LIONEL JOHNSON

The Precept of Silence

I know you: solitary griefs,
Desolate passions, aching hours!
I know you: tremulous beliefs,
Agonized hopes, and ashen flowers!

5 The winds are sometimes sad to me;
The starry spaces, full of fear:
Mine is the sorrow on the sea,
And mine the sigh of places drear.

Some players upon plaintive strings
Publish their wistfulness abroad:
I have not spoken of these things,
Save to one man,¹ and unto God.

1895

Mystic and Cavalier

TO HERBERT PERCY HORNE¹

Go from me: I am one of those, who fall.²
What! hath no cold wind swept your heart at all,
In my sad company? Before the end,
Go from me, dear my friend!

5 Yours are the victories of light; your feet
Rest from good toil, where rest is brave and sweet.
But after warfare in a mourning gloom,
I rest in clouds of doom.

Have you not read so, looking in these eyes?
Is it the common light of the pure skies,
Lights up their shadowy depths? The end is set:
Though the end be not yet.

When gracious music stirs, and all is bright,
And beauty triumphs through a courtly night;

¹ Johnson's confessor.
² 1865–1916; a prominent member of the Century Guild (see the Johnson introduction); architect, art historian, typographer, and poet.
3 Johnson's dramatization of himself as “one of those, who fall,” represents a characteristic pose. He is the “mystic,” the man who remains outside normal active life, addressing his friend the “cavalier,” the man of action and success.
When I too joy, a man like other men:
Yet, am I like them, then?

And in the battle, when the horsemen sweep
Against a thousand deaths, and fall on sleep:
Who ever sought that sudden calm, if I
Sought not? Yet, could not die.

Seek with thine eyes to pierce this crystal sphere:
Canst read a fate there, prosperous and clear?
Only the mists, only the weeping clouds:
Dimness, and airy shrouds.

Beneath, what angels are at work? What powers
Prepare the secret of the fatal hours?
See! the mists tremble, and the clouds are stirred:
When comes the calling word?

The clouds are breaking from the crystal ball,
Breaking and clearing: and I look to fall.
When the cold winds and airs of portent sweep,
My spirit may have sleep.

O rich and sounding voices of the air!
Interpreters and prophets of despair:
Priests of a fearful sacrament! I come,
To make with you mine home.

The Dark Angel

Dark Angel, with thine aching lust
To rid the world of penitence:
Malicious Angel, who still dost
My soul such subtile violence!

Because of thee, no thought, no thing,
Abides for me undesecrate:
Dark Angel, ever on the wing,
Who never reachest me too late!

3. The voices are both uplifting and desolating—a characteristic Johnson combination. The poem expresses both a love and a fear of death, a longing for annihilation and a recognition of its “fearfulness.” For Johnson, there was always a dark side to everything desired; Ernest Dowson regarded this poem as one of Johnson’s most successful expressions of this attitude.

1. The “Dark Angel” is traditionally Satan, the fallen angel; here it is also Johnson’s other self (he was always conscious of a duality within him) preferring the “waters of bitterness” (which are nevertheless “sweet”) to more healthy pleasures. Johnson, like Wilde a practicing homosexual, derived a twisted satisfaction from a contemplation of his own perversity.
When music sounds, then changest thou
Its silvery to a sultry fire:
Nor will thine envious heart allow
Delight untortured by desire.

Through thee, the gracious Muses turn
To Furies, O mine Enemy!
And all the things of beauty burn
With flames of evil ecstasy.

Because of thee, the land of dreams
Becomes a gathering place of fears.
Until tormented slumber seems
One vehemence of useless tears.

When sunlight glows upon the flowers,
Or ripples down the dancing sea:
Thou, with thy troop of passionate powers,
Beleaguerest, bewilderest, me.

Within the breath of autumn woods,
Within the winter silences:
Thy venomous spirit stirs and broods,
O Master of impieties!

The ardor of red flames is thine,
And thine the steely soul of ice:
Thou poisonest the fair design
Of nature, with unfair device.²

Apples of ashes, golden bright;
Waters of bitterness, how sweet!
O banquet of a foul delight,
Prepared by thee, dark Paraclete!³

Thou art the whisper in the gloom,
The hinting tone, the haunting laugh:
Thou art the adorner of my tomb,
The minstrel of mine epitaph.

I fight thee, in the Holy Name!
Yet, what thou dost is what God saith:
Tempter! should I escape thy flame,
Thou wilt have helped my soul from Death:

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² The Dark Angel poisons nature’s design of using sex as a means of continuing the race by the “unfair device” of implanting homosexual instincts in some people, including the poet.
³ “Paraclete,” from the Greek, means “advocate” or “intercessor.” The word is used in the New Testament as a title of the Holy Spirit, and is translated “Comforter” in the King James Bible (John xiv.16, for example). “Dark Paraclete” is thus another aspect of the Dark Angel, and the “foul delight” is the pleasure of perverted love.
The second Death, that never dies,
That cannot die, when time is dead:
Live Death, wherein the lost soul cries,
Eternally uncomforted.

Dark Angel, with thine aching lust!

Of two defeats, of two despairs:
Less dread, a change to drifting dust,
Than thine eternity of cares.

Do what thou wilt, thou shalt not so,
Dark Angel! triumph over me:

Lonely, unto the Lone I go;
Divine, to the Divinity.

4. An echo from the 3rd-century Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus: “This, therefore, is the life of the Gods, and of divine and happy men, a liberation from all earthly concerns, a life unaccompanied by human pleasures, and a flight of the alone to the alone” (Enneads VI.9).