ERNEST DOWSON

To One in Bedlam

FOR HENRY DAVRAY

With delicate, mad hands, behind his sordid bars,
Surely he hath his posies, which they tear and twine;
Those scentless wisps of straw, that miserably line
His strait, caged universe, whereat the dull world stares,

Pedant and pitiful. O, how his rapt gaze wars
With their stupidity! Know they what dreams divine
Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars?

O lamentable brother! if those pity thee,
Am I not fain of all thy lone eyes promise me;
Half a fool’s kingdom, far from men who sow and reap,
All their days, vanity? Better than mortal flowers,
Thy moon-kissed roses seem: better than love or sleep,
The star-crowned solitude of thine oblivious hours!

1892, 1896

A Last Word

Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;
The day is overworn, the birds all flown;
And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;
Despair and death; deep darkness o’er the land,
Broods like an owl; we cannot understand
Laughter or tears, for we have only known
Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
Have driven our perverse and aimless band.
Let us go hence, somewhither strange and cold,
To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust

dedicates

1. Insane asylum (specifically, an ancient mad-house in London).
2. Henry Davray was a French critic and great friend of Dowson’s; he reviewed English books for the Mercure de France. The habit of dedicating individual poems to particular friends Dowson and Lionel Johnson picked up from the French poet Paul Verlaine (1844–96), who entitled one of his volumes of poetry Dédicaces (“Dedications”), and explained in the introduction that “these ballads and sonnets are all intimate and are directed only to
certain friends and good companions of the author who dedicates the poems to them exclusively, without any other intention than of pleasing them.”
3. The sense of lines 10–12 is: “Would I not be glad to have all that your eyes promise me—namely, half a fool’s kingdom—far from men who are engaged in ordinary mundane activities and who thus pass their days in vanity?” The “fool’s kingdom” is the lunatic’s world of imagination; the lunatic’s eyes promise to share that kingdom with the poet.
Find end of labor, where’s rest for the old,
Freedom to all from love and fear and lust.
Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.

1896, 1899

Spleen

FOR ARTHUR SYMONS

I was not sorrowful, I could not weep,
And all my memories were put to sleep.

I watched the river grow more white and strange,
All day till evening I watched it change.

All day till evening I watched the rain
Beat wearily upon the window pane.

I was not sorrowful, but only tired
Of everything that ever I desired.

Her lips, her eyes, all day became to me
The shadow of a shadow utterly.

All day mine hunger for her heart became
Oblivion, until the evening came,
And left me sorrowful, inclined to weep,
With all my memories that could not sleep.

1896

Flos Lunae

FOR YVANHOÉ RAMBOSSON

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
Nor trouble the calm fount of speech
With aught of passion or surprise.
The heart of thee I cannot reach:
I would not alter thy cold eyes!

2. This name sounds too good to be true, and perhaps is. Desmond Flower’s annotated edition of Dowson’s poetical works identifies the other characters to whom Dowson dedicated poems but is silent on this one.
I would not alter thy cold eyes;
Nor have thee smile, nor make thee weep:
Though all my life droops down and dies,
Desiring thee, desiring sleep,

I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
I would not change thee if I might,
To whom my prayers for incense rise,
Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!

I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
With trouble of the human heart:
Within their glance my spirit lies.
A frozen thing, alone, apart:

I would not alter thy cold eyes.

Dregs

The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof,
(This is the end of every song man sings!)
The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,
Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;
And health and hope have gone the way of love
Into the drear oblivion of lost things.
Ghosts go along with us until the end;
This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropped curtain and the closing gate;
This is the end of all the songs man sings.

Exchanges

All that I had I brought.
   Little enough I know;
A poor rhyme roughly wrought,
   A rose to match thy snow:
All that I had I brought.

Little enough I sought;
   But a word compassionate,
A passing glance, or thought,
For me outside the gate:
Little enough I sought.

Little enough I found:
All that you had, perchance!
With the dead leaves on the ground,
I dance the devil’s dance.
All that you had I found

1899

Carthusians

Through what long heaviness, assayed in what strange fire,
Have these white monks been brought into the way of peace,
Despising the world’s monks and the world’s desire,
Which from the body of this death bring no release?

Within their austere walls no voices penetrate;
A sacred silence only, as of death, obtains;
Nothing finds entry here of loud or passionate;
This quiet is the exceeding profit of their pains.

From many lands they came, in divers fiery ways;
Each knew at last the vanity of earthly joys;
And one was crowned with thorns, and one was crowned with bays,²
And each was tired at last of the world’s foolish noise.

It was not theirs with Dominic to preach God’s holy wrath,
They were too stern to bear sweet Francis’ gentle sway;³
Their was a higher calling and a steeper path,
To dwell alone with Christ, to meditate and pray.

A cloistered company, they are companionless,
None knoweth here the secret of his brother’s heart:
They are but come together for more loneliness,
Whose bond is solitude and silence all their part.

O beatific life! Who is there shall gainsay,
Your great refusal’s victory, your little loss,
Deserting vanity’ for the more perfect way,
The sweeter service of the most dolorous Cross.

1. A monastic order founded in 1084 at Chartreuse in the French Alps. The Carthusian regimen is stringently ascetic; each white-robed monk is a silent solitary except when participating in services of worship. Cf. Arnold’s Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.
2. A crown of bay leaves (or laurel) was awarded to poets whose work was admired.
3. St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican order of friars (1215), whose preaching was especially directed to converting heathens in Christianity; St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order of friars in 1209, was a gentle and tender-spirited leader who worked and preached among the poor.
Ye shall prevail at last! Surely ye shall prevail!
   Your silence and austerity shall win at last:
Desire and mirth, the world's ephemeral lights shall fail,
   The sweet star of your queen is never overcast.

We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine;
   With wine we dull our souls and careful strains of art;
Our cups are polished skulls round which the roses twine:
   None dares to look at Death who leers and lurks apart.

Move on, white company, whom that has not sufficed!
   Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail:
Pray for our heedlessness, O dwellers with the Christ!
   Though the world fall apart, surely ye shall prevail.