

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

a selection of religious poems

“The Soul’s Expression” (1844)

With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature, day and night
With dream and thought and feeling interwound,
And inly answering all the senses round 5
With octaves of a mystic depth and height
Which step out grandly to the infinite
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.
This song of soul I struggle to outbear
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole, 10
And utter all myself into the air:
But if I did it, -- was the thunder roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.

“The Seraph and Poet” (1844)

The seraph sings before the manifest
God-One, and in the burning of the Seven,
And with the full life of consummate Heaven
Heaving beneath him like a mother’s breast
Warm with her first-born’s slumber in that nest. 5
The poet sings upon the earth grave-riven,
Before the naughty world, soon self-forgiven
For wronging him, -- and in the darkness prest
From his own soul by worldly weights. Even so,
Sing, seraph with the glory ! heaven is high; 10
Sing, poet with the sorrow ! earth is low:
The universe’s inward voices cry
‘Amen’ to either song of joy and woe:
Sing, seraph, -- poet, -- sing on equally!

“Grief” (1844)

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the mid-night air
Beat upward to God’s throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness, 5
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death –
Most like a monumental statue set 10
In everlasting watch and moveless woe
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

“The Look” (1844)

The Saviour looked on Peter. Ay, no word,
No gesture of reproach; the Heavens serene
Though heavy with armed justice, did not lean
Their thunders that way: the forsaken Lord
Looked only, on the traitor. None record 5
What that look was, none guess; for those who have seen
Wronged lovers loving through a death-pang keen,
Or pale-cheeked martyrs smiling to a sword,
Have missed Jehovah at the judgment-call.
And Peter, from the height of blasphemy – 10
‘I never knew this man’ – did quail and fall
As knowing straight THAT God; and turned free
And went out speechless from the face of all,
And filled the silence, weeping bitterly.

“Cheerfulness Taught by Reason” (1844)

I think we are too ready with complaint
In this fair world of God's. Had we no hope
Indeed beyond the zenith and the slope
Of yon gray blank of sky, we might grow faint
To muse upon eternity's constraint 5
Round our aspirant souls; but since the scope
Must widen early, is it well to droop,
For a few days consumed in loss and taint?
O pusillanimous Heart, be comforted
And, like a cheerful traveler, take the road, 10
Singing beside the hedge. What if the bread
Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod
To meet the flints? At least it may be said
'Because the way is *short*, I thank thee, God.'

“Exaggeration” (1844)

We overstate the ills of life, and take
Imagination (given us to bring down
The choirs of singing angels overshadowed
By God's clear glory) down our earth to rake
The dismal snows instead, flake following flake, 5
To cover all the corn; we walk upon
The shadow of hills across a level thrown,
And pant like climbers: near the alder brake
We sigh so loud, the nightingale within
Refuses to sing loud, as else she would. 10
O brothers, let us leave the shame and sin
Of taking vainly, in a plaintive mood,
The holy name of GRIEF ! -- holy herein,
That by the grief of One came all our good.

“The Prisoner” (1844)

I count the dismal time by months and years
Since last I felt the green sward under foot,
And the great breath of all things summer-mute
Met mine upon my lips. Now earth appears
As strange to me as dreams of distant spheres
Or thoughts of Heaven we weep at. Nature’s lute
Sounds on, behind this door so closely shut,
A strange wild music to the prisoner’s ears,
Dilated by the distance, till the brain
Grows dim with fancies which it feels too fine:
While ever, with a visionary pain,
Past the precluded senses, sweep and shine
Streams, forests, glades, and many a golden train
Of sunlit hills transfigured to Divine.

“Insufficiency” (1844)

When I attain to utter forth in verse
Some inward thought, my soul throbs audibly
Along my pulses, yearning to be free
And something farther, fuller, higher, rehearse,
To the individual, true, and the universe,
In consummation of right harmony:
But, like a wind-exposed distorted tree,
We are blown against for ever by the curse
Which breathes through Nature. Oh, the world is weak!
The effluence of each is false to all,
And what we best conceive we fail to speak.
Wait, soul, until thine ashen garments fall,
And then resume thy broken strains, and seek
Fit peroration without let or thrall.