

1881

THE BURDEN OF ITYS

Oscar Wilde

Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900) - An Irish-born English poet, novelist, and playwright. Considered an eccentric, he was the leader of the aesthetic movement that advocated "art for art's sake" and was once imprisoned for two years with hard labor for homosexual practices. Burden of Itys (1881) - This poem, Wilde's favorite, expresses his melancholy at having no pagan world of deities in which to believe. Opening line: This English Thames is holier far than Rome, ...

THE BURDEN OF ITYS

This English Thames is holier far than Rome, Those harebells like a sudden flush of sea Breaking across the woodland, with the foam Of meadow-sweet and white anemone To fleck their blue waves,- God is likelier there, Than hidden in that crystal-hearted star the pale monks bear!

Those violet-gleaming butterflies that take Yon creamy lily for their pavilion Are monsignores, and where the rushes shake A lazy pike lies basking in the sun His eyes half-shut,- He is some mitred old Bishop in partibus! look at those gaudy scales all green and gold!

The wind the restless prisoner of the trees Does well for Palaestrina, one would say The mighty master's hands were on the keys Of the Maria organ, which they play When early on some sapphire Easter morn In a high litter red as blood or sin the Pope is borne From his dark house out to the balcony Above the bronze gates and the crowded square, Whose very fountains seem for ecstasy To toss their silver lances in the air, And stretching out weak hands to East and West In vain sends peace to peaceless lands, to restless nations rest.

Is not yon lingering orange afterglow That stays to vex moon more fair than all Rome's lordliest pageants! strange, a year ago I knelt before some crimson Cardinal Who bare the Host across the Esquiline, And now- those common poppies in the wheat seem twice as fine.

The blue-green beanfields yonder, tremulous With the last shower, sweeter perfume bring Through this cool evening than the odorous Flame-jewelled censers the young deacons swing, When the gray priest unlocks the curtained shrine, And makes God's body from the common fruit of corn and vine.

Poor Fra Giovanni bawling at the mass Were out of tune now, for a small brown bird Sings overhead, and through the long cool grass I see that throbbing throat which once I heard On starlit hills of flower-starred Arcady, Once where the white and crescent sand of Salamis meets the sea.

Sweet is the swallow twittering on the eaves At daybreak, when the mower whets his scythe, And stock-doves murmur, and the milkmaid leaves Her little lonely bed, and carols blithe To see the heavy-lowing cattle wait Stretching their huge and dripping mouths across the farmyard gate.

And sweet the hops upon the Kentish leas, And sweet the wind
that lifts the new-mown hay, And sweet the fretful swarms of
grumbling bees That round and round the linden blossoms play;
And sweet the heifer breathing in the stall, And the green bursting
figs that hang upon the red-brick wall.

And sweet to hear the cuckoo mock the spring While the last violet
loiters by the well, And sweet to hear the shepherd Daphnis sing
The song of Linus through a sunny dell Of warm Arcadia where
the corn is gold And the slight lithe-limbed reapers dance about
the wattled fold And sweet with young Lycoris to recline In some
Illyrian valley far away, Where canopied on herbs amaracine We
too might waste the summer-tranced day Matching our reeds in
sportive rivalry, While far beneath us frets the troubled purple of
the sea.

But sweeter far if silver-sandalled foot Of some long-hidden God
should ever tread The Nuneham meadows, if with reeded flute
Pressed to his lips some Faun might raise his head By the green
water-flags, ah! sweet indeed To see the heavenly herdsman call
his white-fleeced flock to feed.

Then sing to me thou tuneful chorister, Though what thou sing'st
be thine own requiem!

Tell me thy tale thou hapless chronicler Of thine own tragedies! do
not contemn These unfamiliar haunts, this English field, For many
a lovely coronal our northern isle can yield, Which Grecian
meadows know not, many a rose, Which all day long in vales
Aeolian A lad might seek in vain for, overgrows Our hedges like a
wanton courtesan Unthrifty of her beauty, lilies too Ilissus never
mirrored star our streams, and cockles blue Dot the green wheat
which, though they are the signs For swallows going south, would
never spread Their azure tints between the Attic vines; Even that
little weed of ragged red, Which bids the robin pipe, in Arcady
Would be a trespasser, and many an unsung elegy.

Sleeps in the reeds that fringe our winding Thames Which to
awake were sweeter ravishment Than ever Syrinx wept for,
diadems Of brown be-studded orchids which were meant For
Cytheraea's brows are hidden here Unknown to Cytheraea, and by
yonder pasturing steer There is a tiny yellow daffodil, The
butterfly can see it from afar, Although one summer evening's dew
could fill Its little cup twice over ere the star Had called the lazy
shepherd to his fold And be no prodigal, each leaf is flecked with
spotted gold As if Jove's gorgeous leman Danae Hot from his
gilded arms had stooped to kiss The trembling petals, or young

Mercury Low-flying to the dusky ford of Dis Had with one feather
of his pinions Just brushed them!- the slight stem which bears the
burdens of its suns Is hardly thicker than the gossamer, Or poor
Arachne's silver tapestry, Men say it bloomed upon the sepulchre
Of One I sometime worshipped, but to me It seems to bring diviner
memories Of faun-loved Heliconian glades and blue nymph-
haunted seas, Of an untrodden vale at Tempe where On the clear
river's marge Narcissus lies, The tangle of the forest in his hair, The
silence of the woodland in his eyes, Wooing that drifting imagery
which is No sooner kissed than broken, memories of Salmacis.

Who is not boy or girl and yet is both, Fed by two fires and
unsatisfied Through their excess, each passion being loath For
love's own sake to leave the other's side, Yet killing love by
staying, memories Of Oreads peeping through the leaves of silent
moonlit trees.

Of lonely Ariadne on the wharf At Naxos, when she saw the
treacherous crew Far out at sea, and waved her crimson scarf And
called the false Theseus back again nor knew That Dionysos on an
amber pard Was close behind her: memories of what Maeonia's
bard With sightless eyes beheld, the wall of Troy, Queen Helen
lying in the carven room, And at her side an amorous red-lipped
boy Trimming with dainty hand his helmet's plume, And far away
the moil, the shout, the groan, As Hector shielded off the spear and
Ajax hurled the stone; Of winged Perseus with his flawless sword
Cleaving the snaky tresses of the witch, And all those tales
imperishably stored In little Grecian urns, freightage more rich
Than any gaudy galleon of Spain Bare from the Indies ever! these
at least bring back again, For well I know they are not dead at all,
The ancient Gods of Grecian poesy, They are asleep, and when
they hear thee call Will wake and think 'tis very Thessaly, This
Thames the Daulian waters, this cool glade The yellow-irised mead
where once young Itys laughed and played.

If it was thou dear jasmine-cradled bird Who from the leafy
stillness of thy throne Sang to the wondrous boy, until he heard
The horn of Atalanta faintly blown Across the Cumnor hills, and
wandering Through Bagley wood at evening found the Attic poet's
spring, Ah! tiny sober-suited advocate That pleadest for the moon
against the day!

If thou didst make the shepherd seek his mate On that sweet
questing, when Proserpina Forgot it was not Sicily and leant
Across the mossy Sandford stile in ravished wonderment, Light-
winged and bright-eyed miracle of the wood!

If ever thou didst soothe with melody One of that little clan, that brotherhood Which loved the morning-star of Tuscany More than the perfect sun of Raphael, And is immortal, sing to me! for I too love thee well, Sing on! sing on! let the dull world grow young, Let elemental things take form again, And the old shapes of Beauty walk among The simple garths and open crofts, as when The son of Leto bare the willow rod, And the soft sheep and shaggy goats followed the boyish God.

Sing on! sing on! and Bacchus will be here Astride upon his gorgeous Indian throne, And over whimpering tigers shake the spear With yellow ivy crowned and gummy cone, While at his side the wanton Bassarid Will throw the lion by the mane and catch the mountain kid!

Sing on! and I will wear the leopard skin, And steal the mooned wings of Ashtaroth, Upon whose icy chariot we could win Cithaeron in an hour e'er the froth Has overbrimmed the wine-vat or the Faun Ceased from the treading! ay, before the flickering lamp of dawn Has scared the hooting owlet to its nest, And warned the bat to close its filmy vans, Some Maenad girl with vine-leaves on her breast Will filch their beechnuts from the sleeping Pans So softly that the little nested thrush Will never wake, and then with shrilly laugh and leap will rush Down the green valley where the fallen dew Lies thick beneath the elm and count her store, Till the brown Satyrs in a jolly crew Trample the loosestrife down along the shore, And where their horned master sits in state Bring strawberries and bloomy plums upon a wicker crate!

Sing on! and soon with passion-wearied face Through the cool leaves Apollo's lad will come, The Tyrian prince his bristled boar will chase A down the chestnut copses all a-bloom, And ivory-limbed, gray-eyed, with look of pride, After yon velvet-coated deer the virgin maid will ride.

Sing on! and I the dying boy will, see Stain with his purple blood the waxen bell That overweighs the jacinth, and to me The wretched Cyprian her woe will tell, And I will kiss her mouth and streaming eyes, And lead her to the myrtle-hidden grove where Adon lies!

Cry out aloud on Itys! memory That foster-brother of remorse and pain Drops poison in mine ear- O to be free, To burn one's old ships! and to launch again Into the white-plumed battle of the waves And fight old Proteus for the spoil of coral-flowered caves?

O for Medea with her popped spell!

O for the secret of the Colchian shrine!

O for one leaf of that pale asphodel Which binds the tired brows of
Proserpine, And sheds such wondrous dew at eve that she
Dreams of the fields of Enna, by the far Sicilian sea, Where oft the
golden-girdled bee she chased From lily to lily on the level mead,
Ere yet her sombre Lord had bid her taste The deadly fruit of that
pomegranate seed, Ere the black steeds had harried her away
Down to the faint and flowerless land, the sick and sunless day.

O for one midnight and as paramour The Venus of the little Melian
farm!

O that some antique statue for one hour Might wake to passion,
and that I could charm The Dawn at Florence from its dumb
despair, Mix with those mighty limbs and make that giant breast
my lair!

Sing on! sing on! I would be drunk with life, Drunk with the
trampled vintage of my youth, I would forget the wearying wasted
strife, The riven vale, the Gorgon eyes of Truth, The prayerless
vigil and the cry for prayer, The barren gifts, the lifted arms, the
dull insensate air!

Sing on! sing on! O feathered Niobe, Thou canst make sorrow
beautiful, and steal From joy its sweetest music, not as we Who by
dead voiceless silence strive to heal Our too untented wounds, and
do but keep Pain barricaded in our hearts, and murder pillowed
sleep.

Sing louder yet, why must I still behold The wan white face of that
deserted Christ, Whose bleeding hands my hands did once infold.

Whose smitten lips my lips so oft have kissed, And now in mute
and marble misery Sirs in His lone dishonored House and weeps,
perchance for me.

O memory cast down thy wreathed shell!

Break thy hoarse lute O sad Melpomene!

O sorrow, sorrow keep thy cloistered cell Nor dim with tears this
limpid Castaly!

Cease, cease, sad bird, thou dost the forest wrong To vex its sylvan
quiet with such wild impassioned song!

Cease, cease, or if 'tis anguish to be dumb Take from the pastoral
thrush her simpler air, Whose jocund carelessness doth more
become This English woodland than thy keen despair, Ah! cease
and let the north wind bear thy lay Back to the rocky hills of
Thrace, the stormy Daulian bay.

A moment more, the startled leaves had stirred, Endymion would have passed across the mead Moonstruck with love, and this still Thames had heard Pan splash and paddle groping for some reed To lure from her blue cave that Naiad maid Who for such piping listens half in joy and half afraid.

A moment more, the waking dove had cooed, The silver daughter of the silver sea With the fond gyves of clinging hands had wooed Her wanton from the chase, the Dryope Had thrust aside the branches of her oak To see the he lusty gold-haired lad rein in his snorting yoke.

A moment more, the trees had stooped to kiss Pale Daphne just awakening from the swoon Of tremulous laurels, lonely Salmacis Had bared his barren beauty to the moon, And through the vale with sad voluptuous smile Antinous had wandered, the red lotus of the Nile.

Down leaning the from his black and clustering hair To shade those slumberous eyelids' caverned bliss, Or else on yonder grassy slope with bare High-tuniced limbs unravished Artemis Had bade her hounds give tongue, and roused the deer From his green ambushade with shrill hallo and pricking spear.

Lie still, lie still, O passionate heart, lie still!

O Melancholy, fold thy raven wing!

O sobbing Dryad, from thy hollow hill Come not with such desponded answering!

No more thou winged Marsyas complain, Apollo loveth not to hear such troubled songs of pain!

It was a dream, the glade is tenantless, No soft Ionian laughter moves the air, The Thames creeps on in sluggish leadenness, And from the copse left desolate and bare Fled is young Bacchus with his revelry, Yet still from Nuneham wood there comes that thrilling melody So sad, that one might think a human heart Brake in each separate note, a quality Which music sometimes has, being the Art Which is most nigh to tears and memory, Poor mourning Philomel, what dost thou fear? Thy sister doth not haunt these fields, Pandion is not here, Here is no cruel Lord with murderous blade, No woven web of bloody heraldries, But mossy dells for roving comrades made, Warm valleys where the tired student lies With half-shut book, and many a winding walk Where rustic lovers stray at eve in happy simple talk.

The harmless rabbit gambols with its young Across the trampled towing-path, where late A troop of laughing boys in jostling throng Cheered with their noisy cries the racing eight; The gossamer, with

ravelled silver threads, Works at its little loom, and from the dusky
red-caved sheds Of the lone Farm a flickering light shines out
Where the swinked shepherd drives his bleating flock, Back to
their wattled sheep-cotes, a faint shout Comes from some Oxford
boat at Sandford lock, And starts the moor-hen from the sedgy rill,
And the dim lengthening shadows flit like swallows up the hill.

The heron passes homeward to the mere, The blue mist creeps
among the shivering trees, Gold world by world the silent stars
appear, And like a blossom blown before the breeze, A white moon
drifts across the shimmering sky, Mute arbitress of all thy sad, thy
rapturous threnody.

She does not heed thee, wherefore should she heed, She knows
Endymion is not far away, 'Tis I, 'tis I, whose soul is as the reed
Which has no message of its own to play, So pipes another's
bidding, it is I, Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery.

Ah! the brown bird has ceased: one exquisite trill About the
sombre woodland seems to cling, Dying in music, else the air is
still, So still that one might hear the bat's small wing Wander and
wheel above the pines, or tell Each tiny dewdrop dripping from
the, bluebell's brimming cell.

And far across the lengthening wold, Across the willowy flats and
thickets brown, Magdalen's tall tower tipped with tremulous gold
Marks the long High Street of the little town, And warns me to
return; I must not wait, Hark! 'tis the curfew booming from the bell
of Christ Church Gate.

THE END