

THE COLLECTED POEMS  
OF HENRIK IBSEN

Translated by John Northam



SECTION FIVE  
POEMS ABROAD

## POEMS ABROAD

## FROM THE DYBBØL DAYS

I sounded a tocsin bell in rhyme  
to the land at large; no stir at the time.

We lay fog-bound in the Kattegat;  
first night, no one slept because of that.

We made the saloon Operations Room,  
where passengers talked of Dybbøl's doom.

The talk ranged wide, debating the various  
tales of the volunteers, young and precarious.

A nephew, eighteen, one person had lost;  
another his counter-clerk, much to his cost.

And so it was natural to almost feel;  
one was involved in a way quite real.

Ensofaed right under the shaded lamp  
sat a middle-aged lady of sturdy stamp.

She attracted the bulk of the conversation;  
all strove to excel in consolation.

The ladies, they sighed and moaned, each one  
their fears for madam's young, only son.

I can picture her now, the way, without flurry,  
she nodded and smiled, "O he's not a worry!"

How splendid she was, that silver-haired charmer,  
so firm in her faith that doubt could not harm her.

A trickle of warmth filled me head to heel;  
it braced my slack spine with a rod of steel.

"Your folk isn't dead, although it is lazing;  
it lives in this woman's faith, it's amazing!"

But later I found she was more at home  
with worldly ways than with life's great tome.

And so she puzzled me, too, as a mystery.  
Whence came this gift of her faith, what's its history? —

The obvious answer came out in due course;  
the son was enrolled in our fighting force.

*Dybbøl, a key Danish stronghold, recently taken by the Germans.*

#### THE POWER OF MEMORY

Hi, do you know, if a trainer's clever,  
how he'll teach his bear something that sticks forever?

He binds the beast in a brewer's hopper; —  
then starts a fire beneath the copper.

His hurdy-gurdy starts grinding a hearty  
tune out for Bruin: "Life's one long party!"

The beast soon senses a pain that's lancing;  
he can't stand still, so he must start dancing.

And if the melody's played again, —  
a demon of dance starts to drive him insane.

I found myself once in the copper, seated  
with music full-blast, fire equally heated.

I burnt more than hide on that occasion;  
the memory sticks, it defies erasion.

And each time *that* distant memory's called on,  
I feel I'm bound in a red-hot cauldron.

It feels like one's quick when a sharp thorn's in it; —  
I *have* to dance with my verse-feet, that minute.

*Written in Genzano, 1864.*

#### FROM MY HOME LIFE

The house was all silent, the street a tomb.  
I sat with lamp dimly shrouded;  
the room was enveloped in gentle gloom; —  
bobbing children burst into the room  
that Havana cigar-smoke clouded.

They came, my cherubic youngsters, — a row  
of mad-cap lads and young misses  
with shining cheeks and a bath-time glow.  
Heigh, what sport, romping high and low  
through the realms of delight and their blisses.

But just as the romp had reached its best  
 I, glimpsing the mirror, was shaken.  
 For there appeared so sedate a guest,  
 with blue-grey eyes and buttoned vest,  
 and in slippers, or I'm mistaken.

A weight pressed down on my mad-cap flock;  
 there's one sucks a thumb amongst us,  
 another stands like a clumsy block; — —  
 a stranger's presence is quite a shock,  
 abashes the liveliest youngsters.

### GONE!

The guests who tarried  
 we saw to the gateway;  
 the night winds harried  
 our farewells straightway.

The house, surrounding,  
 a desert, entirely,  
 where tones sweet-sounding  
 would so beguile me.

A party merely, —  
 till darkness came on;  
 a guest too, merely, —  
 and now she is gone.

*Written in summer 1864. Said to have been inspired to Thea Bruun on whom Ibsen modelled Agnes in 'Brand'. She died some 18 months later from tuberculosis.*

### A SWAN

My snow-white swan,  
 so mute and so still;  
 neither bird-call nor trill  
 gave hint of song.

Anxious you caringly  
 watched the sprite sleeping, —  
 listened unsparingly,  
 over him sweeping.

But when we parted,  
 when vows and when eyes  
 were furtive with lies, —  
 yes, then it started!

Your journey ended

with birth of the song.  
 Your death-song blended; —  
 you *were*, then, a swan!

*Probably written 1865. Manifestly different from Ibsen's earlier conventional treatments of the dying swan theme, it invites conjecture that there may be a connection between Thea Bruun's death and the completion of 'Brand' in November 1865 (see 'Gone', above).*

#### THE GULLEY

Dense overcast; a raincloud teemed,  
 and suddenly a river streamed.

And as the sudden flash-flood swelled  
 it foamed and bubbled, rang and yelled.

It soon passed on; a breeze ensued,  
 the flood shrank to a brook, subdued.

Then rainbow-scattering droplets flowed,  
 the dripping leafage shed its load.

A lovely dog-day; as before.  
 The gulley dried its gravelled floor.

But sounds persisted: droplets flowed,  
 the brushwood creaked, leaves shed their load.

It raised dim thoughts of gushing streams.  
 I've passed an evening there in dreams.

#### A CHURCH

The king had erected  
 all day long.  
 By night protected  
 the troll came and wrecked it  
 with pick and prong.

At last it tapers,  
 the finished pile;  
 but kingly labours  
 and trollish capers  
 weren't matched in style.

But knowing prophets  
 flocked there in force.  
 With day-time profits  
 plus night's to scoff — it's  
 the thing, of course.

*Legend has it that King Olav (the Saint) forced a reluctant troll to build a church for him. Ibsen attacks the Norwegian propensity to strike a compromise between the forces of light and darkness.*

#### ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S MURDER

Out there in the west a shot was fired,  
 and it shook Europe up, the bang.  
 Heigh! Look how suddenly life inspired  
 every one of the gold-braided gang!  
 Old Europe, so orderly, patently right,  
 with rules for each rung on the scale,  
 with honour unblemished, clean and bright,  
 with proper scorn for what's black-not-white, —  
 you turned quite remarkably pale.

Now unicorns, eagles are stamped on wax  
 and creatures of every form;  
 the packet-boat swings as its cable slacks;  
 despatches arrive in a swarm.  
 Magnates in cotton, 'gloire's' proud son,  
 the mob from the land of lies,  
 they grabbed for the palm-frond of peace as one,  
 then sounded the single shot from a gun,  
 and he fell there, one person dies.

And then you took fright. Old Europe's way,  
 was *that*, then, so right and true?  
 A Prussian venture, at Dybbøl, say,  
 the world had been witness to.  
 No raven pecks at a brother raven; —  
 remember the Poles and that row,  
 the English siege before Copenhagen?  
 The war-tombs at Flensburg? Was "Sønderborg" graven?  
 But why grow indignant *now*?

That crimson rose there whose flowers shock  
 and frighten you here at home,  
 our Europe supplied the grafting-stock,  
 the West its luxuriant loam.  
 You planted as seedling that thriving stand  
 that reddens the shores of the West; —  
 it's you who tied with your own fair hand  
 the knightly sash of the martyr's band  
 on Abraham Lincoln's breast.

With broken promises, words betrayed  
 and with torn-up treaties all round,  
 with this year's crime against vows last year made  
 you have fertilised history's ground.  
 Then sure in your minds you awaited the day  
 when an honourable harvest would show!  
 Look, it's sprouting, your seed. What a blazing display!  
 You're puzzled, confounded in every way, —  
 it's not corn but stilettos that grow!

Where law is poised on the dagger's edge  
 and right on the gallows' sill,  
 dawn's victory is a surer pledge  
 than here where it's words that kill.  
 A will awakens and courts convene  
 to shatter each lair of lies; —  
 but the worm must first pick the skull quite clean,  
 the times be distorted from what they have been  
 to their own gross parodies.

A demon's in charge, one of boundless strength.  
 Just cross him! Do try if you must!  
 The Aurea Domus crumbled at length  
 like Nero's colossus to dust.  
 But first must the crime that was Rome spread wide  
 o'er the world from pole to pole,  
 the tyrant be worshipped and deified,  
 the Caesars' gold busts range side by side  
 as gods on the Capitol.

Then all of it crumbled; circus, great hall,  
 temple and columned roof,  
 arches, arcades, they were trampled small  
 by the buffalo's armoured hoof.  
 But new building began on that ancient base,  
 and clean for a while was the air.  
 But now there are signs of the plague again;  
 the pestilence climbs from its swampy den  
 and hovers, now here, now there.

But if we're to sink in corruption's haunts  
 there'll be no complaint from me,  
 lamenting each poisonous bloom that flaunts  
 at large on our age's tree.  
 Just let the worm bore. Walls, roof won't fall  
 till the skull has been picked quite clean.  
 Just let "the system" deform, that's all;  
 the sooner comes doomsday and vengeance keen  
 on our times for the life-lie they've been.

*Written shortly after the assassination in 1865, during peace negotiations between the Great Powers following the defeat of Denmark by Germany over Slesvig/Holstein. The place names refer to outrages committed by those same Great Powers against smaller nations. Gold-braided gang: the diplomatic corps; magnates in cotton etc, England, France and Germany; Aurea Domus, Nero's ostentatious palace in Rome.*

## THE EPIC BRAND

### To the accomplices

My folk, my wretched land, my northern home,  
 where sun is screened by snow-fields, peaks that lower,  
 the foot forbade, by rock and fjord, to roam —  
 soul's wing constrained by yet more base a power, —  
 for you I sing a melancholy song,  
 perhaps my last, as bard of Norway, granted;  
 for there's no poet who would sing for long  
 once at the nation's grave the hymn's been chanted.

Plague, even now, is rife. A corpse I see;  
 vast as an Ymir carcase, there it stretches  
 and spreads a pestilence on firth and lea,  
 infecting both the mighty and poor wretches.  
 Use all of Norway's flags to make its pall!  
 Today's youth, help to drown it in the waters!  
 Where Earl faced Jomsborg's men in battle's brawl  
 the giant corpse may best find burial quarters.

No longer cling, you fools, to what has perished,  
 as Harald clung to Snefrid's corpse so long;  
 think not, like him, you glimpse red cheeks once cherished  
 and hear beneath the shroud the heart beat strong.  
 For what is dead no lie restores to living.  
 For what is dead must to the dark, alone.  
 The dead have but one function, that of giving  
 themselves as sustenance to seeds new sown.

And it is many years since your beginning  
 to play this living lie with something dead;  
 it is your crime of youth, your adult sinning,  
 and from it flows the plague that lies ahead.  
 The doom must fall, though, with discrimination;  
 it must assail with ten-fold force all those  
 that head the mustered people's foremost rows; —  
 but hundred-fold the bards of this your nation.

For we have pandered with a line extinct,  
 and rouged the corpse of times too great to perish,  
 hung up gigantic arms with dwarf-like relish,  
 to lend our memory's hall a festive tinct.



We've sung the Past's bright day in Present's night  
 with festive glee; but none thought to enquire:  
 Can he inherit treasure, as of right,  
 who lacks the grasp to heap the treasure higher?

A sultry heaviness invests the mountains.  
 The land, wrapped in a silentness, lies still,  
 as though the people's life, its very fountains,  
 were poisoned cunningly with witch-like skill.  
 Like birds that mope at sun's eclipse in blackness,  
 I see my folk sit mute, a scattered band;  
 its marrow dried, its thews reduced to slackness,  
 while noon-tide murk makes dark the dale and strand.

The poet heeds the tide that sweeps a nation.  
 His flag should flutter in the vanguard's thrust;  
 but solve its problem, that he *shall* and *must*,  
 regardless of the final destination.  
 The people's yearnings through his song are freed;  
 he shrives its sins, interprets its contrition;  
 he sighs its terrors forth; its hidden need  
 he clothes in words. Hence, singer — hence his mission.

And therefore I have turned both mind and gaze  
 far from our past's soul-deadened saga stories,  
 far from our dream-lie of great future glories,  
 and enter our own present world of haze.  
 The solitude of pine-woods I shall wander,  
 my cloak drenched through and clammy to my frame,  
 in autumn's dusk that serves as veil for shame,  
 repose from grief, for me and others yonder.

My poem's like a hillside clad in heather  
 that rises gently from the peasant's plot.  
 But past the ridge, from some clear vantage spot,  
 there you will view white summits wreathed together.  
 I've tuned my zither low to set my work;  
 but sound is coloured by the under-stringing.  
 Hence in the poem shall a poem lurk, —  
 and he who grasps *that*, grasps the song I'm singing.

### From the time of ripening.

It was a sabbath eve, so calm, relaxing,  
 the wondrous peace that's known to everyone, —  
 the peace rich in repose and so untaxing  
 at sun's decline, the week's long labours done, —  
 peace, as though frozen in suspense, displayed  
 within a household when, the lamps collected  
 reveal the party's ready, table laid,  
 the clock strikes and the guests may be expected.

The city lies below, half-veiled in haze,  
 beside the fjord, amidst fine summer places.  
 It is so new, resplendent-white, ablaze,  
 a modern child bedecked in airs and graces.  
 There flags, on bay and harbour, flaunt and fly  
 where boats are glimpsed in groups and lines contending, —  
 but only one sole spire to heaven extending  
 points unto Him who gave the name, on high.

As though life's hectic pace there could confer,  
 as heaven's pointer, but one finger solely,  
 as though the folk caught up in turmoil wholly  
 had built for myriad ends deemed worthier;  
 here one can see the city's bulk expanding,  
 see where it scrabbles in the dale's rich soil;  
 for that employment countless hands will toil,  
 none though to attain the heights demanding.

Some leaf-clad islands rise out of the fjord  
 and sway like wreathed mermen, tossing, arching,  
 viewed from the prospect where the slopes go marching  
 north from the valley floor in contours broad.  
 But on their further side that faces yonder,  
 the landscape falls away, a space enclosed,  
 with woods, fresh-water lakes, swift streams that wander,  
 with waste-lands and, for hedge, steep hills disposed.

Stretched on the ridge that such twinned views imparted,  
 a pair of lads lay, twelve-year-olds, thirteen.  
 Autumn was coming. Only stubble seen  
 still in the fields, the corn already carted.  
 But in the sun a summer's warmth, no cooling,  
 and leafage hung there still on yellowed trees,  
 and it was Saturday, a day off schooling,  
 and hence the pair could lie there at their ease.

The one was fair in colouring, — one of those  
 who view the world with eyes that sparkle brightly,  
 deep-set, a trifle small, but bold and sprightly,  
 sun-steeped and made for glee that plainly shows.  
 Hat pushed askew for shade, hands linked as one  
 to prop beneath his chin, he sprawled there lying  
 stretched comfortably upon his belly, eyeing  
 the city, fjord and landscape in the sun.

The other shunned the sunlight, back averted.  
 His eyes turned north, to the constricted space,  
 the smoke from charcoal-burning, streams that race,  
 the tarn now black, by evening's shade converted.  
 Heard from afar the foundry hammers roar,

with water-fall and mill-wheel clatter vying.  
 A dinghy glided on with silent oar;  
 across the lake one duck went swiftly flying.

The scene, though, scarcely seemed to give him pleasure,  
 the view and he seemed scarcely to commune.  
 He sat, one knee against his chest at leisure,  
 and whistled random snatches from some tune.  
 It was as though thoughts came and went unguided, —  
 as though the tune had long since slipped his mind, —  
 as though he saw *beyond* the view provided, —  
 as though an *unseen* something lay behind.

Some children can look old, he not exempted, —  
 those whom companions, boisterous, unrestrained,  
 can't get to join their games, they won't be tempted,  
 but silently look on quite self-contained.  
 His hair was smooth, fine, straight but black as jet;  
 his looks intense and taut and sharp of feature;  
 and yet they bore the mark of something *set*.  
 He seemed a wilful but tenacious creature.

But then beyond the town, white puffs of cloud  
 rose one by one, with boom on boom of thunder,  
 until both bay and town had vanished under  
 their dragon-winged embrace as in a shroud.  
 It made the youngster start, the fairer one;  
 he lay and counted with the tally growing  
 until at last the cannonade was done, —  
 and then he shouted: "Look, the frigate's going!

"There's music on the poop-deck. Hear the singing!  
 Look at the bows, the foam they're buffeting!  
 Heigh, watch it go! Before the bells are ringing  
 tomorrow it will lie in port, first thing.  
 Imagine being home, then, and invited  
 to join the others and to go on board.  
 That's where the great big groves of beech are sited,  
 and where the township flanks the open fjord.

"Way over there, and past the blue ridge showing  
 beyond the fjord, my word, but it is grand.  
 My father's farm is where the slopes are flowing  
 southwards towards a bay with wooded strand.  
 At home, and Sunday morning — like a fable.  
 Especially in summer, you'll have guessed.  
 The picture-bible laid out on the table,  
 and everyone dressed up in Sunday best.

"Glass doors that open on the garden setting,  
 the steps where sand and juniper are spread,

and from the fence-post there's a flag that's fretting,  
 and there's a rose-hedge gleams intensely red:  
 and doves feed on the peas with no restraining.  
 There's one that's blue, the tamest of them all.  
 It's them we're catering for and entertaining,  
 the big veranda's their reception hall.

“A brig stands in the hall, mast, sails erected.  
 It has a galley puffing smoke for show.  
 That we must play with. Then there's Aunt expected  
 from town, on visit, with the kids in tow.  
 There is an old man, too, who does the driving;  
 he has a yellow coach, so big and wide.  
 You hear them well before they're seen arriving;  
 and if we meet them, we can share the ride.

“We'd charge about the grounds all day in snatches,  
 play chasing games around the great big rick.  
 And Auntie has a daughter; she's a brick;  
 Agnes she's called, whom no-one ever catches:  
 then Sunday roast, with cranberry sauce to smother;  
 we'd sit with all the grown-ups, eat the same; —  
 but best was still to come: when Dad and Mother  
 and Aunt all used to come and join the game.

“Late afternoon, the coach would reappear;  
 there's no-one weary, no-one's for returning; —  
 but town's a long way off; time's up, it's clear,  
 and we're allowed to see them to the turning.  
 We say goodnight there. They must go; light's failing.  
 How still. How white the misted meadows spread.  
 We hear the corncrake up the hillside, railing.  
 Then mother calls us. We must go to bed.”

The lad who'd shunned the sun's light seemed to ponder.  
 Half-twisted round towards his friend to say:  
 “Now tell me all about such things back yonder,  
 before you came for schooling up this way.  
 Take care to tell me all that comes to mind.  
 Don't leave out anything, some dream or other. —  
 But tell me first, where *you* live, do you find  
 it's usual to share games with one's own mother?”

The lad told freely just how things had been,  
 at random, and as memory served unbidden.  
 The other looked at him. His gaze was keen,  
 As though he'd like to probe to depths well-hidden.  
 And then a sudden laugh: “Now stop your chatter!  
 I'd not believe it though the Parson swore.  
 You've got your stories from your reading matter!  
 Fie! Every word's a lie and nothing more!”

He settled back and brooded, counsel keeping; —  
 his neck supported on his one cupped hand,  
 he pushed his stick inside the chin-strap band  
 and swung his hat in circles wide and sweeping.  
 He gazed up in the air as he was playing.  
 But in a while — as tiring of the game —  
 he dropped his stick, half-turned, and with the same  
 he pointed past the hills there northward straying.

“One’s home — it’s always in the distant North;”  
 so he began, scarce noticing his hearer,  
 then, picking up the argument, launched forth,  
 his long, black hair brushed back, his forehead clearer; —  
 “A Sabbath eve, — words tolling like a knell;  
 a song, — the word where hints of pine-twigs linger;  
 a lie, — the word like silk, for stroking finger;  
 a home, — the word debars the South too well.

“It seems to me, now, that I see a home.  
 It’s winter-time. Not snow but hoarfrost scattered.  
 There on the beach, a dinghy lying, shattered.  
 The mountain ridge gleams with the ice-cap’s dome.  
 How grim, the sleeping fjord, how dark its gloss.  
 The great big clouds stare at their own reflection. —  
 To fly away from there, be free — o, what perfection —.  
 But no-one’s there to ferry you across.

“The dreams one has at home, they are the danger!  
 I know a boy had such a dream one day:  
 His dream chased song and sunshine right away, —  
 and he became, to all home means, a stranger.  
 For dream-possessed he peered into his being,  
 as whirlpools can possess those peering in; —  
 the boy peered in, — and then there was no fleeing,  
 round he was swept — —. Now hear the dream begin.

“It was a Christmas Eve, he, sick a-bed.  
 His head — he felt a ring of iron squeezing;  
 his temples throbbed, his arm felt limp and dead;  
 his blood flowed now like fire, now water, freezing.  
 And in the next room, Mother, twice as bad,  
 and from the third there came a rasping rattle.  
 There, crippled with arthritis, lay his Dad;  
 for he had, of them all, the hardest battle.

“The farm had seen, that day, so much toward,  
 the doctor and the priest had both attended.  
 Now, as before a party, peace descended,  
 the only sound, the bell across the fjord.  
 It rang in Christmas, to the youngster’s hearing, —

eyes tightly closed, chilled through where sweat had dried.  
A sound, then — someone in the doorway, peering; —  
and presently — the sound of one who cried.

“It was an aged servant who’d come creeping.  
She thought he slept there soundly in the night.  
He heard her sighing deeply through her weeping:  
‘Your father’s passed away, poor little mite!’  
She padded to the bedside, left neglected  
those several days, and lightly stroked his face,  
she plumped the pillow up, the spread corrected,  
and soundless as a breeze she left her place.

“He heard the bell while she was there beside him.  
His mind was churning like a troubled stream.  
He tried to work out, though it sorely tried him, —  
what was reality and what was dream.  
He slept. And then he dreamed that he lay waking, —  
and it was dark. He called, — but no reply.  
He dimly grasped, like light though mist-veils breaking,  
the meaning of the servant’s whispered cry.

“He dreamed he raised himself, got out of bed.  
He went to find why nobody had sought him.  
His body shuddering, he groped ahead;  
his ears were singing, knees would scarce support him.  
He dreamed that it was dark, the hearth extinguished, —  
that all were sleeping, — that the night was old.  
But where his father lay a light distinguished; —  
he went towards it, found the latch, took hold.

“He crept along the wall into a nook — .  
Two bedside candles, head and foot, burned brightly.  
His father lay stretched out there, with a book  
clutched with both hands against his bosom, tightly.  
His face seemed more a yellow shade than pale; —  
his skin was tight, his wrist so small and tender;  
his outstretched leg was sharp and bony-slender; —  
and sheet-folds lay across him like a veil.

“Still as a church it was, as coldly numbing.  
He recognised the smell of clammy sheet.  
Then in the hall heard footsteps, soft, discreet; —  
a fumbling in the doorway, someone coming.  
He started, looked about him, terrified,  
drew back into his inmost corner, shrinking; —  
and at that moment thought he saw there glide  
a woman in her nightdress, candle winking.

“She went towards the bed, her legs scarce bore her;  
she faltered at each step, as he could tell;

her fingers screened the light she held before her,  
 he even heard the way she breathed as well.  
 Then suddenly she raised a stiff, straight arm, —  
 and cried out in a strangled voice but roundly:  
 ‘This is for having done my life such harm!’ — —  
 At which she boxed the corpse’s ear right soundly.

“It seemed a long day’s work had reached conclusion  
 with that one slap across the dead man’s cheek.  
 She turned and left, — the candle’s light fell bleak  
 upon a face allowing no confusion. —  
 Resembling two things feared above all other  
 before he had the words to phrase their dread:  
 the eagle on the store-barn’s lintel spread,  
 but most of all resembling his own mother.

“He woke as strong as steel, the third day’s dawning.  
 His Dad was dead, though all the rest a dream.  
 He kept his counsel, maids worked as a team,  
 sewing at gowns of black — to trim for mourning.  
 And before noon, the local made-to-measure;  
 he’d come to rig the boy out, such a swell!  
 Then came the ride to town. All went off well.  
 They mourned, drank coffee, had a day of leisure.

“The coffin came one afternoon with sheathing  
 of silver on its lid, as I recall.  
 From town, a new-stitched, folded linen pall,  
 and local-purchased green-stuff for the wreathing.  
 And then the pine-twigs’ turn. When all was ended,  
 the widow’s house reeked with so strong a breath  
 from flowers, sprigs, some greenery, all blended,  
 the lad henceforth thought summer smelt of death.

“The burial day at last. In past the reef  
 folk rowed, boat after boat, for the occasion.  
 Inside the mourning house, half-stifled grief;  
 the parlour, with black bier in occupation.  
 Procession formed, the priest made his addresses  
 on suffering, death, grave’s peace — but used his craft  
 most to depict the widow’s sore distresses,  
 So that the women wept — the boy, though, laughed.

“He laughed for days — but laughed in isolation.  
 But once he laughed to make the heavens shriek.  
 The day he lighted on some information  
 in city papers for the previous week.  
 And there it was in print, black border, cross,  
 the January issue number seven:  
 ‘My husband, much beloved, to my great loss  
 departed, on the twenty-fourth, for Heaven.’

“Recovered though, her pace proved not a slow one!  
 From earliest morning until late at nights  
 she set about to put the house to rights;  
 she handled everything; she trusted no-one.  
 And all done with an urgent, silent questing  
 like some sick person in compulsion’s clutch;  
 it was as though she were afraid of resting,  
 of darkness and reflection and all such.

“Now, on the farm a brindled dog was staying;  
 and this the boy adored with all his heart.  
 Sometime towards the spring, the boy was playing  
 with the small creature in a place apart.  
 They sprawled on sand, against the wall — no clamour —  
 the dog’s tail wagged, the boy’s hand stroked its coat; —  
 and then some troll-force seized him by the throat;  
 he rose and went and came back with a hammer.

“He swung; the small dog whined, the boy hit squarely;  
 it fell and yelped, got up and fell again;  
 it seemed to howl for mercy, dragged — though barely —  
 its crippled self beneath the steps in pain.  
 Just then, before he knew one way or other  
 how to confront full-faced, what he had done,  
 there in the nearby barn door stood his mother,  
 tall, skinny, grey, demanding of her son:

“ ‘Why did you hit it?’ came her angry cry;  
 he shrank, it froze the blood within him coursing;  
 one stands in dread of Mother, one knows why, —  
 but still he raised his head by dint of forcing;  
 he stood there, hammer poised still, and in silence,  
 hand clenched upon the haft, a stiff, straight arm,  
 then answered with a stare that spoke defiance:  
 ‘That was for having done my life such harm!’ “

### Over the great mountain

In Norway there’s a region stands out clear;  
 it rises eastward from the valley, gently,  
 it plunges westward to the fjord-side, sheer,  
 the region of bare heights preeminently.  
 There russet ling usurps the place of tree.  
 There midst rough boulders it is moss thrives only,  
 the glacier there spreads wide its livery,  
 there lives the reindeer, undisturbed and lonely.

Within this region run no beaten ways,  
 wild country for both walking and reflection;  
 now swirls the snow-field like a forest blaze,



now lies in linen folds of smooth perfection,  
 now naked summits nod across the heather,  
 now wrap themselves in mists that venture forth;  
 there's but one post, one stone cairn altogether  
 to mark the pass hemmed in to south and north.

A soft, still summer morning on the mountain.  
 Close by the spot upon the moor's broad breast  
 where, now reduced to one divided fountain,  
 the stream seeps from the bog to east and west, —  
 there a small knot of cheerful friends now settle,  
 young girls contributing to the array;  
 inside a trench ling burns beneath the kettle,  
 and wine is sparkling to the gleam of day.

They must be gentry, those out there together;  
 for they have guides with them, pack-horses, nags,  
 and hats adorned with leaves and sticks with flags,  
 and cloth spread out upon the cushioned heather.  
 Amid the youngsters there is one sits singing;  
 it is as though the song were bathed in sun;  
 a girl's perched by him like a bird, like one  
 that on a willow-spray sits bobbing, swinging.

Now jests resound and laughter, loud and hearty;  
 now joy falls silent, ebbing from its swell;  
 from words and faces it is plain to see our party  
 is gathering to take a last farewell.  
 A man, not really old, stands in the cluster;  
 — nor young, indeed, though sturdy still and strong; —  
 he turns towards a pair, the two whose lustre  
 illuminates their faces in the throng.

He fills a glass and taps to make it sound,  
 begins his speech with just a hint of laughter:  
 "Our Lord knew splendidly what He was after  
 when He had you two meet on my home ground.  
 You, Agnes, sent from town because not thriving,  
 advised to come for bracing mountain air,  
 to drink the sun, the dew and pine-scent there —  
 and then, out of the blue, his own arriving.

"He'd come, with rucksack full of painter's gear,  
 back from a long trip south, at length returning  
 so healthy and so strong, mind bold and clear,  
 breast full of countless songs that he'd been learning.  
 He sought, he said, for beauty on the mountain,  
 amongst the forest streams, where pine-trees march,  
 in flight of storm-clouds under heaven's arch, —  
 then he met you, — found Beauty's source and fountain.

“And there his finest masterpiece was painted,  
 he painted cheeks whereon health’s roses stole,  
 two eyes that shone, their beaming joy untainted,  
 and then a smile that sang within the soul;  
 I soon saw I was surplus, a demotion  
 for your old doctor faced with such a cure;  
 his songs worked better far than any potion,  
 than even God’s own Nature-bath, that’s sure.

“But surplus? No, not really. For I spotted  
 and stopped him in his tracks one day, attired  
 in travelling gear, with rucksack packed and knotted,  
 reminded him of one thing still required, —  
 the thing you two forgot while dream’s rampage meant  
 that fun and games had left you comatose;  
 what was that thing? Well, it was your engagement; —  
 and why? He had forgotten to propose.

“Forgotten to propose and you to answer;  
 the hour you needed, that was granted you;  
 no doubt you thought it some extravaganza,  
 a fête to last day-long the summer through.  
 You *thought*? No, no you failed to think completely;  
 about your future home thought least of all;  
 your lips, your glances laughed, your souls sang sweetly, —  
 the weeks went by in endless festival.

“So, it seemed up to me, then, as things stood;  
 on his part I proposed, on yours accepted,  
 and joined your hands together, paired for good,  
 and thereby it was all arranged, effected.  
 And then the party, three days long from starting,  
 and then we saw the young pair on their way;  
 now, friends, farewell’s stroke tolls the time of day;  
 for here, from him and her, we must be parting.

“It will be calm again quite soon, our valley,  
 only the stream will sing, its old refrain,  
 the sun will sink, the swallow will not dally,  
 mere echoes of our memories will remain.  
 The hedge and hazel will turn gold, come fall,  
 the mead and marsh grow stiff to winter’s whiteness, —  
 one night, the leas and slopes will share one pall, —  
 but you will enter bliss’s summer brightness.

“But first you’ve silent peaks here that need clearing,  
 then steeply down to meet the fjord’s west bay.  
 There waits your Egir’s steed, you’ll go careering  
 full steam ahead for home and wedding day;  
 it’s for the South together you’ll be headed,  
 like youthful swans upon their maiden flight;

you'll live a blissful summer life once wedded,  
as lovely as a dream, a legend bright.

“For happiness's zephyrs shall assist you  
as you embark upon life's open sea;  
it's under bliss's flag you must enlist you,  
a dour campaign would slay you utterly.  
You were created — hence all praise and duty  
unto the hand that spins our Fate's long thread, —  
to make your pilgrimage through realms of beauty  
and on, with song, to paradise ahead.

“And that is why I shall, this Sabbath morrow,  
a doctor merely, layman, not a priest,  
pronounce you here exempt from want and sorrow,  
and dedicate your life to Joy's glad feast.  
In sun you'll thread life's turmoil, never straying,  
for you the stars each night shall glitter fair,  
your life shall be one game of tag to share,  
till you find Heaven, still like children playing!”

He stopped there. But behind the rhetoric  
showed, as behind a cloak, his real emotion.  
He brushed a tear away with just a flick,  
without more words he drained the cup's last potion.  
But all the youngsters, in one great eruption,  
pressed with their beakers full around the pair,  
they banned each sorrow threatening disruption  
to their abode's embowered, dainty lair.

They banished from the language each expression  
that warned, by merest hint, of storms ahead,  
they crowned their hair with leaves to make profession:  
the pair were Joy's true children, born and bred.  
And wild and wilder still the dancing courses  
in circles where the fringe of heather lay,  
they bid defiance to gloom's murky forces,  
they conjure forth the fairies of the day.

And then — a taming weariness descended;  
the last few drops of jubilation drained.  
They firmly, gently grasped the hands extended,  
and took a long farewell, sincere, restrained.  
Then eastward for the dale the party drifted,  
and off to westward, slowly, rode the guide; —  
but in that mountain hall, their arms uplifted,  
the artist stood, alone now, with his bride.

He swung his hat, she kept her veil a-fluttering  
in thanks for each farewell they had been sent,  
for each faint greeting that the group kept uttering

until it vanished in the steep descent.  
 They looked then at each other for a while  
 in parting's afterglow, both grave, not speaking;  
 then on the mouth of each a quivering smile  
 like quivering sunshine through the greenwood peeking.

And that smile spread until a world's begotten  
 wherein youth's shining rapture seemed to lie.  
 The flock of friends, the journeying forgotten  
 as cloud's forgotten with its passing by.  
 They did not look ahead, behind, — unseeing;  
 they only saw the present's instant glow.  
 They did not see the frightened sea birds fleeing  
 on outstretched wing the sound and fjord below.

Like happy kin they bound, hand clasped in hand,  
 westward across the moor's brown spread of heather.  
 He was so slender, lithe as any wand,  
 she barely skimmed the ground, light as a feather.  
 She tore herself away, and off she came  
 and laughed as swiftly he went chasing after, —  
 the chase became a flight, the jest a game  
 until they made a song from words and laughter.

“Agnes, my beautiful butterfly,  
 I shall make sport of your taking!  
 I'm weaving a net of finest mesh,  
 the mesh is the songs I'm making!”

“If I'm a butterfly, tiny and pure  
 let me drink at the tips of the heather;  
 and if you're a lad that's fond of his fun,  
 then *chase* me but *take* me never!”

“Agnes, my beautiful butterfly,  
 I've finished the mesh that I'm knotting;  
 your fluttering flight will not serve you at all, —  
 you'll be trapped in the web of my plotting!”

“If I'm a butterfly, young and bright,  
 I'm happy to play at this scampering;  
 but if you should tangle me up in your web,  
 don't damage my wing with your tampering!”

“No, I shall gather you up with such care  
 and lock you away as heart's treasure;  
 and there you can play your whole life long  
 the game that you've learnt with most pleasure!”

“No, if I'm a butterfly gay and free,  
 the cage, I am sure, would not suit me;

I can't know if life will be long or short,  
but I'm sure of its butterfly-beauty."

Then suddenly they stopped — a gulf divided  
the edge they stood on from their westward course.  
Far down beneath their feet a goshawk glided,  
and here the guide with care got off his horse.  
"Go slowly here" — he told the pair — "Use caution,  
and if you'd fend off evils you might meet  
descending through the pass, use this precaution, —  
drop two crossed twigs before you at your feet."

With that, he strode ahead. The youngsters followed  
with hearts set pounding by a silent fear,  
as now and then the misted depths, blown clear,  
revealed themselves and then again were swallowed.  
She clutched him like a child at dusk, in dread; —  
she whispered: "Isn't this, now, like descending  
out of both life and light's fond fountain-head,  
to plumb the depths of death's dark realm that's pending?"

And then a cloud dispersed, one that had brooded  
upon the mountain's bosom, swathed in storm, —  
and far past the abyss-land, shade-secluded,  
appeared a world that was alluring, warm.  
It was a sight beyond a painter's cunning; —  
there stretched the mighty and the boundless sea  
beyond the furthest valleys, brightly sunning  
as, past the grave, there gleams eternity.

On the expanse of waters sun-gold shimmers,  
and white sails sever gleaming from the strand,  
as, on the world's glad brow, a longing glimmers  
on passage to Infinitude's far land.  
And, framing this stupendous presentation,  
the black walls of the gorge, the clouded height,  
while in the foreground stretched the desolation  
contrasting darkly with the distant light.

And then a wind blew up on the horizon  
and whipped the waste of waters with a gale.  
Mist curtained off all one had there set eyes on  
and drew, on all that spacious world, a veil.  
And steeper, straiter still the path descended;  
and wilder leapt the stream against its brim;  
and blacker now the crag stood and presented  
a barrier, while the upland sun grew dim.

Like ruins of a shattered world unravelled,  
rocks huge as any church aligned their road,  
and on the rubble floor no grass-blade showed,

no living soul encountered as they travelled.  
 Pale at his side she felt her spirits languish;  
 he heard her heart-beat pounding loud and strong;  
 she looked at him as looks a child in anguish;  
 whereon he smiled and raised his voice in song.

“Agnes, my beautiful sister,  
 say, why does your heart beat so?  
 Don’t let the mountain dismay and distress you;  
 it’s to mother’s house you go.

“Agnes, my nature’s lassie,  
 we two have no cause to be daunted;  
 well-behaved children may go at dusk  
 in the room that’s dark and haunted.

“You’re here, in your mother’s haunted room,  
 but don’t let the gloom infect you; —  
 your brother’s beside you with a song,  
 extending a hand to protect you.

“Whatever you hear, there’s no need to be scared, —  
 of shrieks, or howls dogs may utter;  
 this isn’t real dusk, this isn’t real night;  
 it’s only the window-shutter.

“Outside there’s sunshine and light of day;  
 once open the door and they’re flaunted;  
 let’s simply pass through, with a resolute song,  
 the room that is dark and haunted!”

And as his heartfelt song aloft went soaring,  
 the veil was lifting from her face meanwhile.  
 She walked no longer strained and self-deploring;  
 her lips began to hum, to trace a smile.  
 She seized upon two stones, threw one she’d chosen  
 into the fall, one at the mountainside  
 where stood a crag that menaced like a frozen  
 and Moses-bearded giant, petrified.

She called out boldly “Spirit of the river,  
 keep up your sighing, moaning as you please,  
 you’ll not succeed, not chill us, make us shiver,  
 we’ve only ears for joyous melodies.  
 You wicked mountain troll, brow-furrowed minion,  
 by all means stand and threaten as we go;  
 but you’ll not bar our way, we, you shall know,  
 must on, to life and laughter, joy’s dominion!”

And then a singer’s voice peals from the mountain,  
 full as an organ rolling through the church,

it dulls the river's roar, the foss's fountain,  
 and far and wide its spreading billows search.  
 It stops joy's blessed offspring in their traces,  
 where late, defying sprite and troll, they'd sped; —  
 they start, they listen, scan the upland spaces  
 whence rolls the voice intoning overhead.

“Lord, bestow on me wealth of pain;  
 from Joy's wiles, be my defender.  
 Scourge me into a self-disdain!  
 Lord God, Father in Heaven's domain,  
 teach me to pray and surrender!

Teach me to pass through the flesh-world's span  
 blind to bright summer, I pray Thee.  
 Teach me to will beyond what I can.  
 Call me, Lord Saviour, o call on Thy man, —  
 and bow so my mind, I obey Thee!

Earth resembles a winter night;  
 each sorrow a constellation.  
 They serve to give far-straying wayfarers light; —  
 if that be quenched, I am lost outright,  
 know not where to turn for salvation.

Sorrow sits like a queen in pride,  
 in her Northern-light icy splendour.  
 Come with me all to the night outside!  
 Lord, God of Heaven where Thou dost abide,  
 teach us to pray and surrender!”

The sound came from above, where, through the rocks,  
 a curved track issued from a minor valley.  
 It sounded like a solemn trump, to rally  
 far over hill and dale, the wide world's flocks.  
 Then both recalled, with private self-reproaches,  
 the cross they had forgotten they should drop.  
 Too late. No twiglet grew that they might crop,  
 and now the mighty singer, look, approaches.

Dressed all in black, fine features pale and set,  
 a little sharp, the hair somewhat receded; —  
 with his right hand he wiped away the sweat,  
 the other held his hat as he proceeded.  
 His eye, a shadowed tarn amid the boulders,  
 a secret something, deep, denied the light.  
 He bore a well-laced knapsack on his shoulders,  
 and held a staff beneath his arm clamped tight.

His way, like theirs, led to the place down under.  
 He greeted them politely in his stride;

but just a hint of question was implied,  
 as though he thought "Might we have met, I wonder?"  
 And that same thought the artist found so pressing  
 he stopped the man, though hesitantly too,  
 and asked him: "Is it Brand that I'm addressing?"  
 And he replied: "Yes. — Einar, is that you!"

They were two friends whose bonding school created,  
 who stood, once, close as brothers and as dear,  
 who had not met again since separated  
 until their meeting as half-strangers here.  
 The school and now — a distance so far-reaching!  
 Each one had made his way in life meanwhile;  
 each striven towards God in his own style, —  
 one with the painter's palette, one by preaching.

But Einar was the first to find a voice  
 for all the memories in his soul there sleeping.  
 He seized his friend's hand like some prey for keeping  
 unshared by any man on earth, for choice.  
 And then he spoke, his joy at fever heat,  
 about the bond he had, that summer, knotted, —  
 about his hopes, — not doubting he had plotted  
 the nearest course to friendship's heart and seat.

But Brand stood silent. Then he loosed, though gently,  
 the hand held tightly in his friend's warm grip.  
 A faint expression played about his lip;  
 he struggled with himself there, evidently.  
 He answered, half embarrassed, partly musing:  
 "It's good to know one's honoured one's pursuit.  
 You are a painter now, of good repute; —  
 all roads are right, — if they're of one's own choosing.

"Two kinds of road require, though, will's selection;  
 one like the navigable water-ways; —  
 the passage smooth, a ball-room romp, perfection;  
 the other one's the road *you* have to blaze.  
 One, open wide for you and thousands yonder;  
 the latter, *you* must boldly force with steel.  
 On that you dare, and no man else, to wander,  
 until the world perceives the goal is real.

"Two kinds of call, too, rouse up man's resources;  
 one lures him on through impulse and desire; —  
 and then there's spirit-baptism that forces  
 its way deep in his breast with tongue of fire.  
 Whereby he speaks the language of no nation,  
 whereby it's his, the triumph and acclaim; —  
 and if you've known the grace of such a flame, —  
 then I'll accept that painting's your vocation.



“Then you can venture forth to heathen regions,  
 interpret Light’s cause, form- and colour-wise,  
 that souls set free may wing to God in legions,  
 as from the burst cocoon swarm butterflies.  
 For you and Heaven then being in conjunction,  
 you’ll thereby melt the people’s glacial mind.  
 But don’t forget, if this should prove your function,  
 you may well be unique amongst your kind.”

He said this with an urgent, restless air,  
 his voice subdued, his cheek all hot with flushes,  
 his glowing eye was like the blood that blushes  
 upon a arrow’s point to lightning’s glare.  
 He seemed to writhe beneath the word as spoken,  
 to struggle with some force in private fray,  
 thoughts seemed to bore through barriers to be broken,  
 seemed placed there, on his lips, for him to say.

The young girl was observing him intently,  
 like someone spying out a hostile camp.  
 She sought her loved-one’s eye, asked confidently,  
 though mute, an answer bearing victory’s stamp.  
 She was so certain, sure her cause was sound,  
 as earnestly the painter started speaking:  
 “Friend, for the second time today you’re seeking  
 to bury our high spirits in the ground.

“First, you’ve cast gloom upon us with your dirge,  
 and now your speech would make our brightness fainter;  
 but call it what you will, the joyful urge  
 that whispers to me: Life means — be a painter!  
 I’m not in need of an annunciation;  
 I don’t expect some angel from the blue;  
 God doesn’t send to all His revelation;  
 enough, to go the way I *must* pursue.

“And little have you grasped the crux of beauty, —  
 what art achieves you poorly understand, —  
 if you demand salvation’s laws do duty  
 in colour-poesy’s blithe infant-land.  
 Do you believe the flower’s right to dazzle  
 is greater where medicinal forces flow  
 within its stem-sap, in the leaf’s veined tassel,  
 than when it has just scent and hue to show?

“Must bird sit silent in its forest nook  
 unless its song can physic someone’s sorrow?  
 Must all that lacks a lesson you can borrow  
 have no significance in nature’s book?  
 For soul’s own right to joy in life I’ve striven,

the voice's right to sing for singing's sake; —  
 the self-same right anemones are given  
 as elders and wild cherries in a brake.

“And tell me now, by way of termination,  
 with hand on heart, lips truthful, honour bright, —  
 have you had grace's call, clear intimation  
 you're chosen standard-bearer of the Light?  
 Have you, then, known God's Pentecostal morning?  
 Have you, then, felt the dove swoop on your soul,  
 have you, then, from high Heaven heard the warning  
 to dedicate to it your whole life's role?”

It was a while before the priest could speak  
 the answer in his breast that lay there seething;  
 a fevered flush rose to suffuse his cheek;  
 he gripped his comrade's arm and whispered, breathing:  
 “I've had the call indeed; but fitful, straying;  
 it waxes like the moon and then will wane;  
 a ship at sea, I rise to fall again;  
 I pray while striving and I strive while praying.

“But I shall conquer; first my inner vices,  
 then all my brothers in the world's extent;  
 I dare not haggle; I am not content  
 with *some*; it must be *all*, no less suffices.  
 The age's cancer, function's sub-division,  
 eats into everything, destroys what's whole; —  
 one caters for his belly, one his soul,  
 one's for self-coddling, one for erudition.

“That's why it's sunk in mire, our generation.  
 For though the slave *desires* the promised land,  
 he jogs through life in limp disconsolation,  
 and ends up in whatever port's to hand.  
 Where is the man to *will*, *believe* and *see*, —  
 to *fight* for that same goal he *craves* devoutly?  
 I see no *men* now, universally;  
 I see just *bellies*, *heads* and *hands* about me.

“But it was *men* the Lord God once created,  
 it was to *men* that Christ came down of yore; —  
 it was for fallen *men* He mediated,  
 who needed ransoming from doom of law.  
 That masterpiece now strews its scattered length; —  
 look round you, man, from where the summit towers; —  
 weep if you can, — and laugh if you've the strength, —  
 then cry out loud: What waste of noble powers!

“And now you have the pointer to my soul.  
 I sense the only purpose now surviving

to spur a man to choose a lifetime's striving:  
 it is to make this generation *whole*.  
 The age of miracles has passed forever.  
 God shapes no Adam now on earth, perforce;  
 the Lord requires Man's help in His endeavour  
 to bring this generation back on course.

“Hence I shall go into the world abroad  
 and gather up the limbs, the fragments scattered,  
 restoring for the second time unshattered  
 man truly whole, in likeness of our Lord.  
 And hence my war with you, your fellow creatures,  
 with those whose blindness has contrived our fall, —  
 who worshipped truth but in its several features,  
 where Truth abides in nothing if not all!”

Eyes like a bird, a bird ensnared and cowering,  
 the girl was swept away on his mind's surge; —  
 it seemed she yielded to her overpowering  
 by his audaciousness, his will's wild urge.  
 But Einar shook his golden mop, replying  
 with just a hint of smile, a friendly nod:  
 “I see you're still, now you're a man, applying  
 your childhood vow to be the whole world's rod.

“I well remember many a time at school  
 when we immersed ourselves in saga-study,  
 its pain, injustice, violence raw and bloody,  
 contributing more stories from our pool; —  
 with solace, help, you made no contribution,  
 you set no bar to progress evil made;  
 you let the worst befall; the retribution  
 came *after*, with your keen and vengeful blade.

“You're driven now, by that same thought you bruted,  
 to turn the world, regardless, on its head; —  
 but bear in mind, each seedling you've uprooted  
 demands a better seedling in its stead.  
 Don't quench the torch of pine, for all its reeking,  
 before you've lit the lamp to guide the herd; —  
 don't scrap the language's old way of speaking  
 before new thought commands its own new word.

“Remember, too, one's call can often stand  
 at odds with life. A curate on probation  
 is hardly placed to lead a Reformation; —  
 a voice can't carry in a rock-bound land.  
 Make no mistake. Poor circumstance sent many  
 a giant forth, I know, who faced the test; —  
 but this folk has been minted as a penny; —  
 don't falsify the stamp that God impressed.”

A chuckle from the priest, then, like a laughter  
 that died away before it reached the lips;  
 a hint on his fine mouth of scornful quips  
 as he took up the argument thereafter:  
 “O yes, this folk’s a double personage!  
 A race of heroes when the toasts are ringing,  
 when songs and speeches free the spirit’s winging  
 and thought goes flying from its work-day cage.

“It is a folk of memories that are peerless;  
 it is a folk so mighty, once, and strong;  
 it is a folk of men and women fearless —  
 when the bard has been commissioned for a song.  
 It is a folk so stout, so undismayed;  
 it is a folk defies an eastward nation;  
 it is a folk that southward stands arrayed —  
 in speeches uttered at the celebration.

“It is a folk where everyone’s so great  
 that all the world can learn by emulation  
 each noble trait deserving veneration, —  
 as someone wrote once, truth’s own advocate.  
 A folk convinced it’s no more than its due  
 to lead the world from rock-bound isolation,  
 that while the time’s soul flagged, *its* stature *grew*; —  
 such is our folk — in its own estimation.

“But when it’s time to dress for storms and hazards,  
 to hush the talk for action truly brave,  
 when it’s a case of wielding sword, not stave,  
 of left thighs wearing only emptied scabbards —  
 what *is* this folk — men, women it relies on?  
 A folk that has a flaw for every strength;  
 a folk that’s made itself so small at length  
 it almost sinks beneath its own horizon.

“The man then draws aside, the woman screeches;  
 the ear’s then stopped to all demand, each call;  
 we style ourselves the poor folk by the beaches,  
 with, God be praised, God’s penny mark, that’s all.  
 What’s our concern when mighty powers wrestle?  
 What can it count for *there*, the hill-folk’s mite?  
 Its task has been assigned it, wrong or right:  
 to steer the plough-share and to sail its vessel.

“For what can we do if the foe advances?  
 It is for others to make sacrifice.  
 It was for show, mere visionary fancies,  
 that Norway’s flag was slashed with tongued device.  
 No, Great-World-Power cheeks can do the glowing

when hot blood swells the age's arteries; —  
 we're made to plough the soil and plough the seas;  
 with us it's sweat, not blood, that should be flowing.

“Ten years from now murk will beset the nation,  
 the clammy half-night, fit for dwarfish chores,  
 where between good and bad the will see-saws,  
 each vision abject, heart, one desiccation.  
 Then through the land shall clouds of coal-smoke lour,  
 as ashes o'er that ancient city loomed,  
 but no-one seems to see the region's doomed,  
 and no-one thinks to flee the fatal hour.

“The contrary! Within the mine's cramped quarters  
 the dwarf-folk in complacent toil combine,  
 and hack the ore to songs of dripping waters,  
 with hunched backs on their soul as on their spine.  
 Each heart-beat will be muffled by the hammer,  
 each soul-felt cry by saw-blades under file;  
 a friend's distress will draw no heart-rent clamour,  
 a kinsman's downfall will not quench a smile. —

“And were the sun of Norway's faith once threatened  
 by Doubt's fell Fenris wolf-howl gruff and grim,  
 the dwarf descendent will have merely reckoned  
 it was thing for others, not for him.  
 He's of a folk created not for strife  
 or triumph, or renown, but altercation, —  
 he's quite content to gain, in afterlife,  
 a bit of bliss or else a small damnation.

“The nail-marks in the hands — to him, what matter?  
 The Mount of Olives and the mortal dread?  
 The thorn-fangs that made blood-red rubies scatter  
 as at that hour they gashed the Lord's dear head?  
 It was, of course, for others, Christ's last passion;  
 for *them* He came as love's interpreter; —  
 the thong-lash from the Wandering Jew's our ration,  
 was all our Lord, for *this* folk, had to bear!”

No word in answer. Like scared children where,  
 searching the hill-side for ripe-berryed places,  
 they came upon the savage mountain bear,  
 those two stood mute and spellbound in their traces.  
 Eyes fixed upon this furious apparition,  
 their cold hands linked together, gripping fast,  
 staring behind them, terrified, aghast,  
 they stole away with soundless expedition.

They were soon out of eyeshot. Einar panted,  
 like one who'd fought a hard and bitter fight;

he drew in breath like one who'd not been scanted  
 the agony of terrors in the night.  
 He tried to sing, but failed — a weak declaiming; —  
 he tried to laugh but that rang hollow too; —  
 he tried to jest, — the jest a bird that flew  
 the moment that it sensed the hunter aiming.

And so he conjured — pines the south produces,  
 the laurel-groves, the citron's golden wealth,  
 the summer-life that vineyard warmth induces,  
 the clustered grape refulgent in its health. —  
 She gazed upon the fjord, half seeing barely;  
 by ear alone took in the scenes he drew,  
 and in reply she asked one question merely:  
 "But did you see how, as he spoke, he grew!"

### The way to church

A tale records a troll who ranged these quarters  
 and had to cross a fjord where, if you please,  
 he stepped too short and so was left in waters  
 a hundred fathoms deep. Up to his knees.  
 Designed for just his ilk, it seemed, was their way  
 that led from mountain peaks to fjord terrain;  
 two dales divided in a three-link chain, —  
 from summit to the sea, a three-flight stairway.

Lift up your eyes when you've spent hours descending  
 and you'll believe you've reached the mountain's base;  
 but down there, where the valley's course goes wending,  
 there is a new abyss for you to face.  
 The upper dale is narrow, dark but snowless, —  
 the streams of melted ice go racing by; —  
 the lower's narrow, grey, trees make no progress,  
 there people just like us are born and die.

But do not think you've reached the fjord you're seeking —  
 for here but sparsely scattered souls divide  
 life on the lea, death on the mountainside, —  
 here sunlight's cold, rank poverty is reeking.  
 You must climb further down by tracks unmetalled  
 into a farmscape of a different type;  
 there, on lush acres, corn grows golden-ripe;  
 fruit mellows there; down there the rich have settled. —

The upper dale was where their meeting started.  
 They sailed like thunder-clouds intent on war;  
 they clashed; then came the lightning and the roar  
 of stormy conflict, — whereupon they parted.  
 The couple took the steep descent through boulders;

Brand skirted the abyss; he knew the lie.  
 He set his knapsack higher on his shoulders;  
 marched step by step with introverted eye.

His brow gleamed with crusading exaltation.  
 He wallowed in the pleasure, pain-beset,  
 a soul can suck out of the word 'regret' —  
 midway between embrace and execration.  
 He'd met the singer's sunny disposition,  
 he had, by what he'd said, subdued his lay,  
 had turned his gaze from sun to earthly clay, —  
 his handiwork — he writhed now in contrition.

He took the wind into his wide embraces;  
 arms thus outstretched he hastened on ahead;  
 upon his cheek the salt tears burned their traces;  
 he called on Einar's name as though in dread.  
 It went unheard. And then the pain, the smarting  
 within his blood was soothed; he eased his pace; —  
 he walked out on the crag that marked the starting  
 of where the track wound, to the mountain's base.

The pair were well ahead and far below;  
 but horse and guide were out of sight already.  
 She tried the plank that bridged the water's flow;  
 he sounded scared that it might prove unsteady.  
 But over it they went, each, like the other,  
 skirting the drowned ravine with downcast eyes;  
 she seemed as though she bore, like mankind's mother,  
 her gain in knowledge, loss of paradise.

They were soon lost in scrubby growth and shale;  
 but Brand remained to gaze and probe and ponder  
 from high up where he stood, the sunken dale; —  
 it was his native home that he saw yonder.  
 He knew the dismal windings of the strait,  
 the landslide scree with its few spindly birches,  
 the rounded churchyard with its stone-roofed gate,  
 the broken bridge, that tarred bulk there, the church's.

He recognised again each scattered plot;  
 each curving of the road a memory kindled;  
 the red marquee, still in its usual spot;  
 and yet he fancied everything had dwindled.  
 He saw the narrows where the fjord broke through;  
 a sloop before the wind sailed up the reach;  
 he saw a quay, white-painted farm-house too; —  
 it was the factor-widow's, by the beach!

It was his mother's farm, his childhood home,  
 he'd grown up in that stony desolation.

A host of memories began to roam,  
 before, consigned to night by one occasion.  
 He thrust them from him, put them all to flight  
 but they returned there, grinning and tormenting;  
 “Do you remember, Brand — ?” they asked him, tenting, —  
 his breast, faced with home’s dreadfulness, clenched tight.

He felt the crushing pain that he should be  
 kin to a thing distinct from his own being;  
 it seemed half of his strength had left him, fleeing  
 before the weight of shared heredity.  
 His once-great plans estranged now, by that token;  
 his powers weakened, nerves now prone to snap;  
 here, close to home, it was as though he’d woken  
 like Samson, shorn and in his harlot’s lap.

He flung down on a wayside slab of boulder  
 and said, half in his thoughts, half voiced abroad:  
 “It is as though ghouls wept beside the fjord,  
 as though trolls shrieked from every mountain shoulder.  
 Yes, yes, — you well might recognise me too,  
 though I have grown since last you looked to meet me; —  
 I’m sprung from the same kindred loins as you,  
 we are related and you’d want to greet me.

“It’s cold for the encounter, murk increases;  
 there’s ugly weather brewing; aptly cast!  
 The rain out yonder’s falling thick and fast;  
 the sloop’s been reefed; the foresail ripped to pieces.  
 Smite storm, and sooth my cheek, my forehead ease;  
 sweep clean the air of all foul recollection;  
 therein lies plague from which there’s no protection  
 that art provides save distance’s cool breeze.

“My mother’s farm —; and newly-painted, see?  
 Green window-shutters, and it’s roofed with tiling, —  
 but it’s exposed, it lacks a shelter-tree,  
 gets little sun and never noon’s warm smiling.  
 There, slave to restlessness’s constant itch,  
 she goes her ways without one deviation,  
 sees to her business, calculates, grows rich, —  
 so rich the very thought’s abomination.”

Then all at once he laughed, but harsh with hurt,  
 he scanned the slopes down which the hillside wandered; —  
 his voice was low and sharp and wild and curt,  
 as half-aloud, half in a dream he pondered:  
 “Look, there’s the nut-wood. *There’s* a stimulation!  
*There* I first saw Norwegian valour shown;  
 had my first sight of blood that’s Norway’s own,  
 the way it flows, too, in this generation.



“I well recall that autumn day’s clear glowing,  
 the hazels rustling in their brown and gold;  
 the rowan’s berry-clusters bravely showing, —  
 such bird-song, such a swarming to behold.  
 We were all homeward bound; I followed, trailing;  
 it had been hard to reach, that bunch hung high; —  
 I heard the snap as of a dry twig failing, —  
 I heard a footstep; saw a man nearby.

“He had with him an axe beneath his jerkin;  
 at every step he stole a glance behind;  
 then he sat down, worn out it seemed, and lurking:  
 soon rose again, and seemed confirmed of mind.  
 He laid the axe upon a fallen spruce-tree  
 and from his pocket drew a rag, a band, —  
 looked around again and of a sudden, brusquely  
 he hacked a finger from his own right hand.

“I saw blood spurt; that’s all I know. Must smother  
 what I had seen while running on apace.  
 But next day went along with many another  
 to our appointed local `listing-place.  
 Inside there, at a desk, the captain sat,  
 with doctor, mayor, clerk, constable attending.  
 The locals formed a group, exchanging chat;  
 the whisper was that war could be impending.

“And there the lads were called out in succession,  
 were measured and examined and enrolled;  
 when that was done, with serious expression,  
 each then returned to join the anxious fold.  
 At last one came, with bandaged hand, for vetting.  
 And as he crossed the floor, how deathly white!  
 He kept his eyes down; I could see him sweating; —  
 I recognised the fellow at first sight.

“Confronted with the board he seemed to linger,  
 then showed his bandaged hand, but seemed abashed;  
 he stammered something, how a hook had gashed  
 both skin and bone and cut clean through his finger;  
 some talk of ‘accident’ but broken, bitty,  
 he stood, the picture of sheer misery,  
 like one who lied but loathed the perjury, —  
 the image of despair that begged for pity.

“The crowd of them pressed round him in a ring;  
 they stood tip-toe, climbed stools for elevation;  
 they glared, they gaped, broke off their conversation,  
 and each glance pierced the youngster like a sting.  
 Those on the board conferred a while, discreetly.

The captain rose, — an old man, white as snow; —  
 began to speak, choked on his words completely — —  
 then spat and pointed, saying merely ‘Go!’

“And go he did. The people formed a lane  
 for him to slip away, made no objection; —  
 red as his bleeding finger’s crimson stain  
 the blood-red blush now of his cheek’s complexion.  
 He left the farm, made off towards the height;  
 They watched his progress from the yard and chattered;  
 he climbed and climbed till he was out of sight; —  
 he was at home there, where the mountains scattered.

“I’ve thought about that lad since, many a day; —  
 most often May the seventeenth, with meetings  
 in market square to march, in full array,  
 to bear our liberator’s statue greetings.  
 I first attended in a student gang;  
 with eager youngsters, playfully carousing;  
 I felt a sort of infinite arousing  
 as that great flood of people marched and sang.

“The broad street was too narrow for parading.  
 Each vantage point was crammed, no window free;  
 fair ladies smiled upon us graciously;  
 a flash of ribbon here, there flowers cascading.  
 The cannon thundered; brandished flags were thrumming,  
 and dust, as from a battlefield, rose forth,  
 the national anthem sounded, lads were drumming,  
 and hearts bore witness: ‘Why it’s grand, our North!’

“Around the monument our hordes collected,  
 our country’s budding hope, the future’s pledge.  
 All still, now; word that someone was expected.  
 And then a man ascends the statue’s ledge.  
 There came a surge of clapping and of cheering,  
 shrill trumpets and ‘hurrahs’ that followed hard;  
 ‘He’s there!’ rang through the flock then; we were hearing  
 the folk’s collective greeting to its bard.

“For this man was the people’s favourite poet.  
 Broad-shouldered, hatless, blond and big of bone  
 he stood up by the lion, gripped the stone  
 and fed the crowd the sight that great men owe it.  
 And when he’d reaped the crop of approbation  
 that cheers, repeated plaudits wide disperse,  
 he took a breath, gave voice, and his oration  
 proceeded first in prose and then in verse.

“He spoke first of the new dawn’s revelation  
 at Eidsvoll’s grove, when thralldom’s night was done;

he spoke of Freedom's treasure, newly won,  
 the vast importance of the celebration.  
 His eyes shone moist and misted with emotion, —  
 the crowd's sight, too, as shining as his glance; —  
 it was the shine that comes from long devotion  
 to punch-bowls, at some hectic, all-night dance.

“And then he spoke of linking generations  
 from past to present time; his words impress;  
 those who scorned folk-gods earned his comminations;  
 then came this ringing, clarion-call address:  
 ‘The blood that streams in veins of Nordic creatures  
 is blood that in Jarl Haakon's streamed before;  
 the blush that burns upon a Norseman's features  
 once burned the cheek of thunder's god, great Thor!’

“Then I recalled the wood, the blood there streaming,  
 the lad who at the board had stood and blushed; —  
 through all my limbs an icy current rushed,  
 I woke — a flash of lightning broke my dreaming.  
 I looked around. No scoffing, no demurring?  
 The contrary; they held their breath to hear;  
 just murmurs, like a cat's contented purring  
 when someone strokes its back and rubs its ear.

“He tickled up the crowd that loved the tickling; —  
 on me alone truth's heavy burden lay;  
 I knew why blood was likely to be trickling,  
 why cheeks might well be glowing in our day.  
 I ran, as though from demons I'd glimpsed pouring  
 from myriad hells to share festivities;  
 behind me, myriad-mouthed, a beast was roaring; —  
 my people, who endorsed the poet's lies!

“Then to the lie the trumpet blared a pledge,  
 the bard descended, finished with his rally;  
 the seed, though, that he'd sown would sift and dredge  
 in printed form through Norway's every valley.  
 There it would send down roots and sprout and grow;  
 what crop, then, in a hundred years or so?  
 For when the Prince of Lies speaks through the preacher,  
 what prospect for the rest with such a teacher?”

He leaped up from the rock; looked down, where under  
 deep shadow lay the village, dank and dark;  
 his face was like a sleeping threat of thunder;  
 his gaze not merely stern but hard and stark.  
 A second Moses, on his own behalf; —  
 filled with Old Testamental wrath and passion  
 he stood, God's eagle, viewing in what fashion  
 his desert folk adored the golden calf.

But at a sunbeam's touch his brow unravels,  
 shines clearer now, smoothed into peace anew.  
 He saw a boat set out upon its travels;  
 far past the point two more came into view.  
 Soon he saw ten, all making for the spit,  
 and on the paths a busy agitation;  
 crowd upon crowd — there seemed no end to it —  
 the ancient parish church their destination.

It was near time for church. He contemplated  
 the strangely silent scene as it unrolls,  
 his words burst from him, though the voice was bated;  
 "What value have they for the Lord, those souls?  
 Across the world this is the holy hour;  
*there* steeples in their thousands point on high;  
*there* swells the organ; bells ring in the tower;  
*there* anthems summon to tranquillity.

"*There* all is sun; *there* lofty hangs the sky;  
 out there soul rubs with soul until all's shining,  
 thought's ore is made a handle, by refining,  
 to raise the individual soul on high.  
*There* mighty angels come, serenely sharing  
 the proffer of their tidings with mankind; —  
 the way to God's still there, for man to find.  
 All that is needed is the will, the daring.

"But *here*. Observe the church's shingle skin.  
 No tower, no pointing cross upon the steeple;  
 no organ plays; no bells call to the people,  
 and mountain upon mountain hems it in.  
 The snowfield's pared the strip of sky remaining!  
 The mists oppress the heights dark shades besmirch!  
 But see the crowd of people, still maintaining  
 its creeping, crawling climb towards the church.

"These quiet folk, they too would wish to try  
 their voice in the world's chorus, sing beside them.  
 What has God given them to raise them by?  
 What dove, to bear the Word, did He provide them?  
 What were they given but this life of dolour?  
 What moves them then to thanks, doxology?  
 He bade them, uttered forth His mighty 'Be!',  
 the folk became — the sons of wretched squalour.

"Would I knew this. If humankind's creation  
 had perished as redemption's hour drew near,  
 and only these been spared, — would sin's purgation  
 have been secured through blood, as was ours here?  
 Would God have sent to such as these His son?

The Cross's strife been, for these few, so striven?  
 Such vast atonement for so little given?  
 My faith affirms, indeed He would have done!"

He hurried off to reach the nether parts;  
 but at that moment came a small stone, hopping  
 across the path, rolled, slid by fits and starts  
 a long way down the hillside before stopping.  
 He raised his eyes; a dog, its coat all rough,  
 stood there observing him, ears cocked alertly,  
 and just behind, a girl who, laughing pertly,  
 held up before her mouth a scrap of stuff.

She seemed to be but half adult, half child,  
 hot-blooded, lively, eager, plump and growing,  
 uncertain of herself yet somehow knowing,  
 though inexperienced, moved by impulse wild.  
 She stood as though she mocked through inward weeping,  
 she breathed as though enduring joys and pains;  
 her skin was golden brown, plainly in keeping  
 with blood of gypsies flowing in those veins.

She had her hair cut short, just like a lad.  
 Deep-set beneath her brows black eyes were staring  
 hard at the priest with that straight look she had,  
 strangely attractive, and yet somewhat daring.  
 The short skirt flapping round her legs entwined her,  
 her feet were shod in hide, with tying-band;  
 she had a ram's horn there in her right hand;  
 she clutched the branches of a bush behind her.

As marvelling as a baby new-delivered  
 she stared down at the priest, he up at her;  
 thus height and trackway mutually confer,  
 two questions, crossing midway, voiceless quivered.  
 But soon the priest, recovering his tongue,  
 bade her good day, asked "Where's your journey?", kindly.  
 The girl though, screamed as if she had been stung,  
 let go her branch and scrambled higher, blindly.

She simply climbed and climbed without replying;  
 the heather creaked, stones rattled from their perch.  
 She halted higher up, then coldly eyeing  
 the priest below, called sullenly: "To church!"  
 She climbed again, — climbed higher still, though sheer,  
 climbed higher yet; — then paused again soon after,  
 held hollowed hand to mouth, — "To church, you hear!"  
 she shouted down, but this time there was laughter.

She climbed until she vanished round a tongue  
 of over-hanging ice, all cold and gritted.

“To church!” was shouted as a screech, full-lung,  
 but next time as a shout the horn emitted.  
 “To church!” she shouted, now from here, now there,  
 but always higher, further rang her whooping,  
 now amidst snowfields, now black outcrops grouping  
 scree-strewn and black, such as the uplands bear.

“To church!” the lass yelled out, by mouth once more,  
 now through cupped hand, now horn, now both it sounded;  
 the din spilled wide across the valley floor,  
 and echoes from its northern wall rebounded.  
 “To church!” rang out again, sometimes like singing,  
 sometimes like laughter, or like chimes beguiled,  
 sometimes a shriek, sometimes like far-off ringing  
 enchantments from a palace in the wild.

Within the priest’s blood something froze it seemed.  
 He stood a long while silent, listening, seeking,  
 while on the fleeting, shifting voice kept shrieking  
 behind, now to the side, ahead it screamed.  
 She sought the church; but there the church lay, yonder,  
 deep in the dale, yet it’s the height she seeks.  
 How far? And where? Amongst the tops and peaks;  
 the pillared mountain-hall is where she’d wander.

And yet, to church! To church? A name, that second,  
 like flickered lightning flashed through memory’s night;  
 it came, it went; it hissed at him and beckoned,  
 slipped from his tongue; but then he seized it tight.  
 At first it sounded to him strange and darkly;  
 but more and more took on the well-known trait;  
 at length the mists of time all rolled away  
 and there, by light of home, the name stood, starkly.

A dale flashed through his mind, remote, deserted,  
 where under frozen drifts the fells repose;  
 a cleft midst peaks and mountain tops inserted,  
 half-roofed and spanned by ice-cap and packed snows.  
 In frost, in thaw, in blizzard, winter fashioned  
 the gleaming vault hung from the valley wall; —  
 and through the dale would rage a stream impassioned;  
 and on a tarn would livid shadows fall.

The vault would often span one half the dale;  
 extending so far out and yet so brittle;  
 the cunning thaw would little carve by little;  
 but year by year the snow-pack grew in scale.  
 But in a summer warm from sun’s embracing,  
 the wilderness’s structure would crash down;  
 the stream would swell, the river would be racing,  
 the snow-pack split across its soaring crown.

The crust that held it drips, melt-waters sally,  
 and roars and cracks serve notice of its doom;  
 a gust, a snow-squall — then a crash, a boom,  
 then comes the avalanche that fills the valley.  
 A thunder-clap, a rifle shot will do,  
 when all that snow hangs by its flimsy binding, —  
 then, over many years, the river's winding  
 must, deep below the crust there, burrow through.

Then he recalled, from when he was but little,  
 an eerie find brought to the light of day.  
 Years back, a man came hunting out that way,  
 and nothing seen or heard since, jot or tittle.  
 Went after reindeer there in some direction;  
 an avalanche caused by a rifle shot; —  
 folk still discussed the time and place a lot,  
 though well beyond all living recollection.

A century on, the hunter was discovered.  
 The herd of reindeer crushed, the smitten deer,  
 the huntsman's hide, gun, ball-pouch — all uncovered  
 and brought to light beside the frozen mere.  
 Then large and small must go to see the wonder;  
 he with them, he recalled, though just a tot.  
 Now he recalled, for all the years that sunder,  
 what people called that strange, mysterious spot.

The ice-church it was called. A track wound high  
 across a cliff-face that was wild, forsaken, —  
 one that those entering must travel by; —  
 but just that path the girl had lately taken.  
 The ice-church was her goal. A hail storm started,  
 a gust of glacial wind, a swirl of snow  
 when she stood near him, or it struck him so.  
 From snow she'd come and into snow departed.

It coloured all, the chill light she'd been shedding.  
 He saw his birthplace life, its torpor, sweat,  
 as through a veil of frozen mist, and yet  
 there ran the road that he must soon be treading.  
 He longed to have a horse, with speed to tackle  
 one charge past all the farms — his mother's most, —  
 to hear no other sound but sparks that crackle  
 behind the hooves, — then forward, for the coast!

Aboard, aboard! What man accepts seclusion  
 when there's a world ahead that's free and fair?  
 Would break stones on a barren waste when there  
 are ploughlands for the taking, in profusion?  
 Who'd want to raise a crop from planted seed  
 when there are many trees, young, close to mellowing?

Who'd shriek his throat sore with mere workday bellowing  
when he had vision, thoughts that soar indeed?

Who'd sell his life's work for such grains of sand?  
He thought of Einar's "curate on probation  
who's hardly placed to lead a Reformation;  
a voice can't carry in a rock-bound land".  
Out into daylight then from that condition!  
He rose and straightened up, his mind was set;  
the Lord was waiting on his actions yet. —  
To render mankind whole, that was the mission.

He did not see the folk swarm at his feet;  
his vision seized on pathways more inspired;  
he saw a progress, song- and flag-attired,  
with triumph won from sacrifice, defeat.  
With all the force of solitary passion  
he yearned to be outside home's narrow bar;  
he glimpsed *his* way to church, after *his* fashion,  
like sunshine through a door that stands ajar.

Why his concern, that church-goer in the snow, —  
the pair whose way to church would be through pleasure, —  
the throng that crawled the dale of gloom past measure?  
*His* mission was to cure the wide world's woe.  
*His* voice was meant to sound for all creation.  
As proud as one succeeding in his search,  
he strode as if thorn-crowned, in exaltation.  
Then he looked up. He stood before the church.

### At the church

There's many a place by the Norwegian shore  
where life means hunger until death by drowning,  
whole generations slave and reap the crowning  
disaster — rock-fall, flood — like sires of yore.  
There's many a parish there would fit indeed  
into some personage's servant-quarters;  
there's many a house of God whose roof has brought us  
to bend our backs, not just those bowed by need.

Just such this place was; and the church, which stood,  
its tower torn away, storm-mutilated;  
the rain had bleached the walls once decorated,  
the weather had destroyed the once-carved wood.  
The door-surround with snakes and tendrils flanking  
could scarce be seen beneath the tar's thick proof,  
the dragons that had once held up the roof  
had been replaced by timber props and planking.



A ringed enclosure marked the slope, and there  
 the parish young lay, and the wives and mothers.  
 The corpses of the menfolk lay elsewhere,  
 it's falling rock killed some, the sea killed others.  
 It was ill-tended, was that holy ground;  
 and yet the gate implied a thoughtful funder,  
 for it was arched and amply planned all round,  
 as though for the broad highway to pass under.

And there the midwife of the age desisted.  
 He listened; grave-like silence, undisputed;  
 no hymn, no sound of service being held;  
 he seized hold of the latch; the lock resisted. —  
 God's little house was shut; no lesson read  
 by deacon in the choir or Word expounded;  
 he climbed the hedge by which the yard was bounded;  
 there too, deserted; — where had folk all fled?

He listened; torpid air scarce stirred in slumber;  
 but something pierced the silence by and by;  
 he heard a voice yell out and a reply;  
 at times a name was called, at times a number.  
 It came from past the church. His course was set.  
 It sounded near; he climbed the hedge-partition;  
 there he stood high and free; his eye was met  
 below the hillside by an apparition.

The red marquee stood where the stream ran bending  
 its course around a nearby spit of land.  
 The parish — men and women, young attending —  
 had gathered in a group and there they stand.  
 They looked more like the dead than like the living;  
 their temples hollow, eyes ringed round with grey;  
 their voices' hoarseness cried that unforgiving  
 starvation was the force there holding sway.

It was the old, old song that brooks no bridle;  
 a bad year, then a winter without bread;  
 a spring with empty mouths and hands kept idle, —  
 then summertime, of sickness and the dead.  
 Then an appeal that failed, a fruitless call,  
 then poor-relief with niggard minds to stock it,  
 a cautious fumble into purse and pocket —  
 a meagre mite for those who lacked for all.

A man sat by the steps in city vesture,  
 a meerschaum hanging from his mouth's left side;  
 an old tobacco-pouch, gold braid applied,  
 swung from his jacket button with each gesture.  
 He seemed a man in charge of operations;  
 wrote notes upon his knee, read, called aloud

one or another from the pallid crowd  
and doled out corn and bread in scant donations.

For all the rush, he still found time meanwhile  
for jokes and off-hand sallies with each suitor;  
he looked about with a complacent smile,  
he laughed with dull, blue eyes the shade of pewter;  
his shining cheeks shone, pleasantly distended,  
he talked to all as comrades, valued so,  
had handshakes, nods for some, and condescended  
to all the young — while keeping up the flow.

“Here, Nils — here’s corn and cash to get your hand on;  
go home, keep dearth and devil from your door;  
don’t waste it, my good chap, and do abandon  
the penny nips of brandy, what is more!  
Here, Aslak, this is yours; — be off with you,  
tuck in, but feed the ones who’ve waited ages, —  
but, Kari dear, — do burn his hymn-book, do — !  
I mean the one with two and fifty pages.”

And so forth, without pause. Bread, morals, grain,  
well-meant advice, an endless stream of chaffing;  
a man run mad, it seemed, in golden chain,  
who clutched his belly, fit to burst for laughing.  
But from that pallid group came no reaction,  
a brief, pinched smile was all they could display;  
each, be it large or small, took up his fraction,  
and then, without a ‘thank you’, slipped away.

It was as though their plight had seared the soul;  
as though their spirit could survive no longer;  
as though despair’s lead weight had proved the stronger,  
had clogged their heels and taken heavy toll.  
It was as though life were a punishment,  
whose cruel lesson was to teach endurance;  
as though each bargain struck failed of assurance,  
each effort vain, and fruitless all dissent.

Brand stood there looking down on them, and saw  
his friend, girl, guide with nag, all joining forces;  
the emptied pack being loaded on once more;  
the sharing of the food-bag’s last resources.  
And next, their purses — coin on coin they dole  
and those around them stare at the profusion,  
snatch what is given, leave in some confusion, —  
the man upon the steps nigh lost for role.

He soon recovered, though, and twinkled round  
 as though he'd wrought that marvel in some measure;  
 he called out to the pair: "Give at your leisure!  
 Give to the hilt; you're welcome, I'll be bound!  
 Dish out by finger-bowl or bucket and,  
 the biggest as the least, we'll take all, flatly!" —  
 And his eye glistened as he smiled there, fatly, —  
 then he looked round, his gaze encountered Brand.

He nodded, laughed, and pointing with his pipe  
 called out: "Turn round folk! Look, here's more arriving!  
 I do believe the time I chose was ripe;  
 more bounty I dare say, — you'll soon be thriving!  
 You're welcome, sir! Come down! It's poor we are!  
 You've heard about our floods, drought-stricken weather?  
 We're all here in the wilderness together,  
 and my five little fishes won't go far!"

But Brand stayed where he was, cold, pale and serious;  
 the priest, that moment, had a noble air;  
 and yet he seemed untouched at heart, imperious,  
 for all the crowd's mute sighs and its despair.  
 He shook his head, made for a while no stir,  
 then answered: "Yes, I've bread, could play the giver,  
 but rather than give *you* the merest sliver,  
 I'd throw it all away to feed some cur.

"Where is the heart in you dares risk attaining?  
 Where is, amongst you, strength to share abroad?  
 Where is your spirit that would, uncomplaining,  
 submit to castigation from the Lord?  
 Join me! I can a better gift bestow you  
 than recompense for pains lost past recall;  
 but cast your burdens off and I shall show you  
 the meaning of God's writing on the wall!"

It was as though a monarch stood amid them,  
 they yielded so obedient to his voice,  
 and as he left some bondage seemed to bid them  
 walk in the stranger's steps, they had no choice.  
 Without a sound they dropped what they'd been given,  
 no matter whether less or whether more,  
 and still they followed, to the church's door,  
 in silence and by strange excitement driven.

The key was turned; Brand sought the pulpit; mounted;  
 "This is a priest!" they whispered, much impressed.  
 But he, that sunlike beamer, now discounted,  
 skulked by the door, an uninvited guest.  
 Within the gloom, dead silence; none dared utter  
 as they filled up the benches row by row;

up in the pulpit Brand was heard to mutter,  
though what his prayer was, nobody could know.

His prayer was brief, then he addressed them clearly:  
“Remember, man lives not by bread alone;  
but if your body’s needs are met, those merely,  
you are provided not with bread but stone.  
And if you can suppress your hunger solely  
with gifts that can be put into your hands,  
then you’ve no link with God, no bridge expands  
connecting you with everything that’s holy.

“I stood this morning high up on the mountain  
and watched you crowd all roads to church, below,  
I thought then you had Him in mind, the fountain  
of all that raises, frees us mid life’s woe.  
I thought life here still went at its old speed  
amongst you, with no mental stimulation;  
and yet it raised me, that you felt the need  
to clutch at Him, as life-raft of salvation.

“How swift, the fear one’s Maker has forgotten,  
how easy to believe God’s turned away,  
when neither sun nor stars rise re-begotten,  
where there is neither night nor any day,  
when all is grey on grey, all things unchanging,  
the need today as yesterday, the same,  
however far through time your eye goes ranging,  
the same old picture in the same old frame.

“When there is nothing rising or declining,  
when life weighs down like murky overcast,  
when there’s no anger and there’s no repining,  
when sentence is accepted just as passed,  
when there’s no joy or terror to relieve it  
and cast some light and shade on life’s dull pace,  
the soul is tempted to collapse, believe it  
has been struck out of God’s great book of grace.

[The manuscript breaks off here]

*Ibsen struggled for nearly a year with the epic Brand and then in 1865, reported to his friend Bjørnson the remarkable progress he was making with ‘Brand’ in its dramatic form.*

*Ymir, the first living creature, a giant; the maggots that emerged from his rotting corpse were transformed by the gods into dwarfs destined to live and work underground; Earl/Jomsburg: Earl Haakon of Norway defeated at Ålesund a powerful invasion force of Vikings based, since 960 AD, on Jomsburg, at the mouth of the river Oder; Snefrid, the Finnish wife of King Harald Haarfagre; under-stringing, to resonate in sympathy with the plucked strings above; Egir, the sea-god; his steed a riddling reference to a ship; giant petrified i.e. when overtaken by sunlight; tongued device, the leading edge of a flag with two triangles removed, to resemble the jaws and tongue of a dragon; Fenris, the great wolf which devoured the sun thus inaugurating a winter, many years long, during which human society*

*degenerated into chaotic violence; hymn-book of two and fifty pages, a deck of cards for gambling.*

#### IN A YOUNG COMPOSER'S ALBUM

Orpheus struck with purest treble  
soul from beast and fire from pebble.

Stones our Norway has no lack of;  
wild beasts too, we've many a pack of.

Play, that stones may spark in wonder!  
Play, that hides may burst asunder!

*Written in Edward Greig's album February 1866.*

#### AN ALBUM-POEM

Joy's harbinger, my name for you;  
The star of my existence.  
And truth to God, 'twas such you grew,  
Joy's harbinger that came — withdrew; —  
A star — yes, shooting-star, it's true,  
That died out in the distance.

*Written 1868-9.*

#### IN THE GALLERY

A lovely creature  
sits there and graces  
in easel-reach the  
gallery's spaces.

What pure Castalia  
works there upon her? —  
She copies daily the  
Murillo Madonna.

Her rapt, astigmatical  
eye speaks mutely:  
she builds ecstatical  
realms of beauty.

Then I revisited  
 eighteen years later;  
 hailed times pure-spirited,  
 old and greater.

A faded creature  
 sits there and graces  
 in easel-reach the  
 gallery's spaces.

But? — words defeat me!  
 The same punctilio!  
 She copies neatly  
 the same Murillo.

Time's passed — she still perches,  
 survives, this purist,  
 on props for churches  
 and trash for the tourist.

And so she's been slaving  
 for ages there,  
 transfixed with craving  
 and white of hair.

But her rapt, astigmatical  
 eye speaks mutely:  
 she builds ecstatical  
 realms of beauty.

*Written during the winter of 1868-9. See 'In The Picture Gallery' (Bergen section).*

#### TO MY FRIEND THE REVOLUTIONARY ORATOR

You say I've become a 'conservative'.  
 I'm still what I've been every day I live.

I've really no time for fiddling with pieces.  
 You knock the board over; I'm yours till hell freezes.

There's only the one revolution I treasure  
 that wasn't a fudge, a half-hearted measure.

It brings to those later a halo of glory.  
 Of course I refer to the Deluge story.

Though even *that* left Lucifer stranded;  
 for Noah, as you know, took charge single-handed.

Let's try it again, but be more categorical;  
*that* calls for real men, not just the rhetorical.

You fix me a flood to the high-tide mark,  
 I'll gladly, myself, torpedo the Ark.

*Written in 1869 for a revolutionary, Adolf Hedin whom Ibsen had met at the Limmells' house  
 (see 'Balloon Letter' below).*

### BURDEN OF MAJESTY

For a knight beyond comparing  
 this I send without a name.  
 I know how the sword despairing  
 sears the bound hands of the daring,  
 know how savage teeth are tearing  
 at a brow with thought a-flame.

Will attuned to triumph's manner, —  
 will kept shackled, pent unheard;  
 hand stretched for his forebears' banner,  
 soul, a mighty exploit-planner, —  
 wind-felled spruce confine a spanner  
 of the skies, poor regal bird!

Daylight dawns and hunt-horns utter.  
 Heigh, the whole world's in the chase!  
 I know how clipped wings can flutter,  
 beat against the bars and shutter;  
 know how yearning goads when but a  
 pygmy mans the sentry-place.

Horns fall mute now daylight's faded;  
 unused weapons strew the ground.  
 Name on name is serenaded  
 round the hillside, greenwoods shaded; —  
 I know how he feels degraded,  
 he whose name no voices sound.

Creativity his dower,  
 beauty's promise, larva-like, —  
 poem-play his kind of power,  
 bright with vying hues his flower; —  
 sport of dire neglect, while sour  
 deprivation's lightnings strike!

Forced to gainsay what's depicted  
 on his candid forehead plain!  
 Forced to have ideals restricted,  
 just as Peter, lie-afflicted,

sank that night till the predicted  
cock-crow raised him, whole again.

Grief — and silence! Pygmies, dare you  
such a sacrifice assess?

Know you what it costs, to swear to  
foreign swords your fealty, care to  
risk your all as you prepare to  
save an age from fecklessness?

Dream, you'll answer, an illusion,  
all this magnanimity.

Good; spread shrewdness in profusion,  
judgement's caused you no confusion,  
you've not drained the cup — conclusion:  
you've not known what dreams can be.

More than life, in my submission,  
is a dream that's not set free.

Like my poetry's condition,  
shackled by soul's inhibition;  
snarling, clawing for remission,  
lion-like it craves my "Be!"

You will quote the old bathetic:  
"Greatest he who shuns extremes." —  
Golden rule for the ascetic,  
shelter for the apathetic!  
Bells ring but for the athletic  
in whose veins hot blood still streams.

Spare me "higher obligation"! —  
Have you bought his unscathed heart?  
Bought the poet's staunch vocation  
to subvert his dedication?  
Bought him, that with reprobation  
he might view his noblest part?

For a knight beyond comparing  
this my garland with no name.  
I know how the sword despairing  
sears the bound hands of the daring,  
know how savage teeth are tearing; —  
can you, wise men, feel the same?

Purpled martyrdom, his token, —  
sore constraint, the silenced dream,  
flowers mocked, for gloom bespoken, —  
fruit-filled boughs untimely broken, —  
dream, to life's vile crassness woken, —  
hence the Cross provides my theme.



Hence this monument's erection  
 to a masterpiece ill-starred;  
 shrewdness fails, a botched confection, —  
 I salute his *imperfection*,  
 pen my knight this proud reflection:  
*he was all too great a bard.*

*Written in 1869 to King Charles XV, whom Ibsen had met that summer in Stockholm.*

#### AT PORT SAID

Orient the day,  
 and the harbour glittered;  
 the whole world on display,  
 the ensigns flittered.  
 Music abounded,  
 borne to those listening;  
 massed cannon sounded  
 the canal's christening.

Steam-ships on cruise  
 passed the obelisked region.  
 They brought me news  
 from back home, in Norwegian.  
 The play I had polished  
 to mirror male misses,  
 back home was demolished  
 by stinking claque-hisses.

Gadfly had struck;  
 a reminder, a cold one. —  
 Stars, you've brought luck, —  
 my home is the old one!  
 Our river-boat hooted  
 the frigate a greeting;  
 hat raised I saluted  
 the ensign, competing.

Relax, that's best,  
 despite the snake-sting!  
 An honoured guest  
 on a Bitter Lakes fling!  
 When day's unwound  
 I'll dream here in clover  
 of Pharaoh drowned  
 while Moses passed over.

*Ibsen was the Norwegian representative at the opening of the Suez Canal 17<sup>th</sup> November 1869. The play was 'The League of Youth'.*

## BALLOON LETTER

to a Swedish lady

Dresden, 1 December 1870

Yes, I'll chance my arm today,  
 I who, silent for such ages  
 in despite of many gages,  
 fear I've thrown my case away, —  
 I, who fared from Stockholm owing  
 thanks — my thank-account is chronic —  
 visiting realms Pharaonic,  
 tweaking Isis' veil exotic,  
 have to date, — in the demotic —  
 welshed on promises o'er flowing  
 which, on "Lyran's" last occasion,  
 I had solemnly averred, —  
 namely that I'd drop a word  
 just by way of compensation.

Dare I? Have I still the right?  
 Right? — Good Lord, what quaint precision!  
 Now-a-days the right decision  
 rests on, pure and simply, might!  
 So then, short and sharp, I will;  
 but in anti-Prussian fashion;  
 with no claim upon compassion.  
 Don't take my mute wandering ill!

Here I'm living in the way  
 folk in Paris live today.  
 Massive German knights (of phrases)  
 who would whirl the world to blazes,  
 fly the banner, brag and brawl —  
*Wacht am Rhein's* their madrigal, —  
 it's a siege that nothing raises.

Take my word, the circle's small,  
 cramped and narrow, all in all.

Politics and beer-hall chatter's  
 served up with my beef-steak platters,  
 and the local paper's column —  
 German verse, all lame and solemn —  
 dishes up a fare as tasty  
 as a French rat-stew or pasty.

Worse still, when reverberations  
 from the North come echoing;  
 when the vulgar peppering  
 strafes my Spring-like expectations;  
 when brash crudity's derision  
 blows me sky-high to perdition

and I stand, arm in a sling,  
mid the ruins of my vision.

So it's need (no point in lying)  
prompts this long, long overdue  
letter I now send to you, —  
letting the balloon go flying.  
I've no doves, you may assume; —  
doves and hope, birds of a feather, —  
and within this clammy tomb  
only owls and ravens weather.  
But a letter to a lady  
via owl or raven's shady.

So — last year, as well you know,  
with your Mælar sky gloom-shaded,  
biting frost and foliage faded,  
south and deltawards I go.  
It was summer there, perfection.  
Brightness with a strong reflection,  
like our fjords that mirror glaciers.  
Palm-groves, sycamores, acacias  
casting blue-green shade-fantasias.  
We saw Bedouin with missus  
perched up on their camels, bumping  
through the desert's wildernesses.  
At the sight a Nordic bumpkin  
(on his first excursion ever)  
yelled: "An ostrich, well I never!"

On *Ferus* we shot up-stream  
out of Cairo at full-steam.  
Saw the pyramids at Gizeh  
where Napoleon orated  
while the Sphinx just meditated,  
then, before and since — the teaser!

Beni Hassan's royal mummies'  
tombs we crawled through on our tummies.  
Centuries have badly crazed them:  
all dates subject to correction;  
this one *can* take on the nod, —  
Egyptologists I instance, —  
and of course I've well appraised them —  
they were built far in the distance  
(when the Pharaoh was a God)  
under Potiphar's direction  
with his son-in-law's assistance, —  
Joseph, Jacob's offspring, raised them.

Memnon's statue, stone colossus, —  
 he, you know, once sang a little —  
 we approached, the day still young;  
 but the old chap held his tongue.  
 All that's now mere bardic tittle  
 since Cambyses overhauled him,  
 checked his seams for wear, and mauled him,  
 and perhaps, who knows, reviewed the  
 inner organs somewhat crudely.

Many a singer's felt such losses,  
 frozen voice and epiglossis.

Still, a throne's fair compensation  
 for his dawn song's deprivation.

So old Memnon's throned in glory  
 on that loss-of-voice tall story,  
 rakes in tribute worth a mint,  
 holds court, dressed up, without stint,  
 not just for the upper classes —  
 even a Norwegian passes,  
 like your humble, and Peer Gynt.

Who, though, could record the story  
 of a six- or seven-week dream?  
 So I beg you, be a sport  
 and accept this scrawled report  
 of my trip in blazing glory  
 up the crocodilian stream.  
 Mad, to waste one's verbal hoard  
 on our pasha-life aboard  
 our four Noah's-ark type of vessel; —  
 we had four, you must remember,  
 with four barques besides where nestle  
 all the so-called weaker gender.

In the bows, then, setting forth  
 sat three bears from the old North;  
 eleven cocks from France, all mannish;  
 four real stallions — they were Spanish —  
 fiery colts quite hyperbolic,  
 skilled in dances cabriolic,  
 proud as El Olés they frolic.  
 We shipped service-staff besides  
 who, the common vote decides,  
 came from where the ass was stabled.  
 A Swiss buck of sorts moreover;  
 one amphibian genus labelled  
 “should be kept just half seas over,” —  
 with, of course, a crowd of rough  
 mast-fed (i.e. Old) Germanic  
 wild-boars, tame by inclination;

two, by way of variation,  
 predators of martial feature;  
 one Brazilian-hispanic  
 bookworm, and a gallimaufry  
 known collectively as small fry —;  
 item — no, that's quite enough!

Now imagine us all guided,  
 dragomanned, now left now right  
 till our caravan subsided  
 at an old-style super-site.

O'er the tawny waste's dominions  
 sped we as on nimble pinions,  
 though our means of transportation  
 was by ass or, (for the bold),  
 camel, if the truth were told.  
 What delight, what jubilation,  
 childlike milling, highly vocal,  
 from our flock. Alone that yokel  
 ostrich-spotter raised objections,  
 opting for a coach at least;  
 shouting "Ass? Is that the beast  
 for a man with Press connections!  
 What I need's a horse with fire;  
 aren't there thoroughbreds for hire?" —

Luxor, Dendera, Sakkara,  
 Edfu, Assuam and Philae  
 I'll pass over quickly while I  
 pause en passant to compile my  
 outline sketch of the Sahara.

You'll have heard that — one presumes, —  
 when the caravan goes striding  
 through the rolling desert ocean,  
 sand-floods, lashed by fierce simooms,  
 dredge up with their restless motion  
 skeletons the sand's been hiding.

Or (more aptly) — when it's wading  
 through the sand-dunes, it's invading  
 living nature domiciled  
 with mortality's inaction,  
 turned, through time and petrification,  
 architecture that's run wild.

Knuckle-bone, rib, spinal column  
 show like plinths of pillars solemn;  
 camel skulls profusely scattered  
 are the capitals now shattered;  
 yellow gaping teeth parading  
 make a sort of balustrading;  
 fingers twitching in the breezes

are like bits of broken friezes,  
and, like tattered knightly pennants,  
kaftans flap their ragged remnants.

Now imagine that whole setting  
shimmers in these hot, still climes,  
grows and swells, till awe-begetting,  
it expands a thousand times; —  
then conceive this tomb-world here  
an old caravan that died  
in mid-journey, petrified, —  
and you've Egypt's long career.

Yes, it's true. A great procession  
set forth one bright dawn of yore;  
led by priests, in their possession  
hieroglyphic books of lore;  
god-kings, king-gods rode the billowed  
waste where time seems never-ending; —  
Isis and Osiris pillowed  
on high saddles, condescending,  
glorious but in silence wending.  
Horus, Hathor, Thme and Phtah,  
Ammon Re and Ammon Ra  
casting radiance resplendent  
stalk amid the throng attendant;  
Apis golden-browed is guided  
where the waters gently glided  
by a train of slaves in legion,  
and wherever camp was made,  
sphinxes, pylons mark the region.  
Obelisks and stones memorial  
whisper of, in script pictorial,  
death and victory-parade;  
temple colonnades unnumbered  
line the route this pageant lumbered;  
pyramids in strict formation  
mark its final camp's location.

Lo, then from the North a gust,  
soon a gale, the desert battered,  
lashed the caravan to dust; —  
priests were toppled, kings were shattered,  
all the gods declined and fell;  
Pharaoh and his house as well  
lay forgotten, buried, scattered.  
Where the throng once flocked as bidden,  
now a lifeless, silent crowd; —  
for a thousand long years hidden,  
deep-entombed, all light forbidden,  
like a corpse in mummy-shroud,

that four-thousand-year doom-ridden  
culture crumbled, disavowed.

It was relics of *that* blighted  
pageant we Khedive-guests sighted  
as we neared the Nubian border.

We saw fellahin in order  
scud the dunes towards Abydos,  
and a little south, beside us,  
Karnak showed its groves of socles  
like some primal giant's knuckles;  
capitals at Rhamaseum  
like a camel mausoleum;  
Luxor's hundred-columned hall  
like slaves' arms in fettered thrall,  
witnessed to the storm's wild passion  
in a mute "*sic transit*" fashion.

That same scene has stayed with me  
as I travelled other quarters;  
like God's spirit o'er the waters  
made me sense profundity.

Thor in Yule-tide gallop thunders  
foremost in the headlong rout;  
Grecian gods, though toppled wonders,  
to this very day hold out.  
Jove lives on the Capitol,  
here called "tonans", there called "stator".  
Where is Egypt's sacred doll?  
Where is Horus, where is Hathor?  
No memorial, myth or story,  
not one relic to their glory.

Well, the reason's pretty plain.  
Where identity is lacking,  
where the form does not contain  
hatred, pleasure, joy and tension,  
throbbing pulse and blood's bright stain, —  
then the sum of high pretension  
is mere skeleton-like clacking.  
Doesn't Juno still ring true,  
pale, yet in high dudgeon too,  
when she catches hubby petting — ?  
Isn't Mars real, through and through, —  
snared beneath the golden netting?

What of Egypt's gods, though, solemn  
lines of ciphers ranged by column?  
What on earth was their life-mission?  
Just to be, to stay the same,  
painted, stiff with inanition,

stooled beside the altar-flame.  
 One of them's hawk-billed of feature,  
 one's an ostrich-feathered creature,  
 god of day one, one of night,  
 one of everything in sight; —  
 not one felt life's urgent call,  
 felt the call to sin, to stumble,  
 raise himself despite the fall.  
 Hence must Egypt lie and crumble  
 like a crypted corpse that's nameless  
 after four millennia's sameness.

You, dear lady, need no telling  
 why, besieged and ringed so tight,  
 I, withdrawn to my snug dwelling,  
 live by introspection's light.  
 Outdoors there's no consolation,  
 faith's flown like a fall migration,  
 but the inward eye's perception  
 sees Hope's burgeoning inception.  
 On those caravans, long dead,  
 I construct our way ahead.

Every age of humankind  
 climbs an endless spiral stairway;  
 same tight circle, narrow fairway,  
 route eternally confined;  
 will yearns on, undeviating; —  
 time keeps merely escalating.

Hence our generation's banding  
 o'er the Pharaoh's head — next landing.  
 Once more kings rate gods in standing,  
 once more individuals form  
 a morose and fickle swarm —  
 discontent that's still expanding  
 is the disaffected norm.  
 Once more pyramid-creation  
 occupies our generation.  
 Once more veins must be distended,  
 blood and tears must be expended,  
 that the world may contemplate  
 majesty entombed in state.

Modern caravan, old manner,  
 with its Hathor, with its Horus,  
 and, above all, with its chorus  
 blindly swearing on the banner.  
 What great works aren't raised today  
 by the same triumphal way?  
 What proof of the folk's affection!



How Egyptian — one and all  
bring a little stone to fall  
into place in their erection.  
How precise, the formulation;  
how exact the calculation!

Yes, it's great without a doubt,  
so great that the world stands gaping; —  
yet a quavering 'but' escaping  
from the open mouth slips out.  
Doubt takes over, asking gently:  
*Is it great, so evidently?*  
What gives work its quality? —  
Mass-appeal is not the measure  
but strong personality,  
the inspired work's hidden treasure.

Right, but now that horde Germanic,  
storming Paris in this way?  
Who stands firm amid the panic,  
who alone wins victory's bay?  
When did one man's reputation  
shine that thousands voiced his praises,  
sang him home with anthems fair?  
Squadron, regiment, formation,  
H.Q. — viz: spy operation —  
lazy hounds who hunt in braces  
track the quarry to its lair.

Hence the halo's loss of glory. —  
There's no poet tells that story;  
and there's nought that lives for long  
save what's dignified in song.

Think of Gustavus Adolfus —  
tales of leadership engulf us;  
think of Bender's hero, captured, —  
of that thunder-bolt, Per Wessel  
in his night-dispelling vessel,  
Kongedyp's men, blithe and bold; —  
memory spreads its canopies  
o'er them like a choir enraptured  
with its spate of harmonies,  
to the plaudits thousand-fold  
from Spring's festival marquees.

Then consider men today,  
all those Fritzes, Blumenthalers,  
and those Junker 'generalers',  
count them, count their massed array!  
Under Prussia's pestilential

flag in black-white funeral guise,  
 woolly grubs of great potential  
 can't hatch as song's butterflies.  
 They can spin their silk, but shortly  
 die in the cocoon, bound tautly. —  
 In the hour of triumph, shipwreck.  
 Prussian sword turns Prussian whip-crack.  
 There's no kind of elevation  
 in resolving an equation.  
 No achievement worth the prizing  
 since the time when the uprising  
 of a people fine and free  
 changed to staff-machinery,  
 whittled down by shrewd devising, —  
 since von Moltke's pragmatizing  
 killed the struggle's poesy.

Thus demonic is the might  
 pledged to worldly domination:  
 sphinx-like, hoarding its own light,  
 killed by its own obfuscation.

Cypher-triumph meets its fate.  
 Modern winds have blown of late;  
 they will, like the sand-storm's lashing,  
 send the race of idols crashing.  
 Bismarck and those other buffers  
 will on history's throne look duffers,  
 just like Memnon's stumps of column,  
 songless when the sun shines on 'em.

But as we Khedive-invited  
 guests, our trip through death's world ended,  
 midst festivities well-lighted  
 met the dawning age portended, —  
 yes, as we, flag fluttering,  
 hailed, to world-wide chorusing,  
 the canal's inauguration,  
 and as we from Suez strand  
 caught a glimpse of promised land, —  
 so the spirit's expectation  
 of canals to be constructed  
 shall, as on a world-wide tour,  
 by chorales and hymns conducted,  
 by the glow of Beauty's brand,  
 set sail for the dawn's allure,  
 steering for the Promised Land.

It's for Beauty that *we* hunger.  
 Bismarck's just a science-monger.

Shall we join the fun together?  
 Well, who knows, dear lady whether  
 doves will bring the card? We'll see.  
 Till then I wear gloves — kid-leather —  
 in my chamber's privacy;  
 till then I shall seek allayment  
 as a poet garbed in vellum;  
 that will stir the good-folk's venom,  
 "heathen's" sure to be my payment;  
 mobs are my abomination,  
 I fear dregs, contamination,  
 I shall bide time's slow rotation  
 in my spotless wedding raiment.

And with these last words, goodbye!  
 Fare you well, balloon! Now fly!  
 Air's the poet's region, really; —  
 steer due north and land as nearly  
 as you can to Mælarstranden;  
*that's* convenient to land on,  
 Telemark is much too high!

In the basket struts Imp Swanker.  
 Let me not have long to wait  
 to be told he, with his freight —  
 light-weight verse, light thoughts, no rancour —  
 has, at Normalm, dropped his anchor!

*During the summer of 1869 Ibsen had stayed with the Linnells, a Swedish couple, at their house "Lyran" on Lake Mælaren before he set out for Suez. He wrote en route from Dresden, where he felt "besieged" by German society as Paris was, at that date, by the German army; hence the conceit of sending out his letter by balloon — one such from Paris had landed in Telemark — and the linking of Egypt and Germany as states with no soul and no individuality; Ibsen is castigating the militaristic brutality of Prussian influence which had, in his view, perverted Germany's initial aspirations to achieve unity and a national identity — an influence manifested in the bombastic architectural re-planning of the capital; Peter Wessel, the Norwegian Nelson, later entitled Tordenskjold, destroyed with vastly inferior numbers a Swedish fleet in 1716; the prisoner at Bender, King Charles XII, put away in 1713 by his Turkish hosts, to whom his intriguing had become a nuisance; Kongsvinger, a frontier fort on the Swedish border; El Olé, a form of Spanish dance-mime. The desert tour took place before the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal.*

#### TO FREDERIK HEGEL

(on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Gyldendal, the publishing company.

30<sup>th</sup> December 1870)

Take my handclasp, though far distant;  
 take the thanks dead words afford!  
 You've known well of my persistent  
 wish to join the festive board.

Could mere wishes level pathways,

yours would lead without a bruise  
to an evening's aftermath rays,  
to life's porch where you could muse.

You, till then, toil on affording  
help to build our northern keep; —  
walls now rise behind the hoarding;  
upward now the towers creep.

Modest mason, you who quarry  
stone to make our home come true, —  
fear not: there's a laudatory  
statue-niche reserved for you!

### JUDAS

An odd-bird disciple one can't put a tag on, —  
quite literally, the twelfth wheel on the wagon.

What drove him to it stays confidential;  
all history reports is the mere evidential.

A conscience that slept, that's what caused his behaviour,  
as we know, when he ventured to kiss the Saviour.

Both Heaven and Hell won their game; — how fulfilling!  
But what, now, if Judas hadn't been *willing*?

### RHYME LETTER TO FRU HEIBERG

Dresden, Easter week 1871

If I'd sent you, in one go,  
all my little thank-you letters  
penned in sleepless winter's fetters,  
as one thesis  
torn in pieces,  
they'd have, like a cloud of snow,  
caused a flurry,  
one great scurry, —  
strips that hurry,  
filled with writing  
to convey my feeble thanks,  
would have formed a prose-drift blighting  
Rosenvæng's bright-flowered banks.

If I'd sent you, without stint,  
unconfined by text or print,  
every thought-bird as it struggled,

I'd have smuggled  
 them where silence reigns imperious  
 under Rosenvæng's calm roof,  
 there where soul presides aloof,  
 there where Beauty's charms mysterious  
 yearn for their elucidation,  
 like a bud Spring puts to proof,  
 opening in a revelation.

Peace would have succumbed to shock  
 at the landing of my flock;  
 children would have hearkened for us  
 as for hunt-horns far afield; —  
 birds invisibly concealed  
 would have trilled in swirling ranks  
 in a rapt, expectant chorus,  
     hymns of thanks,  
 would have circled, brushed with lightness  
 the great sage's sculptured likeness.

Letters boring,  
     random fancies  
 will not serve; my choice is verse.  
 High above day's deck-planks soaring,  
     from the cross-trees  
 I must scan the universe.  
 Prose is for ideas and notions,  
     verse for visions.  
 Mind's delights and mind's distresses,  
 grief that's whitened my own tresses,  
     wrath's emissions, —  
 I portray life's richness better  
     in strict verse-form's fetter.

But the thanks I now find shaming,  
     thus declaiming, —  
 is it just my play-success's  
     patroness's  
     part I'm faming,  
     weaving praises  
 in these small verse-chains of daisies?

No, a great resplendent memory  
 loads my tongue with terms sublime, —  
 memories of a lovely, glowing  
     festive time,  
 memories of events still chiming,  
     every glorious,  
 when I saw you sweep victorious,  
 splendid, graceful, true of heart,  
 through the wonderland of art.

That was when my thanks were owing;  
 that's my reason now for rhyming.  
 Last year's visit I just squandered,  
     I stayed dumb;  
 Beauty's debt, the whole round sum  
 still heart-hoarded, I just wandered  
     off again.  
 And since then  
 daily interest keeps growing,  
 and for all that's in this letter  
 I shall, like a welshing debtor,  
 never pay the sum that's owing. —

The mind's eye will always see you  
 wondrous, merged with Denmark's reaches,  
 with a day, a lovely sea-view  
 by the Sound mid lofty beeches.  
 Sun-warmed vessels, sun-warmed breezes,  
     fairway rippling  
 with a blue and limpid stippling;  
     summer's wafting,  
     "Greenwood's" offspring,  
 breathes a poem that appeases.  
 It is Sunday; laughter ringing,  
     gay throngs singing,  
     boats a-swinging  
 where the steep banks overlean.  
     Dresses dashing,  
     flirting, flashing  
 where the chimes and fiddles clashing  
 set the backcloth to the scene.

But out yonder, —  
 north where Kronberg's throned in power,  
 southward where the Three Crowns tower  
     gasconading,  
 what a show of swans parading,  
     what elation,  
 what white canvas pageantry;  
 vessels keeping close formation;  
 sunlight on the sails' curvation,  
     pennants legion,  
     heaven's region  
 preen them in the glassy sea.

One contender,  
 dream-fraught maiden slim and slender,  
 now floats past me under sail.  
 She is like some legend hiding  
 wrapped within a trembling veil;

she is like a vision gliding,  
 never biding,  
 on some secret, mystic trail.  
 Sea-elves sporting  
 swirl cavorting  
 in the bow-spray at their game;  
 fairies hurry  
 in the scurry;  
 but within the pennant's flurry  
 lurks "Agnete's" name.

Look — another apparition,  
 such a dancer, wild and fearless!  
 Grace, caprice in coalition,  
 talent peerless.  
 Half familiar, half far distant,  
 half a mermaid, half meek infant  
 fell-exploring,  
 "Dina" rides upon her mooring.  
 As though blindly,  
 guided by the zephyr kindly,  
 as though dreaming  
 cradled on the tide's soft streaming, —  
 the felucca!  
 Every dip, her every rising  
 tells Provence gave vital succour;  
 deep sighs quiver,  
 love's faint zither  
 from the deck soul's Spring prevising,  
 wafted hither;  
 songs descending  
 on the mute throng there attending,  
 as beside the strand's green pillows  
 "Iolanthe" charms the billows.

Who'd not wonder  
 at the vessels  
 following in sun her courses,  
 to a fair wind making foam?  
 "Ragnhild" wrestles  
 heeling under  
 as the sea's dark hidden forces  
 lure her home; —  
 lotus-like the current riding  
 see the fair "Ophelia" cutter  
 seem to flutter,  
 veering, gliding —  
 frigates after,  
 an armada  
 seeking harbour  
 to the land's applause and laughter. —

Thus it is mind's eye will see you  
wondrous, merged with Denmark's reaches, —  
with a day, a lovely sea-view  
by the Sound mid lofty beeches. —

But one question must be faced:  
will the nation  
ever, in its agitation  
and negation,  
sink this wealth by genius graced  
in oblivion's purgatory?  
Will some alienated age then blunder,  
like an English pirate plunder  
this armada, Denmark's glory?

See, we brothers,  
colour-, form- and word-compilers,  
dabs at building,  
or however else we style us,  
we, who for our craft of beauty  
felt the need for heavier duty  
timbers for our keels, less yielding,  
*we* can't blame our fate on others  
if our navy  
is sub-standard sometimes maybe.  
Many clippers, showy cusses,  
rigged out as sublime personas  
can at last  
end up classed  
with the ship-Jeronimuses.  
Many a hull rigged out and splendid —  
under-written by coevals, —  
overwhelmed at sea and rock-scarred,  
have, wrecked by marine upheavals,  
sometimes ended  
being towed back to the dockyard,  
minus guns and gear, o'er blown as  
all the other Magdelonas.  
We shall think our luck ne'er ceases  
if caprice is  
kind to laid-up masterpieces,  
stores them gently  
for the antiquarian gentry.

Scenic art, so it's assented,  
borne to flower  
for an hour,  
must like soapy bubbles scented,  
must like meteors of the night,  
blaze, then shatter,  
traceless scatter,



lost to sight, —  
mortal handiwork's sad plight.

Soar aloft in bird-like cadence,  
rise above this warped objection!

Verily,  
*your* art is the child of fragrance,  
inspiration,  
fervent senses,  
character and fantasy, —  
not a plank- or stone-erection,  
brain-confection  
firmly set in black and white,  
but an elf that haunts perfection,  
beauty's vineyard, airy, light, —  
just *because* it lacks a firm  
figuration  
hands can grasp, it builds defences  
that repel Time's gnawing worm.

All men's minds henceforth shall see you  
wondrous, merged with Denmark's regions, —  
with a night, the Sound, the sea-view  
under memory's starry legions.

What a legendary muster!

Fleet of splendours,  
frigates foaming,  
modest tenders,  
I see homing  
through the gloaming,  
in the shore's snug lee they cluster;  
mist envelops sail and masting;  
twilight casting  
swan-like shapes on yards and stays  
cheats the gaze;  
distance, thwarting close attention,  
breeds invention;  
women on the shore-line ponder,  
men see yonder  
as their fancies choose to stray,  
generations, those that settle  
wood and bay, —  
all interpret beauty's fettle  
each in his own way.

*That's* the life, you see, to trust,  
recollected  
in the people's mind,  
protected  
from time's moth, corrosive rust, —  
*that* is truly life, the turning

of *your* substance, rich and free,  
 to the form the folk's eye yearning  
 seeks for its own poesy;  
     *that* is living —  
     myth-begetting,  
 fairy-like in presentation,  
 one with current aspiration,  
 one with current needs and setting, —  
 and behold the praise you're getting  
     while still living.

In an age that's starved for charm  
 I was soothed to be observer  
 of your passage in full fervour  
 to fair winds, the sun's bright balm, —  
 soothed to gaze upon the calm  
 where in night's cool-shining glory  
 saga wove your journey's story.

For the vision granted me,  
 hear my grateful prophecy.  
 You shall live for generations  
 wondrous, merged with Denmark's reaches, —  
 with a night, the Sound's tall beeches  
 under Memory's constellations.

*Johanne Louise Heiberg, widow of J. L. Heiberg — the "sage" — had had a distinguished career as actress, producer and director at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The letter was prompted by the great success, shortly before, of her production of 'The Pretenders'. Her house, Rosenvænget, where Ibsen had visited her the previous year, stood on the Øresund. Geronimus and Magdalena are middle-aged characters from Holberg's comedies. Felucca, a small Mediterranean two-master.*

## THANKS

Her distress showed when sorrows  
 impeded my way, —  
 her delight was the morrow's  
 creative display.

Her home is far yonder,  
 on freedom's high seas,  
 where poet-craft wander  
 sea-mirrored, at ease.

Her kin, my creations  
 whose varying throng  
 in bannered formations  
 stride forth in my song.

Her aim was inspiring  
 my vision's glow,  
 but who helped the firing  
 there's none she'd have know.

*Written in Rome spring 1871 to his wife.*

### THE BURNT SHIP

He brought his craft facing  
 away from the north;  
 sought more cheerful gods, tracing  
 their sport back and forth.

Beacons of snowland  
 quenched in the seas;  
 fauns of the glow-strand  
 answered his pleas.

He set light to his vessel; —  
 smoke billowed blue,  
 like a slender bridge-trestle  
 northwards it flew.

For huts of the Norsemen  
 from scrub bathed in light,  
 there rides forth a horseman  
 unfailing, each night.

*Written at the conclusion of work on the 1871 volume of Poems.*

### THE CHANGE IN DIRECTION

1872

In Vienna, a battle with diplomats vying,  
 on North Schleswig's frontier, corpses were lying.

Bravest of soldiers, flower of the nation,  
 those men and those women in bloody formation.

Two hundred thousand breast-wounded heroes;  
 two hundred thousand massed in their death-throes.

And so they must lie there, with death still impending,  
 an eight-year-long night that will ne'er have an ending.

An eight-year-long night of a people unfriended,  
 They lie out there still and still they're not tended.

Where were Denmark's champions in that long night?

They flocked to a flag that showed red and white.

It wasn't the Dannebrog tempest-fanner.  
They mustered beneath the Red Cross banner.

They mustered with weapons of hate discarded.  
The right flank was swordless, the left unguarded.

The way though was barred, for a bayonet cordon  
stretching east and west served as front-line warden.

That cross of red on its snow-white strip  
failed to moisten the casualty's lip.

The gaping wounds lacked the soothing needed; —  
the signal for help, that was flown unheeded.

And yet Denmark's champions held out, proved steady,  
enduring, each one of them wide-awake, ready.

Then came the order as stiff as starch:  
"Field Service, retreat; to the North — quick march!

"All flags in your rucksacks, — stow! — and forget them!  
The black eagles are circling, you mustn't upset them.

"The lions rampant, — wag tails in subjection!  
The men on watch, — signal 'Change of direction!'"

It's not in dispute; a bard has declaimed it, —  
and dear old Grundtvig and God have ordained it.

Right! Beat the retreat. To rapprochement's feast!  
On the platform stands Pan-Germania's priest.

The new bosom friends, new brother with brother,  
stand chinking their glasses, embrace one another.

All the lamps have been kindled; our eight-year-long dream  
goes floating away on a speech-making stream.

The smell of tobacco smoke, music is swirling.  
In everyone's mind a great future's unfurling.

What's muddling the music? A death-rattle shriek.  
What's fouling the smoke? It's a corpse-like reek.

A breeze swept the fug — soft sou'westerly weather.  
It brought us the reek and the death-cry together.

Just step up the volume to drown out the seeping!  
A dying man's seemliest when he is sleeping.

His shrieking will stop, neglect's a great curer.  
One gust from the North and the air's made purer. —

There's a change in the offing! Talk on, no objection!  
The weather-vane's signalled the change in direction.

*The eight-year-long night refers back to Denmark's defeat by Germany in 1864. The poem was occasioned by speeches and articles in which Bjørnson, shortly after the death of Grundtvig, who supported the concept of a unified Scandinavia, urged the Danes to come to terms with Germany — a change of direction that Ibsen abominated.*

#### AT THE MILLENNIAL CELEBRATIONS

18<sup>th</sup> July 1872

My folk, who poured for me a deep potation,  
that bitter-cordial draught wherewith to save  
me, as a poet, from the very grave,  
whence I drew strength to fight in dawn's elation, —  
my folk who gave me exile's staff, who gave  
grief's loaded pack, swift shoes of desolation,  
the heavy gear to furnish my retreating, —  
I from abroad send home to you my greeting!

I send with it my thanks for all you've given,  
my thanks for every hour's pain-purging toil.  
Each growth in my vocation's plot that's thriven  
has owed its rooting to yon sometime soil; —  
that there they grandly sprout with lush persistence  
is due to grey-sky winds from yonder distance;  
what sun's warmth loosened, overcast firmed bravely; —  
my country, thanks; that best of gifts *you* gave me.

Yes, thither where the mountain mists are swirling,  
where grey-sky winds invade the upland calm,  
where both within and out the din keeps skirling,  
where wasteland isolates each lonely farm, —  
I, like a pilot at the rail, peer yonder.  
In night, in poetry, I homeward wander.  
And mostly in that enigmatic hour  
when ambiguity invests the nation:  
a folk self-riven as dissensions lour —  
yet drawn to memories of co-operation.  
But as I view these festive days, my vision  
scans a millennium — longer — for revision.

And there I see, from saga's mist emerging,  
the tree that sprouted in Queen Ragnhild's dream.  
I see it spread to Lindesness, diverging

round North Cape's wall, east over Glommen's stream.  
 I witness its red trunk, its verdant bunching,  
 I see its twigs that gleam as white as snow; —  
 but there's a scattered nation dwells below,  
 men sick with envy, self-engrossed, sit hunching  
 on every headland, fjord and corrie-side.  
 One only stands undaunted mid the welter.  
 He casts his dice of fate, all caution spurning,  
 for he has faith and hope, is justified,  
 his call, to feed a universal yearning, —  
 the canopy his mighty dream's green shelter.

Things fall apart! The young with elders grumble;  
 the novel vision challenges old ways.  
 Round Trondhjem I behold eight kingdoms crumble;  
 eight battles set eight kings beneath the harrow,  
 great Rollaug, from his throne of mightier days,  
 must occupy an earl-stool, beaten, humble; —  
 in Naumdal Herlaug, downing sword and arrow,  
 descends with all his heroes to the barrow.

Then they united, those who sought division;  
 they join who once for separation vied;  
 they found a use then for King Harald's vision:  
 the warrior's strongest who fights side by side.  
 They flock from Agder, Telemark, each quarter;  
 the spread sails gleam alongside Lister's strand;  
 flags flying, ships' prows foam the water,  
 and as they speed round Jeder's reef to slaughter,  
 hoarse battle-cries are borne back to the land.  
 They seek King Harald's host. Time now to see  
 if any dare hack down the hallowed tree.  
 Two concepts clad in steel are now debating,  
 two ages will exchange harsh words in wrath;  
 upon his poop-deck Roald Rygg stares north,  
 King Kjötve whets his sword, his shield-rim grating.  
 The time is short. The man's at Hafsford, waiting.

---

See you the hundreds of warships riding  
 anchored, tarred longships drawn up in their ranking?  
 See you where Harald's armed warriors are biding,  
     swarming and striding  
 over the benches, the gunwale's stout planking?

Hear you not Hafsford, the din they're maintaining?  
 Hornklove's threnody lasts to this day.  
 Fighters for twilight and dawn are campaigning,  
 fighters for waxing meet fighters for waning; —  
     longships, tall carriers  
     swirl in the haven,

wheel, snarl like harriers,  
 gulls against raven;  
 arrow-clouds darken the fjord on their way.  
 The Queen's mighty dream-tree — the onslaught broadens!  
 Telemark-, Agder-men menace with ardour  
 its canopy. Fear not — Haarfager's wardens  
 circle its root with their nimble axe-cordons,  
 ward off the whistling broad-axe to guard a  
 life for the future's thousand-year saga.

Daylight fades, the long shadows are falling.  
 Roald and Sote and Tore are sleeping;  
     sun-set is creeping.  
 With it an age sets that outlived its brawling; —  
     the new age is calling. —  
 King Kjotve flees in disgrace from the battle  
 though he can never escape from time's tattle.  
 Still, as Hornklove tells us, he skelters  
     homeward-bound, yearning  
     for mead and soused herring.

But Harald rigs shelters  
 on warships and carriers.  
 They venture forth turning  
 dawn-ward, those harriers,  
 those ranks of high derring.

---

So passed a thousand years. Some harsh, some kind  
 the Norns between them span upon fate's spindle.  
 The dream-tree flourished in the people's mind,  
 its canopy, fruit-laden boughs, ne'er dwindle.  
 For *now* the folk can pause, scan unconfined  
 astern. Now rears the boulder-stone to kindle  
 the whole land's silent pæan, granite-shrined. —  
 On guard, my folk! Shun party, sport and revel; —  
 there stirs within the murk a baleful devil.

I see my home where mountain mists are swirling, —  
 my home where gales disturb the moorland calm,  
 where both within and out the din keeps skirling,  
 where isolation severs farm from farm.  
 What is it lurks at dusk, for byways questing?  
 Who is that shadow, one I've seen before?  
 He frees the latch upon the peasant's door,  
 glides stocking-foot towards the man who's resting; —  
 he whispers in the sleeper's ear, beguiling, —  
 then to the nearest neighbour — silent, smiling.  
 And I see more than one such apparition,  
 and it is more than words that claims attention; —  
 I sense a kind of dirge of inanition,

a cloudy torpor that frustrates ambition,  
 a droning hush that stifles dream-invention.  
 Who are you, shadows? And where dwell you then?  
 Hafsfjord's descendants! Rise, time-present's men!  
 Fight Harald's cause! The dead would walk again!

Yes, Roald, Sote, Tore are still lurking  
 to play their midnight ghou- or spectre-role; —  
 and Rollaud stirs himself; Herlaug's still working,  
 that ancient moldwarp, in his burrowed hole.  
 Such are the foxes round the parish creeping,  
 that bear the muster-staff now here, now there;  
 such are the visitants to peasants sleeping  
 who urge that secret strife should once more flare. —  
 Rise, daytime's warrior, slay night's murky faction.  
 Defend the dream-tree in a ring of trust!  
 King Harald claims a monument of action; —  
 one that today shall soar aloft, august, —  
 one that in Norway's soil we'll gladly thrust  
 to pierce *his* foes, the forces of reaction.

For life is *our* cause, death their chosen bourn; —  
 theirs is King Kjøtve's goal, ours, blushing dawn.  
 Survey the world! There Hafsfjord's day has broken  
 o'er all the earth's high places, clear, wide-woken.  
 The sun that blazed on Solferino's plain,  
 the sun that coloured Lissa's deep blue waters, —  
 that bronzed the Porta Pia's blood-red stain  
 and chased the papal snake to cellar quarters, —  
 the sun that slumbered on Sadowa's walls  
 was Hafsfjord's sun on our new enterprise;  
 it was the sun that shone for those that ventured  
 when statehood was mid barren holms indentured,  
 that turned to flint the self-same trollish thralls  
 and steamed the venom from the self-same lies.  
 Mark where you stand, today's Norwegian brother!  
 Heed time's intent; *your* pact's with that alone.  
 Today lays but one poor foundation-stone  
 to mightier pillars for our strength, no other.  
 Observe time's law! It may not be denied.  
 Cavour and Bismarck wrote it as *our* guide, —  
 and many a ghost he quelled, no spectre-sparer,  
 that hero and that dreamer of Caprera.

Yes, through the ages runs King Harald's vision,  
 and Hafsfjord's fight is fought this very day;  
 for clash of concepts fuels our division,  
 King Harald's concept of one sovereign sway  
 fronts petty concepts flaunting disarray.  
 If you, my folk, desert reunion's host,  
 then fell the column on your chieftain's grave!



Let not the stone speak falsely o'er the wave  
 and point like some gross insult at our coast.  
 But if you've mettle, show *determination*,  
 then I foresee you blithe, your triumph sure!  
 Then shall our union's pillar stand secure  
 for our successors' joyful celebration;  
 but it shall rise above our alienation,  
 above the country, city feuds that smoulder; —  
 its place is chosen: there on Dovre's shoulder.

Queen Ragnild's dream shall prove then not deluded.  
 At last, my land, you'll shelter the sublime.  
 Past greatness shall revive in this our time,  
 dark prophecies be happily concluded.  
 And then, my folk, I see you staunchly keeping  
 vows made when union-fervour was abroad, —  
 I see you follow time's track onward sweeping  
 towards a mighty North of one accord;  
 I see a nation sleeping as though dead  
 yet waking to the call to watch and ward;  
 a generation, *will* and *faith* unflawed, —  
 with strength for more than toil on land and fjord, —  
 with aspiration's universal sword,  
 the great dream's canopy above your head.

---

*The occasion celebrated at Haugesund by the erection of a memorial stone over his grave, marked the achievements of Harald Haarfagre as first unifier of Norway; he defeated at Hafsford a confederacy of petty rulers in the year 872. Hornklove chronicled his victory. Ibsen celebrates places, events and people who had figured in the recent struggles for freedom in other European countries. "The Dreamer of Caprera" is Garibaldi who retired to the island at one stage in his revolutionary career; muster-staff, in the early middle ages an individual could, in his own cause, summon a meeting of the Thing by sending an arrow round from farm to farm.*

#### AT A WEDDING

9<sup>th</sup> October 1874

Leaves are rustling, foliage falling;  
 Nordic autumn's near;  
 through the forest ruins calling  
 Farewell's voice rings clear.  
 Therefore Nordic strength retires  
 to the home affection fires,  
 cherishes within the dwelling  
 out-door thoughts, sweet-smelling.

Partners in a pledge eternal,  
 youthful, loving pair, —  
 enter your abode with vernal  
 garlands in your hair.  
 Outdoor let October's starkness

spread abroad its shroud of darkness;  
let your home become an harbour  
for youth's noble ardour.

*This* is life's true art: to cherish  
through both joy and ruth  
minds as fresh as Spring, to relish  
heart's undying youth;  
*this*, — when evening sun's declining,  
to hoist morn's ideals bright-shining  
high aloft, undaunted, glorious.  
Then you'll be victorious.

Plumbing wedlock's deep resources  
is true wedlock's crown;  
cunning cannot set your courses,  
nor can wisdom's frown.  
When the path is lost, benighted,  
*love* can sense the way unsighted.  
Let your vigil never weaken  
o'er home's trusty beacon.

He who keeps this inspiration  
as his altar-light,  
has a lamp for navigation,  
torch in sorrow's night.  
And one day, as leaves are falling  
round you at late Autumn's calling; —  
gaze, by *this* bright light assigned you,  
on the Spring behind you!

*Written for the wedding of Jacob, son of Frederick Hegel, Ibsen's publisher.*

#### A VERSE LETTER

My dear good friend,  
you write and somewhat anxiously enquire  
the reason why our people's so depressed,  
whom neither grief nor rapture seems to fire,  
they seem to brood on fear that's unexpressed, —

why they are unresponsive to successes,  
why no-one blames himself for tribulation,  
why all fate's favours and all fate's distresses  
are met with apathy and resignation.

Don't press me, friend, to act the necromancer;  
I'd rather ask; it's not my job to answer.

But seeing that you have now dipped your pen,  
 I shall ensure no waste of jot or tittle, —  
 so long as what you seek's a noncommittal  
 reply along the lines of this one then.  
 In short my answer questions you again;  
 and pardon — since the hand that rigs the thimble  
 is mine, a poet's — if it's asked in symbol.

So tell me then if you by chance have ever  
 observed along our coast-line, in full sight,  
 a vessel put to sea in lively weather  
 and set its course directly and dead right.  
 You must have done, and noticed the ungrudging  
 alacrity and joy on every hand,  
 the quiet confidence that speeds the drudging,  
 the firm authority, the clear command,  
 as though it were a world of regulation,  
 with firm-set ways like those we have on land,  
 with laws, as there, for travel, transportation.

The ship is often bound for distant places;  
 seeks many ports in far-off lands for trading,  
 discharging cargoes, loading bales and cases,  
 new freight with foreign names on bills of lading;  
 both fore and aft, holds near to overflowing  
 with numberless great bundles, sacks untallied,  
 nor crew nor skipper have the means of knowing  
 exactly what the cargo is that's carried;  
 it's all piled in, all's taken on as valid.  
 Then off again for the wide-open waters;  
 the bows cut through the salt spray jauntily:  
 it is as though it were too cramped, the sea,  
 as though the surge supplied too narrow quarters  
 for that ineffable life-bouyancy,  
 which storms could only foster, making true men  
 of passengers, the skipper and the crew-men.

Quite natural. Is not the vessel tight?  
 Is not the cargo stowed and trimmed, made steady?  
 Are not the compass, sextant, quadrant ready,  
 all ship-shape to ensure the course is right?  
 Is it not fine, the skill that's omnipresent,  
 that stimulates and keeps one's fears quiescent?

Yet one fine day, despite all, there are changes  
 for no apparent cause that one can find,  
 on every mouth aboard, through every mind  
 a gloomy, strange oppressiveness now ranges.  
 At first it seems few yield to the depression,  
 then more, then several till it's universal,  
 slack sail-change, slack rope-handling's the impression;

slack orders slackly piped — complete reversal.  
 The slightest things are taken quite awry.  
 The calm's effulgence, even favouring breezes  
 portend no good; even a fulmar's cry,  
 a leaping porpoise even — each heart freezes.  
 They've lost their nerve, one secret plague assails them,  
 though no-one tells and no-one asks what ails them.

What's happened then on board? What has occurred?  
 What's the mysterious cause of all this glooming  
 that numbs the mind and will, the arm and word?  
 Is someone in distress, — is danger looming?  
 No, not at all. Things merely jog along, —  
 but hopeless, nerveless, and without a song.  
 And why? Because a surreptitious doubt,  
 sly rumours restlessly keep sneaking out  
 from after-deck and fo'c'stle, a farrago:  
 they think they're sailing with a corpse for cargo.  
 These sailor superstitions show a trend;  
 fill all men's thoughts once they begin exploring.  
 Just how they match the facts though must depend  
 on the arrival and the journey's end,  
 if, spite of perils, reefs and breakers roaring,  
 the ship rides safe in port upon its mooring. —

Look, my dear friend, "Europa" puts to sea  
 full steam ahead for some new destination,  
 and we've bought tickets, booked for you and me  
 a space up on the poop-deck's privacy.  
 Out here the coolth soothes brow and agitation;  
 up here we can breathe deeply and breathe free; —  
 the baggage is all stowed and well secured  
 and catering's in the hands of cook and steward.

What more is needed for a jaunt abroad?  
 The engine does its job, the boilers bubble;  
 the pistons shrug their shoulders at the double;  
 the screw cleaves through the water like a sword; —  
 the stay-sail saves the ship undue commotion;  
 the helmsman sways to every slightest motion;  
 there's ample sea-room; on his bridge the captain  
 deserves the confidence of all on board;  
 the set of sail, the cordage, trim he's rapt in; —  
 what more is needed for a jaunt abroad?

And yet, way out here on the open sea,  
 half-way between our home and destination,  
 our speed falls off, it seems, in some degree,  
 and confidence gives way to perturbation.  
 Both crew and passengers of both the sexes  
 drift round with sunken cheeks and dulled reflexes;

they go to pieces, listen, brood, create gloom  
in steerage quarters and in first-class stateroom.

You seek the reason, my good friend, of me!  
Have you not noticed some upheaval's pending?  
Did you not see a period was ending  
that blew away secure complacency?  
The reason is obscured in obfuscation;  
now you shall hear my own interpretation.

I sat on deck alone once — all was dimmed,  
a star-lit, sultry night, completely soundless;  
the atmosphere was soft, the calm was boundless,  
the evening breeze's wings were clipped and trimmed.  
Each passenger had sought his bunk by number,  
the lamps that shone below were dim, sedating;  
the heat the cabin vented, nauseating,  
it trapped the weary in a semi-slumber.  
Their doze was restless, I could see, and thwarted; —  
I could observe them through the half-closed cowling, —  
there lay a statesman with his mouth contorted  
so that a smile would finish as grim scowling;  
a learned don nearby was twisting, turning,  
at odds, it seemed, with his own line of learning;  
a theologian hid beneath the cover;  
the next man hugged his pillow, fit to smother;  
and artists, writers, lay there in formation  
like dreamers racked with hope and perturbation; —  
but over all that half-sleep dominating,  
a reddish reek hung foul and nauseating.

I turned my eyes from that lethargic flailing,  
I peered ahead in the refreshing night;  
I sought the east where dawn's faint, early light  
began to shroud the starlight in its veiling.

Then, propped against the mast, I heard a wailing:  
words sounded from below-decks, a farrago.  
A voice that cried out loud and sounded such  
as comes from unsound sleep or nightmare's clutch;  
"I think we're sailing with a corpse for cargo!"

*Written 1875, one of two contributions made to Georg Brandes's critical periodical "The Nineteen Hundreds"; the other was "Far Distant" below.*

#### AT AMALIE HOLCK'S BIER

All that's best of what the world possesses,  
works of art in colour and in sound,  
beauty's work such as the word expresses,

she has loved through life, a love profound.

Everything the lovely world embraces, —  
dew, the shade's soft balminess, the sun,  
gentle valley airs, the stream that races,  
she has loved, sought out and dwelt among.

Everything in spirit's realm that urges, —  
love of truth and faith that's full and whole,  
love of candour wherefrom light emerges,  
these she loved deep down within her soul.

Then upon her brow a veil descended,  
darkening her mind in year-long night,  
here, in clay's beclouded realms she wended,  
lost, her treasured clarity of sight.

But through days of grief, through nights of weeping,  
I perceive that little home aglow;  
visitors sit silent, vigil keeping;  
from their presence light and beauty flow.

All that's best of what our life possesses,  
tender care, the solace love can breed,  
sacrifice that no mere word expresses,  
brought her comfort in her time of need.

All that's lovely on this earth and relished,  
kindliness's sun, devotion's calm,  
all that as a woman, she has cherished,  
proved throughout her suffering, a balm.

Thus a beauty halos the departed,  
festive beams illumine the coffin's crape,  
brighten loss and memories down-hearted, —  
seek the light, trapped soul, and thus escape!

*During his stay in Dresden (1863-75) Ibsen saw a good deal of a lady from Bergen, Elise Holck; he was much impressed by her self-sacrificing care of her invalid sister, Amalie.*

#### SONG OF GREETING TO SWEDEN

At the student congress in Uppsala, 1875

Thanks for your assembly's bidding  
to your ancient town!  
The ridge is smoothed now, the forbidding  
craggs are levelled down;  
beetling heights that line the border  
have not barred our way;

Norway's forests now afford a  
route to you without delay.

Forthright as the road let singing  
echo forth steel-strung;  
songs, like sighs through pine-crests, winging  
Sweden's mother-tongue.  
These, our own Norwegian voices,  
bear our greeting hence;  
To the west our land rejoices  
in your eloquence.

Far too long we've sung divided  
in the world-wide choir;  
There where Sweden's voice presided,  
Norway's would retire;  
Where we longed to gain a hearing,  
craved supporting sound,  
Sweden's choir kept disappearing,  
would not join our round.

Pæons 'neath Jerusalem's palm-throng,  
lays in Britain's strait,  
Narva's storm-song, Lützen's psalm-song  
half-choirs celebrate.  
Let our fathers' flags then moulder  
in their bleached display;  
younger spirits must now shoulder  
fresh demands today.

Spring-songs, newly turned and cheering  
through our times now wend; —  
singers must be keen of hearing,  
heed what they portend.  
Our blithe song-birds are the youngsters;  
in the people's view  
it's the singer's task amongst us  
to sing in the new.

Hark with us for future wonders,  
heed the murmuring dawn;  
should you catch one chord that thunders,  
that's of lightning born, —  
sound the horn then, bid Norwegians  
leave their woods that day!  
We shall come! Our frontier regions  
do not bar our way.

*Gustavus Adolfus was killed at the Battle of Lützen in 1632; Charles XII won a great victory over Russia at Narva in 1701.*

## FAR DISTANT

Our youth will soon throng to Uppsala's meeting:  
speeches will flow, songs ring with a greeting.

I've written a poem myself on youth's mingling,  
have felt my soul and my body tingling.

I seized on a moment of faith amid doubting,  
and stood poised and ready to join the outing.

Now that is past. I've locked the resistant  
gates of decision, stay lonely, far distant.

---

Here's to you all in that carefree array!  
Here's to you all who are happy to play!

Overcast, yield to the summertime's fire!  
Forests, breath sweetly on souls that aspire!

Let it be fine, that the chorus be lofted!  
Sun-warmed, your minds, your banners breeze-wafted!

Glittering daytimes and nights clear glowing  
wherever you travel, wherever you're going!

---

Far distant I watch as you speed on your way;  
I hark to the tune known for many a day.

And yet it seems strangely remote and repelling,  
that joyous procession that sweeps through my dwelling.

Ghosts of dead ages and ghosts of dead men  
walk in our congress of youth once again.

From clouds of high rhetoric, fumes of festivity  
spectres take shape of historic proclivity.

---

Such rousing excursions as those in the North  
have swept over Italy back and forth.

Youth's Apennine-march aroused a whole nation  
out of its torpor of ruination.

That was the century's cloud-misted dawning.  
Now Englesborg's flag flies to greet our morning.



Such rousing excursions as those in the North  
have swept over Germany back and forth.

They dreamt of an end to their fragmentation;  
they dreamt of a flag's red and gold decoration.

And then came the serious business, less pleasant.  
Youth had its guests, grey-haired elders were present.

Unshakeable, though, in the cause that had fired  
their fervour they hoisted their flag, still inspired.

They bore it before them through storms they endured;  
they built their own house, and their homestead secured.

They *willed* their dream true; and won by that token.  
For Europe's grown-up now, the age has awoken.

---

And that's why it seems so remote and repelling,  
that joyous procession that sweeps through my dwelling.

Ghosts of dead ages and ghosts of dead men  
walk in our congress of youth once again.

From clouds of high rhetoric, fumes of festivity,  
spirits take shape of historic proclivity.

Why mute, the sole voice of command, that could sweep  
delusion away and arouse us from sleep?

I shall tell you just why. It fell silent as soon  
as a folk unprepared obtained freedom's boon.

It's a dangerous thing to accept as a gift;  
a ship can capsize if that ballast should shift.

They thrust in our hands a good enough blade,  
but the worth of such weapons? — no mention made.

And hence our fate totters its lurching way,  
like the knife in the hands of a child at play.

We listen to pundits and experts and linger  
to dabble in causes with silk-gloved finger.

We live in a dream, know not how to proceed  
to a shattering or constructive deed.

When will it shake us until we are woken,  
the century's spirit, the century's slogan?

Munich, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1875

*The poem was occasioned by the Uppsala rally (above). The place names refer to the endeavours, by Garibaldi and others to achieve independence and unification for their countries.*

TO MISS EMMA KLINGENFELD

(with a copy of 'Lady Inger of Østråt')

The play I composed in the Nordic tongue  
came back from the south like an echo rung.

It echoed but spoke with a tone less strong  
yet its echo was still my Norwegian song.

No echo that snow-clad heights achieve  
but a woodland echo one summer's eve.

How just, that the poet's interpreter spoke  
a tongue that blazed trails amid foreign folk.

Take then, as thanks, a second play  
of a time less violent, less far away.

It opens up visions, a night in the fall,  
without a sun to sound morning's call.

It figures women of strength and fire,  
takes place in grim darkness, its ending dire.

Allow it, young lady, to waft you — roam  
in your mind to the North again, leaving home.

Let it lead you this way where the dark clouds drape  
the fjord up at Trondhjem like funeral crape.

Let Elina's shade reappear at night,  
and her mother's too. But forget the sight.

And turn again, back to the Isar's stream —  
as though you awoke from a dolorous dream.

*In 1876, while in Munich, Ibsen decided to put in hand a German edition of his plays. He enlisted the help of Emma to translate 'The Vikings a Helgeland' and 'Lady Inger of Østråt', the first plays to come out in the series. Isar, the river on which Munich stands.*

## A VERSE

To live is — to fight possession  
of heart and brain by the troll.  
To write is — to sit in session  
judging one's very soul.

*Written, originally in German, to a German lady in 1877.*

## STARS IN NEBULA

As I, just like some comet from afar,  
set course to find a home, who'd been a ranger,  
there, out in space, revealed itself a stranger,  
a guest unwonted in Andromeda.

A message to our ancient earth it bore,  
that in the solemn stillness of the distance  
*there* chaos had evolved a star-existence  
once it discovered gravitation's law.

A different chaos hemmed me in, I found,  
of wills at variance and of paths contested,  
reluctance to accept the middle ground,  
to follow any change of route suggested.

But once I had resumed my isolation,  
I could divine what that event might mean, —  
interpret what I had, in person, seen:  
a nebula turned star through gravitation.

The nebula, though formless, I believe in,  
chaotic though the weltering North may be;  
believe it is on course for unity, —  
a brilliant star in process of conceiving.

*Ibsen returned to Norway in 1885 for a short visit before returning to live in Munich; a new star had been observed in Andromeda in that year.*

## THEY SAT THERE, THOSE TWO —

They sat there, those two, in so snug a home  
through autumns and chill Decembers.  
Then fire destroyed it. Mere rubble to roam.  
The pair have to rake the embers.

For under it all lies a hidden gem,  
a gem that's impervious to burning.  
And if they keep looking, either of them

might find it by raking and turning.

But even if the blaze-ravaged pair should find  
that priceless, fire-proof jewel,  
*she'll* not recover her peace of mind,  
nor *he* his bright joy's renewal.

*Ibsen described the poem as the first preliminary work for 'The Master Builder' 16<sup>th</sup> March 1892.*

#### MY FATHERLAND

Where minds take fire from my poem's brand,  
there runs the frontier of my fatherland.

*Written probably in 1894.*

#### WITH *BRAND* TO A ONE-YEAR-OLD BABY GIRL

28 April 1896

To Little Eldrid!

May your life conform to a poem of beauty  
on the great reconciliation of pleasure and duty.

## CONTENTS

Poems Abroad

From the Dybbøl Days	2
The Power of Memory	3
From my Home Life	3
Gone!	4
A Swan	4
The Gulley	5
A Church	5
Abraham Lincoln's Murder	6
The Epic Brand	8
In a Young Composer's Album	45
An Album-Poem	45
In the Gallery	45
To my Friend the Revolutionary Orator	46
Burden of Majesty	47
At Port-Said	49
Balloon Letter to a Swedish Lady	50
To Frederik Hegel	59
Judas	60
Rhyme Letter to Fru Heiberg	60
Thanks	66
The Burnt Ship	67
The Change in Direction	67
At the Millennial Celebrations	69
At a Wedding	73
A Verse Letter	74
At Amalie Holck's Bier	77
Song of Greeting to Sweden	78
Far Distant	80
To Miss Emma Klingefeld	82
A Verse	83
Stars in Nebula	83
They Sat There, Those Two —	83
My Fatherland	84
With Brand to a One-Year Old Baby Girl	84