Canto; a Poem

BY

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THE CLASS POEM.
POEM.

In summer twilights, when the day has rolled
Wide o'er the earth its floods of ebbing gold,
And slumbering its happy life away,
The June lies dreaming of the vanished May,
And trembles through the charmed air around,
The drowsy melody of twilight sound,
Our souls sink yielding to its mystic power,
Bathed in the Lethean ripples of the hour,
And in the flush that hallows evening's close,
Forget the splendor of the morning rose;
So the warm glow that fills our hearts to-day,
As this fair life is ebbing fast away,
Bends mind and spirit to its sweet control,
And bathes in memory's light the kindling soul.
Let this glad spirit for my faults atone,
And deck my lines in lustre all its own;
As dying light its fairy glory flings
On the black plumes of Night's pursuing wings.

Wherever hearts in human bosoms glow,
Wherever tears from sorrowing eyelids flow,
Where man adores the beauty of the skies,
Or finds a deeper charm in woman's eyes;
Wherever morn in purple splendor fills
The hoary forehead of the sleeping hills;
Where falling day, by savage night hard prest,
Trails its warm life-blood through the lurid West;
Wherever night and nature's holy calm
Call us to join her in her voiceless psalm;
There the deep thoughts that haunt the burning mind,
Plead for a voice and scorn to be confined,
Till, gathering strength, the fire, imprisoned long,
Leaps from the heart and flashes into song.

In every age the poet's lyre has rung,
In every land the God-sent bard has sung.
Old memories, wedded to the minstrel's rhyme,
Stray ever down the rippled shores of time.
In that dim past, where shadowy legends fly,
Like spectral shades o'er History's dawning sky,
Amid the dusk that veils in silent gloom,
The Grecian's trophies and the Trojan's tomb,
We hear the notes from that far distance borne,
Like the lark's hymn in poesy's glimmering morn,
Where the blind bard, in rhythmic ecstacy,
Tames the hoarse tumult of the sounding sea;
When o'er the olive droop the flowers of peace,
More melting measures charm the isles of Greece;
A country's wrongs Tyrtaeus' trump inspire,
A girl's low laughter thrills Anacreon's lyre,
And love-lorn Sappho, with sad streaming eyes,
Pours her wild sorrow to the Lesbian skies.

From those loved haunts the spirit fled afar,
Whelmed in the rushing waves of western war,
And, wafted o'er the Adriatic tide,
Wearily rested by the Tiber's side,
The perfumed minstrel's melting madrigals
Soothed the proud monarch in his marble halls;
The woodland poet, with his lyric thrills,
Waked the wild echoes of the Latian hills.

But lyric song its earliest triumphs won
In lands that basked beneath a brighter sun.
In the deep frondage of the tropic glades,
The silent witchery of the orange shades;
In the still azure of the summer seas,
The fragrant sighs that load the fainting breeze;
In the fair forms that throng the dreamy isles,
Their fervid glances and their sunny smiles;
In the warm air that quivered o'er the ground,
These simple hearts an inspiration found,
And nature, singing to herself apart,
Waked a glad echo in the poet's heart;
He poured his untaught carol on the breeze,
And nature answered from the clustering trees.

Though richer far the gorgeous fancies fly,
In the warm twilight of a Southern sky;
Though hearts are kindled in the torrid glare,
And beauty floats transfigured in the air;
Yet sternest virtues and heroic forms
Are nursed amid the mountains and the storms.
Where the chill starlight shivered on the brine,
Where the bleak wind was shuddering in the pine,
Strayed the lone scald beside the iron shore,
And thundered back an echo to its roar.
Roused by his voice, which thrilled the peopled breeze,
Odin swept landward from the glimmering seas;
Thor's echoing footsteps shook the vaulted sky,
And Nature smiled when Freya glided by.

And shall we track the footsteps of the muse,
In lands yet sparkling with the morning dews?
Recall the songs which charmed the dusky dead,
Whose dust is mingled with the soil we tread?

In the cold sunbeams that forever glow
On old Katahdin's coronal of snow,
In the fair bay whose silvery ripples smile
Round the green margin of Aquidneck's isle;
In the night wind, that, sighing from the West,
Shatters the starlight on Missouri's breast,
The Indian saw, with faith's confiding eye,
The impress of the present Deity.
And, as at morn, he pierced the dewy glades,
Or loitered homeward in the evening shades,
To the dim spirits of the sky and air,
His song arose and trembled into prayer.

But wilder notes the Wauben chaunted there,
When death and slaughter clogged the tainted air.
When the red camp-fire flickered dull and dim,
On the bronzed outline of each sinewy limb,
The warrior-bard, in wild and uncouth rhyme,
Chaunted the legends of the olden time.
He sang the glory of the dying brave,
The battle-birds, that flit above his grave,
The conflict's shock, the war path's crouching wile,
The foeman's hate, the captive's haughty smile:
Their wild hearts, throbbing at the kindling strains,
Roll their red lava through the swelling veins,
They fright the still woods with their tremulous cries,
The hot soul glaring in their panther eyes.

All these are gone. Our eyes no more behold
The mystery and the majesty of old;
No more the muses strike their vibrant strings,
In the soft splashings of Castalian springs.
The wind that stirs the grass on Maro's grave,
Fans the hot forehead of the panting slave;
The long grass nods upon the Troad plain,
Green in the sunlight, dismal in the rain.
With face unchanged, eternal nature smiles,
In the green circlet of the orient isles;
Still, as of old, the hoary mountains rise,
To hold grim converse with the Norland skies;
But these fair charms no answering voice inspire,
Silent the harp, and quenched the heavenly fire;
From storied crag, from naiad-haunted river,
The consecrating light has passed forever.

Think not the soul has perished. It has gone
In other lands to light a brighter dawn.
As the frayed nymph that fled from Arcadie
Passed through the gloomy caverns of the sea,
And issuing forth as pure and far more fair,
Flung out her dew drops on the Ortygian air;
So poesy, from Southern skies withdrawn,
Flashed a new splendor o'er the boreal dawn;
And glided o'er the Atlantic's shaggy breast,
To burn like sunset in the kindling west.

Yet are there idle dreamers who would mourn
That song has died and left the world forlorn.
The morning sun that fires the eastern leas,
Kindles the dewy jewels of the trees;
Awhile they gleam to shrink and vanish soon,
In the fierce splendor of his burning noon.
Song, like a flower, its petals wide unfurled,
In the cool breezes of the early world,
Poured from its trembling cup an airy wine,
That filled the morning with a gleam divine;
But sunk and withered in the noon day glare,
And left the hill-tops rayless, bleak and bare.—
Yet not for us that golden star has set,
In the grey world that spirit lingers yet;
Over the rush and roar of actual things,
Flits the ideal on its viewless wings,
And poets dreaming in the twilight glooms,
May hear the rustling of its purple plumes.
Although the rustling shield, the shivered lance,
Alone recall the dreams of old romance;
Though on the ears of brain-sick dreamers jars,
The thundering anthem of our clattering ears;
Yet, in the tumult of the seething sea,
Lurks the dim soul of subtlest poesy.
No storied castle bosomed in the trees,
E'er flung a nobler banner to the breeze;
Than those dark vapor-flags that grandly rise,
From labor's fane, to flout the resting skies.

Let those who scorn the modern minstrel's rhymes,
Survey his influence in these iron times;
And see how late, in eastern climes afar,
His bugle call led up the van of war.
When the gaunt moon was casting dimly down,
A haggard splendor o'er the fated town,
And proud defiance to the hostile powers,
Waved in the banners fluttering in the towers;
The quivering light in golden showers fell off,
From the grey walls of sturdy Malakoff;
And in its shadow stretching far away,
O'er the dim plain the leaguering army lay.

Amid the gory trenches all night long,
Rolled the soft echoes of their Highland song;
Each heart beat gentler to the well known tune,
Till full above them flared the midnight moon;
While the dear memories of a home afar,
Dimmed with warm tears the flaming eyes of war.
And on the morrow when the field was red,
And ghastly with the life-blood of the dead;
When the sun staggered from the fiery glare,
And death was hurling in the sulphurous air;
Thrice had the Franks assailed the walls in vain,
In their repulse red blushed the gory plain;
While gazing calmly at their baffled powers,
Sevastopol sat scornful in her towers.

On crimson brows a lowering shadow grew,
From rank to rank a threatening murmur flew;—
"Curse these faint tunes! The fortune of old days,
Awaits the sounding of the Marseillaise!"
Then swelled on air, the war din piercing through,
That song baptized in battle's purple dew;
Wide o'er the conflict peals the chanted wail,
And brave hearts, thrilled like aspens in the gale,
Whirled on in battle's wildering ecstasy,
March guilty up, through death, to victory!

When the red sunset trailed its shades along
Sevastopol had yielded—to a song.

But not alone song flames, a baleful star,
In lurid splendor on the helm of war:
Its peaceful radiance glimmers far and wide,
It sits a household angel by our side.
Through perilous seas the poet now may roam,
On either shore he finds a kindly home.
His song, like fragrance in a rose-heart furled,
Lurks in the closed heart of the busy world.
We've seen the nation's pulse with rapture beat,
Thrilled at the coming tread of alien feet;
We've seen a love all splendor might not buy,
Glow in the hands that welcomed Charles Mackay.
If such rewards to living bards are paid,
What honors wait the ascending poets shade?
Go ask the storied graves, whose marble piles
Blanch the dusk grandeur of Westminster's aisles;
Go ask the flowers that bloom through summer days,
In the hushed shadows of the Père-la-chaise;
Go ask the immortelles that idly wave,
In virgin beauty, o'er Béranger's grave.

Song dwells no longer lonely on the hills,
But dusty cities with her presence fills;
The muse has left the mountain's still retreats,
And as a nymphe du pavé haunts the streets.
There is a race sent forth from Europe's shore,
Like jewelers, the nation's ears to bore.
Their true credentials on their face they bear,
The record of Italy's sun and—hair;
Tyrants and tunes remorselessly they slaughter,
Their pet aversions, Austrians and water.
Through their cracked engines wail consumptive tunes,
Easy to follow as the Dighton runes;
Lame waltzes clatter through the iron pegs,
Like Greenwich cripples, innocent of legs;
And frantic Annie Laurie soars on high,
Before concluding to "lie down and die."

Unhonored let them leave a world they've bored,
And die in music, swan-like, on a chord;
Like tunes great Ole from his viol brings,
Be executed all on single strings.
Yet not alone from fair Italia come,
Music's mad priests, to western heathendom;
She sends us voiceful stars, whose song divine
Thrills like her air and sparkles like her wine;
Through gilded galleries Grisi pours along
The luscious melody of Tuscan song,
And Mariò, the beautiful and brave,
Expires like Villikins, "singing a short stave."
Fain would I picture, in these rugged lines,
The woodland music of the English Pynes.
They have been here; but at the door we saw
The fiery-flaming sword of college law;
We thought it splendid, though we did not go,
Omne ignotum pro mirisico.

How half ashamed, time checks his rushing wings,
When Christie wakes the laughing banjo-strings;
How the Pathfinder linked his forest fame
With music, when "Fremont and Jessie" came.
And there are songs which we full oft have sung,
To which the moonlit walls of Brown have rung.
What happy tremblings through the elm-leaves pour,
When wandering Soph'mores shout their "Vive l'Amour;"
How gleams the meerschaum, at the close of day,
When dreamy spirits seem "Floating away,"
And Freshmen ask their chums, with anxious frown,
"What can it be the Sophs are "drinking down!"
Then give the honor due to these old lays,
That breathe the bounding soul of youth's fair days.
They will attend our life's dull pilgrimage,
Glide faint and dim across the calm of age,
Lie the last wrecks upon oblivion's strand—
Be voiceful memories in the silent land.

O'er the wide world, song sheds its tender gleam,
Whose glimmering dawn blushed in the poet's dream.
Why should we name its triumphs one by one?
As well recount the trophies of the sun,
Who fills the butter-cup with golden fire,
And melts the iceberg in his flaming ire.
In shadowy palaces, whose blushing walls
Ring to the silvery splash of waterfalls,
Through the hushed air the rippling music flows,
Till beauty grows more queenly in repose;
And where the fettered image of his God
Blasts with his burning tears the arid sod,
Song, even there, its soulful magic tries,
And flames its triumph in his kindling eyes.

Thus bloom forever in the paths of trade,
These heavenly asphodels that shall not fade,
Nor let earth's cares crush, in their rude career,
These bright memorials of a higher sphere;
Let not the whirling incense-clouds of steam
Dim the pure radiance of the poet's dream;
Let his free song forever wider range,
As the great world sweeps down the tide of change;
As the mad years in thunder roll along,
Let them glide softly, at the touch of song;
On the wild age let song in beauty rest,
Like sunset flushing o'er the thunderous west.

Tired of the lesser bards, who lark-like rain
Their quivering fancies o'er the morning plain,
We wait a poet, who with tuneful chime,
Shall ring the iron music of the time.
In this wild period, when the fleeting hours
Teem with cyclopean shapes of new-born powers;
When anarch mind, high poised on vampire wings,
Blasts with their shade the tinselled pride of kings;
When labor reigns, a giant swart and bare,
The diadem flashing in his streaming hair;
And far away, we see the rattling trains
Fling their mad clamor o'er the trembling plains;
And on the deep, see man's Titanic slaves,
Mad with hot life, plunge through the hissing waves;
Mid all the roar, hear Thought's prophetic tones,
Stunning old dynasties and shattering thrones,
While Freedom's banners, flushing as they rise,
Blaze in far flashing splendor up the skies.
He who would win the worship of the time
Must have its spirit singing in his rhyme;
The kingly age must all his strains employ,
Its love, its hope, its passion and its joy.

Here let the verse stoop, after soaring long,
And grant the muse one swallow flight of song,
To show the only life the student knows,
Runs through a field of most prosaic prose.
What threatening storms, what boding tempests lower,
Around the dismal recitation hour!
Of course, he lacks the mathematic mind,
To inclined planes is plainly disinclined;
If Hydrostatics' watery waste he crams,
He feels like cursing, when he comes to dams.
He, when on stars to fix his mind he tries,
Thinks of Forbes' play-bills and his lady's eyes;
Or if one guess he hazards where they would be,
Like civic stars, they're never where they should be.
He execrates Achilles and his foe man,
He half forgets if Ovid's nose was Roman,
And dreams amid the mist that thought has spread
Around the philosophic Frenchman's head;
When gathering zeros in the air gleam blue,
By some "illicit process," flounders through.
There is a class we all have seen, or heard,
Oft "singing darkling like the wakeful bird,"
Who love to wander from the cloister-bars
When gas-lamps die and streets are full of "stars;"
Eat Schweitzer's Kaise with a bowie knife;"
Call the "Varieties" the "spice of life;"
Spout Woodbury's phrases with a grin sardonic,
And make their language like their beer, too tonic;
Risk all to learn what real actors are;
And wing their furtive flight from "star to star."
Prose rules supremely in this dull career,
You surely could not look for poets here.
Go seek for sympathy in tailor-duns,
Go search the "Register's Report" for puns;
But ask not poetry from him whose life,
Rolls its jarred wheels through paths of college strife.
Oft let the poet leave his toil and care,
To greet the spirits of the sky and air;
Let him go forth to learn of love and truth,
From nature smiling in eternal youth;
To ponder long on infinite wealth and power,
Squandered to deck with gold one way-side flower;
And share the peaceful majesty that fills,
The emerald circuit of the sunny hills.
Earth grows not old, nor niggard of her joys,
But spells as genial on our souls employs,
As when Greek sunsets poured their purple dyes
In wasteful splendor on blind Homer's eyes.

Let him beware lest nature's subtle art
Dry up the fountains of his human heart.
Ah! woe to him who may no longer scan,
Beauty in woman's face or truth in man.
There is no glory in the summer skies,
Can match the tearful light of loving eyes;
There is no voice by woodland breezes stirred,
Vies with the music of one loving word;
The gleaming splendors of the evening air,
Pale in the light of girlhood's clustering hair.
Drear is the song when love withholds its light,
An Eve-less Eden and a starless night;
Over our life's mad whirl of tossing floods,
Woman's pure soul in tranquil beauty broods;
Like rainbow-gleams those starry beauties hide,
The rushing terror of Niagara's tide.
Thus shall the poet chant his soulful rhyme,
Thus shall he beat the pulses of the time.

Say not the poet's lot though high, is hard:
Great is his toil, but great is his reward.
O'er the wide world his winged words shall fly,
Deep in warm hearts his cherished name shall lie;
And when he sleeps, the ever-gliding hours,
Still, as they pass, shall wreath his tomb with flowers.
Where'er the lustre of his song shall shine,
Heaven shall be near, and earth be half-divine;
From sordid cares shall regal spirits rise,
And the full soul stand dewy in the eyes.
His song shall shed, down time's descending stream,
The mystic glory of a morning dream;
The earth shall blossom where his feet have trod,
And blush to roses on the hallowed sod.
Where'er he strays shall break a Fairer day,
A richer joy shall flood the air of May;
And when lone violets weep above the clay,
Whence God has led the wandering soul away;
Still, with the eternal stars, his fame above,
Crowned by the ages, dowered by their love,
Hallowed by manhood's praise, by woman's tears,
Gleams through the mist of ever-gathering years.

Our words may not float down the surging ages,
As Hindoo lamps adown the sacred stream;
We may not stand sublime on history's pages,
The bright ideals of the future's dream;
Yet we may all strive for the goal assigned us,
Glad if we win, and happy if we fail;
Work calmly on nor care to leave behind us,
The lurid glaring of the meteor's trail.
As we go forth, the smiling world before us,
Shouts to our youth the old inspiring tune;
The same blue sky of God is bending o'er us,
The green earth sparkles in the joy of June.
Where'er afar the beck of fate shall call us,
'Mid winter's boreal chill or summer's blaze,
Fond memory's chain of flowers shall still enthrall us,
    Wreathed by the spirits of these vanished days.
Our hearts shall bear them safe through life's commotion,
    Their fading gleam shall light us to our graves;
As in the shell, the memories of ocean,
    Murmur forever of the sounding waves.