

# **The Tower**

William Butler Yeats

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# The Tower

William Butler Yeats

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## Sailing to Byzantium

THAT is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
– Those dying generations – at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

## The Tower

I  
WHAT shall I do with this absurdity –  
O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature,  
Decrepit age that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail?  
Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination, nor an ear and eye  
That more expected the impossible –  
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,  
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back  
And had the livelong summer day to spend.  
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,

Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend  
Until imagination, ear and eye,  
Can be content with argument and deal  
In abstract things; or be derided by  
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

II

I pace upon the battlements and stare  
On the foundations of a house, or where  
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;  
And send imagination forth  
Under the day's declining beam, and call  
Images and memories  
From ruin or from ancient trees,  
For I would ask a question of them all.

Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French, and once  
When every silver candlestick or sconce  
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine.  
A serving-man, that could divine  
That most respected lady's every wish,  
Ran and with the garden shears  
Clipped an insolent farmer's ears  
And brought them in a little covered dish.

Some few remembered still when I was young  
A peasant girl commended by a Song,  
Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,  
And praised the colour of her face,  
And had the greater joy in praising her,  
Remembering that, if walked she there,  
Farmers jostled at the fair  
So great a glory did the song confer.

And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,  
Or else by toasting her a score of times,  
Rose from the table and declared it right  
To test their fancy by their sight;  
But they mistook the brightness of the moon  
For the prosaic light of day –  
Music had driven their wits astray –  
And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;  
Yet, now I have considered it, I find  
That nothing strange; the tragedy began  
With Homer that was a blind man,  
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.  
O may the moon and sunlight seem  
One inextricable beam,  
For if I triumph I must make men mad.

And I myself created Hanrahan  
And drove him drunk or sober through the dawn  
From somewhere in the neighbouring cottages.  
Caught by an old man's juggleries  
He stumbled, tumbled, fumbled to and fro  
And had but broken knees for hire  
And horrible splendour of desire;  
I thought it all out twenty years ago:

Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn;  
And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on  
He so bewitched the cards under his thumb  
That all but the one card became  
A pack of hounds and not a pack of cards,  
And that he changed into a hare.  
Hanrahan rose in frenzy there  
And followed up those baying creatures towards –

O towards I have forgotten what – enough!  
I must recall a man that neither love  
Nor music nor an enemy's clipped ear  
Could, he was so harried, cheer;  
A figure that has grown so fabulous  
There's not a neighbour left to say  
When he finished his dog's day:  
An ancient bankrupt master of this house.

Before that ruin came, for centuries,  
Rough men–at–arms, cross–gartered to the knees  
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,  
And certain men–at–arms there were  
Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,  
Come with loud cry and panting breast  
To break upon a sleeper's rest  
While their great wooden dice beat on the board.

As I would question all, come all who can;  
Come old, necessitous. half–mounted man;  
And bring beauty's blind rambling celebrant;  
The red man the juggler sent  
Through God–forsaken meadows; Mrs. French,  
Gifted with so fine an ear;  
The man drowned in a bog's mire,  
When mocking Muses chose the country wench.

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,  
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,  
Whether in public or in secret rage  
As I do now against old age?  
But I have found an answer in those eyes

That are impatient to be gone;  
Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,  
For I need all his mighty memories.

Old lecher with a love on every wind,  
Bring up out of that deep considering mind  
All that you have discovered in the grave,  
For it is certain that you have  
Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing  
plunge, lured by a softening eye,  
Or by a touch or a sigh,  
Into the labyrinth of another's being;

Does the imagination dwell the most  
Upon a woman won or woman lost?  
If on the lost, admit you turned aside  
From a great labyrinth out of pride,  
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought  
Or anything called conscience once;  
And that if memory recur, the sun's  
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

### III

It is time that I wrote my will;  
I choose upstanding men  
That climb the streams until  
The fountain leap, and at dawn  
Drop their cast at the side  
Of dripping stone; I declare  
They shall inherit my pride,  
The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State.  
Neither to slaves that were spat on,  
Nor to the tyrants that spat,  
The people of Burke and of Grattan  
That gave, though free to refuse –  
pride, like that of the morn,  
When the headlong light is loose,  
Or that of the fabulous horn,  
Or that of the sudden shower  
When all streams are dry,  
Or that of the hour  
When the swan must fix his eye  
Upon a fading gleam,  
Float out upon a long  
Last reach of glittering stream  
And there sing his last song.  
And I declare my faith:  
I mock plotinus' thought  
And cry in plato's teeth,  
Death and life were not

## The Tower

Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul,  
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,  
And further add to that  
That, being dead, we rise,  
Dream and so create  
Translunar paradise.  
I have prepared my peace  
With learned Italian things  
And the proud stones of Greece,  
Poet's imaginings  
And memories of love,  
Memories of the words of women,  
All those things whereof  
Man makes a superhuman,  
Mirror-resembling dream.

As at the loophole there  
The daws chatter and scream,  
And drop twigs layer upon layer.  
When they have mounted up,  
The mother bird will rest  
On their hollow top,  
And so warm her wild nest.

I leave both faith and pride  
To young upstanding men  
Climbing the mountain-side,  
That under bursting dawn  
They may drop a fly;  
Being of that metal made  
Till it was broken by  
This sedentary trade.

Now shall I make my soul,  
Compelling it to study  
In a learned school  
Till the wreck of body,  
Slow decay of blood,  
Testy delirium  
Or dull decrepitude,  
Or what worse evil come –  
The death of friends, or death  
Of every brilliant eye  
That made a catch in the breath – .  
Seem but the clouds of the sky  
When the horizon fades;  
Or a bird's sleepy cry  
Among the deepening shades.

## Meditations In Time Of Civil War

I

Ancestral Houses

Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns,  
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,  
Life overflows without ambitious pains;  
And rains down life until the basin spills,  
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains  
As though to choose whatever shape it wills  
And never stoop to a mechanical  
Or servile shape, at others' beck and call.

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not Sung  
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
That out of life's own self-delight had sprung  
The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems  
As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung  
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,  
And not a fountain, were the symbol which  
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man  
Called architect and artist in, that they,  
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone  
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,  
The gentleness none there had ever known;  
But when the master's buried mice can play.  
And maybe the great-grandson of that house,  
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

O what if gardens where the peacock strays  
With delicate feet upon old terraces,  
Or else all Juno from an urn displays  
Before the indifferent garden deities;  
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways  
Where slipped Contemplation finds his ease  
And Childhood a delight for every sense,  
But take our greatness with our violence?

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,  
And buildings that a haughtier age designed,  
The pacing to and fro on polished floors  
Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined  
With famous portraits of our ancestors;

What if those things the greatest of mankind  
Consider most to magnify, or to bless,  
But take our greatness with our bitterness?

II

My House

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,  
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,  
An acre of stony ground,  
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,  
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,  
The sound of the rain or sound  
Of every wind that blows;  
The stilted water-hen  
Crossing Stream again  
Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,  
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,  
A candle and written page.  
Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on  
In some like chamber, shadowing forth  
How the daemonic rage  
Imagined everything.  
Benighted travellers  
From markets and from fairs  
Have seen his midnight candle glimmering.

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms  
Gathered a score of horse and spent his days  
In this tumultuous spot,  
Where through long wars and sudden night alarms  
His dwindling score and he seemed castaways  
Forgetting and forgot;  
And I, that after me  
My bodily heirs may find,  
To exalt a lonely mind,  
Befitting emblems of adversity.

III

My Table

Two heavy trestles, and a board  
Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,  
By pen and paper lies,  
That it may moralise  
My days out of their aimlessness.  
A bit of an embroidered dress  
Covers its wooden sheath.  
Chaucer had not drawn breath  
When it was forged. In Sato's house,  
Curved like new moon, moon-luminous

It lay five hundred years.  
Yet if no change appears  
No moon; only an aching heart  
Conceives a changeless work of art.  
Our learned men have urged  
That when and where 'twas forged  
A marvellous accomplishment,  
In painting or in pottery, went  
From father unto son  
And through the centuries ran  
And seemed unchanging like the sword.  
Soul's beauty being most adored,  
Men and their business took  
Me soul's unchanging look;  
For the most rich inheritor,  
Knowing that none could pass Heaven's door,  
That loved inferior art,  
Had such an aching heart  
That he, although a country's talk  
For silken clothes and stately walk.  
Had waking wits; it seemed  
Juno's peacock screamed.

IV

My Descendants

Having inherited a vigorous mind  
From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams  
And leave a woman and a man behind  
As vigorous of mind, and yet it seems  
Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind,  
Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams,  
But the torn petals strew the garden plot;  
And there's but common greenness after that.

And what if my descendants lose the flower  
Through natural declension of the soul,  
Through too much business with the passing hour,  
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?  
May this laborious stair and this stark tower  
Become a roofless min that the owl  
May build in the cracked masonry and cry  
Her desolation to the desolate sky.

The primum Mobile that fashioned us  
Has made the very owls in circles move;  
And I, that count myself most prosperous,  
Seeing that love and friendship are enough,  
For an old neighbour's friendship chose the house  
And decked and altered it for a girl's love,  
And know whatever flourish and decline  
These stones remain their monument and mine.

V

The Road at My Door

An affable Irregular,  
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,  
Comes cracking jokes of civil war  
As though to die by gunshot were  
The finest play under the sun.

A brown Lieutenant and his men,  
Half dressed in national uniform,  
Stand at my door, and I complain  
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,  
A pear-tree broken by the storm.

I count those feathered balls of soot  
The moor-hen guides upon the stream.  
To silence the envy in my thought;  
And turn towards my chamber, caught  
In the cold snows of a dream.

VI

The Stare's Nest by My Window

The bees build in the crevices  
Of loosening masonry, and there  
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.  
My wall is loosening; honey-bees,  
Come build in the empty house of the state.

We are closed in, and the key is turned  
On our uncertainty; somewhere  
A man is killed, or a house burned,  
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;  
Some fourteen days of civil war;  
Last night they trundled down the road  
That dead young soldier in his blood:  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;  
More Substance in our enmities  
Than in our love; O honey-bees,  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

VII

I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's  
Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness  
I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,

## The Tower

A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,  
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon  
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,  
A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind  
And those white glimmering fragments of the mist sweep by.  
Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;  
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye.

"Vengeance upon the murderers,' the cry goes up,  
"Vengeance for Jacques Molay.' In cloud-pale rags, or in lace,  
The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,  
Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,  
Plunges towards nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide  
For the embrace of nothing; and I, my wits astray  
Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried  
For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay.

Their legs long, delicate and slender, aquamarine their eyes,  
Magical unicorns bear ladies on their backs.  
The ladies close their musing eyes. No prophecies,  
Remembered out of Babylonian almanacs,  
Have closed the ladies' eyes, their minds are but a pool  
Where even longing drowns under its own excess;  
Nothing but stillness can remain when hearts are full  
Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness.

The cloud-pale unicorns, the eyes of aquamarine,  
The quivering half-closed eyelids, the rags of cloud or of lace,  
Or eyes that rage has brightened, arms it has made lean,  
Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place  
To brazen hawks. Nor self-delighting reverie,  
Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone,  
Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,  
The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon.

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair  
Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth  
In something that all others understand or share;  
But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth  
A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,  
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,  
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,  
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.

## Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen

I

MANY ingenious lovely things are gone  
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,  
protected from the circle of the moon  
That pitches common things about. There stood  
Amid the ornamental bronze and stone  
An ancient image made of olive wood –  
And gone are phidias' famous ivories  
And all the golden grasshoppers and bees.

We too had many pretty toys when young:  
A law indifferent to blame or praise,  
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong  
Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays;  
Public opinion ripening for so long  
We thought it would outlive all future days.  
O what fine thought we had because we thought  
That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.

All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,  
And a great army but a showy thing;  
What matter that no cannon had been turned  
Into a ploughshare? Parliament and king  
Thought that unless a little powder burned  
The trumpeters might burst with trumpeting  
And yet it lack all glory; and perchance  
The guardsmen's drowsy chargers would not prance.

Now days are dragon–ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery  
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot–free;  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

He who can read the signs nor sink unmanned  
Into the half–deceit of some intoxicant  
From shallow wits; who knows no work can stand,  
Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent  
On master–work of intellect or hand,  
No honour leave its mighty monument,  
Has but one comfort left: all triumph would  
But break upon his ghostly solitude.  
But is there any comfort to be found?

Man is in love and loves what vanishes,  
What more is there to say? That country round  
None dared admit, if Such a thought were his,  
Incendiary or bigot could be found  
To burn that stump on the Acropolis,  
Or break in bits the famous ivories  
Or traffic in the grasshoppers or bees.

II

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound  
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,  
It seemed that a dragon of air  
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round  
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;  
So the platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

III

Some moralist or mythological poet  
Compares the solitary soul to a swan;  
I am satisfied with that,  
Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,  
Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,  
An image of its state;  
The wings half spread for flight,  
The breast thrust out in pride  
Whether to play, or to ride  
Those winds that clamour of approaching night.

A man in his own secret meditation  
Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made  
In art or politics;  
Some platonist affirms that in the station  
Where we should cast off body and trade  
The ancient habit sticks,  
And that if our works could  
But vanish with our breath  
That were a lucky death,  
For triumph can but mar our solitude.

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:  
That image can bring wildness, bring a rage  
To end all things, to end  
What my laborious life imagined, even  
The half-imagined, the half-written page;  
O but we dreamed to mend  
Whatever mischief seemed  
To afflict mankind, but now

## The Tower

That winds of winter blow  
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.

### IV

We, who seven yeats ago  
Talked of honour and of truth,  
Shriek with pleasure if we show  
The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth.

### V

Come let us mock at the great  
That had such burdens on the mind  
And toiled so hard and late  
To leave some monument behind,  
Nor thought of the levelling wind.

Come let us mock at the wise;  
With all those calendars whereon  
They fixed old aching eyes,  
They never saw how seasons run,  
And now but gape at the sun.

Come let us mock at the good  
That fancied goodness might be gay,  
And sick of solitude  
Might proclaim a holiday:  
Wind shrieked – and where are they?

Mock mockers after that  
That would not lift a hand maybe  
To help good, wise or great  
To bar that foul storm out, for we  
Traffic in mockery.

### VI

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;  
Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded  
On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,  
But wearied running round and round in their courses  
All break and vanish, and evil gathers head:  
Herodias' daughters have returned again,  
A sudden blast of dusty wind and after  
Thunder of feet, tumult of images,  
Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;  
And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter  
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,  
According to the wind, for all are blind.  
But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon  
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought  
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,  
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson

## The Tower

To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought  
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.

## The Wheel

THROUGH winter-time we call on spring,  
And through the spring on summer call,  
And when abounding hedges ring  
Declare that winter's best of all;  
And after that there's nothing good  
Because the spring-time has not come –  
Nor know that what disturbs our blood  
Is but its longing for the tomb.

## Youth And Age

MUCH did I rage when young,  
Being by the world oppressed,  
But now with flattering tongue  
It speeds the parting guest.

## The New Faces

IF you, that have grown old, were the first dead,  
Neither catalpa tree nor scented lime  
Should hear my living feet, nor would I tread

Where we wrought that shall break the teeth of Time.  
Let the new faces play what tricks they will  
In the old rooms; night can outbalance day,  
Our shadows rove the garden gravel still,  
The living seem more shadowy than they.

## A Prayer For My Son

BID a strong ghost stand at the head  
That my Michael may sleep sound,  
Nor cry, nor turn in the bed  
Till his morning meal come round;  
And may departing twilight keep  
All dread afar till morning's back.  
That his mother may not lack  
Her fill of sleep.

Bid the ghost have sword in fist:  
Some there are, for I avow  
Such devilish things exist,  
Who have planned his murder, for they know  
Of some most haughty deed or thought  
That waits upon his future days,  
And would through hatred of the bays  
Bring that to nought.

Though You can fashion everything  
From nothing every day, and teach  
The morning stars to sing,  
You have lacked articulate speech  
To tell Your simplest want, and known,  
Wailing upon a woman's knee,  
All of that worst ignominy  
Of flesh and bone;

And when through all the town there ran  
The servants of Your enemy,  
A woman and a man,  
Unless the Holy Writings lie,  
Hurried through the smooth and rough  
And through the fertile and waste,  
protecting, till the danger past,  
With human love.

## Two Songs From A Play

I

I SAW a staring virgin stand  
Where holy Dionysus died,  
And tear the heart out of his side.  
And lay the heart upon her hand  
And bear that beating heart away;  
Of Magnus Annus at the spring,  
As though God's death were but a play.

Another Troy must rise and set,  
Another lineage feed the crow,  
Another Argo's painted prow  
Drive to a flashier bauble yet.  
The Roman Empire stood appalled:  
It dropped the reins of peace and war  
When that fierce virgin and her Star  
Out of the fabulous darkness called.

II

In pity for man's darkening thought  
He walked that room and issued thence  
In Galilean turbulence;  
The Babylonian starlight brought  
A fabulous, formless darkness in;  
Odour of blood when Christ was slain  
Made all platonic tolerance vain  
And vain all Doric discipline.

Everything that man esteems  
Endures a moment or a day.  
Love's pleasure drives his love away,  
The painter's brush consumes his dreams;  
The herald's cry, the soldier's tread  
Exhaust his glory and his might:  
Whatever flames upon the night  
Man's own resinous heart has fed.

## Fragments

I

LOCKE sank into a swoon;  
The Garden died;  
God took the spinning-jenny  
Out of his side.

II

Where got I that truth?  
Out of a medium's mouth.  
Out of nothing it came,  
Out of the forest loam,  
Out of dark night where lay  
The crowns of Nineveh.

## Leda And The Swan

A SUDDEN blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

## On A Picture Of A Black Centaur By Edmund Dulac

YOUR hooves have stamped at the black margin of the wood,  
Even where horrible green parrots call and swing.  
My works are all stamped down into the sultry mud.  
I knew that horse–play, knew it for a murderous thing.  
What wholesome sun has ripened is wholesome food to eat,  
And that alone; yet I, being driven half insane  
Because of some green wing, gathered old mummy wheat  
In the mad abstract dark and ground it grain by grain  
And after baked it slowly in an oven; but now  
I bring full–flavoured wine out of a barrel found  
Where seven Ephesian topers slept and never knew  
When Alexander's empire passed, they slept so sound.  
Stretch out your limbs and sleep a long Saturnian sleep;  
I have loved you better than my soul for all my words,  
And there is none so fit to keep a watch and keep  
Unwearied eyes upon those horrible green birds.

## Among School Children

I  
I WALK through the long schoolroom questioning;  
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
The children learn to cipher and to sing,  
To study reading–books and histories,  
To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
In the best modern way – the children's eyes  
In momentary wonder stare upon  
A sixty–year–old smiling public man.

II  
I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
Above a sinking fire. a tale that she  
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event

That changed some childish day to tragedy –  
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent  
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,  
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,  
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage  
I look upon one child or t'other there  
And wonder if she stood so at that age –  
For even daughters of the swan can share  
Something of every paddler's heritage –  
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,  
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind –  
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it  
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind  
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?  
And I though never of Ledaean kind  
Had pretty plumage once – enough of that,  
Better to smile on all that smile, and show  
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed,  
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape  
As recollection or the drug decide,  
Would think her Son, did she but see that shape  
With sixty or more winters on its head,  
A compensation for the pang of his birth,  
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;  
Solider Aristotle played the taws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;  
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings  
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,  
But thos the candles light are not as those  
That animate a mother's reveries,  
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.

And yet they too break hearts – O presences  
That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise –  
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

## Colonus' Praise

(From Oedipus at Colonus)

Chorus. Come praise Colonus' horses, and come praise  
The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies,  
The nightingale that deafens daylight there,  
If daylight ever visit where,  
Unvisited by tempest or by sun,  
Immortal ladies tread the ground  
Dizzy with harmonious sound,  
Semele's lad a gay companion.

And yonder in the gymnasts' garden thrives  
The self-sown, self-begotten shape that gives  
Athenian intellect its mastery,  
Even the grey-leaved olive-tree  
Miracle-bred out of the living stone;  
Nor accident of peace nor war  
Shall wither that old marvel, for  
The great grey-eyed Athene stares thereon.

Who comes into this county, and has come  
Where golden crocus and narcissus bloom,  
Where the Great Mother, mourning for her daughter  
And beauty-drunken by the water  
Glittering among grey-leaved olive-trees,  
Has plucked a flower and sung her loss;

Colonus' Praise

Who finds abounding Cephisus  
Has found the loveliest spectacle there is.

because this country has a pious mind  
And so remembers that when all mankind  
But trod the road, or splashed about the shore,  
Poseidon gave it bit and oar,  
Every Colonus lad or lass discourses  
Of that oar and of that bit;  
Summer and winter, day and night,  
Of horses and horses of the sea, white horsffes.

## Wisdom

THE true faith discovered was  
When painted panel, statuary.  
Glass-mosaic, window-glass,  
Amended what was told awry  
By some peasant gospeller;  
Swept the Sawdust from the floor  
Of that working-carpenter.  
Miracle had its playtime where  
In damask clothed and on a seat  
Chryselephantine, cedar-boarded,  
His majestic Mother sat  
Stitching at a purple hoarded  
That He might be nobly breeched  
In starry towers of Babylon  
Noah's freshet never reached.  
King Abundance got Him on  
Innocence; and Wisdom He.  
That cognomen sounded best  
Considering what wild infancy  
Drove horror from His Mother's breast.

## The Fool By The Roadside (version of The Hero, The Girl And The Fool)

WHEN all works that have  
From cradle run to grave  
From grave to cradle run instead;  
When thoughts that a fool  
Has wound upon a spool  
Are but loose thread, are but loose thread;  
When cradle and spool are past  
And I mere shade at last  
Coagulate of stuff  
Transparent like the wind,  
I think that I may find  
A faithful love, a faithful love.

## Owen Aherne And His Dancers

A strange thing surely that my Heart, when love had come unsought  
Upon the Norman upland or in that poplar shade,  
Should find no burden but itself and yet should be worn out.  
It could not bear that burden and therefore it went mad.

The south wind brought it longing, and the east wind despair,  
The west wind made it pitiful, and the north wind afraid.  
It feared to give its love a hurt with all the tempest there;  
It feared the hurt that she could give and therefore it went mad.

I can exchange opinion with any neighbouring mind,  
I have as healthy flesh and blood as any rhymer's had,  
But O! my Heart could bear no more when the upland caught the wind;  
I ran, I ran, from my love's side because my Heart went mad.

The Heart behind its rib laughed out. "You have called me mad," it said,  
"Because I made you turn away and run from that young child;  
How could she mate with fifty years that was so wildly bred?  
Let the cage bird and the cage bird mate and the wild bird mate in the wild."

"You but imagine lies all day, O murderer," I replied.  
"And all those lies have but one end, poor wretches to betray;  
I did not find in any cage the woman at my side.

## The Tower

O but her heart would break to learn my thoughts are far away.'

'Speak all your mind,' my Heart sang out, "speak all your mind; who cares,  
Now that your tongue cannot persuade the child till she mistake  
Her childish gratitude for love and match your fifty years?  
O let her choose a young man now and all for his wild sake.'

## A Man Young And Old

### I First Love

THOUGH nurtured like the sailing moon  
In beauty's murderous brood,  
She walked awhile and blushed awhile  
And on my pathway stood  
Until I thought her body bore  
A heart of flesh and blood.

But since I laid a hand thereon  
And found a heart of stone  
I have attempted many things  
And not a thing is done,  
For every hand is lunatic  
That travels on the moon.

She smiled and that transfigured me  
And left me but a lout,  
Maundering here, and maundering there,  
Emptier of thought  
Than the heavenly circuit of its stars  
When the moon sails out.

### II Human Dignity

Like the moon her kindness is,  
If kindness I may call  
What has no comprehension in't,

A Man Young And Old

But is the same for all  
As though my sorrow were a scene  
Upon a painted wall.

So like a bit of stone I lie  
Under a broken tree.  
I could recover if I shrieked  
My heart's agony  
To passing bird, but I am dumb  
From human dignity.

### **III The Mermaid**

A mermaid found a swimming lad,  
Picked him for her own,  
Pressed her body to his body,  
Laughed; and plunging down  
Forgot in cruel happiness  
That even lovers drown.

### **IV The Death of the Hare**

I have pointed out the yelling pack,  
The hare leap to the wood,  
And when I pass a compliment  
Rejoice as lover should  
At the drooping of an eye,  
At the mantling of the blood.

Then suddenly my heart is wrung  
By her distracted air  
And I remember wildness lost  
And after, swept from there,  
Am set down standing in the wood  
At the death of the hare.

## V The Empty Cup

A crazy man that found a cup,  
When all but dead of thirst,  
Hardly dared to wet his mouth  
Imagining, moon–accursed,  
That another mouthful  
And his beating heart would burst.  
October last I found it too  
But found it dry as bone,  
And for that reason am I crazed  
And my sleep is gone.

## VI His Memories

We should be hidden from their eyes,  
Being but holy shows  
And bodies broken like a thorn  
Whereon the bleak north blows,  
To think of buried Hector  
And that none living knows.

The women take so little stock  
In what I do or say  
They'd sooner leave their cosseting  
To hear a jackass bray;  
My arms are like the twisted thorn  
And yet there beauty lay;

The first of all the tribe lay there  
And did such pleasure take –  
She who had brought great Hector down  
And put all Troy to wreck –  
That she cried into this ear,  
"Strike me if I shriek."

## VII The Friends of his Youth

Laughter not time destroyed my voice  
And put that crack in it,

And when the moon's pot-bellied  
I get a laughing fit,  
For that old Madge comes down the lane,  
A stone upon her breast,  
And a cloak wrapped about the stone,  
And she can get no rest  
With singing hush and hush-a-bye;  
She that has been wild  
And barren as a breaking wave  
Thinks that the stone's a child.

And Peter that had great affairs  
And was a pushing man  
Shrieks, "I am King of the Peacocks,"  
And perches on a stone;  
And then I laugh till tears run down  
And the heart thumps at my side,  
Remembering that her shriek was love  
And that he shrieks from pride.

## **VIII Summer and Spring**

We sat under an old thorn-tree  
And talked away the night,  
Told all that had been said or done  
Since first we saw the light,  
And when we talked of growing up  
Knew that we'd halved a soul  
And fell the one in t'other's arms  
That we might make it whole;  
Then peter had a murdering look,  
For it seemed that he and she  
Had spoken of their childish days  
Under that very tree.  
O what a bursting out there was,  
And what a blossoming,  
When we had all the summer-time  
And she had all the spring!

## **IX The Secrets of the Old**

I have old women's secrets now

That had those of the young;  
Madge tells me what I dared not think  
When my blood was strong,  
And what had drowned a lover once  
Sounds like an old song.

Though Margery is stricken dumb  
If thrown in Madge's way,  
We three make up a solitude;  
For none alive to-day  
Can know the stories that we know  
Or say the things we say:

How such a man pleased women most  
Of all that are gone,  
How such a pair loved many years  
And such a pair but one,  
Stories of the bed of straw  
Or the bed of down.

## **X His Wildness**

O bid me mount and sail up there  
Amid the cloudy wrack,  
For peg and Meg and Paris' love  
That had so straight a back,  
Are gone away, and some that stay  
Have changed their silk for sack.

Were I but there and none to hear  
I'd have a peacock cry,  
For that is natural to a man  
That lives in memory,  
Being all alone I'd nurse a stone  
And sing it lullaby.

## **XI From Oedipus at Colonus**

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;  
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.

## The Tower

Even from that delight memory treasures so,  
Death, despair, division of families, all entanglements of mankind grow,  
As that old wandering beggar and these God-hated children know.

In the long echoing street the laughing dancers throng,  
The bride is carried to the bridegroom's chamber through torchlight and tumultuous song;  
I celebrate the silent kiss that ends short life or long.

Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;  
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;  
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.