

1820

HYMN TO DEATH

William Cullen Bryant

Bryant, William Cullen (1794-1878) - American poet and editor of the New York Evening Post who practiced law before devoting his life to writing. A master of blank verse, Bryant's earliest works are considered his best. Hymn to Death (1820) - Opening lines: Oh! could I hope the wise and pure in heart / Might hear my song without a frown, nor deem...

HYMN TO DEATH

Oh! could I hope the wise and pure in heart
 Might hear my song without a frown, nor deem
 My voice unworthy of the theme it tries,
 I would take up the hymn to Death, and say
 To the grim power, The world hath slandered thee
 And mocked thee. On thy dim and shadowy brow
 They place an iron crown, and call thee king
 Of terrors, and the spoiler of the world,
 Deadly assassin, that strik'st down the fair,
 The loved, the good- that breathe on the lights
 Of virtue set along the vale of life,
 And they go out in darkness. I am come,
 Not with reproaches, not with cries and prayers,
 Such as have stormed thy stern, insensible ear
 From the beginning; I am come to speak
 Thy praises. True it is, that I have wept
 Thy conquests, and may weep them yet again,
 And thou from some I love wilt take a life
 Dear to me as my own. Yet while the spell
 Is on my spirit, and I talk with thee
 In sight of all thy trophies, face to face,
 Meet it is that my voice should utter forth
 Thy nobler triumphs; I will teach the world
 To thank thee. Who are thine accusers?- Who?
 The living!- they who never felt thy power,
 And know thee not. The curses of the wretch
 Whose crimes are ripe, his sufferings when thy hand
 Is on him, and the hour he dreads is come,
 Are writ among thy praises. But the good
 Does he whom thy kind hand dismissed to peace,
 Upbraid the gentle violence that took off
 His fetters, and unbarred his prison-cell?

Raise then the hymn to Death. Deliverer!
 God hath anointed thee to free the oppressed
 And crush the oppressor. When the armed chief,
 The conqueror of nations, walks the world,
 And it is changed beneath his feet, and all
 Its kingdoms melt into one mighty realm
 Thou, while his head is loftiest and his heart
 Blasphemes, imagining his own right hand

Almighty, thou dost set thy sudden grasp
 Upon him, and the links of that strong chain
 Which bound mankind are crumbled; thou dost break
 Sceptre and crown, and beat his throne to dust.
 Then the earth shouts with gladness, and her tribes
 Gather within their ancient bounds again.
 Else had the mighty of the olden time,
 Nimrod, Sesostris, or the youth who feigned
 His birth from Libyan Ammon, smitten yet
 The nations with a rod of iron, and driven
 Their chariot o'er our necks. Thou dost avenge,
 In thy good time, the wrongs of those who know
 No other friend. Nor dost thou interpose
 Only to lay the sufferer asleep,
 Where he who made him wretched troubles not
 His rest- thou dost strike down his tyrant too.
 Oh, there is joy when hands that held the scourge
 Drop lifeless, and the pitiless heart is cold.
 Thou too dost purge from earth its horrible
 And old idolatries;- from the proud fanes
 Each to his grave their priests go out, till none
 Is left to teach their worship; then the fires
 Of sacrifice are chilled, and the green moss
 O'ercreeps their altars; the fallen images
 Cumber the weedy courts, and for loud hymns,
 Chanted by kneeling multitudes, the wind
 Shrieks in the solitary aisles. When he
 Who gives his life to guilt, and laughs at all
 The laws that God or man has made, and round
 Hedges his seat with power, and shines in wealth,
 Lifts up his atheist front to scoff at Heaven,
 And celebrates his shame in open day,
 Thou, in the pride of all his crimes, cutt'st off
 The horrible example. Touched by thine,
 The extortioner's hard hand foregoes the gold
 Wrung from the o'er-worn poor. The perjurer,
 Whose tongue was lithe, e'en now, and voluble
 Against his neighbor's life, and he who laughed
 And leaped for joy to see a spotless fame
 Blasted before his own foul calumnies,
 Are smit with deadly silence. He, who sold
 His conscience to preserve a worthless life,
 Even while he hugs himself on his escape,
 Trembles, as, doubly terrible, at length,

Thy steps o'ertake him, and there is no time
 For parley, nor will bribes unclench thy grasp.
 Oft, too, dost thou reform thy victim, long
 Ere his last hour. And when the reveller,
 Mad in the chase of pleasure, stretches on,
 And strains each nerve, and clears the path of life
 Like wind, thou point'st him to the dreadful goal,
 And shak'st thy hour-glass in his reeling eye,
 And check'st him in mid course. Thy skeleton hand
 Shows to the faint of spirit the right path,
 And he is warned, and fears to step aside.
 Thou sett'st between the ruffian and his crime
 Thy ghastly countenance, and his slack hand
 Drops the drawn knife. But, oh, most fearfully
 Dost thou show forth Heaven's justice, when thy shafts
 Drink up the ebbing spirit- then the hard
 Of heart and violent of hand restores
 The treasure to the friendless wretch he wronged.
 Then from the writhing bosom thou dost pluck
 The guilty secret; lips, for ages sealed,
 Are faithless to their dreadful trust at length,
 And give it up; the felon's latest breath
 Absolves the innocent man who bears his crime;
 The slanderer, horror-smitten, and in tears,
 Recalls the deadly obloquy he forged
 To work his brother's ruin. Thou dost make
 Thy penitent victim utter to the air
 The dark conspiracy that strikes at life,
 And aims to whelm the laws; ere yet the hour
 Is come, and the dread sign of murder given.

Thus, from the first of time, hast thou been found
 On virtue's side; the wicked, but for thee,
 Had been too strong for the good; the great of earth
 Had crushed the weak for ever. Schooled in guile
 For ages, while each passing year had brought
 Its baneful lesson, they had filled the world
 With their abominations; while its tribes,
 Trodden to earth, imbruted, and despoiled,
 Had knelt to them in worship; sacrifice
 Had smoked on many an altar, temple-roofs
 Had echoed with the blasphemous prayer and hymn:
 But thou, the great reformer of the world,
 Tak'st off the sons of violence and fraud

In their green pupilage, their lore half learned
 Ere guilt had quite o'errun the simple heart
 God gave them at their birth, and blotted out
 His image. Thou dost mark them flushed with hope,
 As on the threshold of their vast designs
 Doubtful and loose they stand, and strik'st them down.

Alas! I little thought that the stern power,
 Whose fearful praise I sang, would try me thus
 Before the strain was ended. It must cease
 For he is in his grave who taught my youth
 The art of verse, and in the bud of life
 Offered me to the Muses. Oh, cut off
 Untimely! when thy reason in its strength,
 Ripened by years of toil and studious search,
 And watch of Nature's silent lessons, taught
 Thy hand to practise best the lenient art
 To which thou gavest thy laborious days,
 And, last, thy life. And, therefore, when the earth
 Received thee, tears were in unyielding eyes
 And on hard cheeks, and they who deemed thy skill
 Delayed their death-hour, shuddered and turned pale
 When thou wert gone. This faltering verse, which thou
 Shalt not, as wont, o'erlook, is all I have
 To offer at thy grave- this- and the hope
 To copy thy example, and to leave
 A name of which the wretched shall not think
 As of an enemy's, whom they forgive
 As all forgive the dead. Rest, therefore, thou
 Whose early guidance trained my infant steps
 Rest, in the bosom of God, till the brief sleep
 Of death is over, and a happier life
 Shall dawn to waken thine insensible dust.
 Now thou art not- and yet the men whose guilt
 Has wearied Heaven for vengeance- he who bears
 False witness- he who takes the orphan's bread,
 And robs the widow- he who spreads abroad
 Polluted hands in mockery of prayer,
 Are left to cumber earth. Shuddering I look
 On what is written, yet I blot not out
 The desultory numbers; let them stand,
 The record of an idle revery.

THE END