

1878

RAVENNA

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. Ravenna (1878) -One of Wilde's earliest long poems, it won the coveted Oxford Newdigate Prize. It describes his responses to the ancient Italian city, Ravenna. Opening line:A year ago I breathed the Italian air, ...

RAVENNA

I A year ago I breathed the Italian air, And yet, methinks this northern Spring is fair, These fields made golden with the flower of March, The throstle singing on the fathered larch, The cawing rooks, the wood-doves fluttering by, The little clouds that race across the sky; And fair the violet's gentle drooping head, The primrose, pale for love uncomforted, The rose that burgeons on the climbing briar, The crocus-bed, (that seems a moon of fire Round-girdled with a purple marriage-ring); And all the flowers of our English Spring, Fond snow-drops, and the bright-starred daffodil.

Up starts the lark beside the murmuring mill, And breaks the gossamer-threads of early dew; And down the river, like a flame of blue, Keene as an arrow flies the water-king, While the brown linnets in the greenwood sing.

A year ago!- it seems a little time Since last I saw that lordly southern clime, Where flower and fruit to purple radiance blow, And like bright lamps the fabled apples grow.

Full Spring it was- and by rich flowing vines, Dark olive-groves and noble forest-pines, I rode at will; the moist glad air was sweet, The white road rang beneath my horse's feet, And musing on Ravenna's ancient name, I watched the day till, marked with wounds of flame, The turquoise sky to burnished gold was turned.

O how my heart with boyish passion burned, When far away across the sedge and mere I saw that Holy City rising clear, Crowned with her crown of towers!- On and on I galloped, racing with the setting sun, And ere the crimson after-glow was passed, I stood within Ravenna's walls at last!

II How strangely still! no sound of life or joy Startles the air! no laughing shepherd-boy Pipes on his reed, nor ever through the day Comes the glad sound of children at their play: O sad, and sweet, and silent! surely here A man might dwell apart from troublous fear, Watching the tide of seasons as they flow From amorous Spring to Winter's rain and snow, And have no thought of sorrow;- here, indeed, Are Lethe's waters, and that fatal weed Which makes a man forget his fatherland.

Ay! amid lotus-meadows dost thou stand, Like Proserpine, with poppy-laden head, Guarding the holy ashes of the dead.

For though thy brood of warrior sons hath ceased, Thy noble dead
are with thee!- they at least Are faithful to thine honour:- guard
them well, O childless city! for a mighty spell, To wake men's
hearts to dream of things sublime, Are the lone tombs where rest
the Great of Time.

III Yon lonely pillar, rising on the plain, Marks where the bravest
knight of France was slain, The Prince of chivalry, the Lord of war,
Gaston de Foix: for some untimely star Led him against thy city,
and he fell, As falls some forest-lion fighting well.

Taken from life while life and love were new, He lies beneath
God's seamless veil of blue; Tall lance-like reeds wave sadly o'er
his head, And oleanders bloom to deeper red, Where his bright
youth flowed crimson on the ground.

Look farther north unto that broken mound, There, prisoned now
within a lordly tomb Raised by a daughter's hand, in lonely gloom,
Huge-limbed Theodoric, the Gothic king, Sleeps after all his weary
conquering.

Time hath not spared his ruin,- wind and rain Have broken down
his stronghold; and again We see that Death is mighty lord of all,
And king and clown to ashen dust must fall.

Mighty indeed their glory! yet to me Barbaric king, or knight of
chivalry, Or the great queen herself, were poor and vain Beside
the grave where Dante rests from pain.

His gilded shrine lies open to the air; And cunning sculptor's
hands have carven there The calm white brow, as calm as earliest
morn, The eyes that flashed with passionate love and scorn, The
lips that sang of Heaven and of Hell, The almond-face which
Giotto drew so well, The weary face of Dante;- to this day, Here in
his place of resting, far away From Arno's yellow waters, rushing
down Through the wide bridges of that fairy town, Where the tall
tower of Giotto seems to rise A marble lily under sapphire skies!

Alas! my Dante! thou hast known the pain Of meaner lives,- the
exile's- galling chain, How steep the stairs within king's houses
are, And all the petty miseries which mar Man's nobler nature with
the sense of wrong.

Yet this dull world is grateful for thy song; Our nations do thee
homage,- even she, That cruel queen of vine-clad Tuscany, Who
bound with crown of thorns thy living brow, Hath decked thine
empty tomb with laurels now, And begs in vain the ashes of her
son.

O mightiest exile! all thy grief is done: Thy soul walks now beside thy Beatrice; Ravenna guards thine ashes: sleep in peace.

IV How lone this palace is; how grey the walls!

No minstrel now wakes echoes in these halls.

The broken chain lies rusting on the door, And noisome weeds have split the marble floor: Here lurks the snake, and here the lizards run By the stone lions blinking in the sun.

Byron dwelt here in love and revelry For two long years- a second Anthony, Who of world another Actium made! Yet suffered not his royal soul to fade, Or lyre to break, or lance to grow less keen, 'Neath any wiles of an Egyptian queen.

For from the East there came a mighty cry, And Greece stood up to fight for Liberty, And called him from Ravenna: never knight Rode forth more nobly to wild scenes of fight!

None fell more bravely on ensanguined field, Borne like a Spartan back upon his shield!

O Hellas! Hellas! in thine hour of pride, Thy day of might, remember him who died To wrest from off thy limbs the trammelling chain: O Salamis! O lone Plataean plain!

O tossing waves of wild Euboean sea!

O wind-swept heights of lone Thermopylae!

He loved you well- ay, not alone in word, Who freely gave to thee his lyre and sword Like Aeschylus at well-fought Marathon: And England, too, shall glory in her son, Her warrior-poet, first in song and fight.

No longer now, shall Slander's venom'd spite Crawl like a snake across his perfect name, Or mar the lordly scutcheon of his fame.

For as the olive-garland of the race Which lights with joy each eager runner's face, As the red cross which saveth men in war, As a flame-bearded beacon seen from far By mariners upon a storm-tossed sea, Such was his love for Greece and Liberty!

Byron, thy crowns are ever fresh and green: Red leaves of rose from Sapphic Mitylene Shall bind thy brows; the myrtle blooms for thee, In hidden glades by lonely Castaly; The laurels wait thy coming: all are thine, And round thy head one perfect wreath will twine.

V The pine-tops rocked before the evening breeze With the hoarse murmur of the wintry seas, And the tall stems were streaked with amber bright; I wandered through the wood in wild delight, Some startled bird, with fluttering wings and fleet, Made snow of all the

blossoms: at my feet, Like silver crowns, the pale narcissi lay, And small birds sang on every twining spray.

O waving trees, O forest liberty!

Within your haunts at least a man is free, And half forgets the weary world of strife: The blood flows hotter, and a sense of life Wakes i' the quickening veins, while once again The woods are filled with gods we fancied slain.

Long time I watched, and surely hoped to see Some goat-foot Pan make merry minstrelsy Amid the reed! some startled Dryad-maid In girlish flight! or lurking in the glade, The soft brown limbs, the wanton treacherous face Of woodland god! Queen Dian in the chase, White-limbed and terrible, with look of pride, And leash of boar-hounds leaping at her side!

Or Hylas mirrored in the perfect stream.

O idle heart! O fond Hellenic dream!

Ere long, with melancholy rise and swell, The evening chimes, the convent's vesper-bell Struck on mine ears amid the amorous flowers.

Alas! alas! these sweet and honied hours Had 'whelmed my heart like some encroaching sea, And drowned all thoughts of black Gethsemane.

VI O lone Ravenna! many a tale is told Of thy great glories in the days of old: Two thousand years have passed since thou didst see Caesar ride forth in royal victory.

Mighty thy name when Rome's lean eagles flew From Britain's isles to far Euphrates blue; And of the peoples thou wast noble queen, Till in thy streets the Goth and Hun were seen.

Discrowned by man, deserted by the sea, Thou sleepest, rocked in lonely misery!

No longer now upon thy swelling tide, Pine-forest like, thy myriad galleys ride!

For where the brass-beaked ships were wont to float, The weary shepherd pipes his mourning note; And the white sheep are free to come and go Where Adria's purple waters used to flow.

O fair! O sad! O Queen uncomforted!

In ruined loveliness thou liest dead, Alone of all thy sisters; for at last Italia's royal warrior hath passed Rome's lordliest entrance, and hath worn his crown In the high temples of the Eternal Town!

The Palatine hath welcomed back her king, And with his name the seven mountains ring!

And Naples hath outlived her dream of pain, And mocks her tyrant! Venice lives again, New risen from the waters! and the cry Of Light and Truth, of Love and Liberty, Is heard in lordly Genoa, and where The marble spires of Milan wound the air, Rings from the Alps to the Sicilian shore, And Dante's dream is now a dream no more.

But thou, Ravenna, better loved than all, Thy ruined palaces are but a pall That hides thy fallen greatness! and thy name Burns like a grey and flickering candle-flame, Beneath the noon-day splendour of the sun Of new Italia! for the night is done, The night of dark oppression, and the day Hath dawned in passionate splendour: far away The Austrian hounds are hunted from the land, Beyond those ice-crowned citadels which stand Girdling the plain of royal Lombardy, From the far West unto the Eastern sea.

I know, indeed, that sons of thine have died In Lissa's waters, by the mountain-side Of Aspromonte, on Novara's plain, Nor have thy children died for thee in vain: And yet, methinks, thou hast not drunk this wine From grapes new-crushed of Liberty divine, Thou hast not followed that immortal Star Which leads the people forth to deeds of war.

Weary of life, thou liest in silent sleep, As one who marks the lengthening shadows creep, Careless of all the hurrying hours that run, Mourning some day of glory, for the sun Of freedom hath not shown to thee his face, And thou hast caught no flambeau in the race.

Yet wake not from thy slumbers,- rest thee well, Amidst thy fields of amber asphodel, Thy lily-sprinkled meadows,- rest thee there, To mock all human greatness: who would dare To vent the paltry sorrows of his life Before thy ruins, or to praise the strife Of kings' ambition, and the barren pride Of warrior nations! wert not thou the Bride Of the wild Lord of Adria's stormy sea!

The Queen of double Empires! and to thee Were not the nations given as thy prey!

And now- thy gates lie open night and day, The grass grows green on every tower and hall, The ghastly fig hath cleft thy bastioned wall; And where thy mailed warriors stood at rest The midnight owl hath made her secret nest.

O fallen! fallen! from thy high estate, O city trammelled in the toils of Fate, Doth nought remain of all thy glorious days, But a dull shield, a crown of withered bays!

Yet who beneath this night of wars and fears, From tranquil tower can watch the coming years; Who can fortell what joys the day shall bring, Or why before the dawn the linnets sing? Thou, even thou, mayst wake, as wakes the rose To crimson splendour from its grave of snows; As the rich corn-fields rise to red and gold From these brown lands, now stiff with Winter's cold As from the storm-rack comes a perfect star!

O much-loved city! I have wandered far From the wave-circled islands of my home, Have seen the gloomy mystery of the Dome Rise slowly from the drear Campagna's way, Clothed in the royal purple of the day I from the city of the violet crown Have watched the sun by Corinth's hill go down, And marked the "myriad laughter" From the hills of flower-starred Arkady; Yet back to thee returns my perfect love, As to its forest-nest the evening dove.

O poet's city! one who scarce has seen Some twenty summers cast their doublets green, For Autumn's livery, would seek in vain To wake his lyre to sing a louder strain, Or tell thy days of glory;- poor indeed Is the low murmur of the shepherd's reed, Where the loud clarion's blast should shake the sky, And flame across the heavens! and to try Such lofty themes were folly: yet I know That never felt my heart yet nobler glow That when felt my the silence of thy street With clamorous trampling of my horse's feet, And saw the city which now I try to sing, After long days of weary travelling.

VII Adieu, Ravenna! but a year ago, I stood and watched the crimson sunset glow From the lone chapel on thy marshy plain: The sky was as a shield that caught the stain Of blood and battle from the dying sun, And in the west the circling clouds had spun A royal robe, which some great God might wear, While into ocean-seas of purple air Sank the gold galley of the Lord of Light.

Yet here the gentle stillness of the night Brings back the swelling tide of memory, And wakes again my passionate love for thee: Now is the Spring of Love, yet soon will come On meadow and tree the Summer's lordly bloom: And soon the grass with brighter flowers will blow, And send up lilies for some boy to mow.

Then before long the Summer's conqueror, Rich Autumn-time, the season's usurer, Will lend his hoarded gold to all the trees, And see

it scattered by the spend-thrift breeze; And after that the Winter
cold and drear.

So runs the perfect cycle of the year.

And so from youth to manhood do we go, And fall to weary days
and locks of snow.

Love only knows no winter; never dies: Nor cares for frowning
storms or leaden skies.

And mine for thee shall never pass away, Though my weak lips
may falter in my lay.

Adieu! Adieu! yon silent evening star, The night's ambassador,
doth gleam afar, And bid the shepherd bring his flocks to fold.

Perchance before our inland seas of gold Are garnered by, the
reapers into sheaves, Perchance before I see the Autumn leaves, I
may behold thy city; and lay down Low at thy feet the poet's laurel
crown.

Adieu! Adieu! yon silver lamp, the moon, Which turns our
midnight into perfect noon, Doth surely light thy towers, guarding
well Where Dante sleeps, where Byron loved to dwell.

THE END