

# Giacomo Leopardi



## The Canti

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## **Translator's Note.**

The poems of the *Canti* below are complete but not in their originally published order. I have taken the liberty of re-arranging them into four groups, Personal (Poems 1-11), Philosophical (12-24), 'Romantic' (25-34), and Political (35-41). These categories are not exact, as Leopardi frequently blends elements together in the one poem, but they may help the reader, as they helped me, to adjust to his variations in style. The original published position of each poem is given in Roman numerals in the brackets following the poem's title.

## 1. To Silvia (XXI)

Silvia, do you remember  
those moments, in your mortal life,  
when beauty still shone  
in your sidelong, laughing eyes,  
and you, light and thoughtful,  
leapt beyond girlhood's limits?

The quiet rooms and the streets  
around you, sounded  
to your endless singing,  
when you sat, happily content,  
intent on that woman's work,  
the vague future, arriving alive in your mind.  
It was the scented May, and that's how  
you spent your day.

I would leave my intoxicating studies,  
and the turned-down pages,  
where my young life,  
the best of me, was left,  
and from the balcony of my father's house  
strain to catch the sound of your voice,  
and your hand, quick,  
running over the loom.  
I'd look at the serene sky,

the gold lit gardens and paths:  
this side the mountains, that side the far-off sea.  
And human tongue cannot say  
what I felt then.

What sweet thoughts,  
what hope, what hearts, O my Silvia!  
How all human life and fate  
appeared to us then!  
When I recall that hope  
such feelings pain me,  
harsh, disconsolate,  
I brood on my own destiny.  
Oh Nature, Nature  
why do you not give now  
what you promised then? Why  
do you so deceive your children?

Attacked, and conquered, by secret disease,  
you died, my tenderest one, and did not see  
your years flower, or feel your heart moved,  
by sweet praise of your black hair  
your shy, loving looks.  
No friends talked with you,  
on holidays, about love.

My sweet hopes died also  
little by little: to me too  
Fate has denied those years.  
Oh, how you've passed me by,  
dear friend of my new life,  
my saddened hope!

Is this the world, the dreams,  
the loves, events, delights,  
we spoke about so much together?  
Is this our human life?  
At the advance of Truth  
you fell, unhappy one,  
and from the distance,  
with your hand you pointed  
towards death's coldness and the silent grave.

## **2. The Infinite (XII)**

It was always dear to me, this solitary hill,  
and this hedgerow here, that closes off my view,  
from so much of the ultimate horizon.  
But sitting here, and watching here,  
in thought, I create interminable spaces,  
greater than human silences, and deepest  
quiet, where the heart barely fails to terrify.  
When I hear the wind, blowing among these leaves,  
I go on to compare that infinite silence  
with this voice, and I remember the eternal  
and the dead seasons, and the living present,  
and its sound, so that in this immensity  
my thoughts are drowned, and shipwreck  
seems sweet to me in this sea.

### **3. The Evening Of The Holiday (XIII)**

The night is sweet and clear, without a breeze,  
and the moon rests in the gardens,  
calm on the roofs, and reveals, clear,  
far off, every mountain. O my lady,  
the paths are still, and the night lights  
shine here and there from the balconies:  
you sleep, and sleep gently welcomed you  
to your quiet room: nothing  
troubles you: you still don't know, or guess  
with how deep a wound you've hurt my heart.  
You sleep: I gaze at the sky  
that seems so kind to my eyes:  
gaze on ancient all-powerful Nature,  
who created me for pain. She said:  
'I refuse you hope, even hope, and may  
your eyes not shine, except with tears.'  
Today was holy: now rest  
from pleasure, remember in dream, perhaps,  
how many you liked today, how many  
liked you: not I, it's not I that hope  
to fill your thoughts. Instead I ask  
what life has left me, throw myself  
to earth, cry out, and tremble: oh,  
terrible days of green youth! Ah, on the road  
nearby, I hear the solitary song  
of the worker returning to his poor

lodging, late, after the revels:  
and it grips my heart fiercely  
to think the whole world passes,  
and scarcely leaves a trace. See: the holiday's  
over: some nondescript day follows:  
time carries off all mortal things.  
Where now's the sound of all those  
ancient peoples? Where are the cries  
of our famous ancestors, Rome's  
vast empire, its weapons, the clash  
of arms, crossing land and sea?  
All's peace and silence: the world  
rests entirely, and we speak of them no more.  
Now I remember, in my young days,  
when the longed-for holiday was awaited,  
how, once it had passed, I lay, in sadness,  
pressed tight to my sheets: and, deep in the night,  
a song I heard in the streets,  
died, little by little, far off,  
crushing my heart, as now.

#### **4. To the Moon (XIV)**

O lovely moon, now I'm reminded  
how almost a year since, full of anguish,  
I climbed this hill to gaze at you again,  
and you hung there, over that wood, as now,  
clarifying all things. Filled with mistiness,  
trembling, that's how your face seemed to me,  
with all those tears that welled in my eyes, so  
troubled was my life, and is, and does not change,  
O moon, my delight. And yet it does help me,  
to record my sadness and tell it, year by year.  
Oh how sweetly it hurts, when we are young,  
when hope has such a long journey to run,  
and memory is so short,  
this remembrance of things past, even if it  
is sad, and the pain lasts!

## **5. Saturday Night In The Village (XXV)**

The girl comes from the fields,  
at sunset,  
carrying her sheaf of grass: in her fingers  
a bunch of violets and roses:  
she's ready, as before,  
to wreath her hair and bodice,  
for tomorrow's holiday.

The old woman sits spinning,  
facing the dying sunlight,  
on the stairway, with her neighbours,  
telling the tale of her own young days,  
when she dressed for the festival,  
and still slim and lovely,  
danced all evening, with those young  
boys, companions of her fairer season.

Already the whole sky darkens,  
the air turns deep blue: already  
shadows of hills and roofs return,  
on the young moon's pale rising.

Now the bells are witness  
to the coming holiday:  
you would say the heart  
might take comfort from the sound.

A gang of little boys  
shout in the tiny square,  
leaping here and there,

making a happy din:  
and the farmhand, whistling,  
returns for his simple meal,  
dreams of his day of rest.

When the other lights are quenched, all round,  
and everything else is silent,  
I hear the hammer ringing, I hear  
the carpenter sawing: he's still awake  
in the lamplight, in his shut workshop,  
hurrying and straining,  
to finish his task before dawn.

This is the best of the seven days,  
full of hope and joy:  
tomorrow the hours will bring  
anxiety and sadness, and make each  
turn, in thought, to their accustomed toil.

Lively boy,  
your life's sweet flowering  
is like this day of gladness,  
a clear day, unclouded,  
that heralds life's festival.  
Enjoy the sweet hour, my child,  
this pleasant, delightful season.  
I'll say nothing, more: let it not grieve you  
if your holiday, like mine, is slow to arrive.



## **6. To Himself (XXVIII)**

Now you'll rest forever  
my weary heart. The last illusion has died  
I thought eternal. Died. I feel, in truth,  
not only hope, but desire  
for dear illusion has vanished.  
Rest forever. You've laboured  
enough. Not a single thing is worth  
your beating: the earth's not worthy  
of your sighs. Bitter and tedious,  
life is, nothing more: and the world is mud.  
Be silent now. Despair  
for the last time. To our race Fate  
gave only death. Now scorn Nature,  
that brute force  
that secretly governs the common hurt,  
and the infinite emptiness of all.

## **7. Night-Song Of A Wandering Shepherd of Asia** **(XXIII)**

Why are you there, Moon, in the sky? Tell me  
why you are there, silent Moon.

You rise at night, and go  
contemplating deserts: then you set.

Are you not sated yet  
with riding eternal roads?

Are you not weary, still wishing  
to gaze at these valleys?

It mirrors your life,  
the life of a shepherd.

He rises at dawn:

he drives his flock over the fields, sees  
the flocks, the streams, the grass:

tired at evening he rests:  
expecting nothing more.

Tell me, O Moon, what life is  
worth to a shepherd, or  
your life to you? Tell me: where  
does my brief wandering lead,  
or your immortal course?

Like an old man, white-haired, infirm,  
barefoot and half-naked,  
with a heavy load on his shoulders,  
running onwards, panting,

over mountains, through the valleys,  
on sharp stones, in sand and thickets,  
wind and storm, when the days burn  
and when they freeze,  
through torrents and marshes,  
falling, rising, running faster,  
faster, without rest or pause,  
torn, bleeding: till he halts  
where all his efforts,  
all the roads, have led:  
a dreadful, vast abyss  
into which he falls, headlong, forgetting all.  
Virgin Moon,  
such is the life of man.

Man is born in labour:  
and there's a risk of death in being born.  
The very first things he learns  
are pain and anguish: from the first  
his mother and father  
console him for being born.  
Then as he grows  
they both support him, go on  
trying, with words and actions,  
to give him heart,  
console him merely for being human:  
there's nothing kinder  
a parent can do for a child.

Yet why bring one who needs  
such comforting to life,  
and then keep him alive?  
If life is a misfortune,  
why grant us such strength?  
Such is the human condition,  
inviolate Moon.  
But you who are not mortal,  
care little, maybe, for my words.

Yet you, lovely, eternal wanderer,  
so pensive, perhaps you understand  
this earthly life,  
this suffering, the sighs that exist:  
what this dying is, this last  
fading of our features,  
the vanishing from earth, the losing  
all familiar, loving company.  
And you must understand  
the 'why' of things, and view the fruits  
of morning, evening,  
silence, endless passing time.  
You know (you must) at what sweet love  
of hers the springtime smiles,  
the use of heat, and whom the winter  
benefits with frost.  
You know a thousand things, reveal

a thousand things still hidden from a simple shepherd.

Often as I gaze at you  
hanging so silently, above the empty plain  
that the sky confines with its far circuit:  
or see you steadily  
follow me and my flock:  
or when I look at the stars blazing in the sky,  
musing I say to myself:  
'What are these sparks,  
this infinite air, this deep  
infinite clarity? What does this  
vast solitude mean? And what am I?'  
So I question. About these  
magnificent, immeasurable mansions,  
and their innumerable family:  
and the steady urge, the endless motion  
of all celestial and earthly things,  
circling without rest,  
always returning to their starting place:  
I can't imagine  
their use or fruit. But you, deathless maiden,  
I'm sure, know everything.  
This I know, and feel,  
that others, perhaps, may gain  
benefit and comfort from  
the eternal spheres, from  
my fragile being: but to me life is evil.

O flock at peace, O happy creatures,  
I think you have no knowledge of your misery!  
How I envy you!  
Not only because  
you're almost free of worries:  
quickly forgetting all hardship,  
every hurt, each deep fear:  
but because you never know tedium.  
When you lie in the shade, on the grass,  
you're peaceful and content:  
and you spend most of the year  
untroubled, in that state.  
If I sit on the grass, in the shade,  
weariness clouds my mind,  
and, as if a thorn pricked me,  
sitting there I'm still further  
from finding peace and rest.  
Yet there's nothing I need,  
and I've known no reason for tears.  
I can't say what you enjoy  
or why: but you're fortunate.  
O my flock: there's little still  
I enjoy, and that's not all I regret.  
If you could speak, I'd ask you:  
'Tell me, why are all creatures  
at peace, idle, lying  
in sweet ease: why, if I lie down

to rest, does boredom seize me?’

If I had wings, perhaps,  
to fly above the clouds,  
and count the stars, one by one,  
or roam like thunder from crest to crest,  
I’d be happier, my sweet flock,  
I’d be happier, bright moon.  
Or perhaps my thought  
strays from truth, gazing at others’ fate:  
perhaps whatever form, whatever state  
it’s in, its cradle or its fold,  
the day of birth is dark to one that’s born.

## **8. First Love (X)**

My thoughts turn to the day when I felt love  
war in me, for the first time, and I said:  
'Ah, if this is love, how it torments me!'

When, with eyes fixed wholly on the ground,  
I marvelled at her, she who was first to open,  
all innocent, the passage to my heart.

Ah, Love, how badly you've treated me!  
Why does such sweet affection bring  
so much desire, and so much grief?

And why did such delight enter my heart  
not serenely, not entire and pure,  
but filled with agony and trouble?

Tell me, gentle heart, what fear  
what anguish entered with that thought,  
compared with which all pleasures were annoyance?

Fulfilling thought that offered up yourself,  
in the day and night, when all things seem  
to be at peace in this hemisphere,

you troubled me, unquiet, happy,  
wretched, lying beneath the covers,

throbbing strongly at every moment.

And whenever, sad, afflicted, weary,  
I closed my eyes in sleep: sleep vanished  
consumed by fever and delirium.

Oh how the sweet vision rose, living,  
among the shadows, my closed eyes  
gazing at it beneath my eyelids!

Oh, how that sweetest of motions spread  
through my bones, oh, how a thousand  
confused thoughts rolled through

my trembling soul! As a breeze, flows  
through the heights of an ancient forest,  
and creates a long, uncertain murmuring.

And oh, my heart, while I was silent, while  
I failed to struggle, what did you say, as she departed,  
she the source of pain and throbbing?

I'd no sooner felt the burning  
of that blaze of love, than the little breeze  
that fanned the flame, flew on its way.

I lay there sleepless in the dawn,  
and heard those horses, that would leave me lost,  
stamping their hooves outside my ancestral home.

And I, secret, timid, and unsure, turned  
my eager hearing, eyes open in vain,  
towards the balcony in the darkness,

to hear the last words, that might fall  
from her lips: to hear that voice:  
alas, since heaven took all else away.

The servants' voices often struck  
my doubting ear, and a chill took me,  
and my heart beat more fiercely!

And when that dear voice finally sank  
into my heart, mixed with the sounds  
of carriage wheels and horses:

I was left deserted, huddled trembling  
on my bed, and, eyes closed, pressed  
my hand to my heart and sighed.

Later, stupefied, dragging my  
shaking limbs round the silent room,  
I said: 'What else could ever move my heart?'

Then the bitterest memory  
rooted in my mind, and closed my heart  
to all other voices, every other form.

And a deep grief searched my breast,  
as when the heavens rain widely,  
washing the fields with melancholy.

Nor did I, a boy of eighteen summers  
recognise you, Love, when you first tried  
your power on one born to weep.

When I scorned every joy, and the stars'  
smiles did not please, not dawn's  
calm silence, not green fields.

Even the love of glory was silent  
in my heart that it used to warm,  
where once love of beauty lived.

My eyes would not return to my studies,  
and that which I thought had made  
all other desires vain, seemed vain itself.

Ah how could I have altered so, in myself,  
how had one love taken all others from me?  
Ah, in truth, how changeable we are!

Only my heart pleased, and that  
perpetual dialogue buried in my heart,  
keeping a guard on grief.

And my eyes that searched the earth or myself,  
and allowed no fugitive or wandering glance  
to light on any face, vile or lovely:

fearing to disturb the bright, virgin  
image that I held in my heart, as waves  
in a lake may be stirred by the breeze.

And that regret, for not having fully  
delighted in fleeting days,  
that weighs on the spirit,

changing to poison past delight,  
stung my heart wholly: while shame  
with its harsh bite still had no power.

I swear to heaven, to you, great spirits,  
that there was no low desire in my heart:  
it burned with pure, unblemished fire.

That fire still lives, affection lives,  
the lovely image breathes in my thought,  
from which I draw no delight that is not

heavenly, and that, alone, satisfies me.

## **9. The Solitary Bird (XI)**

Solitary bird, you sing  
from the crest of the ancient tower  
to the landscape, while day dies:  
while music wanders the valley.  
Spring brightens  
the air around, exults in the fields,  
so the heart is moved to see it.  
Flocks are bleating, herds are lowing:  
more birds happily make a thousand  
circles in the clear sky, all around,  
celebrating these happy times:  
you gaze pensively, apart, at it all:  
no companions, and no flight,  
no pleasures call you, no play:  
you sing, and so see out  
the year, the sweet flowering of your life.

Ah, how like  
your ways to mine! Pleasure and Joy  
youth's sweet companions,  
and, Love, its dear friend,  
sighing, bitter at passing days,  
I no longer care for them, I don't know why:  
indeed I seem to fly far from them:  
seem to wander, a stranger  
in my native place,

in the springtime of my life.  
This day, yielding to evening now,  
is a holiday in our town.  
You can hear a bell ring in the clear sky,  
you can hear the cannon's iron thunder,  
echoing away, from farm to farm.  
Dressed for the festival  
young people here  
leave the houses, fill the streets,  
to see and be seen, with happy hearts.  
I go out, alone,  
into the distant country,  
postpone all delight and joy  
to some other day: and meanwhile  
my gaze takes in the clear air,  
brings me the sun that sinks and vanishes  
among the distant mountains,  
after the cloudless day, and seems to say,  
that the beauty of youth diminishes.

You, lonely bird, reaching the evening  
of this life the stars grant you,  
truly, cannot regret  
your existence: since your every  
action is born of nature.  
But I, if I can't  
evade through prayer,  
the detested threshold of old age,

when these eyes will be dumb to others,  
and the world empty, and the future  
darker and more irksome than the present,  
what will I think of such desires?  
Of these years of mine? Of what happened?  
Ah I'll repent, and often,  
un-consoled, I'll gaze behind me.

## **10. Imitation (XXXV)**

Poor frail leaf  
far from your own branch,  
where are you flying? – The wind  
tore *me* from the beech that bore me.  
Whirling, in flight, it takes me  
from the forest to the plain,  
from the valley to the mountain.  
I myself journey  
forever: ignoring all the rest.  
I go where all things go,  
where, of nature, goes  
the flower of the rose,  
and the flower of the laurel.

Note: The original French poem is by Antoine-Vincent Arnault (1766-1834)

## **11. Scherzo (XXXVI)**

When as a boy I set myself  
to learn from the Muses,  
one of them grasped me by the hand  
and all that day  
led me around,  
to contemplate her workshop.  
Little by little she showed me  
the instruments of her art,  
and all their diverse uses  
the effect of each of them  
when they're employed in prose  
or they're employed in verses.  
I marvelled, and I said:  
'And Muse, your file?' The Goddess  
said: 'Worn out: we do without it.'  
'Shouldn't it be repaired,' I added, 'if it's done for?'  
She replied: 'It should, but it's something we've no  
time for.'

## **12. Moon-Set (XXXII)**

As on a lonely night  
the moon descends,  
over the silvery waters and fields,  
where the breeze sighs,  
and distant shadows make  
a thousand vague aspects,  
and deceptive objects,  
among the tranquil waves,  
the branches, hedges, hills, and villages:  
and, lost at the sky's end,  
behind Alps or Apennines, or  
in endless Tyrrhenian deeps,  
sets, and dims the world,  
so that shadows scatter, and a single  
gloom darkens valley and mountain,  
so night remains alone,  
and the carter on the road salutes,  
with mournful song, the last gleam  
of vanishing light that led him on:

so youth melts away,  
and leaves  
our mortal state. The shadows  
and the forms of delighted  
illusion flee: and all the distant  
hopes our mortal nature

trusts in, grow less.  
Life remains, dark,  
abandoned. The uncertain traveller  
strains his eyes, blindly, in vain,  
to find some goal or reason in the long  
road ahead: and sees  
how human habitation becomes  
truly foreign to him, and he to it.

Our wretched life  
would have seemed  
too happy and joyful, up there, if youth,  
whose every good brings a thousand ills,  
had been allowed to last a lifetime.  
The law that sentences  
all creatures to death, would be too mild,  
if half of life  
had not first been made  
harsher than the vilest death.  
The eternal made a worthy discovery  
of immortal intellect: old age,  
worst of all evils, where desire  
clings, but hope is quenched,  
the founts of pleasure run dry, pain  
often grows, and good will not return.

You, hills and shores,  
the glory in the west, that silvered

the veil of night, has died,  
yet you will not  
be widowed long: from the east  
you'll see the sky  
whiten anew, and dawn will rise:  
then the sun will quickly follow  
and, shine out  
with powerful flames,  
flooding you, and the eternal realms,  
with torrents of light.  
But mortal life, will not brighten  
with new light, or new dawn,  
once lovely youth is gone.  
It will be lonely to the end: the gods  
have set no limit to the gloom  
that darkens old age, except the tomb.

**13. Wild Broom (XXXIV)**  
*(or The Flower of the Desert)*

*‘And men loved darkness rather than  
the light’*

*John, III:19*

Fragrant broom,  
content with deserts:  
here on the arid slope of Vesuvius,  
that formidable mountain, the destroyer,  
that no other tree or flower adorns,  
you scatter your lonely  
bushes all around. I’ve seen before  
how you beautify empty places  
with your stems, circling the City  
once the mistress of the world,  
and it seems that with their grave,  
silent, aspect they bear witness,  
reminding the passer-by  
of that lost empire.  
Now I see you again on this soil,  
a lover of sad places abandoned by the world,  
a faithful friend of hostile fortune.  
These fields scattered  
with barren ash, covered  
with solid lava,  
that resounds under the traveller’s feet:

where snakes twist and couple  
in the sun, and the rabbits return  
to their familiar cavernous burrows:  
were once happy, prosperous farms.  
They were golden with corn, echoed  
to lowing cattle:  
there were gardens and palaces,  
the welcome leisure retreats  
for powerful, famous cities,  
which the proud mountain crushed  
with all their people, beneath the torrents  
from its fiery mouth. Now all around  
is one ruin,  
where you root, gentle flower, and as though  
commiserating with others' loss, send  
a perfume of sweetest fragrance to heaven,  
that consoles the desert. Let those  
who praise our existence visit  
these slopes, to see how carefully  
our race is nurtured  
by loving Nature. And here  
they can justly estimate  
and measure the power of humankind,  
that the harsh nurse, can with a slight movement,  
obliterate one part of, in a moment, when we  
least fear it, and with a little less gentle  
a motion, suddenly,  
annihilate altogether.

The 'magnificent and progressive fate'  
of the human race  
is depicted in this place.

Proud, foolish century, look,  
and see yourself reflected,  
you who've abandoned  
the path, marked by advancing thought  
till now, and reversed your steps,  
boasting of this regression  
you call progress.

All the intellectuals, whose evil fate  
gave them you for a father,  
praise your babbling, though  
they often make a mockery  
of you, among themselves. But I'll  
not vanish into the grave in shame:  
As far as I can, I'll demonstrate,  
the scorn for you, openly,  
that's in my heart,  
though I know oblivion crushes  
those hated by their own time.

I've already mocked enough  
at that fate I'll share with you.

You pursue Freedom, yet want thought  
to be slave of a single age again:  
by thought we've risen a little higher  
than barbarism, by thought alone civilisation

grows, only thought guides public affairs  
towards the good.

The truth of your harsh fate  
and the lowly place Nature gave you  
displease you so. Because of it  
you turn your backs on the light  
that illuminated you: and in flight,  
you call him who pursues it vile,  
and only him great of heart  
who foolishly or cunningly mocks himself  
or others, praising our human state above the stars.

A man generous and noble of soul,  
of meagre powers and weak limbs,  
doesn't boast and call himself  
strong and rich in possessions,  
doesn't make a foolish pretence  
of splendid living or cutting a fine  
figure among the crowd:  
but allows himself to appear  
as lacking wealth and power,  
and says so, openly, and gives  
a true value to his worth.

I don't consider a man  
a great-hearted creature, but stupid,  
who, born to die, nurtured in pain,  
says he is made for joy,  
and fills pages with the stench

of pride, promising  
an exalted destiny on earth,  
and a new happiness, unknown to heaven  
much less this world, to people  
whom a surging wave, a breath  
of malignant air, a subterranean tremor,  
destroys so utterly that they  
scarcely leave a memory behind.

He has a noble nature  
who dares to raise his voice  
against our common fate,  
and with an honest tongue,  
not compromising truth,  
admits the evil fate allotted us,  
our low and feeble state:  
a nature that shows itself  
strong and great in suffering,  
that does not add to its miseries with fraternal  
hatred and anger, things worse  
than other evils, blaming mankind  
for its sorrows, but places blame  
on Her who is truly guilty, who is the mother  
of men in bearing them, their stepmother in malice.  
They call her enemy:  
and consider  
the human race  
to be united, and ranked against her,  
from of old, as is true,

judge all men allies, embrace  
all with true love, offering sincere  
prompt support, and expecting it  
in the various dangers and anguish  
of the mutual war on her. And think  
it as foolish to take up arms against men  
and set up nets and obstacles  
against their neighbours as it would be in war,  
surrounded by the opposing army, in the most  
intense heat of battle,  
to start fierce struggles with friends,  
forgetting the enemy,  
to incite desertion, and wave their swords  
among their own forces.

If such thoughts were revealed  
to the crowd, as they used to be,  
along with the horror that first  
brought men together in social contract  
against impious Nature,  
then by true wisdom  
the honest, lawful intercourse  
of citizens would be partly renewed,  
and justice and piety, would own  
to another root than foolish pride,  
on which the morals of the crowd  
are as well founded  
as anything else that's based on error.

Often I sit here, at night,  
on these desolate slopes,  
that a hardened lava-flow has clothed  
with brown, and which seem to undulate still,  
and over the gloomy waste,  
I see the stars flame, high  
in the purest blue,  
mirrored far off by the sea:  
the universe glittering with sparks  
that wheel through the tranquil void.  
And then I fix my eyes on those lights  
that seem pin-pricks,  
yet are so vast in form  
that earth and sea are really a pin-prick  
to them: to whom man,  
and this globe where man is nothing,  
are completely unknown: and gazing  
at those still more infinitely remote,  
knots, almost, of stars,  
that seem like mist to us, to which  
not only man and earth but all  
our stars, infinite in number and mass,  
with the golden sun,  
are unknown, or seem like points  
of misted light, as they appear  
from earth: what do you seem like,  
then, in my thoughts, O children  
of mankind? And mindful of

your state here below, of which  
the ground I stand on bears witness,  
and that, on the other hand, you believe  
that you've been appointed the master  
and end of all things: and how often  
you like to talk about the creators  
of all things universal, who descended  
to this obscure grain of sand called earth,  
for you, and happily spoke to you, often:  
and that, renewing these ridiculous dreams,  
you still insult the wise, in an age  
that appears to surpass the rest  
in knowledge and social customs: what feeling is it,  
then, wretched human race, what thought  
of you finally pierces my heart?  
I don't know if laughter or pity prevails.

As a little apple that falls from a tree:  
late autumn ripeness,  
and nothing else, bringing it to earth:  
crushes, wastes, and covers  
in a moment, the sweet nests  
of a tribe of ants, carved out  
of soft soil, with vast labour,  
and the works, the wealth,  
that industrious race had vied  
to achieve, with such effort,  
and created in the summer: so the cities

of the farthest shores  
that the sea bathed,  
were shattered, confounded, covered  
in a few moments, by a night of ruin,  
by ashes, lava and stones,  
hurled to the heights of heaven  
from the womb of thunder,  
falling again from above,  
mingled in molten streams,  
or by the vast overflow  
of liquefied masses,  
metals and burning sand,  
descending the mountainside  
racing over the grass: so that now  
the goats graze above them,  
and new cities rise beside them, whose base  
is their buried, demolished walls  
that the cruel mountain seems to crush underfoot.  
Nature has no more love or care  
for the seed of man  
than for the ants: and if the destruction  
of one is rarer than that of the other,  
it's for no other reason  
than that mankind is less rich in offspring.

Fully eighteen hundred years  
have passed, since those once-populated cities  
vanished, crushed by fiery force,

yet the farmer intent  
on his vines, this dead  
and ashen soil barely nourishes,  
still lifts his gaze  
with suspicion,  
to the fatal peak  
that sits there brooding,  
no gentler than ever, still threatening  
to destroy him, his children, and his  
meagre possessions. And often  
the wretch, lying awake  
on the roof of his house, where  
the wandering breezes blow at night,  
jumps up now and again, and checks  
the course of the dreadful boiling,  
that pours from that inexhaustible lap  
onto its sandy slopes, and illuminates  
the bay of Capri, the ports  
of Naples and Mergellina.  
And if he sees it nearing, or hears  
the water bubbling, feverishly, deep  
in the well, he wakes his children, quickly  
wakes his wife, and fleeing, with whatever  
of their possessions they can grasp,  
watches from the distance, as his familiar  
home, and the little field  
his only defence against hunger,  
fall prey to the burning tide,

crackling as it arrives, inexorably  
spreading over all this, and hardening.  
Lifeless Pompeii returns to the light of heaven  
after ancient oblivion, like a buried  
skeleton, that piety or the greed  
for land gives back to the open air:  
and, from its empty forum,  
through the ranks of broken  
columns, the traveller contemplates  
the forked peak and the smoking summit,  
that still threatens the scattered ruins.  
And, like night's secret horror,  
through the empty theatres,  
the twisted temples, the shattered  
houses, where the bat hides its brood,  
like a sinister brand  
that circles darkly through silent palaces,  
the glow of the deathly lava runs,  
reddening the shadows  
from far away, staining the region round.  
So, indifferent to man, and the ages  
he calls ancient, and the way descendants  
follow on from their ancestors,  
Nature, always green, proceeds instead  
by so long a route  
she seems to remain at rest. Meanwhile empires fall,  
peoples and tongues pass: She does not see:  
and man lays claim to eternity's merit.

And you, slow-growing broom,  
who adorn this bare landscape  
with fragrant thickets,  
you too will soon succumb  
to the cruel power of subterranean fire,  
that, revisiting places  
it knows, will stretch its greedy margin  
over your soft forest. And you'll bend  
your innocent head, without a struggle,  
beneath that mortal burden:  
yet a head that's not been bent in vain  
in cowardly supplication  
before a future oppressor: nor lifted  
in insane pride towards the stars,  
or beyond the desert, where  
you were born and lived,  
not through intent, but chance:  
and you'll have been so much wiser  
so much less unsound than man, since you  
have never believed your frail species,  
can be made immortal by yourself, or fate.

## **14. The Calm After The Storm (XXIV)**

The storm has gone:  
I hear the joyful birds, the hen,  
returning to the path,  
renews her cackling. See the clear sky  
opening from the west, over the mountain:  
the landscape clarifies,  
the river gleams bright in the valley.  
Now every heart is happy, on every side  
there's the noise of work  
as they return to business.  
The craftsman comes to the door,  
his work in hand, singing,  
to gaze at the humid sky:  
a girl runs out to draw water  
that's charged with fresh rain:  
and, from street to street,  
the vegetable seller  
raises his cry again  
See the sun return, see how it's smiling  
from hills and farms. The servants  
open balconies, terraces, lodges:  
hear the harness clinking, far off  
along the highway: as the traveller's carriage  
moves, once more, down the road.

Every heart is happy.

When was life as sweet,  
as pleasant as it is now?  
When did men turn  
to their work, or bend to  
their studies with such love? Or begin  
some new venture? Or were so forgetful  
of old wrongs? Joy is born of pain:  
vain joy, the fruit  
of fear past, in one shaken,  
and fearful of death,  
who abhorred life before:  
fear that made men sweat and tremble  
in enduring anguish,  
shivering, silent, pale: seeing  
lightning, cloud, and wind,  
moving to attack them.

O kindly Nature,  
these are your gifts,  
these are the delights  
you give to mortals. To be free  
of pain is our delight.  
You scatter ills with generous hands: grief  
appears of itself, and pleasure, that's so often  
born of trouble, through the monstrous,  
and the miraculous, is our only gain. The human  
race, dear to the gods! Happy enough  
to gain a breathing space

from sorrow: blessed  
when death heals you of every grief.

## **15. Masterful Thought (XXVI)**

Sweetest, powerful  
lord of my deepest mind:  
terrible, but dear  
gift of the heavens: companion  
of my darkest days,  
Thought, that often stirs inside me.

Who does not talk of your secret  
nature? Who does not know its power  
among us? Yet often, since human  
language gains its own impetus  
from your action, it often seems strange  
to those who listen to what you create.

How lonely my mind  
has become, since you  
took it as your home!  
All my other thoughts vanish,  
swift as flashes of lightning  
all around: Like a tower  
on an empty plain,  
you stand alone, gigantic, among them.

What are earthly affairs,  
what is all life to me,  
compared with you!

What intolerable tedium,  
our leisure, familiar trades,  
the vain hopes of vain pleasure,  
beside that joy,  
the heavenly joy that comes from you!

Just as a traveller is happy  
to turn his eyes from bare rock  
in the rugged Apennines,  
towards some far green sunlit field,  
so I turn willingly from harsh, dry  
mundane conversations, as if  
towards a happy garden, and your space  
restores my senses again.

It seems well nigh incredible  
I've endured this wretched life,  
and this foolish world,  
for so long without you:  
almost impossible to comprehend  
how others can sigh  
with desire for anything  
except what resembles you.

Fear of death has never entered  
my heart, since I first learned  
from experience what life was.  
That final necessity  
this strange world sometimes praises,  
yet abhors and trembles at,  
seems like a jest to me today:  
and if danger threatens, I pause  
and smile, to contemplate its menace.

I've always despised  
cowards, and ungenerous  
spirits. Now any shameful act  
stings me at once:  
examples of human baseness  
stir my soul, at once, to scorn.  
I feel myself greater  
than this insolent age  
that nourishes itself on empty hope,  
in love with gossip, hostile to virtue:  
foolish, it asks for sense,  
without seeing how life  
becomes more and more senseless.  
I scorn human judgement: and tread down  
that fickle crowd, hostile  
to true thought, who despise your worth.

What allegiance does not yield  
to that from which you rise?  
Indeed what other allegiance  
but this has power among mortals?  
Avarice, pride, hatred, disdain,  
love of honour, power,  
what are they but whims  
compared to this? Only one allegiance  
is alive to us: eternal law  
has only decreed one

over-ruling lord of the human heart.

Life has no worth or meaning  
except in this, which is all to us:  
which alone absolves fate  
for placing mortals here  
to suffer, with no other purpose:  
in this one allegiance,  
life is more noble than death,  
if not to fools, to hearts that are not base,

Sweet thought, because of your joys,  
to have endured our human troubles,  
and suffered this mortal life  
for many years, has not been in vain:  
and expert though I am in pain,  
I'd still be prepared  
to take to the road for such a purpose:  
since I've never journeyed,  
weary, through the sands,  
among the venomous snakes,  
and reached you, without my pain  
being eased by your great blessing.

What a world, what a new  
immensity, what a paradise it is  
to which your marvellous enchantment  
seemed to lift me! Where I used  
to wander in that strange light,  
forgetting my earthly state,  
and everything of our reality,  
among the dreams, I think,  
that immortals know. Alas, you are,  
in the end, a dream, sweet thought,  
one that adorns truth for the most part:  
yet a dream, a clear illusion. But you,  
among nature's happy illusions,  
are divine: because you are so strong,

and vital, that you can endure tenaciously  
against truth, and even adapt to truth,  
and not dissolve, till you meet with death.

O my thought, it's true, that you,  
the only vital part of my days,  
delightful cause of infinite pain,  
will sometime be quenched with me in death:  
you whose signs I feel alive in my soul,  
such that you'll be my lord for ever.

Other noble illusions  
often fail in the face  
of truth. The more I turn  
to gaze at her,  
of whom I love to speak with you,  
the greater grows the delight,  
the greater the delirium, I breathe.

Angelic beauty!

Wherever I look, among the lovely faces,  
they are only painted images  
of your face. It seems to me, you  
are the sole fount of every other  
loveliness, of every true beauty.

When, since I first saw you,  
were you not the ultimate goal  
of my deepest cares? What part of the day  
passed when I did not think of you?  
How often did my dreams lack  
your sovereign image? Lovely as a dream,  
angelic form,

in earthly place,  
in the high realms of the universe,  
what do I ask for, or hope to see  
that is more beautiful than your eyes,  
or own that is sweeter than thought of you?

## 16. Love And Death (XXVII)

*'Those whom the gods love die  
young'*

*Menander*

Fate gave birth, at the same moment,  
to the brothers, Love and Death.  
The world owns to none  
so fine, nor do the stars.  
From the former, the Good is born,  
and the greatest pleasure,  
to be found in the ocean of being:  
the latter annuls our greatest  
pain, and all our greatest evil.  
Often the boy, Love,  
joys in keeping company,  
with a beautiful girl,  
sweet to see, not  
as cowardly people paint her:  
and flying together through human life  
they are the wise heart's greatest solace.  
No heart was ever wiser  
than when pierced by love, nor firmer  
in scorning wretched life,  
nor so ready to face danger  
for any lord but this one:  
Love, where you give your help,

courage is born, is roused:  
then the human race is wise  
in what it does, not as so often,  
only wise in thought.

When a new loving  
affection is born,  
in the deepest heart,  
we feel the languid desire to die,  
simultaneously in our soul:  
how, who knows? But such  
is the power and true first effect of love.  
Perhaps the desolation here  
terrifies our sight: perhaps a mortal finds  
this world uninhabitable,  
without that new,  
sole, infinite happiness  
his thoughts create:  
and by reason of that great storm  
presaged in his heart, seeks quiet,  
seeks to reach harbour,  
driven by desire,  
that roars and darkens all around.

Then, when formidable power  
wraps everything about,  
and invading passion flashes in the heart,  
how often you, Death,  
are invoked, with intense  
desire, by the troubled lover!  
How often at evening, how often  
when the weary body is abandoned to dawn,

he might call himself blessed  
never to rise again,  
or see the bitter light!  
And often at the sound of the funeral bell  
the dirge that takes  
the dead to their eternal rest,  
he envies, from his heart's depths,  
with many ardent sighs,  
he who joins the lost in their ancient home.  
Even the untaught man,  
the farmer, ignorant  
of all virtue derived from wisdom,  
even a shy and timid girl,  
who once felt her hair stand on end  
at the name of death, dares  
to fix her gaze on the tomb,  
on the winding sheet, with calm constancy,  
dares to meditate on  
poison or the knife,  
and feel, deep in her mind,  
the courtesy of death.  
So love leads his disciples  
to death. Yet often  
the internal struggle is so great  
a mortal cannot endure its strength,  
and either the frail body yields  
to those terrible forces, and in that way  
Death prevails, aided by his brother's power:

or Love drives them towards the depths,  
so the unlearned farmer,  
and the tender girl,  
fell themselves with violent hand  
while the world,  
to which heaven grants  
peace and old age, mocks them.

Sweet lords, friends  
of the human race,  
to whom nothing in this vast  
universe compares, and whom no power  
but fate can overcome,  
may it grant one of you  
to enter fervid, happy,  
intelligent minds.  
And you, lovely Death,  
whom I've always called on, and honoured  
since my early years, who alone  
in the world take pity on human troubles,  
if you have ever been honoured  
by me, if I have tried to address  
the crowd's ingratitude  
for your divine status,  
don't delay, favour this  
unfamiliar prayer,  
close these sad eyes of mine  
to the light, now, O king of the ages.

Whenever the hour falls when you come  
in answer to my prayer, you'll find me  
armed, head high,  
and firm against fate:  
not heaping praise on the flailing hand  
stained with my innocent blood,  
nor blessing you, from cowardice,  
like the human race of old:  
I'll throw away every vain hope  
that consoles the childish world,  
every foolish comfort,  
and I'll not hope for any  
other moment, but yours alone:  
and only wait calmly  
for that day when I lay my sleeping  
head on your virgin breast.

**17. Bas-Relief On An Ancient Tomb (XXX)**  
**(Where The Dead Girl is Shown**  
**Departing, and Taking Leave of her Family)**

Lovely girl, where are you going?  
Who calls you, far  
from your loved ones?  
Do you abandon your father's house  
so soon, wandering off, alone? Will you  
return to this threshold? Will you ever make  
those who mourn you today, happy again?

Your eyes are dry, and your attitude brave,  
but you still seem unhappy. It would be hard  
to tell from your serious aspect,  
whether your road is pleasant  
or sorrowful, joyful or sad  
the place you travel to. Alas, I could never  
decide myself, nor perhaps has  
the world decided, whether  
you should be called hated by heaven,  
or beloved: wretched or fortunate.

Death calls: at the dawn of day,  
comes the final moment. You'll not return  
to the nest you left. You've left  
the sight of your sweet  
parents forever. The place

you go to lies underground:  
there's your dwelling for all time.  
Perhaps you're blessed: but he who gazes,  
thoughtfully, at your fate, must sigh.

I think that never to see  
the light is best. But, being born,  
to vanish at that time when beauty  
first displays her limbs and face,  
and the world begins  
to bow down before her from afar:  
when every hope is flowering,  
long before truth has flashed its gloomy  
rays against her joyful brow:  
and like mist condensing  
to a fleeing cloud-form on the horizon,  
as if she had not been,  
renounce the future  
for the tomb's dark silence,  
this, though to our intellect  
it seems best, strikes the heart  
deeply, in profound pity.

Mother Nature, bewailed and feared,  
by those of the animal kingdom,  
you marvel, not worth our praise,  
who bear and nourish to kill,  
if it's a mortal ill

to die before our time, why  
bring it on innocent heads?  
If it's a good, why make this parting  
more gloomy, inconsolable,  
than every other ill,  
for those who go, and those who live?

Wretched, wherever they gaze,  
wretched, where they turn or run,  
this sensitive species!  
It pleased you that youthful  
hopes of life  
should be illusions: trouble-filled  
the tide of their years: Death their only  
shield against evil: the inevitable goal,  
the immutable law  
ruling human life. Ah, after  
the sad journey why not at least  
make the ending happy? Rather  
than this certain future,  
the living keep before their eyes,  
the sole comfort  
for our miseries,  
clothed in black robes,  
veiled with sad shade,  
why make the harbour more fearful  
a sight than ever the waves were?

Given the harsh fate of dying  
to which you destine us,  
we whom you abandon, in our innocence,  
unknowingly, unwillingly, to life,  
then he who dies is more enviable  
than he who witnesses the death

of those he loves. Yet though it's true,  
as I fervently believe,  
that life is pain,  
and death a gift, who could wish,  
as indeed he should  
for the death of those he cares for,  
himself to still remain  
behind, diminished:  
to see the beloved one  
with whom he's spent so many years  
carried from the threshold,  
a farewell with no hope of ever  
meeting again  
on this world's roads:  
then left alone, abandoned on earth,  
to gaze around, and in familiar places  
remember the lost companion?  
O Nature, how, ah how, can your heart allow  
such embraces to be loosened,  
friend from friend,  
brother from brother,  
child from father,  
lover from lover: one dying,  
the other granted life? How can  
you make such grief  
our fate, that mortals  
survive a mortal love? But Nature  
bestows its care on other things,

than our good or ill.

**18. On A Lovely Lady's Image (XXX1)**  
**(Carved on her Tomb)**

You were such, who now are buried  
dust and skeleton. Placed motionless,  
helpless, above the earth and bone,  
mute, gazing at the flight of ages,  
stands the sole guardian  
of grief and memory, the image  
of lost beauty. That sweet glance  
that made men tremble as it gazed  
at them, motionless, as now: those lips,  
from whose depths pleasure flowed,  
as though from a full urn: that neck,  
once circled by desire: that loving hand,  
that often, lightly opened, felt  
the hand it clasped grow cold:  
and the breast, at which men  
visibly paled, once lived:  
now they are earth  
and bone: and stone conceals  
the sad and shameful sight.

So fate diminishes  
that image, that seemed to us  
a living vision of heaven. Eternal  
mystery of our being. One moment, Beauty,  
the fount of vast, exalted thoughts,

ineffable feelings, towers over us, and seems  
like a tremulous radiance  
immortal nature casts on this arena,  
the sign and sure hope  
of blessed realms and the golden world,  
of a superhuman fate,  
granted to our mortal state:  
next moment, at a light touch,  
what was but now  
an angelic face becomes vile,  
abominable, base, and the  
marvellous ideal that took  
its being from it, vanishes  
at once from the mind.

Infinite desires  
and noble visions  
are created in the mind  
by virtue of harmonious knowledge:  
so that the human spirit wanders  
secretly through a sea of delight,  
as though swimming ardently  
in play through the Ocean:  
But if a discordant note  
strikes the ear, that paradise  
turns to nothingness in a moment.

How does human nature reach

so high, if it is merely  
wretched, frail, dust and shadow?  
Yet if it is somehow noble,  
how can our finest thoughts and acts  
be kindled and quenched  
for such slight, ignoble reasons?

## 19. To Spring (or Of The Ancient Myths) (VII)

Because the sun renews  
the injured heavens, and Zephyrus revives  
the dull air, and the dark shadows of clouds  
are driven off, scattered down the valleys;  
birds trust their fragile forms  
to the wind, and the light of day  
brings new desire for love, fresh hope,  
penetrating the woods and through  
the melting frost, to waking creatures:  
perhaps human spirits, drowned in grief  
and weariness might remake  
the age of beauty, which tragedy, and the black  
torch of truth, consumed  
before its time? Are Phoebus's rays  
truly quenched in darkness  
forever? Fragrant Spring  
can you rouse and inspire  
this frozen heart that knows  
old age's bitterness in the flower of youth?

Are you alive, O sacred Nature,  
are you alive? Alive, and your maternal voice  
gathered to an unaccustomed hearing?  
Your rivers were once home to the bright nymphs,  
the liquid founts were placid haunts and mirrors.  
And the rugged mountain ridges, the tangled

woods (today the remote haunt of the winds)  
trembled to the arcane dance  
of immortal footsteps: and the shepherd  
leading his thirsty flock through the flickering  
mid-day shadows of the flowering  
river-banks, heard the shrill piping  
of woodland Pan echoing  
along the stream: saw the waves  
tremble, amazed, and, saw, vaguely,  
the quiver-bearing goddess  
descending into the warm flood,  
washing the grime and dust of the bloody chase  
from her white flanks and virgin arms.

Once, the grass and flowers breathed,  
and the woods. The gentle airs,  
the clouds, and the lamp of the sun,  
were aware of humanity, then, when  
the traveller followed you with intent eyes,  
Cyprian Planet, in the empty night,  
you, naked above the hills and shores,  
his companion on the road, the image  
of mortal thought. When, fleeing  
the impure towns  
and deadly anger and shame,  
men clasped the rugged tree-trunks,  
deep in dense woods,  
and thought that living flame surged

through the dry veins, leaves breathed:  
that they clasped in their arms the hidden heartbeat  
of sorrowful Daphne, or sad Phyllis, or heard  
Clymene's disconsolate daughters weeping  
for Phaethon, drowned by the Sun in the Italian  
River.

Nor, harsh cliffs, were the mournful sounds  
of human misery lost  
as they struck you,  
while timorous Echo haunted your spaces,  
not the wind's vain wandering,  
but a nymph's unhappy spirit, she,  
whom the weight of love and harsh fate  
robbed of her limbs. From caves,  
and naked cliffs, and desolate haunts,  
she taught a message, her understanding  
of our high and broken lament,  
to the arching sky. You too, nightingale,  
the tale declares, were expert  
in human fate, you who sing now  
the coming of the re-born year,  
and in the deep  
quiet of the countryside, through the dark silent air,  
mourn your ancient wrong, an ill vengeance,  
anger and pity to make the sun grow pale.

But your race is unknown to us:

grief does not form those varying  
notes of yours, and free of guilt,  
and so less dear to us, they climb the dark valley.  
Ah, since the halls of Olympus  
are empty, and thunder strays blindly  
among dark clouds and mountains,  
filling guilty or innocent hearts  
with the same cold terror: and their native land  
is alien to her children, the sad spirits  
she produces: lovely Nature  
listen to the unhappy cares,  
and unjust fate of mortals,  
and rekindle the ancient flame  
in me: if you still live,  
if there's truly one thing  
at least in heaven, or on  
the naked earth, or in the deep sea,  
that may not pity but observes our pain.

Note: The nightingale refers to the myth of Procne,  
Philomela and Tereus.

**20. Hymn To The Patriarchs (VIII)**  
**(Or: The Beginnings Of The Human Race)**

And you, sung by your grieving sons,  
you, glorious fathers of the human race,  
will be spoken of with praise: dearer  
to the eternal mover of the stars, and so much  
less to be wept for, than we whom a gentler  
age produces. The irreparable afflictions  
of wretched mortals, born to weep,  
who find their last day and the darkened  
tomb sweeter than ethereal light,  
were not imposed by pity or the direct  
rule of Heaven. And though ancient error  
delivered the human race to the tyrannous  
grip of disease and misfortune,  
the cause of your ancient cry, the worse crimes  
of your children, their unquiet minds,  
and greater madness raised Olympus's weapons  
and the neglected hands of nurturing Nature  
against us: so life's flame was detested,  
and our birth from the maternal womb  
was hateful, and, in violence, despairing  
Erebus emerged from the earth.

O ancient father and leader  
of the human family you first saw  
the sun, the glorious fires of the turning spheres,

and the fresh verdure of the fields, and watched  
the breezes wandering through the young meadows:  
when the cliffs and deserted valleys  
echoed to the rushing mountain streams,  
their roar unheard: when the fair  
future sites of famous peoples,  
their noisy cities, still unknown, were ruled  
by peace: and silent and alone  
the clear rays of Phoebus and the golden moon  
climbed the uncultivated hills. Oh, empty  
places of the earth, untouched by crime  
and sad event! Oh unhappy father  
what pain for your offspring,  
and what a vast chain of bitter events  
destiny prepares! See the greedy field  
is stained with a brother's blood, through a brothers'  
murder, in an unprecedented act of anger,  
and the bright air knows evil wings of death.  
The fearful exiled fratricide, fleeing  
the solitary shadows and the secret anger  
of the winds in the deepest woods,  
raises the first city roofs, the haunts and kingdom  
of all-consuming care: and for the first time  
desperate contrition, breathless, ill,  
brings blind mortals together and shuts them  
in shared shelters: so wicked hands  
rejected the curving plough, and it was shameful  
to sweat in the fields: the idle occupied

the gates of the wicked: slothful bodies  
tamed natural vigour, minds were languid  
and indolent: and weakened humanity  
accepted servitude, the ultimate harm.

And you, to whom a white dove first brought  
the certain sign of promised hope,  
from blind air and soaking hills:  
for whom the drowned sun, rising  
from ancient evening cloud,  
painted a rainbow on the dark sky:  
oh, you rescue the evil generation  
from the hostile sky and the waves moaning  
over clouded ridges. The people saved  
repopulate the earth, renewing savage affections,  
wicked works, and the pain that follows.  
Impious hands mock the inaccessible kingdom  
of the vengeful sea, and weeping and wickedness  
are taught to alien shores and other stars.

Now I think of you, also, father of the elect,  
strong, just: and of the generous children  
born from your seed. I will speak of how you  
were sitting, resting, screened by the midday shade,  
of your tent, on the sweet plain of Mamre,  
space and pasture for your flocks:  
of how angels disguised as travellers  
brought divine grace: and, O son

of wise Rebecca, how in the evening  
by the rustic well in the sweet vale of Haran,  
haunt of shepherds and of idle hours,  
love for Laban's lovely daughter pierced you:  
unconquered Love, that condemned your proud  
willing spirit to long exile, and long trouble,  
and the odious burden of servitude.

There was indeed a time (The Muses' song  
and the cry of fame have not indeed fed the avid  
crowd on error or empty shadows), a time  
when this poor earth was friendly and pleasant  
and dear to our race, and our fallen age  
flowed with gold. True, streams of pure milk  
did not flow down the face  
of native cliffs, shepherds did not  
drive tigers to the fold with their flocks,  
or wolves to the springs  
for their pleasure: but the human  
race did live then in ignorance  
of its fate, and trouble, free of misery:  
a sweet primal veil of kind illusion was drawn  
over the hidden laws of nature  
and heaven: and content with hope  
our peaceful ship reached harbour.

And a happy race still lives in the vast  
forests of California, whose hearts

are not withered by pale care, whose limbs  
harsh disease does not waste: the woods  
feed them, the hollow cliffs shelter them,  
the watered valley refreshes them, death's  
dark day looms over them unseen. Oh,  
wise nature's realms are defenceless  
against our sinful daring! Their shores and caves  
and peaceful woods lie open to our un-abating  
fury: those violated races learn  
misery's invasion, unprecedented  
greed: and happiness, fleeing, naked,  
is pursued, into the western deeps.

## 21. Sappho's Last Song (IX)

Calm night, modest rays of the descending moon: and you, herald of the day, that rise above the cliffs, among the silent woods: you seemed dear and pleasant to my eyes while I was ignorant of fate and the Furies: now no gentle prospect smiles on my despair. For us an unaccustomed joy revives only when the dust-filled flow of the south-wind blows through the liquid air and over the quivering fields, and when the chariot, Jupiter's heavy chariot, above our heads, thunders, and splits the shadowy sky. In cliffs or deepest valleys we take joy in the storm, in the widespread flight of the stricken flocks, or in the sound and conquering fury of water, on the shifting banks of the deep river.

Your mantle is lovely, O sacred sky, and you are lovely dew-wet earth. Ah, not one part of that infinite beauty was granted to wretched Sappho by the gods, or pitiless fate. O Nature, I am only a humble and troubled guest in your proud kingdom, a lover scorned, and I turn heart and eyes

in vain, in supplication, towards  
your graceful form. No sunlit place,  
nor the dawn light at heaven's gate  
smiles on me: the brightly coloured birds  
sing, but not for me, the murmur of the beech  
trees is not for me: and where the bright river  
shows its pure flood, beneath the shade  
of the weeping willows, it draws back  
its lithe waters disdainfully  
from my sliding foot, touching  
the perfumed shores in its retreat.

What fault, what wicked excess  
stained me at birth, that heaven turned  
me towards ill and her face from fortune?  
How did childhood, when life  
is ignorant of wrong, sin, so that stripped  
of youth, its flower, my iron-dark thread  
was wound on the spindle  
of indomitable Fate? Incautious words  
spill from my lips: the events of destiny  
move in hidden ways. All is hidden,  
except our unhappiness. Neglected children  
we are born to weep, and our purpose lies  
in the lap of the gods. Oh the cares, the hopes  
of our youth! But the Father gave dreams,  
sweet dreams eternal dominion  
over men: virtue in plain dress

does not shine among brave deeds  
or learned lines of verse.

We die. The worthless veil fallen to earth,  
the naked spirit will fly towards Dis,  
erasing the cruel error of the blind  
dispenser of Fate. And you, live as happily  
as any mortal ever lived on earth, you,  
through whom a long unrequited love  
long loyalty, and the vain fury  
of implacable desire gripped me. Jupiter  
has not sprinkled me with happiness  
from his bitter jar, and my illusions died  
with my childhood dreams. All  
the happiest days of our youth are gone.  
Illness follows: old age: and the shadow  
of icy death. See, Tartarus is left  
of all the prizes hoped for,  
the sweet illusions: and the dark goddess,  
black night, and the silent shore  
confine the proud intellect.

## **22. To Count Carlo Pepoli (XIX)**

Dear Pepoli, how do you endure  
this wearisome and troubling sleep  
that we call life? By what hopes  
is your heart sustained? In what thoughts,  
in what happy or irksome works do you employ  
that leisure your distant ancestors bequeathed you  
this heavy and exhausting gift? All life  
is idle, in every human condition,  
if all the effort, that is aimed  
at nothing worthy, and has no power  
to realise its intent, is rightly named  
idleness. And if I should call the labouring  
crowd, seen at tranquil dawn and evening,  
breaking the soil, or tending crops and herds,  
idle, I would be right, since their life  
is to sustain life, and life has no value  
to the human race of itself alone.

The experienced sailor spends days  
and nights in idleness: the endless sweat  
of the workshops is idle: the soldier  
on watch is idle, and in the danger of war:  
and the miserly merchant lives in idleness:  
whatever the care, the sweat, the watches,  
the dangers, no one gains lovely happiness  
for himself or others, though it's all  
mortal nature desires and searches for.

Yet for all the desire that has lead mortals  
to be blessed with useless sighing  
since the day when the world was born  
nature has made a sort of medicine,  
amongst life's unhappiness, the various  
necessities, that have to be provided  
by thought and effort, and the day is  
full, even if it may not be joyful,  
for the human family: so that desire  
is troubled and confused, and has less scope  
to disturb the heart. So the creatures,  
in whose hearts the desire to be happy  
lives, no less vainly than it does in ours,  
intent on what is needed for their lives,  
spend their time less sadly, and less burdened,  
than us, not condemning the slow hours.  
But we, who trust to others' hands  
to provide our living, are left with  
a greater necessity that none  
but ourselves can supply, and that  
with pain and tedium: I mean the necessity  
of getting through our lives: cruel, unconquerable  
necessity, that no accumulated wealth,  
no rich flocks, or fertile fields,  
no great halls, or purple robes can free  
the human race from. When one of us,  
scornful of the empty years, and hating  
the light above, and inclined

to anticipate slow fate, fails to turn  
a suicidal hand against himself,  
the harsh sting of insatiable desire  
that longs uselessly for happiness  
makes him search all Italy  
for a thousand ineffectual cures  
that cannot compensate for the one  
that Nature intends for us.

One man is occupied night and day  
cultivating his clothes and hairstyle,  
his gestures and bearing, the vanity  
of coaches and horses, crowded salons,  
echoing squares and public gardens,  
gambling, dining and envied dancing:  
a smile never far from his lips: ah, but  
deep in his heart, heavy, fixed, immovable,  
like a column of steel, eternal tedium sits,  
against which youth's vigour  
is powerless, unshaken by  
sweet words from rosebud lips,  
or a tender glance, trembling  
from two dark eyes, the dear glance,  
the mortal thing most worthy of heaven.

Some other, turning to flee our sad  
human fate, crosses the globe, spending  
his time changing countries and climes,

wandering seas and hills: and all  
the confines of space, that the infinite fields  
of nature entire open to men, he adds  
to his wandering. Ah, black care  
sits high on his prow, and in every clime,  
under every sky, happiness is called to  
in vain: sadness lives and rules.

There are those who choose to pass their time  
in the cruel work of war, and idly stain  
their hands with their brothers' blood:  
and those comforted by others' pain,  
thinking to make themselves less sad  
by making others wretched, and using up  
the time by doing harm. And those who  
oppress virtue, wisdom and the arts:  
and those who trample on their own  
and other races, troubling the ancient peace  
of foreign shores, with war, trade, fraud,  
consuming the life their fate has granted.

A gentler desire, a sweeter concern  
rules you in the flower of youth, the lovely  
April of your years, to some the happiest  
and best gift of heaven, but heavy, bitter,  
hostile to one without a country. You are  
moved and roused to study verse,  
and rehearse the beauty that appears rare,

slight, fugitive in this world, in speech,  
with what vague imagination and our  
own true error, more benign than nature  
or the gods, produce so richly for us.  
That man is a thousand times fortunate  
who does not lose the fallen power  
of dear imaginings through the years:  
whom fate allows to keep his youthful  
heart forever: who in his vigour  
and in his failing years, beautifies  
nature with his thoughts,  
as he once did in his green age,  
making dead things and the desert bloom.  
May heaven grant you such: may the flame  
that warms your heart today keep you  
a lover of poetry in old age. I already feel  
the sweet deceptions of my early years  
failing me, and their delightful images  
fade from my eyes, those I so loved,  
that recalling them, always, to my final hour,  
will make me desire them, and weep.  
When my heart is wholly frozen,  
chilled, and the calm and solitary smile  
of open fields, the dawn song of the birds,  
in spring, and the silent moon over the hills  
and ridges in a clear sky, cannot move  
my soul: when every beauty  
of art or nature seems lifeless

and still to me: when every noble feeling  
every tender affection is alien, strange:  
then stripped of my only solace  
I will choose other studies, less sweet,  
on which the thankless residue of a life  
of iron can be based. I will search for  
the bitter truths, the hidden destiny  
of mortal, and eternal things: why  
the human race was born, and burdened  
with pain and misery: to what final goal  
fate and nature drive us: who delights in  
or benefits from our sorrows:  
by what rules or laws this mysterious  
universe moves: on which the wise  
heap praise, and to which I pay homage.

I'll spend my idle days in these  
speculations: since truth, once known,  
has its sad delights. And if in reasoning  
on truth this way, my words prove  
unpleasant to others, or misunderstood,  
I'll not grieve, since all my old desire  
for glory will be quenched: no longer  
that goddess vain, but blinder still  
than chance, or fate, or love.

Note: Count Pepoli, of Bologna, was a man of letters  
and vice-president of the Accademia dei Felsinei.

Leopardi recited this poem at one of the meetings of the Academy.

### **23. Fragment (From Simonides I: XL)**

Every earthly event  
is in Jupiter's power, Jupiter's, O my son,  
According to his will  
he ordains all things.  
But our blind thought is anxious  
and troubled by distant futures,  
though human fate,  
since heaven decrees what falls,  
is to endure from day to day.  
Lovely hope feeds all here  
on sweet illusions,  
so we weary ourselves in vain:  
One lives for a brighter day,  
another a better age,  
and no one lives on earth  
whose mind does not dream  
that Pluto god of wealth, and all  
the gods, will be generous and kind.  
See how before hope is achieved  
the one's overcome by age,  
the other drawn to dark Lethe by disease:  
This one by cruel war, and that by the tide  
of a rapacious sea: another consumed  
by black care, or twisting the sad noose  
round his neck, seeks peace below.  
A fierce and motley tribe,

of a thousand ills,  
torments and consumes wretched mortals.  
But in my judgement  
a wise man, free of common error,  
should not accept such suffering,  
nor devote so much love  
to sadness and his own harm.

## **24. Fragment (From Simonides II: XLI)**

Things human last so short a time:  
he spoke true  
the blind poet of Chios:  
similar in nature are  
the leaves, and humanity.  
But there are few who take  
these words to heart. All have  
unquiet hope, the child  
of youth, to live with them.  
While the flower of our  
green age shows bright,  
the free, proud soul  
vainly feeds a hundred sweet thoughts,  
not knowing death or age: in health  
and strength a man cares nothing for disease.  
But he's a fool who cannot see  
how swiftly youth beats its wings,  
how close the cradle  
is to the pyre.  
You, about to tread  
the fatal path  
to Pluto's realms:  
to present delight  
commit brief life.

Note. The blind poet of Chios is Homer.

## **25. The Dream (XV)**

It was dawn, the sun insinuated  
the day's first light through the balcony's  
closed shutters to my blind room.  
In that moment, when sleep shadows  
our eyelids more lightly, more gently,  
the image of her who first taught me  
to love, then left me to grieve,  
stood there, next to me, gazing at my face.  
She didn't seem dead, only saddened,  
an image of unhappiness. She stretched  
her right hand to my cheek, and sighing said:  
'Do you still live, and retain any memory  
of me?' 'Oh my dear,' I replied, 'Where  
and how do you come to me, in beauty?  
Ah, how I grieved for you, and grieve:  
I thought you would never know: and  
it made my grief for you more desolate.  
But will you leave me again?  
I greatly fear it. Now say what happened?  
Are you as before? And what torments you  
within?' She said: 'Forgetfulness stifles  
your thoughts, sleep enshrouds them.  
I am dead, a few moons ago  
you saw me for the last time.' Vast  
sorrow oppressed my heart at that voice.  
She said: 'I vanished in the first flower of youth,

when life is sweetest, and before the heart  
knows the vanity of human hope  
as certain. Mortal sickness has not long  
to wait for what will free it  
from all trouble: but the young gain no  
solace in death, and cruel is our fate  
when hope is quenched beneath earth.  
Knowledge of what nature hides is no help  
to those innocent of life, and blind grief  
easily conquers an immature wisdom.’  
‘Oh dear unfortunate one, be silent,’ I said,  
‘be silent, such words break my heart.  
Oh my delight, you are dead then,  
and I am living, and was it decreed  
in heaven that your dear and tender body  
should endure those last sweats,  
while this wretched one of mine  
should be untouched? Oh despite those  
moments when I thought you no longer lived,  
that I would never see you again in this world,  
I still cannot believe. Ah, what is this thing  
called death? If only I could know,  
now, and so protect my defenceless  
head from fate’s atrocious hatred.  
I am young, but this youth of mine  
consumes itself and is lost like old-age  
I dread, though it’s still far from me.  
The flower of my youth is little

different to age.’ She said: ‘We were born to weep, we two, happiness never smiled on our lives: heaven delighted in our troubles.’ ‘Now if this eyelid is wet with tears,’ I replied, ‘and our parting makes your face pale, and your heart heavy with anguish, tell me: did a spark of love, or pity, ever turn your heart towards this wretched lover, while you lived? Then, I despaired, but dragged myself, in hope, through days and nights: now my mind wearies itself with empty doubt. So if sorrow at my darkened life, even once, oppressed you, don’t hide it, I beg you, and the memory will help me, now our future has been taken from us.’ She said: ‘O unhappy one, be comforted. I did not grudge you pity while I was alive, nor now: I was wretched too. Do not complain of it, unlucky child.’ I cried out: ‘In the name of our misfortunes, and the love that destroys me, of our delighted youth, and the lost hopes of our life, allow me, my dear one, to touch your hand.’ And she, sadly, gently, held it out to me. Now, as I covered it with kisses, and held it

to my heaving breast, trembling with  
sweet distress, my face and chest  
sweating with fever, my voice caught  
in my throat, my vision shook in the light.  
Then, fixing her gaze on me, tenderly,  
she said: 'Oh my dear, have you forgotten  
already, that I am stripped of beauty?  
O, unhappy one, you tremble and burn  
with love, in vain. Now is the last farewell.  
Our wretched minds and bodies  
are severed for eternity. You are not living  
for me, nor will again: fate has already shattered  
the loyalty you promised.' Then I tried  
to cry out in agony, and roused myself  
from sleep, trembling, my eyes  
filled with disconsolate tears. She still  
stood before my gaze: and in the uncertain  
rays of the sun, I believed I saw her yet.

## **26. The Solitary Life (XVI)**

Now the hen exults with beating wings  
in her closed run, and the countryman  
goes by the balcony, and the rising sun  
throws its tremulous rays  
on the falling drops  
of morning rain that wake me,  
striking softly on my cabin roof.  
I rise and bless the light cloud,  
and the first murmur of the birds,  
the fresh breeze, the smiling slopes:  
because I've seen you and I know you  
too well, sad city walls, where hate  
follows sorrow as its companion, and I  
will live in sorrow, and so die, and soon!  
Though Nature still shows me some rare  
pity here, how much kinder she was  
to me once! And Nature, you divert  
your gaze from the miserable: scorning  
misfortune and trouble, you serve  
your queen, happiness. There's no friend  
or refuge left, in sky or earth,  
for the wretched, except the knife.

Sometimes, I sit in a lonely place,  
on a slope at the margin of the lake,  
that is wreathed with silent plants.

There, as noon wheels in the sky, the sun  
paints his tranquil image, the grass  
and leaves are unbending in the breeze,  
and no wave wrinkles, no cicada ticks,  
no bird lifts a feather on the branch,  
no butterfly flickers, no voice or movement  
can be heard or seen, near or far.

The deepest quiet grips the banks:  
then I sit so motionless I almost lose myself,  
and forget the world: and it seems to me  
my limbs are so still, no spirit or feeling  
can ever stir them again, and their primal calm  
is merged with the silence of the place.

Love, you have flown so far  
from my heart, which once was warm,  
red-hot rather. Ruin gripped it  
with a chill hand, turned it to ice  
in the flower of youth. I recall the time  
when you pierced me. It was that sweet,  
irrevocable time, when to youth's eyes  
the world's unhappy landscape  
smiles like a vision of paradise.

To a youth his heart leaps  
with virgin hope and desire:  
and he prepares for the task  
of living, as a poor mortal  
does for a joyful dance. But, Love,

I no sooner knew you, than Fate  
shattered my life, and nothing seemed  
right for these eyes but endless weeping.  
Still, when I sometimes meet the face  
of a lovely young girl in the open fields,  
in the silence of dawn, or when the sun  
shines on roofs and hills and meadows:  
or when in the placid calm  
of a summer night, my wandering steps  
pass a rural village, I contemplate  
the lonely earth, and hear the quick song  
of a girl in her hidden room,  
adding hours of night to her daytime labours:  
this heart of mine, of stone, begins  
to tremble: ah, but it soon returns  
to iron sleep: so that all gentle feelings  
are strangers to my breast.

O, dear Moon, under whose tranquil rays  
the hares dance in the woods: so the hunter  
curses at dawn when he finds  
false, intricate trails, and error's web  
leads him away from their forms: welcome,  
benign queen of night. Your rays  
pour down among bushes and cliffs,  
over lonely ruins, and onto the knife  
of the pale thief whose ears catch  
the sound of wheels and horses

far off, or a clatter of feet  
on the silent road: then suddenly,  
with the rattle of arms, and loud cries,  
and a dreadful face, he turns the heart  
of the traveller to ice, whom he shortly  
leaves, naked, half-dead, among the rocks.  
You pour your white light on the city limits,  
on the vile voluptuary, who hugs the walls  
of houses and keeps to the secret  
shadows, and stops, and is afraid  
of burning lamps and open  
balconies. Pouring down on wicked minds,  
your aspect will always seem benign to me,  
among these landscapes where you reveal  
to my sight nothing but delightful hills  
and open plains. Yet, once, I, innocent  
that I was, accused your lovely rays  
in peopled places, that exposed me to human sight,  
and exposed human faces to my gaze.  
Now I'll always praise you, when I watch you  
sailing through the clouds, or,  
serene highness of the eternal realms,  
as you look down on these pale human haunts.  
You'll often see me, silent and alone,  
wandering the woods and the green banks,  
or seated on the grass, content enough  
if heart remains, and breath, for me to sigh.

## 27. To His Lady (XVIII)

Dearest beauty, who inspire  
my love from afar, who hide your face,  
except when deep in sleep  
your image moves my heart,  
or in fields where the light  
of day and nature's smile are brighter:  
perhaps you blessed that innocent  
age that is called Golden,  
or fly as an airy spirit  
among men? Or does greedy fate  
hide you from us till some later time?

Now no hope is left me  
of ever gazing at you:  
unless it may be, when naked and alone,  
my spirit travels those new paths  
to a foreign place. Once, in the fresh  
dawn of my dark uncertain day,  
I thought you were a traveller  
in this arid land. But nothing on this earth  
resembles you: and if there were an equal  
to your face, gestures, spirit, that beauty  
though similar would still be less.

Among all this suffering  
that fate creates for human beings,

if anyone on earth loved you  
as my imagination forms you,  
he'd be blessed in this life:  
and I see clearly how your love  
might make me seek out praise and virtue,  
as in my first youth. Now heaven  
grants no solace for our troubles:  
and, with you, mortal life would be  
like that which heaven reveals.

Through the valleys, where the song  
of the weary farmer echoes,  
and I sit and mourn  
youthful error that deserts me:  
and in the hills where I recall, weeping,  
lost desires, and the lost hope  
of my days: thinking of you  
my feelings wake. And if I might  
hold your noble image, in this dark age  
and sinful atmosphere, and be content  
with that vision rather than the truth.

If you are one of those  
eternal Ideas, that the eternal mind  
scorns to clothe in solid form,  
to endure the pain of our deathly life  
among fallen bodies,  
or if you are received in another earth,  
in the highest circling, among  
the innumerable worlds, and a star  
closer and brighter than the sun  
illuminates you, who breathe a purer air:  
accept your unknown lover, in this hymn  
from this world of unhappy and brief days.

## 28. Memories (XXII)

Lovely stars of the Plough, I never dreamed  
I would return to gaze at you, as before,  
sparkling above my father's gardens,  
or meditate on you, from the window  
of the same house I lived in as a child,  
where I saw an end to all my happiness.  
What imaginings, what fancies the sight  
of you, the lights of your company,  
used to create then in my thoughts!  
Then I used to sit silent on green grass,  
spending the greater part of the evening,  
watching the sky, hearing the croaking  
of frogs far off in the countryside!  
And the fireflies flickering here and there  
in hedges, flowers, the breeze sighing  
from scented roadways, the cypress trees,  
that woodland: under my father's roof  
conversation echoed, and the calm work  
of the servants. What immense thoughts,  
what sweet dreams breathed in me at the sight  
of the distant ocean, those azure hills  
that I can see from here, and that I hoped  
to cross one day, imagining secret worlds  
and arcane delights to support my existence!  
Ignorant of my fate, how often  
I wished to exchange this sad

naked life of mine, for death.

I never thought in my heart that in my green youth I'd be condemned to waste away in my barbarous native place, among a vile, loutish race: where learning and wisdom are foreign words, and a cause of mockery and laughter: they hate and ignore me, not just through envy, since they don't think me superior to them, but they consider that I do think so, in my heart, even though I give no sign of that to anyone. Hidden, abandoned here, I spend my time, without love, without life: becoming coarse, perhaps, among this crowd of ill-wishers: this place strips me of all pity and virtue, and makes me scornful of all mankind, oppressed by the herd: and meanwhile the hours of my dear youth fly by: dearer than fame and laurels, dearer than the pure light of day, or breathing: I lose you, without delight, uselessly, in this inhuman place, among my troubles, O sole flower of my arid life.

The wind comes bringing the sound of the hour striking from the clock tower. I remember how it used to comfort me

when I was a child, in my darkened room,  
waiting every night, in inexorable terror,  
for dawn's sighing. Here there's nothing I see  
and feel that doesn't stir visions inside me,  
or fails to make some sweet memory rise.  
In itself, sweet: but thoughts of the present  
bring sorrow, vain desire for the past,  
and its sadness, and the words: 'I was'.  
That lodge there, facing the last rays  
of the sun, those painted walls, the cattle  
they picture, and the daylight rising  
on open country, offered my leisure  
a thousand delights, while, wherever I was,  
I had that powerful illusion, speaking with me,  
at my side. In these old rooms, lit  
by the snow outside, while the wind  
whistled round the wide casements,  
our games and our shouting echoed,  
at that age when the shameful, bitter  
mystery of things appears to us full  
of sweetness: the child, like  
a naïve lover, sees deceptive life,  
whole and un-tasted, and worships  
the heavenly beauty he imagines.

O hope, hope, pleasant illusion  
of those first years! Often in speech

I return to you: whom I can't forget  
despite time's changes, and the tide  
of thoughts and feelings. I know  
that glory and honour are phantoms:  
joy and goodness mere desire: life,  
worthless misery, bears no fruit. Yet,  
however void my years, dark and arid  
my mortal state, Fate, I know, robs me  
of little. Ah, but whenever I think  
of you again, O ancient hope of mine,  
and of my first dear imaginings,  
and then consider my vile, sad  
life, and realise that death  
is what remains of all that hope,  
I feel my heart shrink, and feel  
I'll never be reconciled to my fate.  
And when death, wished for so long,  
arrives, and when my misfortunes  
are at an end, when the earth  
is a foreign vale to me, and the future  
vanishes from sight, I'll still  
remember you: and that vision  
will still make me sigh, embitter me  
at having lived in vain, and temper  
the fatal day's delight with pain.

And already in the first tumult of youth,  
of happiness, and anguish, and desire,

I often called on death, and sat  
for a long time beside the water,  
thinking of ending hope and grief  
below the surface. Then when a secret  
illness placed my life in danger,  
I wept for my youth, and the flower  
of my poor days, fading away  
in time: and often, late at night,  
sitting on my bed, sadly creating  
poetry, in the dim lamplight,  
mourned, with night and silence,  
the fleeting soul, and, in my weakness,  
even sang a funeral elegy to myself.

Who can remember you without sighs,  
first threshold of youth, O lovely days,  
impossible to describe, when young girls  
first began to smile at a rapturous mortal:  
everything is smiling as it gathers  
around him: envy, not yet roused,  
or still benign, is silent: and isn't it  
as if, (unaccustomed miracle!), the world  
reaches out its hand to assist him, forgives  
his errors, applauds his first appearance  
in life, and bowing low shows it accepts  
him as a man, and names him so?  
Fleeting days! Vanishing like a gleam  
of lightning. And what human being ever

remains ignorant of misfortune, once that lovely season is done, when the best of times, his youth, ah youth, has gone?

O Nerina! Do I not hear these places speak of you? Could you truly have slipped from my mind? Where have you gone, my sweetest one, that all I find of you are memories? I no longer see you in your native land: that window's deserted from which you used to talk with me, from which the starlight is sadly reflected. Where are you, whose voice I no longer hear as I once did, when every remote sound your lips gave made my face grow pale as it reached me? Time passes. Your days are gone, my sweet love. You have vanished. To pass through this world is given to others, and to make a home among these fragrant hills. You vanished so swiftly: and your life was like a dream. Here you danced: on your brow joy shone out, and that confident illusion, that light of youth, shone out, till fate quenched them, and you lay there, dead. Ah Nerina, the ancient love reigns in my heart. Whenever I go to dinners, or celebrations, I often say to myself:

‘Oh, Nerina, you never dress  
for dinners, or celebrations now.’  
If May returns, when lovers go with branches  
full of flowers, and songs, to their girls,  
I say: ‘My Nerina, spring never  
returns for you, love never returns.  
With every clear day, every flowered  
field I see, and every joy I feel, I say:  
‘Nerina no longer feels the joy: she sees  
neither fields nor sky.’ Ah, you are gone,  
my eternal sigh: you are gone, and bitter  
memory is the companion to all my vague  
imaginings, all my tender feelings,  
the dear, sad tremors of my heart.

## **29. The Re-awakening (Il Risorgimento: XX)**

I thought the sweet troubles  
of my first youth were lost,  
after my fresh springtime:  
all the sweet troubles,  
all the tender feelings,  
of my deepest heart,  
all that in this world  
makes us glad to feel.

What grief and tears were  
scattered, in that new life,  
when the pain first ended  
in my frozen heart!  
Every tremor ended,  
love faded in me,  
and the sighs diminished  
in my icy breast!

I wept for life, deadened  
by me, and earth  
made barren, locked  
in eternal cold:  
empty the day, silent  
the night, lonelier, darker:  
the moon quenched for me,  
the stars quenched in the sky.

Yet the old affection  
was the source of weeping:  
my heart was still alive  
deep in my chest.

Wearied imagination  
searched for old visions:  
and my sadness  
still brought its pain.

Soon that last grief  
was quenched in me,  
and no strength was left me  
to mourn any more.  
I lay there: senseless, stunned,  
not asking for solace:  
as if dead, forsaken,  
my heart abandoned.

How different I was  
from him who once nourished  
such ardour, lovely error,  
deep in his soul!  
The wakeful swallow  
singing in the dawn light,  
outside my window,  
did not move my heart:

nor in pallid autumn,  
in the lonely farmlands  
the evening chimes,  
or the fugitive sun.  
I saw twilight shine  
in vain on silent roads,  
in vain the valley echoed  
to the sad nightingale.

And you, tender eyes,  
furtive, wandering glances,  
you, immortal love  
god of gentle lovers,  
and you bright, naked  
hand placed in my hand,  
you too countered my  
solid stupor in vain.

Robbed of every sweetness,  
sad: but not troubled,  
my state was peaceful,  
my face was serene.  
I might have wished for  
the end of my existence:  
but all desire was quenched,  
in my exhausted breast.

Like the poor bare remains  
of a diminished age,  
so I lived through  
the April of my years:  
O my heart, I suffered  
those ineffable days,  
that heaven allows us,  
so brief and so fleeting.

Who has roused me now  
from my deep forgetful peace?  
What new power is this,  
that I feel inside?  
Sweet tremors, visions,  
throbbing, blessed error,  
surely you are denied  
to my heart forever?

Are you really that lone  
light of my days?  
The affection I lost  
in earliest times?  
In the sky, on green banks,  
wherever vision gazes,  
all breathes sadness to me,  
all gives me delight.

The fields, woods and mountains  
return to life as I have:  
the fountain speaks to my heart  
the ocean speaks to me.  
Who brings back my tears  
after such long neglect?  
And how can the world  
appear so changed to me?

Perhaps, O wretched heart,  
hope turned to you with laughter?  
Ah, I shall never see  
the face of hope again.  
Nature's tremors were innate  
in me, its sweet illusions.  
My sufferings lulled  
my inborn powers to sleep.

But fate and misfortune  
did not annul or conquer:  
nor unhappy truth  
with its darkened face.  
I know it does not match  
my wandering fancy:  
I know Nature is deaf to us,  
and knows no charity.

She is not truly careful  
of us, only our survival:  
provided we endure grief  
she cares for nothing else.  
The wretched man discovers  
no pity from mankind:  
so that in his flight  
every mortal scorns him.

And this sad age is free  
of intellect or virtue:  
and there's no true concern  
now for naked glory.  
And you, trembling eyes,  
you, celestial rays,  
I know you shine in vain,  
love cannot burn in you.

No secret, no intimate  
affection can burn there:  
that white breast hides not  
a single glowing spark.  
Rather it mocks at  
other's tender feelings:  
disdain is the reward  
for that celestial fire.

Yet still I feel the old  
known illusions:  
and my soul marvels  
at its own tremors.  
In you, my heart, this last  
spirit, and ardour is born:  
and all my solace  
comes from you alone.

I know that fate and nature,  
beauty and the world,  
fail the noble spirit,  
the gentle and the pure.  
But if you're alive, poor heart,  
if you do not yield to fate,  
then I'll not call her pitiless,  
she who gave me life.

### **30. Consalvo (XVII)**

Consalvo lay close to the end of life  
on earth: he who was once so scornful  
of his fate: but now no more, since in the first  
years of manhood, a wished-for oblivion  
now hung above his head. On that fatal day,  
he lay abandoned by his dearest friends,  
as he had been abandoned for so long:  
since no friend on earth is left, at last,  
to those who scorn the earth itself.  
Still, Elvira, famed for divine beauty,  
was by his side, whom pity had brought  
to console him in his lonely state, she  
who was always and solely in his mind:  
knowing her power, knowing a single look  
of hers, delightful, a word, longed-for, sweet,  
repeated a thousand on a thousand times,  
in his constant thoughts, had always been  
the food and sustenance of this unhappy lover:  
though she had heard not one word of love  
from him. Always overpowering fear  
had been stronger than deep desire  
in his soul, since as a boy he had  
become a slave through excessive love.

But at last death broke the former bonds  
of speech. Sensing the hour that sets

men free, by certain signs, and taking hold of her hand, as she was about to leave him, clasping that whitest of hands tightly, he said: 'You leave, Elvira, and the time now forces you from me, farewell. I do not hope to see you again. So, farewell now. I render the greatest thanks to you that lips could give, for your care. He who can will reward you, if virtue is rewarded by heaven.' She had grown pale, and her breast heaved on hearing what he said: since human hearts are always oppressed with grief when anyone, even a stranger, leaves this world and says farewell forever. And she wished to contradict the dying man, hiding the approach of death. But he prevented her speaking, and spoke again: 'Death comes to me, as you know, like one desired, prayed for many times, and not feared: and this day of my death seems joyful. It weighs on me, it's true, that I'm losing you forever. Ah, I part forever from you. My heart breaks at those words. Never to see those eyes again, or to hear that voice! Tell me: Elvira, will you not grant me a kiss before you abandon me to eternity? One kiss alone for a whole existence? A grace requested should not be denied a dying man. Nor will I ever boast

about that gift, I, half-dead, whose lips  
will be closed in a while, eternally,  
by a strange hand.' Having spoken,  
he fixed his cold lips, with a sigh,  
in supplication, on the hand he adored.

The loveliest of women remained motionless  
and thoughtful in aspect, and fixed her gaze,  
sparkling with a thousand graces, on that  
of the unhappy man, where a last tear  
glistened. Nor had she the heart to scorn  
his request, and render the last goodbye  
bitter with denial: rather she was overcome  
by pity for that ardour, well known to her.  
And that heavenly face, and that mouth,  
desired so deeply, for so many years  
the goal of all his dreams and sighs,  
gently approaching the suffering face,  
discoloured by its mortal affliction,  
pressed kiss after kiss, in utter kindness  
and from deep pity, on the trembling lips  
of that anxious, and enraptured lover.

What became of you then, Consalvo?  
How did life, death and misfortune appear  
as he was dying? With beloved Elvira's  
hand that he still held, pressed to a heart  
beating with the last tremors of love and death,

he said: 'Ah, Elvira, my Elvira! Then I am  
still on earth: those lips were truly  
your lips, and I grasp your hand!  
It seems like a dying vision, a dream,  
a thing incredible. Ah. Elvira, how much  
I owe to death! My love has not been hidden  
from you for all time, not from you nor  
others: truly love cannot be concealed  
on earth. My actions, my troubled look,  
my eyes had made it clear to you: but my  
words had not. The infinite love that governs  
my heart would still have been silent,  
forever, if dying had not made me bolder.  
Now I shall die content with my destiny,  
and no longer regret that I saw  
the light of day. Life was not in vain,  
since it was granted to my mouth  
to kiss your mouth. Rather I think  
my fate has been happy. This world  
owns two lovely things: love and death.  
Heaven brings me one in the flower  
of youth: and in the other I consider  
myself fortunate. Ah, if you had only,  
just once, calmed and requited  
my great love, then earth would have  
changed to paradise forever  
to my altered eyes. I would even  
have suffered old age, abhorrent

old age, with a quiet heart, since the memory of one moment would have sufficed to endure it: and to say: "I have been happy, with more than all others' happiness." Ah, but heaven does not allow earthly nature to be so blessed. No one is permitted to love with such joy. And yet I would have had the power to endure the whips of the executioner, the wheel, the fires, flying to them from your arms: and even gone down to dreadful everlasting darkness.

Oh, Elvira, Elvira, oh, happy is he, oh blessed above the immortals, to whom your smile of love's revealed! Next is he who sheds his lifeblood for you! It is allowed, allowed to mortals, not just a dream as I long thought, allowed for us to know happiness. I knew it when I first gazed at you. It happened through my dying. And even in such pain I cannot find it in my heart to condemn this fatal day.

Now you are blessed, my Elvira, and your face adorns the earth. No one will love you as I loved you. No such love to equal it will be born. Ah, how often,

how often, wretched Consalvo, called out  
to you, how long he grieved, and wept!  
How pale I grew, at Elvira's name,  
frozen at the heart: how I used to tremble  
at the harsh stone of your threshold,  
at that angelic voice, at the aspect  
of your brow, I, who do not fear death!  
But breath and life grow less at the sound  
of love. My time has passed, and it  
will not be granted me to recall this day.  
Elvira: farewell. Your image vanishes  
from my heart at last, with my vital flame.  
Farewell. If this love of mine was not  
a burden to you, send a sigh towards  
my tomb, tomorrow, when night falls.

He fell silent: and in a moment his spirit  
ebbed with the sound: and his first day  
of happiness fled from sight, before the dark.

### **31. Aspasia (XXIX)**

Aspasia, your image sometimes enters  
my thoughts. Either it gleams  
fugitively, in strangers' faces,  
in busy places: or the glorious  
vision appears on empty plains  
under the clear sky, silent stars,  
like a sweet harmony echoed  
in my almost amazed soul.

Adored so much, you gods, and once  
so much my delight and torment! I never  
scent the fragrance of a flowery bank,  
or the perfume of blooms in a city street,  
without seeing you as you were that day,  
enclosed in your charming apartment,  
that was full of fresh petals of spring,  
dressed in the colours of dark violet,  
your angelic form revealed to me,  
curving from under gleaming  
furs, and you surrounded  
by secret voluptuousness: while you,  
clever seductress, showered fervent  
echoing kisses on the curved lips  
of your children, often stretching out  
your white neck, and clutching them,  
they not knowing why, to your hidden,

desirable breast, with a gentle hand.  
A new heaven and earth appeared,  
to my mind, and an almost divine light.  
So it was that your arm, with living force,  
drove that arrow into my defended heart,  
which, once fixed there, I carried, crying out,  
till the sun returned twice in its circling.

Lady, your beauty seemed to me  
like a divine light in my mind. Beauty  
and music have a similar effect:  
often both reveal the high mystery  
of unknown Elysium. Then the wounded  
man must live desiring that child  
of his own mind, that image of love,  
containing so much of the Olympians  
in itself: in all its looks, and dress, and speech,  
equal to that lady the rapturous lover desires,  
and thinks in his confusion that he loves.  
Now indeed he serves and loves the idea,  
and not the lady whose body he embraces.  
He is angered at last to realise his error,  
his mistaken objective, and often, wrongly,  
blames his lady: feminine understanding  
seldom reaches to that exalted image:  
woman cannot conceive or even begin  
to understand what her own beauty  
can inspire in a generous lover. She holds

no similar concept in her slender brow,  
and, in the vital flashes of her glances,  
man is deceived, wrong to hope,  
wrong to demand deep feelings, strange  
and more than human, in one who in all  
her nature is less than man. Since, just  
as her limbs are softer and more tender,  
so her mind is less capable and weaker.

So, Aspasia, you were never able  
to imagine what you inspired  
for a time in my mind. You never knew  
what immeasurable love, intense pain,  
what unspeakable tremors and delirium  
you stirred in me: and there will never be  
a moment when you could understand.  
In the same way, the musician cannot  
conceive what he creates, with hand or voice,  
in his listeners. That Aspasia, whom I loved,  
is dead. Once the object of my whole life, she  
is lost forever: except when she returns  
from time to time, then vanishes,  
a dear ghost. But you live on,  
not merely beautiful, but lovelier  
it seems to me than all others.  
Only the fire born from you is quenched:  
since I loved not you but that Goddess  
who once had life, now burial, in my heart.

I adored her for so long: her heavenly beauty  
pleased me so, that though I was clearly  
aware from the first moment  
of what you were, your arts and wiles,  
when I saw her lovely eyes in yours,  
I desired you while she lived,  
not deceived, but driven, by my pleasure  
in that sweet resemblance, to suffer  
a long and bitter slavery for you.

Boast of it now, as you may. Say you were  
the only one of all your sex to whom I submitted  
to bow my noble head, to whom I willingly  
gave my indomitable heart. Say you were  
the first and I hope the last, it's true, to see  
my brow bend in supplication, fearful  
before you, trembling (I burn to repeat it  
with shame and scorn), beside myself,  
hanging slavishly on all your wishes,  
every word, each action, paling at your  
superb disdain, my face glowing at some  
sign of kindness, changing my colour  
and looks at every glance. The spell broke,  
and my chains were shattered too, and fell  
to the ground: and I was happy. And though  
I'm filled with tedium, I'm content,  
after such long slavery, such madness,  
to embrace freedom and sense. And though

a life devoid of affection, and noble illusion,  
is like a midwinter night empty of stars,  
it's my solace and my revenge for a fate  
that's hard enough for me, that idle  
and immobile on the grass I can gaze  
at sea and land and sky, and I can smile.

## **32. Fragment (Alcetas and Melissus: XXXVII)**

### **Alcetas:**

Listen, Melissus: I'll tell you a dream  
I had tonight, that comes to mind on  
seeing the moon again. I was standing  
at the window that faces the meadow,  
gazing at the sky: and suddenly, look,  
the moon broke loose: and it seemed  
the nearer it came in its fall  
the bigger it grew: till it landed  
with a bang in the midst of the meadow:  
and it was the size of a bucket, and spewed  
a shower of sparks, that hissed as loud  
as a glowing coal when you plunge it  
in water, and quench it. Just like that,  
the moon, I say, in the midst of the meadow,  
quenched itself, darkening, little by little,  
and all the grass around was smoking.  
Then gazing at the sky, I saw a sort of  
gleam was left, a scar or a gaping hole,  
it might have torn away from: so that  
it made me shiver: and I'm still shaking.

### **Melissus:**

You're right to worry, it's likely,

that the moon would fall in your field!

**Alcetas:**

Who knows? Don't we often see a star fall  
in summer?

**Melissus:**

There are so many stars up there  
no harm if one or two of them fall,  
there's thousands left. But only one  
moon in the sky, and no one's ever  
seen it fall, except in dreams.

### **33. Fragment (Separation: XXXVIII)**

I who wander before this threshold  
call in vain on rain and tempest  
that they might keep her here with me.

Surely the wind roared in the forest,  
among the clouds the thunder roaring,  
'ere dawn was in the heavens shining.

O dear clouds, O sky, O earth, O branches,  
my lady now departs: have pity, if ever  
was pity in this world for wretched lovers.

O storm, now stir yourself, O rain-clouds  
now gather yourself to overwhelm me,  
until the sun bears day to other lands.

Clear sky, the dying winds, on every hand  
the leaves and grasses rest, the cruel sun  
dazzles me with light, filled with tears.

### **34. Fragment (Turned to Stone: XXXIX)**

The rays of light were dying in the west:  
the cottage-smoke was motionless, still  
the sound of village dogs, and people:

when she, intent on lovers' meeting,  
found herself deep in a landscape  
happier, more charming than all others.

There the moon spread all its brightness,  
through every level, and turned the trees  
to silver, that wreathed the place around.

The branches were sighing in the wind,  
and weeping ever, with the nightingale,  
a stream within the wood made sweet lament.

The sea shone in the distance, and the land,  
the forest, and the summits, one by one,  
of all the mountain-tops were revealed.

The darkened valley lay in tranquil shadow,  
and the moonlight's dew-wet brightness  
covered the little hills all around.

The lady took her lonely way in silence  
and felt the breeze filled with fragrance,

passing across her face, so gently.

Vain to ask if she were happy:  
she took pleasure in the vistas,  
and the great good her heart promised.

O sweet serene moments, how you vanish!  
What delights us here, except our hopes,  
never lasts for us, or even lingers.

See the night troubled, and then darken  
the face of heaven that was so lovely,  
and all her pleasure turn to fear.

A storm cloud, the herald of the cyclone,  
rose from behind the mountain, deepened,  
so the moon and stars were hidden.

She saw it spread on every side  
and, gradually, mount through the air,  
to form a sort of mantle overhead.

The little light there was grew fainter:  
and in the wood the wind was rising,  
the wood that was her happy destination.

Every moment the wind grew stronger,  
till all the birds, awake, in their fear,  
fluttered about among the leaves.

And the gathering cloud descended  
towards the shore, till one edge touched  
the mountain, the other edge the sea.

Now all was sunk in darkness's lap,  
and the rain began its beating,  
the sound increasing as the cloud neared.

The lightning flashed in a fearful manner  
behind the clouds, making her eyes blink,  
the earth was gloomy, and the air reddened.

Wretchedly, she felt her body tremble:  
the thunder rumbled with the same echo  
as torrents flowing downward from the heights.

She paused sometimes, and gazed in terror  
at the darkened air, and hurried on,  
her hair and robes streaming out behind her.

So she breasted the harsh tempest,  
that sighed against her face and scattered  
those icy drops of water through dark air.

Like a wild beast thunder assailed her,  
roaring horribly without ceasing:  
all the while the rain and wind grew stronger.

And it was terrible to see around her,  
dust and leaves, stones and branches flying,  
and sounds the heart fears to imagine.

She hid her eyes against the lightning flashes  
that wearied and strained her sight, and clutching  
her robes to her, sped faster through the storm.

But the lightning still blazed in her face  
so brightly, that at last she stood motionless  
in fear, and all her courage ebbed away.

Then she turned back. And at that moment  
the lightning ceased, the night grew dark,  
the thunder quietened, the wind was still.

All was silent: and she had turned to stone.

### 35. To Italy (I)

O my country, I see the walls, arches  
columns, statues, lone  
towers of our ancestors,  
but I do not see the glory,  
I do not see the iron and the laurel in which  
our forefathers were clasped. Now, defenceless,  
you show your naked breast and brow.  
Ah, how wounded,  
what blood and bruises! Oh how I see you  
loveliest of ladies! I ask the sky  
and the earth: tell me, tell me:  
who reduced her to this? And worse,  
imprisoned both her arms in chains:  
so with loosened hair, without a veil,  
she sits on the ground, neglected, disconsolate,  
hiding her face  
between her knees, and weeping.  
Weep, my Italy, with good reason,  
you, born to outdo nations,  
in good fortune and in ill.

If your eyes were two living fountains  
your weeping would be unequal  
to your hurt and your disgrace:  
once a lady, now you're a poor servant.  
Who can speak or write of you,

remembering your past glories,  
and not say: 'Once great, you are so no longer'?  
Why? Why? Where is the ancient power,  
where the weapons, courage, and endurance?  
Who lowered your sword?  
Who betrayed you? What art or effort  
or superior force  
stripped you of your cloak and laurel wreath?  
How did you fall, and when,  
from such heights to such depths?  
Does no one fight for you? Not one  
of your own defend you? To arms, arms: I alone  
I'll fight, I'll fall, alone.  
Heaven, grant that my blood  
might set Italian hearts on fire.

Where are your sons? I hear the sound of weapons  
and the wagons, and the voices, and the drums:  
your sons are fighting  
on a foreign field.  
Listen, Italy: listen. I see, oh, around me,  
the swell of troops and horsemen,  
smoke, dust, the glitter of swords,  
like lightning in the mist.  
Surely you're neither comforted nor willing for  
your trembling sight to witness so dubious a fate?  
Why should the youth of Italy  
fight in such fields? O powers,

that Italians should fight for another country.  
O wretch, lost in war,  
not for his homeland and a loyal wife,  
and beloved sons,  
but at the hands of another's enemies,  
for another's race: who cannot say in dying:  
'Dear land of my birth, see,  
how I render the life you gave me.'

Oh blessed, and dear and fortunate  
those ancient days when our people  
rushed to die in ranks for their country:  
And you, O narrow pass,  
honoured and glorious for ever,  
where Persia and fate were not strong enough  
for a few brave and generous spirits!  
I think your grass and stone and waves  
and mountains, tell the passer-by  
with indistinct voices  
how the unconquered ranks of corpses  
sacrificed for Greece  
covered all that shore.  
Then Xerxes, cruel and cowardly,  
fled over the Hellespont  
to be mocked to the last generation:  
and Simonides climbed  
the hill of Antela, where the sacred band  
in dying made themselves deathless,

to gaze on the earth and sea and sky.

And both cheeks wet with tears,  
with beating heart, and stumbling feet,  
he took his lyre in his hand:

‘You, most blessed of all,  
who each offered yourself to the enemy lance,  
for love of her who gave you to the light,  
you the Greeks revered, the world admired,  
what was that love so great that led  
young men to war and danger,  
what love drew them to their bitter fate?  
How, sons, could you find such joy,  
in that last moment, when smiling  
you rushed to the harsh, sad pass?  
Each of you seemed like one who goes to dance  
not die, or goes to a glorious feast:  
but dark Tartarus awaited  
you, and the dread waves:  
no wife or child accompanied you  
when you died, on that cruel shore,  
without kisses, without grief.

But not without deep hurt to the Persians,  
and eternal anguish.

Like a lion in a herd of bulls  
that leaps on the back of one, and tears  
its back with its teeth,

and bites its flanks or thighs,  
so the anger and courage of Greek hearts  
raged amongst the Persian ranks.  
See the horses and riders levelled,  
see where the shattered tents and wagons  
block the flight of the defeated,  
and the tyrant, pale, escaping,  
runs with the leaders:  
see how the Greek heroes drenched  
and stained with barbarous blood,  
bringing infinite grief to the Persians,  
fall one against the other, gradually  
defeated by their wounds. Oh live, live,  
you blessed ones,  
while the world can speak and write.

The stars stripped from the sky, falling to the sea,  
will sooner be drowned, hissing, in the deep,  
than our love for you  
be past and done.

Your tomb's an altar: where the mothers  
come to show their little ones the glorious  
traces of your blood. See how I bend,  
O blessed ones, to the soil,  
and kiss the turf and stones,  
that will be praised, famous for ever,  
from pole to pole.

Ah if only I were with you, below,

and the kind earth was moistened by my blood.  
If fate's opposed, and will not consent  
that I fall in war, and close  
my dying eyes, for Greece,  
then, if the powers above so will,  
may that lesser fame,  
of your poet, the future may bring,  
endure as long as yours shall endure.'

Note: Leopardi contemplates the Italian troops in Napoleon's armies, and then recalls the ancient Greek heroes of Thermopylae and Salamis who repulsed the Persians.

## **36. On the Proposed Dante Monument in Florence** **(II)**

Because our people  
sheltering under the white wing of peace,  
will never see the Italian spirit freed  
from the bonds of ancient sleep  
until this unhappy land returns  
to the example set by her early days,  
take care, O Italy,  
to honour those past, since you  
are widowed of such men today,  
when there's none worthy of honour.  
Turn, and gaze, O my homeland,  
at that vast crowd of immortals,  
and weep, and be scornful of yourself,  
since grief without scorn is foolish now.  
Turn, and be ashamed, and rouse yourself,  
and spur yourself on  
by thinking of our ancestors, our children.

The eager visitor, foreign in looks  
and understanding and speech, would  
indeed search the soil  
of Tuscany to find  
where that poet lies through whose verse  
Homer is not unique.  
And he would learn, ah shame,

not only that his ashes and naked bone  
are still exiled,  
after their burial, in foreign earth,  
but there is not a stone to him,  
for whose virtues all the world honours you,  
Florence, within your walls.  
Oh you compassionate ones, through whom  
such sad and base dishonour will be erased!  
Noble, generous ones, you've undertaken a fine  
labour,  
and your love will be repaid,  
by those whom love of Italy inspires.

Love of Italy: oh dear friends,  
may love of this wretched land spur you on,  
she, towards whom loyalty now  
is dead in every heart, so that the sky  
grants us bitter days after fair ones.  
Oh, my sons, may pity, grief and anger  
at the pain that bathes  
her cheeks and veil, give you courage  
and crown your efforts.  
What words or song are appropriate  
for you, who give not only true care and thought,  
but labour, and display the eternal merit  
of artistry and the hand's skill and virtue,  
in this sweet enterprise?  
What verses can I send you that might have

the power to kindle fresh light  
in your heart and burning spirit?

The great subject will inspire you,  
a blade to prick and pierce your breast.  
Who could describe the tide and storm  
of your fury or your deep emotions?  
Who could paint your dazed expression,  
the lightning of your eyes?  
How could a mortal voice capture  
the measure of divine things?  
'Be far away, profanity, far from me'. Oh  
Italy, what tears have been denied a noble  
monument!  
How can it die, how or when  
can your glory be erased by time?  
O, dear divine arts, ever-living:  
you, by whom our wrongs are sweetened,  
a solace to our unfortunate race,  
intent on honouring Italian virtue  
among the ruins of Italy.

See, I also want  
to honour our grieving mother:  
I bring what I can  
joining my song to your work,  
seated where your chisel gives life to marble.  
O glorious father of Tuscan verse,

if news of things on earth,  
of her you raised so high,  
ever reaches your shores,  
I know you feel no joy for yourself,  
since bronze and marble are less enduring  
than wax and sand, compared with the fame  
you left among us: and if you've ever  
been, or shall be, absent from our minds,  
I hope our ills will grow, if they can grow,  
and your people weep forever  
at a wholly darkened world.

But you will be happy, not for yourself,  
but for your poor country, if ever  
the example of her ancestors  
rouses her sick and slumbering sons  
with such virtue that they raise their heads a moment.  
Ah, what long torment you see  
afflicting her, who was so troubled  
at saying farewell to you  
when you rose again to Paradise!  
She must seem so abased to you today  
who was a fortunate and royal lady then.  
She's so wretched now  
that, stunned, you can't believe it.  
I'm silent about other enemies and sorrows,  
but not the most recent and the cruellest,  
through which your country has seen

the depths of night touch her threshold.

Blessed are you, fated  
not to live through such horrors,  
who have not seen Italian women  
in the arms of barbarous soldiers:  
not seen enemy weapons in foreign fury  
sack, and lay waste, town and country:  
not seen divine works of Italian skill  
dragged to servitude beyond the Alps,  
trains of wagons filling roads of grief:  
the harsh gestures and the proud commands:  
not heard the insults, and the evil voice  
of freedom that delivers them,  
among the noise of chains and whips.  
Who did not grieve? What did not suffer?  
What was left untouched by those felons?  
What temple, or altar, or crime?

Why were such perverse times ours?  
Why were we destined to be born, or  
why were we not destined to die first,  
bitter fate? We've been forced to see  
our country made servant, made slave,  
her virtue eroded  
by the biting file, with no aid  
and no comfort given us  
to ease at all the pitiless ills

that tore her. Ah, dear one,  
we have not given our blood,  
our life for you: and I am not  
dead of your cruel fate.

There is anger and pity in our hearts:  
many of us have fought, died  
but not for dying Italy,  
no: for her oppressors.

Dante, if you do not feel scorn,  
you must have altered from what you were  
on earth. Ah, worthy  
of a better death, Italians lay dying  
on the foul Russian plains, and air, sky,  
men and beasts made fierce war on them.  
They fell, squadron after squadron,  
half-clothed, bloodstained, exhausted,  
the ice the only sheet for their bodies.  
Then, drawing their last breath,  
remembering their longed-for mother,  
said: 'Oh if we'd been conquered by steel,  
and not by cloud and wind, but for you,  
our homeland. See, we are far from you,  
when time should be smiling sweetly on us,  
ignored by everyone,  
dying for those who are destroying you.

The northern wastes, the hissing woods,

were witness to their sorrows.  
They reached such a pass  
the abandoned corpses, unburied,  
on the dread ocean of snow,  
were torn apart by wild creatures,  
and the names of the noble and the brave,  
will always be lost among those  
of the cowardly and base. Dear spirits,  
rest in peace, though your misfortune  
is eternal: and may it be your solace  
that you will have no solace  
in this or any future age.  
Sleep in the clasp of your immense  
affliction, o true sons of her  
whose supreme hurt  
only your hurt can equal.

Your country does not complain  
of you, but those who sent you  
to war against her,  
so that she weeps most bitterly  
and confounds her tears with yours.  
Oh that pity for her who dims  
all others' glory,  
might be born in the heart of one  
who might raise her, dull and weary,  
from so dark and deep  
a chasm! O glorious spirit,

say: is love for your Italy dead?  
say: is the fire that burned you quenched?  
say: will the myrtle never be renewed  
that eased our troubles for so long?  
Will our wreaths be scattered on the earth?  
Will no one ever rise  
to equal you at all?

Are we lost forever? Is our  
shame without limits?  
While I have life in me I'll cry:  
'Turn to your ancestors, you broken branches:  
gaze at these ruins,  
words and paintings, marbles, temples:  
think what earth you tread: and if the light  
of these examples does not stir you,  
why linger? Rise and go.  
This seedbed, this school of great spirits  
is no place for such decayed morals:  
if she's filled with cowards,  
she were better widowed and alone.'

### **37. To Angelo Mai (III)**

#### **(On His Discovering A Copy of Cicero's De Re Publica)**

Ardent Italian, do you never tire  
of raising our ancestors  
from the tomb? Of bringing them  
to speak to this dead age overcast  
with such clouds of boredom? Why do they come  
to our ears so strongly now, so often,  
those ancient voices of ours,  
mute for so long? Why so many  
resurrections? In a fecund lightning-flash  
their pages come: for this age alone  
the dusty cloisters  
have kept safe the sacred, generous  
words of our ancestors. What courage,  
zealous Italian, does fate inspire in you?  
Or perhaps fate fights with mortal courage in vain?

Surely it must be by the gods' high counsel,  
when our desperate neglect  
is duller and deeper, each moment,  
almost, that strikes us with our ancestors'  
fresh calls. The heavens are still  
faithful to Italy: some immortal  
still cares for us:  
and since now or never is the time

to trust ourselves to the disused  
powers of our native Italy,  
we hear how great the clamour is  
from the tombs, and why the soil reveals  
these forgotten heroes,  
asking at this late hour if you  
delight, our country, in cowardice.

O glorious one, do you still nourish  
hopes of us? Are we not  
wholly ruined? Perhaps the future's  
not unknown to you? I am distraught,  
with no refuge from grief, what will be  
is hidden from me, and what I see  
is such that it makes hope seem  
a folly and a dream. Noble spirits,  
a foul, dishonourable crew succeed  
to your place: in your blood,  
every worth of work or word  
is mocked: no longer shame or envy  
of your lasting fame: neglect  
surrounds your monuments: and we  
have become a base example for future ages.

Noblest of minds, now no one else cares  
about our high ancestry,  
it falls to you, on whom fate breathes  
kindly, to you, to offer up with both hands

those former times, when the ancients raised  
their heads out of dark oblivion,  
with the buried arts,  
those godlike ancestors to whom nature  
spoke without unveiling, in whom was enclosed  
the generous calm of Rome and Athens.  
Oh ages, oh ages lost  
in eternal sleep, when Italy's ruin  
was incomplete, when we disdained  
base idleness, and the wind in flight  
drew sparks more intensely from this soil.

Your sacred ashes were still warm,  
Dante, unconquered enemy  
of fortune, to whose grief and scorn  
Hell was friendlier than earth.  
Hell: is that not a better place  
than this? And the sweet strings  
still trembled, Petrarch,  
unhappy lover, from the touch  
of your hand. Ah, Italian poetry  
was born in sadness. Yet the ills  
that grieve us are lighter and hurt less  
than the boredom that drowns us. Oh you,  
blessed ones, to whom life was tears! Irritation  
binds our swaddling bands: for us, by the cradle  
and above the tomb, sits motionless nullity.

While all your life, Columbus, ardent son  
of Liguria, was with stars and sea,  
beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and lands  
where men thought they heard the waves  
hiss as they quenched the sun, committed  
to the infinite swell, you found the rays  
of fallen Sol once more, and the daylight  
born again there, as ours merged with the deep:  
and, overcoming all Nature's barriers,  
an immense and unknown land was the glory  
of your voyage, and your return  
with all its risks. Ah, but the world does not  
grow greater by being known, it grows less,  
and the sounding air, the kindly earth, the sea  
seem vaster to the child than the learned man.

Where have our happy dreams gone,  
the unknown harbours  
of unknown peoples, the diurnal  
houses of the stars, the young Aurora's  
remote bed, and the hidden nocturnal  
sleep of the greatest planet?  
See they vanish in a moment,  
the world's captured on a flimsy chart:  
see, all's the same, and only nothingness  
grows by discovery. O dear imaginings,  
you're denied us  
when truth arrives: our minds separate

from you forever: the years part us  
from your first stupendous powers:  
and the solace for our pain disappears.

You, Ariosto, meanwhile, were born to sweet  
dreams, and the primal sun, shone  
on your face, carefree singer of love and arms,  
who filled life with happy illusions,  
in an age less sad than ours:  
Italy's new hope. O chambers, O towers,  
O ladies, O cavaliers,  
O gardens, O palaces, thinking of you,  
my mind is lost in a thousand  
empty pleasures. Vanities, lovely follies,  
and strange thoughts,  
filled human life: what remains, now the leaves  
are stripped from things? Only the certainty  
of seeing all is empty, except sadness.

O Tasso, Tasso, then heaven prepared  
your excellent mind for us:  
weeping and little else for you.  
Oh sad Torquato! The sweet song  
could not solace you, or melt the ice  
your soul possessed, once warm  
but chilled by hatred, fouled  
by the envy of tyrant and citizen. Love,  
Amor, abandoned you, that last deception

of our life. Nothingness seemed real,  
a solid shade to you, and the world  
an empty wasteland. Your eyes were not raised  
to tardy honours: the last hour was mercy  
not ruin for you. He who knows our ills  
asks for death and not a laurel wreath.

If you wish for anguish, return,  
return to us, rise  
from the mute and melancholy tomb,  
O sad example of misfortune. Our life  
grows worse than that which seemed  
so wicked and so dark to you. O dear one,  
who will sympathise with you  
when no one cares for any but himself?  
Who, today, would not call your mortal anguish  
foolish, now everything great and rare  
is called madness:  
when something worse than envy,  
indifference, greets the highest? O who  
when measure rather than poetry reigns,  
would offer you the laurel wreath once more?

O unfortunate spirit, from your time  
until now only one Italian  
with a famous name has risen  
above his shameful and cowardly age,  
Alfieri, the fierce Piedmontese, to whom

heaven, not this waste and arid land  
of mine, gave a heart of manly courage:  
he alone, unarmed (ardent memory!) made war  
on tyrants through the drama: the world  
at least was given  
that pitiful conflict, that vain field  
for impotent anger. He was the first to enter  
that arena, and no one followed, since now neglect  
and brutish silence have wholly crushed us.

He passed his entire life, immaculate,  
angry and disdainful,  
and death saw him escape the worst.  
Vittorio, this was not the place or time  
for you. Other ages, other regions  
are needed for noble minds. Now  
we live content with inaction,  
led by mediocrity: the wise have fallen  
and the crowd have risen to form this single space  
where the world is levelled. O famous explorer,  
go on: wake the dead,  
now that the living are asleep: arm the mute  
tongues of former heroes: so that, at last,  
this age of mud may either stir to life, and rise  
to noble action, or sink in shame.

Note: Angelo Mai (1782-1854) was the custodian of  
the Vatican Library from 1819, and a discoverer and

editor of ancient manuscripts. Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803) was a poet and playwright.

### **38. For The Marriage of His Sister Paolina (IV)**

Leaving, at last, the silences  
of your native nest, and the blessed  
shades, and the ancient illusion, heaven's gift,  
that, to your eyes, enhances these lonely shores,  
fate draws you to the noise  
and dust of life: my sister, you learn  
the shameful state harsh skies prescribe for us,  
you, who in a grave  
and mournful time  
will add unhappy children  
to sad Italy. Provide strong examples  
to your offspring. Cruel fate denies  
helpful breezes  
to human virtue,  
nor can a pure soul live in a frail breast.

You will have wretched  
or cowardly sons. Choose the wretched.  
Corrupted custom sets a vast gulf  
between fate and worth. Ah, the child  
born today, in the twilight  
of mankind, acquires its life and senses too late.  
Birth is fate's: yours the sovereign  
care of the heart, that your sons  
will not grow to be friends  
of fortune, or playthings of base fear

and hope: then the future ages  
will call you happy:  
for (sinful custom  
of false idle slaves)  
dead, we praise the virtue we scorned alive.

Ladies, our country expects  
much from you: and the sweet rays  
of your eyes were not granted their power  
to tame steel and fire, in scorn, or to harm  
the human race. The wise and strong act  
and think according to your judgement: and all  
that the sun's bright chariot circles bows to you.  
I ask you the reason  
for this age of ours. Is it your hands  
that quenched the sacred fire  
of our youth? Our nature thinned  
and broken by you? The mind  
sleeping, the will ignoble,  
our native courage lacking  
in muscle and sinew: is yours the blame?

Love, if we think truly, is the spur  
to noble actions, and beauty the teacher  
of deep affections. That spirit must be severed  
from love whose heart's core does not rejoice  
when the winds war together, and Olympus  
gathers the clouds, and the thunder of the storm

strikes the mountain. O brides,  
O virgins, I think that he  
who flinches from danger, unworthy  
of our country, and sets his heart  
his common affections on base things,  
moves you to hatred and scorn:  
if women's hearts burn to love  
men, and not mere children.

May you hate to be known  
as mothers of a cowardly race. May your children  
grow used to bearing the pain and grief  
of virtue, and scorning and condemning  
all that this shameful age prizes and adores,  
live for their country, learning its noble deeds,  
and what this land owes to their ancestors.  
Just as the sons of Sparta  
grew to honour Greece,  
among the memories and fame  
of ancient heroes:  
till the young bride strapped  
the sword to her dear one's side,  
only to loosen her dark hair  
over his bloodless naked corpse,  
returned to her on his intact shield.

Virginia, your soft cheek  
touched by the all-powerful hand

of beauty, and your noble disdain,  
troubled the foolish Lord of Rome.  
You were pure, and were at that stage  
where sweet dreams summon,  
when your father's harsh steel pierced  
that white breast,  
and willingly you descended  
to Erebus. 'O father,' she said, 'let time  
loosen and unmake my limbs, prepare  
a tomb for me, before an impious  
tyrant's bed possesses me.  
And if Rome gains life and strength  
from my blood, let me expire.'

O generous one, though the sun  
shone with a greater splendour on you  
than it does today, let your prize  
and solace be that tomb your sweet native land  
honours with tears. See how the Roman people,  
alight with a new anger,  
gather round your remains. See the dust  
befoul the tyrant's head:  
and freedom flare  
in forgetful hearts: and ardent Roman arms  
advance over defeated lands  
from the dark pole to the torrid zone.  
So a woman's fate  
stirs eternal Rome

once more, from its deep slumber.

Note: Virginia was killed by her Roman father to save her from a forced marriage to Appius Claudius (who in 451**BC** helped give Rome its first legal code, but was later perceived as a would-be tyrant). The events caused an uprising when the Decemviri (the Commission of Ten Men) were overthrown.

### **39. To A Winner In The Games (V)**

Blessed youth, know the face of glory  
and the joyful voices,  
and how a hard-won virtue surpasses  
effeminate idleness. Listen: listen,  
generous champion (your courage sets  
the reward of your fame against the swift  
flow of the years ) listen and lift your heart  
towards noble desires. The arena,  
and the stadium echo for you, and tremble  
as popular applause calls you to glory.  
Today, our beloved country  
prepares to renew the ancient exemplars  
in you, resplendent in your youthfulness.

It was not he who gazed stupidly  
at the Olympian course, naked athletes,  
and the gymnasium's rigour,  
without being stirred to emulation  
by the lovely palm and the crown,  
who stained his hand  
with barbarians' blood at Marathon.  
Such as perhaps had washed the dusty flanks  
and manes of his conquering team in the Alpheus,  
and now led Greek standards and Greek spears  
against the pale swarms of weary fleeing Persians:  
till the wide banks and servile shores of Euphrates

echoed with mournful cries.

Is it vanity that rouses and frees  
the rekindled spark  
of natural virtue? And revives the sunken  
fervour of vital spirits, dulled  
in the sick breast? Since Phoebus  
first turned his sad wheels, has human effort  
ever been other than a game? And is truth  
less a vanity than the lie? Nature gave  
happy illusions, felicitous shadows,  
to console us: and when foolish custom  
could no longer shake off certain error  
the nation changed its study  
of the glorious to dark, bare, inaction.

Perhaps a time will come when indifferent  
herds will browse  
the ruins of Italy, and the Seven Hills  
will feel the plough: and perhaps  
in only a few years, sly foxes  
will inhabit Latin cities, and the dark woods'  
murmuring surround the high walls:  
if fate cannot rid perverted minds  
of this sad forgetfulness  
for the things of their country,  
and if heaven remembering past greatness,  
is not kind, in averting

the final ruin of an abject race.

O worthy son, grieve that you survive  
of our unhappy country.

When she bore the palm, which she has lost  
through our fatal error, you would have  
brought her fame. That age is gone:  
today no one looks for honour from her womb:  
but lift your spirit to heaven for yourself alone:  
what value does our life have? Only to be despised:  
blessed only when no danger threatens,  
and we forget ourselves, when we do not measure  
the hurt of slow destructive hours, or listen to their  
flow:  
blessed only when we draw back  
from Lethe's channel, to seek more grace.

#### **40. Marcus Junius Brutus (VI)**

When the pride of Rome lay  
wholly ruined in the Thracian dust,  
so that fate prepared  
the tramp of barbarous cavalry,  
for green Italy and the Tiber's banks,  
and called a host of Goths, from naked woods  
the freezing Bear oppressed,  
to pierce Rome's noble walls:  
Brutus, panting, wet with fraternal blood,  
in the dark night in a lonely place,  
ready now to die, cursed  
hell and the inexorable gods,  
stirring the drowsy air in vain  
with his angry call.

'Dumb courage, the empty mists,  
the unquiet fields of shadows,  
are your haunts, and repentance  
follows you. The unhappy crowd  
are a mockery and derision to you,  
gods of marble (if there are gods,  
by Phlegethon or among the clouds),  
a race you look to for temples, and insult  
mortally with your fraudulent rule.  
Does earthly piety serve only  
to stir divine hatred? Do you sit there,

Jupiter, aiding the impious? And when  
the storm flies through the air, and you  
hurl your swift lightning, is it against  
the pious you brandish the sacred fire?

Unconquerable fate, and iron  
necessity, crush the weak  
slave of death: and the wretch whose power  
fails, opposing them, takes solace  
in the inevitability of ruin. Are ills  
less cruel that have no redress? Does one  
devoid of hope feel no pain?  
O ignoble fate, the noble man, unused  
to yielding, wages  
eternal mortal war on you: and when  
the tyranny of your right hand overcomes him  
with its weight, he will shrug it off indomitably,  
ceremoniously, piercing his side  
with the bitter steel,  
and smiling mockingly at the dark shadows.

Those who enter Tartarus by violence  
displease the gods. Such courage  
is absent from mild eternal hearts.  
Perhaps the gods created our troubles,  
our bitter fortune, and unhappy affections,  
as an amusing spectacle for their idleness?  
Nature, once queen and goddess

ordained not misery and guilt for us  
but a free and pure life  
in the forest. Now impious customs  
have beaten her sacred kingdom to the earth,  
and encumbered our lives with alien laws,  
does kindly Nature rise up,  
when the strong reject  
their unhappy times,  
and accuse the arrow that is not hers?

The wild creatures, happy, ignorant of guilt,  
and their own misfortune,  
are led by old age serenely  
to their unrecognised end. But if pain  
led them to strike their brows  
against harsh trees, or hurl their bodies  
headlong to the wind, from stony mountains,  
O shadowy intelligence,  
no arcane law would oppose  
their wretched wish. Only you, of all  
the many species heaven creates,  
Sons of Prometheus, regret life:  
only to you, O wretched men,  
if slow fate delays,  
does Jupiter deny the shores of death.

And you rise, bright moon, from a sea  
that flows with our blood,

and explore this unquiet night,  
and this land fatal to Italy's bravest.  
The victor tramples on kindred hearts,  
the hills tremble, ancient Rome  
sinks from highest glory to disaster:  
can you be so calm? You saw  
Lavinia's people born, and the years  
of joy, and unfading laurels:  
and you will shed your immutable rays  
on the silent peaks, when,  
to servile Italy's shame,  
this solitary place echoes again,  
to barbarous footsteps.

See how the birds, the wild creatures,  
hearts filled with their habitual lives,  
among the naked rocks, the green branches,  
ignore the great disaster, the altered  
fate of the world: and when the roofs  
of the industrious farmers first redden,  
the birds will rouse the valleys  
with their morning songs,  
and the wild beasts will chase  
the weaker host of lesser creatures.  
Oh fate! Oh vain humanity! We are  
an abject part of things: and our ills  
have not troubled the bloodstained turf,  
the caves filled with groans,

human cares have not obscured the stars.

I do not call on the deaf kings  
of Cocytus or Olympus,  
or shameful earth, or moribund night:  
nor you, future age of knowledge,  
furthest bound of dark death. Can tears  
assuage a scornful end, or words or gifts  
from the base crowd adorn it? Time  
alters for the worse: it would be wrong  
to entrust the honour of noble minds,  
the last revenge for misery,  
to decayed generations. Let the dark bird  
hover over me with its cruel wings:  
wild beasts crush my nameless remains,  
storms disperse them,  
winds scatter my fame, and all memory of me.

Note: Marcus Junius Brutus, was one of the conspirators who assassinated Julius Caesar. He committed suicide after the defeat at Philippi in 42**BC**. Leopardi treats his death as marking the death of the Roman Republic and its values. Lavinia was the wife of Aeneas, the mythical Trojan father of the Roman people.

## 41. Palinode To Marchese Gino Capponi (XXXII)

*'Constant sighing doesn't  
help'*

*Petrarch*

My honest Gino, I was wrong: wrong for years  
and wildly wrong. I thought life wretched  
and empty, and the age that now unfolds  
the most stupid of all. The language I used  
seemed, and was, intolerant of this blessed  
mortal race, if men ought to call themselves  
mortal, or dare do so. Noble people laughed  
at me in wonder and scorn from that fragrant  
Eden they inhabit, and I ought to call myself  
lonely, unfortunate, incapable of pleasure,  
and ignorant of it, to believe my own fate  
universal, and the human species a partner  
in my ills. At last there shone, vivid,  
to my eyes, through the cigar smoke  
of honour, murmurs of crackling pastries,  
military cries, commanders  
of ices and drinks, among the clash  
of cups, and brandished  
spoons, the flash of the daily  
papers. I realised then, I saw  
public happiness, and the sweetness  
of mortal destiny. I saw the excellence

and the value of earthly things,  
a human path all flowers, and saw  
how nothing here can last or displease.  
Nor did I fail to see the studies, the mighty  
works, the sense, virtues, and noble wisdom  
of my century. And indeed I saw kingdoms,  
duchies and empires, from Morocco to Cathay,  
from the Pole to the Nile, and Boston to Goa,  
rushing in fierce competition on the track  
of soul's Happiness: seizing her by her  
streaming hair, or at least by the tail  
of her boa. Seeing all this and reflecting  
deeply on the huge spread-out pages,  
I was ashamed of my grave, long-standing  
error, and indeed ashamed of myself.

Oh, Gino, the thread of the Fates is spinning  
a golden age today. Every newspaper  
born of so many languages and columns,  
promises it to the world from every shore,  
simultaneously. Universal love, railways,  
the multiplicity of commerce, steam,  
the printing press, and cholera unite,  
the widely scattered peoples and climates:  
it's no real wonder if oaks and pines  
exude milk and honey, or dance  
to the sound of a waltz. So has the  
power of alembics and retorts increased,

of machines that challenge the heavens,  
and so it will increase in the ages  
that follow: the seed of Shem, Ham,  
and Japheth flies, and will fly,  
to greater and greater things forever.

True, the earth won't live on acorns,  
unless hunger forces it to: nor end  
the use of iron. But often it will  
scorn silver and gold, content  
with paper money. Nor will  
the generous race hold back its hand  
from blood, the blood of its own: Europe  
indeed, and the far side of the Atlantic  
the fresh nurse of true community,  
will be full of strife, whenever this crowd  
of brothers take the field against each other,  
for pepper, or cinnamon, or some  
other fatal spice, or for sugar canes,  
or anything else they can turn to gold.  
Courage and virtue, faith and modesty,  
love of justice, will always,  
in whatever political system, be wholly  
and utterly alien, wholly unhappy,  
oppressed, defeated: since nature  
has always placed them down below,  
in every age. Bold impudence,  
deceit, and mediocrity will always rule,

fated to rise to the surface. Authority and power, concentrated or devolved, however you wish, will be abused by those who have it, in whatever name. Nature and fate engraved this primal law in adamant: and Volta and Davy can't cancel it with electricity, nor England with all her machines, nor this new century with all its river of political tracts. The good will always grieve, the bad rejoice in mockery: the world will always take up arms against noble spirits, forever. Slander, envy and hate will pursue true honour: the weak will feed the strong, the indigent beggar must cultivate and serve the rich, whatever the form of communal order, however near or far the equator or pole, eternally, unless the day arrives when our race no longer knows its home or daylight.

These slight remains and traces of past ages must still impress themselves on this age of gold: since the human race has a thousand conflicting, discordant parts and principles, in its nature: and human intellect and power has never served to make peace

our of hatred, from the day our glorious  
race was born, and never will,  
however wise or potent our century's  
newspapers or treaties. Yet human happiness  
will be found in weightier things, wholesome,  
not seen before. Our clothes  
of wool or silk will become softer  
day by day. Farmers and craftsmen  
hastening to throw off rough garments,  
will hide their coarse skin in cotton,  
and clothe their backs in beaver-furs.  
Carpets, blankets, chairs, settees,  
stools and dining tables, beds and other  
kinds of furnishings will be more usable,  
or at least easier on the eye, adorning  
apartments with this month's beauty:  
the wondrous kitchen will be ablaze  
with new forms of pots and pans.  
Journeys or rather flights will be  
swifter than anyone dare imagine,  
Paris to Calais, and London: London  
to Liverpool: and under the Thames'  
broad flood the tunnel will be open,  
bold, immortal work that should have  
been opened years ago. The less  
frequented streets will be lit better  
than now, yet just as safe, in sovereign  
cities, and perhaps, in lesser towns,

the major roads, sometimes.  
Such the delights and blessed destiny  
that heaven ordains for future peoples.

How fortunate those the midwife  
holds mewling in her arms,  
as I write, whom the vision awaits  
of the days, sighed-for, when lengthy  
study will reveal, and every infant  
will absorb with its milk, what weight  
of salt, of meat, how many tons of flour,  
its native town consumes: how many  
births and deaths, the old priest notes  
every year: when hill and plain, I think,  
and even the vast tracts of ocean,  
will be covered by magazines,  
the work of steam-driven presses  
printing thousands of copies a second,  
as if by a flight of cranes that suddenly  
steals daylight from the broad landscape:  
magazines, journals, the life and spirit  
of the universe, sole fount of wisdom  
for this age and all those to come!

As a child, with great care,  
raises a structure, out of twigs  
and bits of paper, shaped  
like a church, tower, or palace,

and, when it's done, levels it,  
because the paper and twigs  
are needed for another effort,  
so, no sooner does nature find  
that any work of hers, however  
artistically noble to contemplate,  
is perfect, she starts to undo it,  
allotting the parts to something else.  
And so to preserve themselves from  
this foolish game, whose meaning  
is eternally hidden, human beings  
employ their talents a thousand ways  
with skilful hands: since for all their efforts  
cruel Nature, like a persistent child,  
indulges her caprice, amuses herself,  
without cease, creating and destroying.  
So an infinite, varied family  
of incurable ills and troubles  
oppresses the frail mortal, irremediably  
fated to die: so a hostile, destructive force  
strikes him from within and from  
all sides, intense and relentless,  
from his day of birth: indefatigably  
tires him, wearies him, till he lies  
crushed and spent beside his cruel mother.  
These final miseries of our mortal state,  
O gentle spirit, old age and death,  
whose origin is when the infant's mouth

sucks at the tender breast that gives it life,  
are things the happy nineteenth century  
can no more end than the ninth or tenth  
could, I think, and no more than future  
ages will have the power to do.

So, if we're entitled sometimes to call  
the truth by its proper name, all who are  
born will never be anything but wretched,  
not only in civic realms and ways,  
but in every other aspect of life,  
incurably, and by a universal law,  
that embraces earth and heaven.

But the greatest minds of my century  
have discovered a new, almost divine  
programme: lacking the power  
to make a single person happy,  
they've ignored the one, to search for  
the happiness of many: finding it easily  
among the sad and wretched, they make  
one happy smiling people: and the mob  
will marvel at this miracle, not yet announced  
in newspapers, pamphlets or magazines.

Oh minds, oh judgement, oh superhuman acumen  
of the age that unfolds! Oh, Gino,  
what solid philosophy, what wisdom,  
in the most sublime and most abstruse  
subjects, my century and yours will teach

the future ages! With what constancy  
it admires today what it mocked the day  
before, and will destroy tomorrow,  
gathering the fragments together,  
to set them among incense the day after!  
How we should treasure, what faith it inspires,  
the harmony of feeling of this century,  
rather this year, that unfolds! When we  
compare our feelings with this year's feelings,  
which are bound to be different to next year's  
feelings, with what care we should avoid  
the slightest sign of divergence! And how far  
our wisdom has travelled in philosophy  
when we contrast modern times with ancient!

Dear Gino, a friend of yours, a true  
master of poetry, learned in all the arts,  
and sciences and human disciplines,  
and critic of those minds that have been  
and are and will be, said to me: 'Forget  
your own feelings. This virile age  
no longer cares for them, it's dedicated  
to the harsh study of economics, its gaze  
is fixed on public things. What's the point  
of exploring your own soul? Don't search  
inside yourself for poetic subjects. Sing  
the needs of this century, mature hope,  
memorable sentences!' That raised a solemn

smile, when the word 'hope' was mentioned,  
a ridiculous word to my profane ear,  
like the babbling of an infant's tongue  
not long after it's been weaned. Now  
I've reversed my course, taken a track  
opposite to that before, seeing clearly  
at last from unmistakable signs that I  
shouldn't contradict, oppose my own century,  
if I want praise and fame, but conform to it,  
with faithful flattery: 'so by a short  
and easy path we travel to the stars'.  
Though desirous of the stars, I doubt  
I'll ever have the matter to make  
a song about our century's needs,  
since the ever-increasing markets  
and production provide so generously  
for them: but I'll certainly sing of hope,  
of which the gods now grant us  
a visible sign: now young men's lips  
and cheeks display, as a token of fresh  
felicity, liberal lengths of hair.

O hail, O signs of salvation, O first  
lights of the glorious age that rises.  
See how heaven and earth laugh  
before you, and the girls' glances  
sparkle, and, through feasts and gatherings,  
your fame, you bearded heroes, already flies.

Flourish, for our country's sake, flourish  
O modern race of true men. Italy will  
flourish: all of Europe, from the mouth  
of Tagus to Hellespont, will flourish in your  
woolly shade, and earth rest, secure.

And you, begin by greeting your bristly  
fathers with laughter, O infant race,  
destined for golden days: and do not fear  
the innocuous gloom on those dear faces.  
Laugh, O tender race: the fruit of so much  
talk has been preserved for you: to see  
joy rule, to see cities and towns, and age  
and youth, all happy in equal contentment,  
with flowing beards, beards two foot long.

Note: Gino Capponi (1792-1876) a Catholic, liberal,  
and Florentine man of letters.

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