

Novalis - Hymns to the Night

I.

BEFORE all the wondrous shows of the widespread space around him, what living, sentient thing loves not the all-joyous light, with its colors, its rays and undulations, its gentle omnipresence in the form of the wakening Day? The giant-world of the unresting constellations inhales it as the innermost soul of life, and floats dancing in its azure flood; the sparkling, ever-tranquil stone, the thoughtful, imbibing plant, and the wild, burning multiform beast inhales it; but more than all, the lordly stranger with the sense-filled eyes, the swaying walk, and the sweetly closed, melodious lips. Like a king over earthly nature, it rouses every force to countless transformations, binds and unbinds innumerable alliances, hangs its heavenly form around every earthly substance. Its presence alone reveals the marvelous splendor of the kingdoms of the world.

Aside I turn to the holy, unspeakable, mysterious Night. Afar lies the world, sunk in a deep grave; waste and lonely is its place. In the chords of the bosom blows a deep sadness. I am ready to sink away in drops of dew, and mingle with the ashes.-- The distances of memory, the wishes of youth, the dreams of childhood, the brief joys and vain hopes of a whole long life, arise in gray garments, like an evening vapor after the sunset. In other regions the light has pitched its joyous tents. What if it should never return to its children, who wait for it with the faith of innocence?

What springs up all at once so sweetly boding in my heart, and stills the soft air of sadness? Dost thou also take a pleasure in us, dark Night? What holdest thou under thy mantle, that with hidden power affects my soul? Precious balm drips from thy hand out of its bundle of poppies. Thou upliftest the heavy-laden wings of the soul. Darkly and inexpressibly are we moved: joy-startled, I see a grave face that, tender and worshipful, inclines toward me, and, amid manifold entangled locks, reveals the youthful loveliness of the Mother. How poor and childish a thing seems to me now the

Light! how joyous and welcome the departure of the day!-- Didst thou not only therefore, because the Night turns away from thee thy servants, you now strew in the gulfs of space those flashing globes, to proclaim, in seasons of thy absence, thy omnipotence, and thy return?

More heavenly than those glittering stars we hold the eternal eyes which the Night hath opened within us. Farther they see than the palest of those countless hosts. Needing no aid from the light, they penetrate the depths of a loving soul that fills a loftier region with bliss ineffable. Glory to the queen of the world, to the great prophet of the holier worlds, to the guardian of blissful love! she sends thee to me, thou tenderly beloved, the gracious sun of the Night. Now am I awake, for now am I thine and mine. Thou hast made me know the Night, and brought her to me to be my life; thou hast made of me a man. Consume my body with the ardour of my soul, that I, turned to finer air, may mingle more closely with thee, and then our bridal night endure for ever.

II.

Must the morning always return? Will the despotism of the earthly never cease? Unholy activity consumes the angel-visit of the Night. Will the time never come when Love's hidden sacrifice shall burn eternally? To the Light a season was set; but everlasting and boundless is the dominion of the Night. Endless is the duration of sleep. Holy Sleep, gladden not too seldom in this earthly day-labor, the devoted servant of the Night. Fools alone mistake thee, knowing nought of sleep but the shadow which, in the twilight of the real Night, thou pitifully castest over us. They feel thee not in the golden flood of the grapes, in the magic oil of the almond tree, and the brown juice of the poppy. They know not that it is thou who hauntest the bosom of the tender maiden, and makest a heaven of her lap; never suspect it is thou, opening the doors to Heaven, that steppest to meet them out of ancient stories, bearing the key to the dwellings of the blessed, silent messenger of secrets infinite.

III.

Once when I was shedding bitter tears, when, dissolved in pain, my hope was melting away, and I stood alone by the barren mound which in its narrow dark bosom hid the vanished form of my Life, lonely as never yet was lonely man, driven by anxiety unspeakable, powerless, and no longer anything but a conscious misery;--as there I looked about me for help, unable to go on or to turn back, and clung to the fleeting, extinguished life with an endless longing: then, out of the blue distances -- from the hills of my ancient bliss, came a shiver of twilight -- and at once snapt the bond of birth, the chains of the Light. Away fled the glory of the world, and with it my mourning; the sadness flowed together into a new, unfathomable world. Thou, soul of the Night, heavenly Slumber, didst come upon me; the region gently upheaved itself; over it hovered my unbound, newborn spirit. The mound became a cloud of dust, and through the cloud I saw the glorified face of my beloved. In her eyes eternity reposed. I laid hold of her hands, and the tears became a sparkling bond that could not be broken. Into the distance swept by, like a tempest, thousands of years. On her neck I welcomed the new life with ecstatic tears. Never was there such another dream; then first and ever since I hold fast an eternal, unchangeable faith in the heaven of the Night, and its Light, the Beloved.

IV.

Now I know when will come the last morning: when the Light no more scares away the Night and Love, when sleep shall be without waking, and but one continuous dream. I feel in me a celestial exhaustion. Long and weariful was my pilgrimage to the holy grave, and crushing was the cross. The crystal wave, which, imperceptible to the ordinary sense, springs in the dark bosom of the mound against whose foot breaks the flood of the world, he who has tasted it, he who has stood on the mountain frontier of the world, and looked across into the new land, into the abode of the Night, verily he turns not again into the tumult of the world, into the land where dwells the Light in ceaseless unrest. On those heights he builds for himself tabernacles-- tabernacles of peace; there longs and loves and gazes across, until the welcomest of all hours draws him down into the waters of the spring. Afloat above remains what is earthly, and is swept back in storms; but what became holy by the touch of Love, runs free through hidden ways to the region beyond, where, like odours, it mingles with love asleep. Still wakest thou, cheerful Light, that weary man to his labour, and into me pourest gladsome life; but thou wilt not me away from Memory's moss-grown monument.

Gladly will I stir busy hands, everywhere behold where thou hast need of me; bepraise the rich pomp of thy splendor; pursue unwearied the lovely harmonies of thy skilled handicraft; gladly contemplate the clever pace of thy mighty, radiant clock; explore the balance of the forces and the laws of the wondrous play of countless worlds and their seasons; but true to the Night remains my secret heart, and to creative Love, her daughter. Canst *thou* show me a heart eternally true? Has thy sun friendly eyes that know me? Do thy stars lay hold of my longing hand? Do they return me the tender pressure and the caressing word? Was it thou did bedeck them with colours and a flickering outline? Or was it *she* who gave to thy jewels a higher, a dearer significance? What delight, what pleasure offers *thy* life, to outweigh the transports of Death? Wears not everything that inspirits us the livery of the Night? Thy mother, it is she brings thee forth, and to her thou owest all thy glory. Thou wouldst vanish into thyself, thou wouldst dissipate in boundless space, if she did not hold thee fast, if she swaddled thee not, so that thou grewest warm, and flaming, gavest birth to the universe. Verily I was before thou wast; the mother sent me with sisters to inhabit thy world, to sanctify it with love that it might be an ever-present memorial, to plant it with flowers unfading. As yet they have not ripened, these thoughts divine; as yet is there small trace of our coming apocalypse. One day thy clock will point to the end of Time, and then thou shalt be as one of us, and shalt, full of ardent longing, be extinguished and die. I feel in me the close of thy activity, I taste heavenly freedom, and happy restoration. With wild pangs I recognize thy distance from our home, thy feud with the ancient, glorious Heaven. Thy rage and thy raving are in vain. Inconsumable stands the cross, victory-flag of our race.

Over I pilgrim
Where every pain
Zest only of pleasure
Shall one day remain.
Yet a few moments
Then free am I,
And intoxicated
In Love's lap lie.
Life everlasting
Lifts, wave-like, at me:
I gaze from its summit
Down after thee.

Oh Sun, thou must vanish
Yon yon hillock beneath;
A shadow will bring thee
Thy cooling wreath.
Oh draw at my heart, love,
Draw till I'm gone,
That, fallen asleep, I
Still may love on.
I feel the flow of
Death's youth-giving flood;
To balsam and Æther, it
Changes my blood!
I live all the daytime
In faith and in might:
And in holy rapture
I die every night.

V.

In ancient times an iron Fate lorded it, with dumb force, over the widespread families of men. A gloomy oppression swathed their anxious souls: the earth was boundless, the abode of the gods and their home. From eternal ages stood its mysterious structure. Beyond the red hills of the morning, in the sacred bosom of the sea, dwelt the sun, the all-enkindling, live luminary. An aged giant upbore the happy world. Prisoned beneath mountains lay the first-born sons of mother Earth, helpless in their destroying fury against the new, glorious race of gods, and their kindred, glad-hearted men. Ocean's dusky, green abyss was the lap of a goddess. In the crystal grottos revelled a wanton folk. Rivers, trees, flowers, and beasts had human wits. Sweeter tasted the wine, poured out by Youth impersonated; a god was in the grape-clusters; a loving, motherly goddess upgrew in the full golden sheaves; love's sacred carousal was a sweet worship of the fairest of the goddesses. Life revelled through the centuries like one spring-time, an ever-variegated festival of the children of and the dwellers on the earth. All races childlike adored the ethereal, thousand-fold flame as the one sublimest thing in the world.

It was but a fancy, a horrible dream-shape--

That fearsome to the merry tables strode,
And wrapt the spirit in wild consternation.
The gods themselves here counsel knew nor showed
To fill the stifling heart with consolation.
Mysterious was the monster's pathless road,
Whose rage would heed no prayer and no oblation;
'Twas Death who broke the banquet up with fears,
With anguish, with dire pain, and bitter tears.

Eternally from all things here departed
That sway the heart with pleasure's joyous flow,
Divided from the loved, whom, broken-hearted,
Vain longing tosses and unceasing woe--
In a dull dream to struggle, faint and thwarted,
Seemed all was granted to the dead below!
Broke lay the merry wave of human glory
On Death's inevitable promontory.

With daring flight, aloft Thoughts pinions sweep;,
The horrid thing with beauty's robe men cover:
A gentle youth puts out his torch, to sleep;
Sweet comes the end, like moaning lute of lover.
Cool shadow-floods o'er melting memory creep:
So sang the song, for Misery was the mover.
Still undeciphered lay the endless Night--
The solemn symbol of a far-off Might.

The old world began to decline. The pleasure-garden of the young race withered away;
up into opener, regions and desolate, forsaking his childhood, struggled the growing
man. The gods vanished with their retinue. Nature stood alone and lifeless. Dry
Number and rigid Measure bound her with iron chains. As into dust and air the
priceless blossoms of life fell away in words obscure. Gone was wonder-working Faith,
and its all-transforming, all-uniting angel-comrade, the Imagination. A cold north wind
blew unkindly over the torpid plain, and the wonderland first froze, then evaporated
into Æther. The far depths of heaven filled with flashing worlds. Into the deeper

sanctuary, into the more exalted region of the mind, the soul of the world retired with all her powers, there to rule until the dawn should break of the glory universal. No longer was the Light the abode of the gods, and the heavenly token of their presence: they cast over them the veil of the Night. The Night became the mighty womb of revelations; into it the gods went back, and fell asleep, to go abroad in new and more glorious shapes over the transfigured world. Among the people which, untimely ripe, was become of all the most scornful and insolently hostile to the blessed innocence of youth, appeared the New World, in guise never seen before, in the song-favouring hut of poverty, a son of the first maid and mother, the eternal fruit of mysterious embrace. The foreseeing, rich-blossoming wisdom of the East at once recognized the beginning of the new age; a star showed it the way to the lowly cradle of the king. In the name of the far-reaching future, they did him homage with lustre and odour, the highest wonders of Nature. In solitude the heavenly heart unfolded itself to a flower-chalice of almighty love, upturned to the supreme face of the father, and resting on the bliss-boding bosom of the sweetly solemn mother. With deifying fervour the prophetic eye of the blooming child beheld the years to come, foresaw, untroubled over the earthly lot of his own days, the beloved offspring of his divine stem. Ere long the most childlike souls, by true love marvellously possessed, gathered about him. Like flowers sprang up a strange new life in his presence. Words inexhaustible and the most joyful fell like sparks of a divine spirit from his friendly lips. From a far shore, came a singer, born under the clear sky of Hellas, to Palestine, and gave up his whole heart to the marvellous child:-

The youth thou art who ages long hast stood
Upon our graves, lost in an aze of weening;
Sign in the darkness of God's tidings good,
Whence hints of growth humanity is gleaning;
For that we long, on that we sweetly brood
Which erst in woe had lost all life and meaning;
In everlasting life death found its goal,
For thou art Death who at last mak'st us whole.

Filled with joy, the singer went on to Indostan, his heart intoxicated with the sweetest love, and poured it out in fiery songs under that tender sky, so that a thousand hearts bowed to him, and the good news sprang up with a thousand branches. Soon after the singer's departure, his precious life was made a sacrifice for the deep fall of man. He

died in his youth, torn away from his loved world, from his weeping mother, and his trembling friends. His lovely mouth emptied the dark cup of unspeakable wrongs. In horrible anguish the birth of the new world drew near. Hard he wrestled with the terrors of old Death; heavy lay the weight of the old world upon him. Yet once more he looked kindly at his mother; then came the releasing hand of the Love eternal, and he fell asleep. Only a few days hung a deep veil over the roaring sea, over the quaking land; countless tears wept his loved ones; the mystery was unsealed: heavenly spirits heaved the ancient stone from the gloomy grave. Angels sat by the sleeper, sweetly outbodied from his dreams; awaked in new Godlike glory, he clomb the limits of the new-born world, buried with his own hand the old corpse in the forsaken cavity, and with hand almighty laid upon it the stone which no power shall again upheave.

Yet weep thy loved ones over thy grave tears of joy, tears of emotion, tears of endless thanksgiving; ever afresh with joyous start, they see thee rise again, and themselves with thee; behold thee weep with soft fervour on the blessed bosom of thy mother, walk in thoughtful communion with thy friends, uttering words plucked as from the tree of life; see thee hasten, full of longing, into thy father's arms, bearing with thee youthful Humanity, and the inexhaustible cup of the golden Future. Soon the mother hastened after thee in heavenly triumph; she was the first with thee in the new home. Since then, long ages have flowed past, and in splendour ever-increasing have bestirred thy new creation, and thousands have, out of pangs and tortures, followed thee, filled with faith and longing and truth, and are walking about with thee and the heavenly virgin in the kingdom of Love, minister in the temple of heavenly Death, and forever thine.

Uplifted is the stone,
And all mankind is risen;
We all remain thine own.
And vanished is our prison.
All troubles flee away
Before thy golden cup;
For Earth nor Life can stay
When with our Lord we sup.

To the marriage Death doth call;
No virgin holdeth back;
The lamps burn lustrous all;
Of oil there is no lack.

Would thy far feet were waking
The echoes of our street!
And that the stars were making
Signal with voices sweet.

To thee, O mother maiden
Ten thousand hearts aspire;
In this life, sorrow-laden,
Thee only they desire.
In thee they hope for healing;
In thee expect true rest,
When thou, their safety sealing,
Shalt clasp them to thy breast.

With disappointment burning
Who made in hell their bed,
At last from this world turning
To thee have looked and fled:
Helpful thou hast appeared
To us in many a pain:
Now to thy home we've neared,
Not to go out again!

Now at no grave are weeping
Such as do love and pray;
The gift that Love is keeping
From none is taken away.
To soothe and quiet our longing,
Night comes, and stills the smart;
Heaven's children round us thronging
Watch and ward our heart.

Courage! for life is striding
To endless life along;
The sense in love abiding,
Grows clearer and more strong.
One day the stars, down dripping,

Shall flow in golden wine:
We, of that nectar sipping,
As living stars will shine.

Free, from the tomb emerges
Love, to die never more;
Fulfilled, life heaves and surges
A sea without a shore.
All night! all blissful leisure!
One jubilating ode!
And the sun of all our pleasure
The countenance of God.

VI.

Longing for Death

Into the bosom of the earth!
Out of the Light's dominions!
Death's pains are but the bursting forth
Of glad departures pinions!
Swift in the narrow little boat,
Swift to the heavenly shore we float!

Blest be the everlasting Night,
And blest the endless slumber!
We are heated with the day too bright,
And withered up with cumber!
We're weary of that life abroad:
Come, we will now go home to God!

Why longer in this world abide?
Why love and truth here cherish?
That which is old is set aside--
For us the new may perish!

Alone he stands and sore downcast
Who loves with pious warmth the Past.

The Past where yet the human spirit
In lofty flames did rise;
Where men the Father did inherit,
His countenance recognize;
And, in simplicity made ripe,
Many grew like their archetype.

The Past wherein, still rich in bloom
Old stems did burgeon glorious;
And children, for the world to come,
Sought pain and death victorious;
And, through both life and pleasure spake,
Yet many a heart for love did break.

The Past, where to the flow of youth
God yet himself declared;
And early death in loving truth
The young beheld, and dared--
Anguish and torture patient bore
To prove they loved him as of yore

With anxious yearning now we see
That Past in darkness drenched;
With this world's water never we
Shall find our hot thirst quenched:
To our old home we have to go
That blessed time again to know.

What yet doth hinder our return?
Long since repose our precious!
Their grave is of our life the bourne;
We shrink from times ungracious!
By not a hope are we decoyed:
The heart is full; the world is void.

Infinite and mysterious,
Thrills through me a sweet trembling,
As if from far there echoed thus
A sigh, our grief resembling:
The dear ones long as well as I,
And sent to me their waiting sigh.

Down to the sweet bride, and away
To the beloved Jesus!
Courage! the evening shades grow gray,
Of all our griefs to ease us!
A dream will dash our chains apart,
And lay us on the Father's heart

End

Translated by George MacDonald and found in Rampolli (1897).