

The Penguin Book of the Sonnet

500 YEARS OF A CLASSIC TRADITION IN ENGLISH



EDITED BY

Phillis Levin



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❖ FRANCESCO PETRARCA ❖

from Canzoniere

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*S' amor non è, che dunque è quel ch' io sento?
ma s' egli è amor, per Dio, che cosa et quale?
se bona, ond' è l'effetto aspro mortale?
se ria, ond' è sì dolce ogni tormento?*

*S' a mia voglia ardo, ond' è 'l pianto e lamento?
s' a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?
O viva morte, o diletto male,
come puoi tanto in me s' io nol consento?*

*Et s' io 'l consento, a gran torto mi doglio.
Fra sì contrari venti in frale barca
mi trovo in alto mar senza governo,*

*sì lieve di saver, d' error sì carca
ch' i' medesimo non so quel ch' io mi voglio,
e tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.*

❖ SIR THOMAS WYATT ❖

"The longe love, that in my thought doeth harbar"

The longe love, that in my thought doeth harbar
And in myn hert doeth kepe his residence
Into my face preseth with bold pretence,
And therin campeth, spreding his baner.
She that me lerneth to love and suffre
And will that my trust, and lustes negligence
Be reinèd by reason, shame, and reverence
With his hardines taketh displeasure.
Wherewithall, unto the hertes forrest he fleith,
Leving his entreprise with payne and cry
And there him hideth and not appereth.
What may I do when my maister fereth,
But, in the felde, with him to lyve and dye?
For goode is the liff, ending faithfully.

[after the Italian of Petrarch]

"Who so list to hounte I know where is an hynde"

Who so list to hounte I know where is an hynde;
But as for me, helas, I may no more:
The vayne travaill hath weried me so sore,
I ame of them that farthest cometh behinde;
Yet may I by no meanes my weried mynde
Drawe from the Diere: but as she fleeth afore
Faynting I folowe; I leve off therefore,
Sithens in a nett I seke to hold the wynde.
Who list her hount I put him owte of dowbte,
As well as I may spend his tyme in vain:
And graven with Diamondes in letters plain
There is written her faier neck rounde abowte:
'Noli me tangere for Cesars I ame,
And wylde for to hold though I seme tame.'

[after the Italian of Petrarch]

"I find no peace, and all my war is done"

I find no peace, and all my war is done,
I fear, and hope. I burn, and freeze like ice.
I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise.
And naught I have, and all the world I season.
That loseth nor locketh holdeth me in prison,
And holdeth me not, yet can I 'scape nowise:
Nor letteth me live nor die at my devise,
And yet of death it giveth me occasion.
Without eyen I see, and without tongue I 'plain;
I desire to perish, and yet I ask health;
I love another, and thus I hate myself;
I feed me in sorrow, and laugh at all my pain.
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,
And my delight is causer of this strife.

[after the Italian of Petrarch]

❖ HENRY HOWARD, EARL OF SURREY ❖

"The soote season, that bud and blome furth bringes"

The soote season, that bud and blome furth bringes,
With grene hath clad the hill and eke the vale;
The nightingale with fethers new she singes;
The turtle to her make hath tolde her tale.
Somer is come, for every spray nowe springes;
The hart hath hong his olde hed on the pale;
The buck in brake his winter cote he flinges;
The fishes flote with newe repaired scale;
The adder all her sloughe awaye she slinges;
The swift swallow pursueth the flyes smale;
The busy bee her honye now she minges;
Winter is worne that was the flowers bale.
And thus I see among these pleasant thinges
Eche care decayes, and yet my sorow springes.

[after the Italian of Petrarch]

FEELINGS OF A REPUBLICAN ON THE FALL OF BONAPARTE

I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan
To think that a most unambitious slave,
Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave
Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy throne
Where it had stood even now: thou didst prefer
A frail and bloody pomp which Time has swept
In fragments towards Oblivion. Massacre,
For this I prayed, would on thy sleep have crept,
Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear, and Lust,
And stifled thee, their minister. I know
Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,
That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,
And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time.

Percy Bysshe Shelley OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

John Donne, Holy Sonnet 14

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Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy,
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthal me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

18

Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear.
What, is it she, which on the other shore
Goes richly painted? or which robbed and tore
Laments and mourns in Germany and here?
Sleeps she a thousand, then peeps up one year?
Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore?
Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
On one, on seven, or on no hill appear?
Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights
First travail we to seek and then make love?
Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,
Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then
When she's embraced and open to most men.

❖ JAMES WELDON JOHNSON ❖

MOTHER NIGHT

Eternities before the first-born day,
Or ere the first sun fledged his wings of flame,
Calm Night, the everlasting and the same,
A brooding mother over chaos lay.
And whirling suns shall blaze and then decay,
Shall run their fiery courses and then claim
The haven of the darkness whence they came;
Back to Nirvanic peace shall grope their way.

So when my feeble sun of life burns out,
And sounded is the hour for my long sleep,
I shall, full weary of the feverish light,
Welcome the darkness without fear or doubt,
And heavy-lidded, I shall softly creep
Into the quiet bosom of the Night.

❖ PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR ❖

ROBERT GOULD SHAW

Why was it that the thunder voice of Fate
Should call thee, studious, from the classic groves,
Where calm-eyed Pallas with still footsteps roves,
And charge thee seek the turmoil of the State?
What bade thee hear the voice and rise elate,
Leave home and kindred and thy spicy loaves,
To lead th' unlettered and despised droves
To manhood's home and thunder at the gate?

Far better the slow blaze of Learning's light,
The cool and quiet of her dearer fane,
Than this hot terror of a hopeless fight,
This cold endurance of the final pain,—
Since thou and those who with thee died for right
Have died, the Present teaches, but in vain!

Paul Laurence Dunbar DOUGLASS

Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days,
Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,
And all the country heard thee with amaze.
Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,
The awful tide that battled to and fro;
We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,
And Honor, the strong pilot, lieth stark,
Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,
For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,
The blast-defying power of thy form,
To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

❖ AMY LOWELL ❖

TO JOHN KEATS

Great master! Boyish, sympathetic man!
Whose orb'd and ripened genius lightly hung
From life's slim, twisted tendril and there swung
In crimson-sphered completeness; guardian
Of crystal portals through whose openings fan
The spiced winds which blew when earth was young,
Scattering wreaths of stars, as Jove once flung
A golden shower from heights cerulean.
Crumbled before thy majesty we bow.
Forget thy empurpled state, thy panoply
Of greatness, and be merciful and near;
A youth who trudged the highroad we tread now
Singing the miles behind him; so may we
Faint throbbings of thy music overhear.

Claude McKay AMERICA

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

❖ ARCHIBALD MACLEISH ❖

THE END OF THE WORLD

Quite unexpectedly as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
In waltz time swinging Jocko by the thumb—
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the canceled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.

❖ ROBERT HAYDEN ❖

THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices.

❖ FREDERICK DOUGLASS ❖

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

❖ GWENDOLYN BROOKS ❖

from *The Children of the Poor*

I

People who have no children can be hard:
Attain a mail of ice and insolence:
Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
Hesitate in the hurricane to guard.
And when wide world is bitten and bewarred
They perish purely, waving their spirits hence
Without a trace of grace or of offense
To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-starred.
While through a throttling dark we others hear
The little lifting helplessness, the queer
Whimper-whine; whose unridiculous
Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.
And makes a curse. And makes a sugar of
The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.

4

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

FINAL NOTATIONS

it will not be simple, it will not be long
it will take little time, it will take all your thought
it will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
it will be short, it will not be simple

it will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
it will not be long, it will occupy your thought
as a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
it will take all your flesh, it will not be simple

You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
you are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
you are taking parts of us into places never planned
you are going far away with pieces of our lives

it will be short, it will take all your breath
it will not be simple, it will become your will

❖ DEREK WALCOTT ❖

HOMAGE TO EDWARD THOMAS

Formal, informal, by a country's cast
topography delineates its verse,
erects the classic bulk, for rigid contrast
of sonnet, rectory or this manor house
dourly timbered against these sinuous
Downs, defines the formal and informal prose
of Edward Thomas's poems, which make this garden
return its subtle scent of Edward Thomas
in everything here hedged or loosely grown.
Lines which you once dismissed as tenuous
because they would not howl or overwhelm,
as crookedly grave-bent, or cuckoo-dreaming,
seeming dissoluble as this Sussex down
harden in their indifference, like this elm.

Marilyn Hacker

I woke up, and the surgeon said, "You're cured."
Strapped to the gurney, in the cotton gown
and pants I was wearing when they slid me down
onto the table, made new straps secure
while I stared at the hydra-headed O.R.
lamp, I took in the tall, confident, brown-
skinned man, and the ache I couldn't quite call pain
from where my right breast wasn't anymore
to my armpit. A not-yet-talking head,
I bit dry lips. What else could he have said?
And then my love was there in a hospital coat;
then my old love, still young and very scared.
Then I, alone, graphed clock hands' asymptote
to noon, when I would be wheeled back upstairs.

The odd and even numbers of the street
I live on are four thousand miles away
from an Ohio February day
snow-blanketed, roads iced over, with sleet
expected later, where I'm incomplete
as my abbreviated chest. I weigh
less—one breast less—since the Paris-gray
December evening, when a neighbor's feet
coming up ancient stairs, the feet I counted
on paper were the company I craved.
My calm right breast seethed with a grasping tumor.
The certainty of my returns amounted
to nothing. After terror, being brave
became another form of gallows humor.

❖ DANIEL GUTSTEIN ❖

WHAT CAN DISAPPEAR

"The very structure of it," said Warren, "the very idea. Now, think. Rhyme—yes. Meter—yes. The number of lines—yes, yes, yes,—"
he said, as I got it, it seemed, an eight and a six, an eight and two less, the sestet as an octave minus two. We smiled a moment, then drank down our drafts, and more, and more after those. The dull clinks our glasses left on the table, in toast, until we slurred—"less and loss, lesson lost." We gave up laughing. Warren went to pay, then to piss. Then I thought: two lines gone—the genius of the sonnet—in a blink.

We would never meet again. I would sit at our table and conjure the very structure of it, the very idea. Meter—yes, yes, and rhyme. The sestet as an octave minus two—or, *what can disappear*. I mull the table's quiet grain, my draft (a couple sips short), and I figure how the loss of a person grows beyond form, magnitude, and time. How there used to be two glasses rising and falling. Now, the lull—

❖ BETH ANN FENNELLY ❖

POEM NOT TO BE READ AT YOUR WEDDING

You ask me for a poem about love
in place of a wedding present, trying to save me
money. For three nights I've lain under
glow-in-the-dark stars I've stuck to the ceiling
over my bed. I've listened to the songs
of the galaxy. Well, Carmen, I would rather
give you your third set of steak knives
than tell you what I know. Let me find you
some other store-bought present. Don't
make me warn you of stars, how they see us
from that distance as miniature and breakable,
from the bride who tops the wedding cake
to the Mary on Pinto dashboards
holding her ripe red heart in her hands.