are sick of black,
Black eyes, black hair!

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
[10] The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff
[20] Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace – all and each
[30] Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked
Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let
[40] Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
– E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
[50] Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister

I
Gr-r-r – there go, my heart’s abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God’s blood, would not mine kill you!
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims –
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
Hell dry you up with its flames!

II
At the meal we sit together:
[10] *Salve tibi!* I must hear
Wise talk of the kind of weather,
Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork-crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt:
What’s the Latin name for ‘parsley’?
What’s the Greek name for Swine’s Snout?

III
Whew! We’ll have our platter burnished,
Laid with care on our own shelf!
With a fire-new spoon we’re furnished,
[20] And a goblet for ourself,
Rinsed like something sacrificial
Ere ’tis fit to touch our chaps –
Marked with L. for our initial!
(He-he! There his lily snaps!)

IV
Saint, forsooth! While brown Dolores
Squats outside the Convent bank
With Sanchicha, telling stories,
Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,

[30] – Can't I see his dead eye glow,

Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?

(That is, if he'd let it show!)

v

When he finishes refection,

Knife and fork he never lays

Cross-wise, to my recollection,

As do I, in Jesu's praise.

I the Trinity illustrate,

Drinking watered orange-pulp –

In three sips the Arian frustrate;

[40] While he drains his at one gulp.

vi

Oh, those melons? If he's able

We're to have a feast! so nice!

One goes to the Abbot's table,

All of us get each a slice.

How go on your flowers? None double?

Not one fruit-sort can you spy?

Strange! – And I, too, at such trouble,

Keep them close-nipped on the sly!

vii

There's a great text in Galatians,

[50] Once you trip on it, entails

Twenty-nine distinct damnations,

One sure, if another fails:

If I trip him just a-dying,

Sure of heaven as sure can be,

Spin him round and send him flying

Off to hell, a Manichee?

viii

Or, my scrofulous French novel

On grey paper with blunt type!

Simply glance at it, you grovel

[60] Hand and foot in Belial's gripe:

If I double down its pages

At the woeful sixteenth print,

When he gathers his greengages,

Ope a sieve and slip it in't?

ix

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