

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

A READING OF
LIFE, WITH
OTHER POEMS

George Meredith

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A READING OF LIFE

THE VITAL CHOICE

I

Or shall we run with Artemis
Or yield the breast to Aphrodite?
Both are mighty;
Both give bliss;
Each can torture if divided;
Each claims worship undivided,
In her wake would have us wallow.

II

Youth must offer on bent knees
Homage unto one or other;
Earth, the mother,
This decrees;
And unto the pallid Scyther
Either points us shun we either
Shun or too devoutly follow.

WITH THE HUNTRESS

Through the water-eye of night,
Midway between eve and dawn,
See the chase, the rout, the flight
In deep forest; oread, faun,
Goat-foot, antlers laid on neck;
Ravenous all the line for speed.
See yon wavy sparkle beck
Sign of the Virgin Lady's lead.
Down her course a serpent star
Coils and shatters at her heels;
Peals the horn exulting, peals
Plaintive, is it near or far.
Huntress, arrowy to pursue,
In and out of woody glen,
Under cliffs that tear the blue,
Over torrent, over fen,
She and forest, where she skims
Feathery, darken and relume:
Those are her white-lightning limbs
Cleaving loads of leafy gloom.
Mountains hear her and call back,
Shrewd with night: a frosty wail
Distant: her the emerald vale
Folds, and wonders in her track.
Now her retinue is lean,
Many rearward; streams the chase
Eager forth of covert; seen
One hot tide the rapturous race.
Quiver-charged and crescent-crowned,
Up on a flash the lighted mound
Leaps she, bow to shoulder, shaft
Strung to barb with archer's craft,
Legs like plaited lyre-chords, feet
Songs to see, past pitch of sweet.
Fearful swiftness they outrun,
Shaggy wildness, grey or dun,
Challenge, charge of tusks elude:
Theirs the dance to tame the rude;
Beast, and beast in manhood tame,
Follow we their silver flame.
Pride of flesh from bondage free,
Reaping vigour of its waste,
Marks her servitors, and she
Sanctifies the unembraced.
Nought of perilous she reeks;

Valour clothes her open breast;
Sweet beyond the thrill of sex;
Hallowed by the sex confessed.
Huntress arrowy to pursue,
Colder she than sunless dew,
She, that breath of upper air;
Ay, but never lyrist sang,
Draught of Bacchus never sprang
Blood the bliss of Gods to share,
High o'er sweep of eagle wings,
Like the run with her, when rings
Clear her rally, and her dart,
In the forest's cavern heart,
Tells of her victorious aim.
Then is pause and chatter, cheer,
Laughter at some satyr lame,
Looks upon the fallen deer,
Measuring his noble crest;
Here a favourite in her train,
Foremost mid her nymphs, caressed;
All applauded. Shall she reign
Worshipped? O to be with her there!
She, that breath of nimble air,
Lifts the breast to giant power.
Maid and man, and man and maid,
Who each other would devour
Elsewhere, by the chase betrayed,
There are comrades, led by her,
Maid-preserver, man-maker.

WITH THE PERSUADER

Who murmurs, hither, hither: who
Where nought is audible so fills the ear?
Where nought is visible can make appear
A veil with eyes that waver through,
Like twilight's pledge of blessed night to come,
Or day most golden? All unseen and dumb,
She breathes, she moves, inviting flees,
Is lost, and leaves the thrilled desire
To clasp and strike a slackened lyre,
Till over smiles of hyacinth seas,
Flame in a crystal vessel sails
Beneath a dome of jewelled spray,
For land that drops the rosy day
On nights of throbbing nightingales.

Landward did the wonder flit,
Or heart's desire of her, all earth in it.
We saw the heavens fling down their rose;
On rapturous waves we saw her glide;
The pearly sea-shell half enclose;
The shoal of sea-nymphs flush the tide;
And we, afire to kiss her feet, no more
Behold than tracks along a startled shore,
With brightened edges of dark leaves that feign
An ambush hoped, as heartless night remain.

More closely, warmly: hither, hither! she,
The very she called forth by ripened blood
For its next breath of being, murmurs; she,
Allurement; she, fulfilment; she,
The stream within us urged to flood;
Man's cry, earth's answer, heaven's consent; O she,
Maid, woman and divinity;
Our over-earthly, inner-earthly mate
Unmated; she, our hunger and our fruit
Untasted; she our written fate
Unread; Life's flowering, Life's root:
Unread, divined; unseen, beheld;
The evanescent, ever-present she,
Great Nature's stern necessity
In radiance clothed, to softness quelled;
With a sword's edge of sweetness keen to take
Our breath for bliss, our hearts for fulness break.

The murmur hushes down, the veil is rent.

Man's cry, earth's answer, heaven's consent,
Her form is given to pardoned sight,
And lets our mortal eyes receive
The sovereign loveliness of celestial white;
Adored by them who solitarily pace,
In dusk of the underworld's perpetual eve,
The paths among the meadow asphodel,
Remembering. Never there her face
Is planetary; reddens to shore sea-shell
Around such whiteness the enamoured air
Of noon that clothes her, never there.
Daughter of light, the joyful light,
She stands unveiled to nuptial sight,
Sweet in her disregard of aid
Divine to conquer or persuade.
A fountain jets from moss; a flower
Bends gently where her sunset tresses shower.
By guerdon of her brilliance may be seen
With eyelids unabashed the passion's Queen.

Shorn of attendant Graces she can use
Her natural snares to make her will supreme.
A simple nymph it is, inclined to muse
Before the leader foot shall dip in stream:
One arm at curve along a rounded thigh;
Her firm new breasts each pointing its own way
A knee half bent to shade its fellow shy,
Where innocence, not nature, signals nay.
The bud of fresh virginity awaits
The wooer, and all roseate will she burst:
She touches on the hour of happy mates;
Still is she unaware she wakens thirst.

And while commanding blissful sight believe
It holds her as a body strained to breast,
Down on the underworld's perpetual eve
She plunges the possessor dispossessed;
And bids believe that image, heaving warm,
Is lost to float like torch-smoke after flame;
The phantom any breeze blows out of form;
A thirst's delusion, a defeated aim.

The rapture shed the torture weaves;
The direst blow on human heart she deals:
The pain to know the seen deceives;
Nought true but what insufferably feels.
And stabs of her delicious note,
That is as heavenly light to hearing, heard
Through shelter leaves, the laughter from her throat,

We answer as the midnight's morning's bird.

She laughs, she wakens gleeful cries;
In her delicious laughter part revealed;
Yet mother is she more of moans and sighs,
For longings unappeased and wounds unhealed.
Yet would she bless, it is her task to bless:
Yon folded couples, passing under shade,
Are her rich harvest; bidden caress, caress,
Consume the fruit in bloom; not disobeyed.
We dolorous complainers had a dream,
Wrought on the vacant air from inner fire,
We saw stand bare of her celestial beam
The glorious Goddess, and we dared desire.

Thereat are shown reproachful eyes, and lips
Of upward curl to meanings half obscure;
And glancing where a wood-nymph lightly skips
She nods: at once that creature wears her lure.
Blush of our being between birth and death:
Sob of our ripened blood for its next breath:
Her wily semblance nought of her denies;
Seems it the Goddess runs, the Goddess hies,
The generous Goddess yields. And she can arm
Her dwarfed and twisted with her secret charm;
Benevolent as Earth to feed her own.
Fully shall they be fed, if they beseech.
But scorn she has for them that walk alone;
Blanched men, starved women, whom no arts can pleach.
The men as chief of criminals she disdains,
And holds the reason in perceptive thought.
More pitiable, like rivers lacking rains,
Kissing cold stones, the women shrink for drought.
Those faceless discords, out of nature strayed,
Rank of the putrefaction ere decayed,
In impious singles bear the thorny wreaths:
Their lives are where harmonious Pleasure breathes
For couples crowned with flowers that burn in dew.
Comes there a tremor of night's forest horn
Across her garden from the insaner crew,
She darkens to malignity of scorn.
A shiver courses through her garden-grounds:
Grunt of the tusky boar, the baying hounds,
The hunter's shouts, are heard afar, and bring
Dead on her heart her crimsoned flower of Spring.
These, the irreverent of Life's design,
Division between natural and divine
Would cast; these vaunting barrenness for best,
In veins of gathered strength Life's tide arrest;

And these because the roses flood their cheeks,
Vow them in nature wise as when Love speaks.
With them is war; and well the Goddess knows
What undermines the race who mount the rose;
How the ripe moment, lodged in slumberous hours,
Enkindled by persuasion overpowers:
Why weak as are her frailer trailing weeds,
The strong when Beauty gleams o'er Nature's needs,
And timely guile unguarded finds them lie.
They who her sway withstand a sea defy,
At every point of juncture must be proof;
Nor look for mercy from the incessant surge
Her forces mixed of craft and passion urge
For the one whelming wave to spring aloof.
She, tenderness, is pitiless to them
Resisting in her godhead nature's truth.
No flower their face shall be, but writhen stem;
Their youth a frost, their age the dirge for youth.
These miserably disinclined,
The lamentably unembraced,
Insult the Pleasures Earth designed
To people and beflower the waste.
Wherefore the Pleasures pass them by:
For death they live, in life they die.

Her head the Goddess from them turns,
As from grey mounds of ashes in bronze urns.
She views her quivering couples unconsolated,
And of her beauty mirror they become,
Like orchard blossoms, apple, pear and plum,
Free of the cloud, beneath the flood of gold.
Crowned with wreaths that burn in dew,
Her couples whirl, sun-satiated,
Athirst for shade, they sigh, they wed,
They play the music made of two:
Oldest of earth, earth's youngest till earth's end:
Cunniger than the numbered strings,
For melodies, for harmonies,
For mastered discords, and the things
Not vocable, whose mysteries
Are inmost Love's, Life's reach of Life extend.

Is it an anguish overflowing shame
And the tongue's pudency confides to her,
With eyes of embers, breath of incense myrrh,
The woman's marrow in some dear youth's name,
Then is the Goddess tenderness
Maternal, and she has a sister's tones
Benign to soothe intemperate distress,

Divide despair from hope, and sighs from moans.
Her gentleness imparts exhaling ease
To those of her milk-bearer votaries
As warm of bosom-earth as she; of the source
Direct; erratic but in heart's excess;
Being mortal and ill-matched for Love's great force;
Like green leaves caught with flames by his impress.
And pray they under skies less overcast,
That swiftly may her star of eve descend,
Her lustrous morning star fly not too fast,
To lengthen blissful night will she befriend.

Unfailing her reply to woman's voice
In supplication instant. Is it man's,
She hears, approves his words, her garden scans,
And him: the flowers are various, he has choice.
Perchance his wound is deep; she listens long;
Enjoys what music fills the plaintive song;
And marks how he, who would be hawk at poise
Above the bird, his plaintive song enjoys.

She reads him when his humbled manhood weeps
To her invoked: distraction is implored.
A smile, and he is up on godlike leaps
Above, with his bright Goddess owned the adored.
His tales of her declare she condescends;
Can share his fires, not always goads and rends:
Moreover, quits a throne, and must enclose
A queenlier gem than woman's wayside rose.
She bends, he quickens; she breathes low, he springs
Enraptured; low she laughs, his woes disperse;
Aloud she laughs and sweeps his varied strings.
'Tis taught him how for touch of mournful verse
Rarely the music made of two ascends,
And Beauty's Queen some other way is won.
Or it may solve the riddle, that she lends
Herself to all, and yields herself to none,
Save heavenliest: though claims by men are raised
In hot assurance under shade of doubt:
And numerous are the images bepraised
As Beauty's Queen, should passion head the rout.

Be sure the ruddy hue is Love's: to woo
Love's Fountain we must mount the ruddy hue.
That is her garden's precept, seen where shines
Her blood-flower, and its unsought neighbour pines.
Daughter of light, the joyful light,
She bids her couples face full East,
Reflecting radiance, even when from her feast

Their outstretched arms brown deserts disunite,
The lion-haunted thickets hold apart.
In love the ruddy hue declares great heart;
High confidence in her whose aid is lent
To lovers lifting the tuned instrument,
Not one of rippled strings and funeral tone.
And doth the man pursue a tightened zone,
Then be it as the Laurel God he runs,
Confirmed to win, with countenance the Sun's.

Should pity bless the tremulous voice of woe
He lifts for pity, limp his offspring show.
For him requiring woman's arts to please
Infantile tastes with babe reluctances,
No race of giants! In the woman's veins
Persuasion ripely runs, through hers the pains.
Her choice of him, should kind occasion nod,
Aspiring blends the Titan with the God;
Yet unto dwarf and mortal, she, submits
In her high Lady's mandate, yields the kiss;
And is it needed that Love's daintier brute
Be snared as hunter, she will tempt pursuit.
She is great Nature's ever intimate
In breast, and doth as ready handmaid wait,
Until perverted by her senseless male,
She plays the winding snake, the shrinking snail,
The flying deer, all tricks of evil fame,
Elusive to allure, since he grew tame.

Hence has the Goddess, Nature's earliest Power,
And greatest and most present, with her dower
Of the transcendent beauty, gained repute
For meditated guile. She laughs to hear
A charge her garden's labyrinths scarce confute,
Her garden's histories tell of to all near.
Let it be said, But less upon her guile
Doth she rely for her immortal smile.
Still let the rumour spread, and terror screens
To push her conquests by the simplest means.
While man abjures not lustihead, nor swerves
From earth's good labours, Beauty's Queen he serves.

Her spacious garden and her garden's grant
She offers in reward for handsome cheer:
Choice of the nymphs whose looks will slant
The secret down a dewy leer
Of corner eyelids into haze:
Many a fair Aphrosyne
Like flower-bell to honey-bee:

And here they flicker round the maze
Bewildering him in heart and head:
And here they wear the close demure,
With subtle peeps to reassure:
Others parade where love has bled,
And of its crimson weave their mesh:
Others to snap of fingers leap,
As bearing breast with love asleep.
These are her laughters in the flesh.
Or would she fit a warrior mood,
She lights her seeming unsubdued,
And indicates the fortress-key.
Or is it heart for heart that craves,
She flecks along a run of waves
The one to promise deeper sea.

Bands of her limpid primitives,
Or patterned in the curious braid,
Are the blest man's; and whatsoever he gives,
For what he gives is he repaid.
Good is it if by him 'tis held
He wins the fairest ever welled
From Nature's founts: she whispers it: Even I
Not fairer! and forbids him to deny,
Else little is he lover. Those he clasps,
Intent as tempest, worshipful as prayer,—
And be they doves or be they asps,—
Must seem to him the sovereignty fair;
Else counts he soon among life's wholly tamed.
Him whom from utter savage she reclaimed,
Half savage must he stay, would he be crowned
The lover. Else, past ripeness, deathward bound,
He reasons; and the totterer Earth detests,
Love shuns, grim logic screws in grasp, is he.
Doth man divide divine Necessity
From Joy, between the Queen of Beauty's breasts
A sword is driven; for those most glorious twain
Present her; armed to bless and to constrain.
Of this he perishes; not she, the throned
On rocks that spout their springs to the sacred mounts.
A loftier Reason out of deeper founts
Earth's chosen Goddess bears: by none disowned
While red blood runs to swell the pulse, she boasts,
And Beauty, like her star, descends the sky;
Earth's answer, heaven's consent unto man's cry,
Uplifted by the innumerable hosts.

Quickened of Nature's eye and ear,
When the wild sap at high tide smites

Within us; or benignly clear
To vision; or as the iris lights
On fluctuant waters; she is ours
Till set of man: the dreamed, the seen;
Flushing the world with odorous flowers:
A soft compulsion on terrene
By heavenly: and the world is hers
While hunger after Beauty spurs.

So is it sung in any space
She fills, with laugh at shallow laws
Forbidding love's devised embrace,
The music Beauty from it draws.

THE TEST OF MANHOOD

Like a flood river whirled at rocky banks,
An army issues out of wilderness,
With battle plucking round its ragged flanks;
Obstruction in the van; insane excess
Oft at the heart; yet hard the onward stress
Unto more spacious, where move ordered ranks,
And rise hushed temples built of shapely stone,
The work of hands not pledged to grind or slay.
They gave our earth a dress of flesh on bone;
A tongue to speak with answering heaven gave they.
Then was the gracious birth of man's new day;
Divided from the haunted night it shone.

That quiet dawn was Reverence; whereof sprang
Ethereal Beauty in full morningtide.
Another sun had risen to clasp his bride:
It was another earth unto him sang.

Came Reverence from the Huntress on her heights?
From the Persuader came it, in those vales
Whereunto she melodiously invites,
Her troops of eager servitors regales?
Not far those two great Powers of Nature speed
Disciple steps on earth when sole they lead;
Nor either points for us the way of flame.
From him predestined mightier it came;
His task to hold them both in breast, and yield
Their dues to each, and of their war be field.

The foes that in repulsion never ceased,
Must he, who once has been the goodly beast
Of one or other, at whose beck he ran,
Constrain to make him serviceable man;
Offending neither, nor the natural claim
Each pressed, denying, for his true man's name.

Ah, what a sweat of anguish in that strife
To hold them fast conjoined within him still;
Submissive to his will
Along the road of life!
And marvel not he wavered if at whiles
The forward step met frowns, the backward smiles.
For Pleasure witched him her sweet cup to drain;
Repentance offered ecstasy in pain.
Delicious licence called it Nature's cry;

Ascetic rigours crushed the fleshly sigh;
A tread on shingle timed his lame advance
Flung as the die of Bacchanalian Chance,
He of the troubled marching army leaned
On godhead visible, on godhead screened;
The radiant roseate, the curtained white;
Yet sharp his battle strained through day, through night.

He drank of fictions, till celestial aid
Might seem accorded when he fawned and prayed;
Sagely the generous Giver circumspect,
To choose for grants the egregious, his elect;

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