

1864

RABBI BEN EZRA

Robert Browning

Browning, Robert (1812-1899) - British Victorian Poet, noted for his dramatic monologues, his rejection of overly-florid language, and his mastery of psychological characterization. In 1846 he married Elizabeth Barrett and shared with her one of the world's most celebrated romances. Rabbi Ben Ezra (1864) - Browning's famous poem on old age. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1168) was a learned philosopher, physician, and poet. Opens with the well-known lines: Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, ...

RABBI BEN EZRA

GROW old along with me!

The best is yet to be, The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in his hand Who saith, "A whole I planned, Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Not that, amassing flowers, Youth sighed, "Which rose make ours, Which lily leave and then as best recall?" Not that, admiring stars, It yearned, "Nor Jove, nor Mars; Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends them all!"

Not for such hopes and fears Annulling youth's brief years, Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!

Rather I prize the doubt Low kinds exist without, Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

Poor vaunt of life indeed, Were man but formed to feed On joy, to solely seek and find a feast:

Such feasting ended, then As sure an end to men; Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Rejoice we are allied To that which doth provide And not partake, effect and not receive!

A spark disturbs our clod; Nearer we hold of God Who gives, than of his tribes that take, I must believe.

Then, welcome each rebuff That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!

Be our joys three-parts pain!

Strive, and hold cheap the strain; Learn, nor account the pang;
dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence,- a paradox Which comforts while it mocks, Shall life
succeed in that it seems to fail:

What I aspired to be, And was not, comforts me; A brute I might
have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

What is he but a brute Whose flesh has soul to suit, Whose spirit
works lest arms and legs want play? To man, propose this test Thy
body at its best, How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

Yet gifts should prove their use:

I own the Past profuse Of power each side, perfection every turn:

Eyes, ears took in their dole,

Brain treasured up the whole; Should not the heart beat once "How
good to live and learn"?

Not once beat "Praise be thine!"

I see the whole design, I, who saw power, see now Love perfect
too:

Perfect I call thy plan:

Thanks that I was a man!

Maker, remake, complete,- I trust what thou shalt do!"

For pleasant is this flesh; Our soul, in its rose-mesh Pulled ever to
the earth, still yearns for rest:

Would we some prize might hold To match those manifold
Possessions of the brute,- gain most, as we did best!

Let us not always say, "Spite of this flesh to-day I strove, made
head, gained ground upon the whole!" As the bird wings and
sings, Let us cry, "All good things

Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"
Therefore I summon age To grant youth's heritage, Life's struggle
having so far reached its term:

Thence shall I pass, approved A man, for aye removed From the
developed brute; a God though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:

Fearless and unperplexed, When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armor to indue.

Youth ended, I shall try My gain or loss thereby;
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:

And I shall weigh the same, Give life its praise or blame:

Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

For note, when evening shuts, A certain moment cuts
The deed off, calls the glory from the gray:

A whisper from the west Shoots- "Add this to the rest,
Take it and try its worth: here dies another day."

So, still within this life, Though lifted o'er its strife,
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last, "This rage was right i' the main,
That acquiescence vain:

The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

For more is not reserved To man, with soul just nerved
To act to-morrow what he learns to-day:

Here, work enough to watch The Master work, and catch Hints
of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

As it was better, youth Should strive, through acts uncouth,
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:

So, better, age, exempt From strife, should know, than tempt
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!

Enough now, if the Right And Good and Infinite Be named here,
as thou callest thy hand thine own, With knowledge absolute,
Subject to no dispute From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel
alone.

Be there, for once and all, Severed great minds from small,
Announced to each his station in the Past!

Was I, the world arraigned, Were they, my soul disdained, Right?
Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!

Now, who shall arbitrate? Ten men love what I hate, Shun what I
follow, slight what I receive; Ten, who in ears and eyes Match me;
we all surmise, They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul
believe?

Not on the vulgar mass Called "work," must sentence pass, Things done, that took the eye and had the price; O'er which, from level stand, The low world laid its hand, Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb And finger failed to plumb, So passed in making up the main account; All instincts immature, All purposes unsure, That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed Into a narrow act, Fancies that broke through language and escaped; All I could never be, All, men ignored in me, This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel, That metaphor! and feel Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay, Thou, to whom fools propound, When the wine make its round, "Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all, Lasts ever, past recall; Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:

What entered into thee, That was, is, and shall be:

Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee 'mid this dance Of plastic circumstance, This Present, thou, forsooth, would fain arrest:

Machinery just meant To give thy soul its bent, Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

What though the earlier grooves, Which ran the laughing loves Around thy base, no longer pause and press? What though, about thy rim, Skull-things in order grim Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

Look not thou down but up!

To uses of a cup, The festal board, lamp's flash, and trumpet's peal, The new wine's foaming flow, The master's lips aglow!

Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what needst thou with earth's wheel?

But I need, now as then, Thee, God, who moldest men; And since, not even while the whirl was worst, Did I- to the wheel of life With shapes and colors rife, Bound dizzily- mistake my end, to slake thy thirst:

So, take and use thy work:

***Amend what flaws may lurk, What strain o' the stuff, what
warpings past the aim!***

My times be in thy hand!

Perfect the cup as planned!

Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

THE END