

Soles occidere et redire possunt, Aldous Huxley

SOLES OCCIDERE ET REDIRE POSSUNT

FOREWORD

JOHN RIDLEY, the subject of this poem, was killed in February 1918. "If I should perish," he wrote to me only five weeks before his death, "if I should perish—and one isn't exactly a 'good life' at the moment—I wish you'd write something about me. It isn't vanity (for I know you'll do me, if anything, rather less than justice!), not vanity, I repeat; but that queer irrational desire one has for immortality of any kind, however short and precarious—for frankly, my dear, I doubt whether your verses will be so very much more perennial than brass. Still, they'll be something. One can't, of course, believe in any au-delà for one's personal self; one would have first to believe in some kind of a friendly god. And as for being a spiritualist spook, one of those wretched beings who seem to spend their eternity in trying to communicate with the earth by a single telephone, where the number is always engaged, and the line chronically out of order—well, all I can say is, Heaven preserve me from such a future life. No, my only hope is you—and a damned poor guarantee for eternity. Don't make of me a khaki image, I beg. I'd rather you simply said of me, as Erasmus did of his brother, 'Strenuus compotor, nec scortator ignavus.' I sincerely hope, of course, that you won't have to write the thing at all—hope not, but have very little doubt you will. Good-bye."

The following poem is a tentative and provisional attempt to comply with his request. Ridley was an adolescent, and suffered from that instability of mind "produced by the mental conflict forced upon man by his sensitiveness to herd suggestion on the one hand and to experience on the other" (I quote from Mr. Trotter's memorable work on Herd Instinct), that characteristic instability which makes adolescence so feebly sceptical, so inefficient, so profoundly unhappy. I have fished up a single day from Ridley's forgotten existence. It has a bedraggled air in the sunlight, this poor wisp of Lethean weed. Fortunately, however, it will soon be allowed to drop back into the water, where we shall all, in due course, join it. "The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been."

I

BETWEEN the drawing of the blind

And being aware of yet another day

There came to him behind

Close, pregnant eyelids, like a flame of blue,

Intense, untroubled by the wind,

A Mediterranean bay,

Bearing a brazen beak and foamless oars

To where, marmoreally smooth and bright,

The steps soar up in one pure flight

From the sea's edge to the palace doors,  
That have shut, have shut their valves of bronze—  
And the windows too are lifeless eyes.  
The galley grated on the stone;  
He stepped out—and was alone:  
No white-sailed hopes, no clouds, nor swans  
To shatter the ocean's calm, to break the sky's.  
Up the slow stairs:  
Did he know it was a dream?  
First one foot up, then the other foot,  
Shuddering like a mandrake root  
That hears the truffle-dog at work  
And draws a breath to scream;  
To moan, to scream.  
The gates swing wide,  
And it is coolly dark inside,  
And corridors stretch out and out,  
Joining the ceilings to their floors,  
And parallels ring wedding bells  
And through a hundred thousand doors  
Perspective has abolished doubt.  
But one of the doors was shut,  
And behind it the subtlest lutanist  
Was shaking a broken necklace of tinkling notes,  
And somehow it was feminine music.  
Strange exultant fear of desire, when hearts  
Beat brokenly. He laid his hand on the latch—  
And woke among his familiar books and pictures;  
Real as his dream? He wondered. Ten to nine.  
Thursday. Wasn't he lunching at his aunt's?

Distressing circumstance.

But then he was taking Jenny out to dine,

Which was some consolation. What a chin!

Civilized ten thousand years, and still

No better way than rasping a pale mask

With imminent suicide, steel or obsidian:

Repulsive task!

And the more odious for being quotidian.

If one should live till eighty-five . . .

And the dead, do they still shave? The horrible dead, are they alive?

But that lute, playing across his dream . . .

Quick drops breaking the sleep of the water-wheel,

Song and ebbing whisper of a summer stream,

Music's endless inconsequence that would reveal

To souls that listened for it, the all

Unseizable confidence, the mystic Rose,

Could it but find the magical fall

That droops, droops and dies into the perfect close . . .

And why so feminine? But one could feel

The unseen woman sitting there behind

The door, making her ceaseless slow appeal

To all that prowls and growls in the caves beneath

The libraries and parlours of the mind.

If only one were rational, if only

At least one had the illusion of being so . . .

Nine o'clock. Still in bed. Warm, but how lonely!

He wept to think of all those single beds,

Those desperate night-long solitudes,

Those mental Salons full of nudes.

Shelley was great when he was twenty-four.

Eight thousand nights alone—minus, perhaps,  
Six, or no! seven, certainly not more.

Five little bits of heaven

(Tum-de-rum, de-rum, de-rum),

Five little bits of Heaven and one that was a lapse,

High-priced disgust: it stopped him suddenly

In the midst of laughter and talk with a tingling down the

(Like infants' impoliteness, a terrible infant's brightness),

And he would shut his eyes so as not to see

His own hot blushes calling him a swine.

Atrocious memory! For memory should be

Of things secure and dead, being past,

Not living and disquieting. At last

He threw the nightmare of his blankets off.

Cloudy ammonia, camels in your bath:

The earth hath bubbles as the water hath:

He was not of them, too, too solidly

Always himself. What foam of kissing lips,

Pouting, parting with the ghost of the seven sips

One smacks for hiccoughs!

Pitiable to be

Quite so deplorably naked when one strips.

There was his scar, a panel of old rose

Slashed in the elegant buff of his trunk hose;

Adonis punctured by his amorous boar,

Permanent souvenir of the Great War.

One of God's jokes, typically good,

That wound of his. How perfect that he should

Have suffered it for—what?

OH, the dear front page of the Times!

Chronicle of essential history:

Marriage, birth, and the sly mysteriousness

Of lovers' greetings, of lovers' meetings,

And dirty death, impartially paid

To courage and the old decayed.

But nobody had been born to-day,

Nobody married that he knew,

Nobody died and nobody even killed;

He felt a little aggrieved—

Nobody even killed.

But, to make up: "Tuesday, Colchester train:

Wanted Brown Eyes' address, with a view to meeting again."

Dear Brown Eyes, it had been nice of her

To talk so friendly to a lonely traveller!

Why is it nobody ever talks to me?

And now, here was a letter from Helen.

Better to open it rather than thus

Dwell in a long muse and maze

Over the scrawled address and the postmark,

Staring stupidly.

Love—was there no escape?

Was it always there, always there?

The same huge and dominant shape,

Like Windsor Castle leaning over the plain;

And the letter a vista cut through the musing forest,

At the end the old Round Tower,

Singing its refrain:

Here we are, here we are, here we are again!

The life so short, so vast love's science and art,

So many conditions of felicity.

"Darling, will you become a part

Of my poor physiology?

And, my beloved, may I have

The latchkey of your history?

And while this corpse is what it is

Dear, we must share geographies."

So many conditions of felicity.

And now time was a widening gulf and space,

A fixed between, and fate still kept them apart.

Her voice quite gone; distance had blurred her face.

The life so short, so vast love's science and art.

So many conditions—and yet, once,

Four whole days,

Four short days of perishing time,

They had fulfilled them all.

But that was long ago, ah! long ago,

Like the last horse bus, or the Christmas pantomime,

Or the Bells, oh, the Bells, of Edgar Allan Poe.

III

"HELEN, your letter, proving, I suppose,

That you exist somewhere in space, who knows?

Somewhere in time, perhaps, arrives this morning,

Reminding me with a note of Lutheran warning

That faith's the test, not works. Works!—any fool

Can do them if he tries to; but what school

Can teach one to credit the ridiculous,

The palpably non-existent? So with us,

Votaries of the copulative cult,

In this affair of love, quicumque vult,

Whoever would be saved, must love without  
Adjunct of sense or reason, must not doubt  
Although the deity be far removed,  
Remote, invisible; who is not loved  
Best by voluptuous works, but by the faith  
That lives in absence and the body's death.  
I have no faith, and even in love remain  
Agnostic. Are you here? The fact is plain,  
Constated by the heavenly vision of you,  
Maybe by the mouth's warm touch; and that I love you,  
I then most surely know, most painfully.  
But now you've robbed the temple, leaving me  
A poor invisibility to adore,  
Now that, alas, you're vanished, gone . . . no more;  
You take my drift. I only ask your leave  
To be a little unfaithful—not to you,  
My dear, to whom I was and will be true,  
But to your absence. Hence no cause to grieve;  
For absence may be cheated of a kiss—  
Lightly and laughing—with no prejudice  
To the so longed-for presence, which some day  
Will crown the presence of  
Le Vostre J.

(As dear unhappy Troilus would say)."

IV

OH, the maggots, the maggots in his brains!  
Words, words and words.  
A birth of rhymes and the strangest,  
The most unlikely superfœtations—  
New deep thoughts begot by a jingle upon a pun,

New worlds glimpsed through the window of a word

That has ceased, somehow, to be opaque.

All the muses buzzing in his head.

Autobiography crystallised under his pen, thus:

"When I was young enough not to know youth,  
I was a Faun whose loves were Byzantine  
Among stiff trees. Before me naked Truth  
Creaked on her intellectual legs, divine  
In being inhuman, and was never caught  
By all my speed; for she could outrun thought.  
Now I am old enough to know I am young,  
I chase more plastic beauties, but inspire  
Life in their clay, purity in their dung  
With the creative breath of my desire.  
And utter truth is now made manifest  
When on a certain sleeping face and breast  
The moonlight dreams and silver chords are strung,  
And a god's hand touches the aching lyre."  
He read it through: a pretty, clinquant thing,  
Like bright spontaneous bird-song in the spring,  
Instinct with instinct, full of dewy freshness.  
Yes, he had genius, if he chose to use it;  
If he chose to—but it was too much trouble,  
And he preferred reading. He lit his pipe,  
Opened his book, plunged in and soon was drowned  
In pleasant seas . . . to rise again and find  
One o'clock struck and his unshaven face  
Still like a record in a musical box,  
And Auntie Loo miles off in Bloomsbury.



i.

THE Open Sesame of "Master John,"

And then the broad silk bosom of Aunt Loo.

"Dear John, this is a pleasure. How are you?"

"Well, thanks. Where's Uncle Will?" "Your uncle's gone

To Bath for his lumbago. He gets on

As well as anyone can hope to do

At his age—for you know he's seventy-two;

But still, he does his bit. He sits upon

The local Tribunal at home, and takes

Parties of wounded soldiers out in brakes

To see the country. And three times a week

He still goes up to business in the City;

And then, sometimes, at night he has to speak

In Village Halls for the War Aims Committee."

ii.

"Well, have you any news about the war?

What do they say in France?" "I daren't repeat

The things they say." "You see we've got some meat

For you, dear John. Really, I think before

To-day I've had no lamb this year. We score

By getting decent vegetables to eat,

Sent up from home. This is a good receipt:

The touch of garlic makes it. Have some more.

Poor Tom was wounded on the twenty-third;

Did you know that? And just to-day I heard

News from your uncle that his nephew James

Is dead—Matilda's eldest boy." "I knew

One of those boys, but I'm so bad at names.

Mine had red hair." "Oh, now, that must be Hugh."

iii.

"Colonel McGillicuddy came to dine

Quietly here, a night or two ago.

He's on the Staff and very much in the know

About all sorts of things. His special line

Is Tanks. He says we've got a new design

Of super-Tank, with big guns, that can go

(I think he said) at thirty miles or so

An hour. That ought to make them whine

For peace. He also said, if I remember,

That the war couldn't last beyond September,

Because the Germans' trucks were wearing out

And couldn't be replaced. I only hope

It's true. You know your uncle has no doubt

That the whole thing was plotted by the Pope . . ."

". . . Good-bye, dear John. We have had a nice talk.

You must soon come again. Good-bye, good-bye. . . ."

He tottered forth, full of the melancholy

That comes of surfeit, and began to walk

Slowly towards Oxford Street. The brazen sky

Burned overhead. Beneath his feet the stones

Were a grey incandescence, and his bones

Melted within him, and his bowels yearned.

VI

THE crowd, the crowd—oh, he could almost cry

To see those myriad faces hurrying by,

And each a strong tower rooted in the past

On dark unknown foundations, each made fast

With locks nobody knew the secret of,

No key could open: save that perhaps love

Might push the bars half back and just peep in—  
And see strange sights, it may be. But for him  
They were locked donjons, every window bright  
With beckoning mystery; and then, Good Night!  
The lamp was out, they were passed, they were gone  
For ever . . . ever. And one might have been  
The hero or the friend long sought, and one  
Was the loveliest face his eyes had ever seen,  
(Vanished as soon) and he went lonely on.  
Then in a sudden fearful vision he saw  
The whole world spread before him—a vast sphere  
Of seething atoms moving to one law:  
“Be individual. Approach, draw near,  
Yes, even touch: but never join, never be  
Other than your own selves eternally.”  
And there are tangents, tangents of thought that aim  
Out through the gaps between the patterned stars  
At some fantastic dream without a name  
That like the moon shining through prison bars,  
Visits the mind with madness. So they fly,  
Those soaring tangents, till the first jet tires,  
Failing, faltering half-way up the sky,  
And breaks—poor slender fountain that aspires  
Against the whole strength of the heavy earth  
Within whose womb, darkly, it took birth.  
Oh, how remote he walked along the street,  
Jostling with other lumps of human meat!  
He was so tired. The café doors invite.  
Caverned within them, still lingers the night  
In shadowy coolness, soothing the seared sight.

He sat there smoking, soulless and wholly crass,  
Sunk to the eyes in the warm sodden morass  
Of his own guts, wearily, wearily  
Ruminating visions of mortality—  
Memento Moris from the pink alcove,  
Nightmare oppressiveness of profane love.  
Cesspool within, and without him he could see  
Nothing but mounds of flesh and harlotry.  
Like a half-pricked bubble pendulous in space,  
The buttered leatheriness of a Jew's face  
Looms through cigar-smoke; red and ghastly white,  
Death's-head women fascinate the sight.  
It was the nightmare of a corpse. Dead, dead . . .  
Oh, to wake up, to live again! he fled  
From that foul place and from himself.

## VII

TWIN domes of the Alhambra,  
Veiled tenderness of the sky above the Square:  
He sat him down in the gardens, under the trees,  
And in the dust, with the point of his umbrella,  
Drew pictures of the crosses we have to bear.  
The poor may starve, the sick have horrible pains—  
But there are pale eyes even in the London planes.  
Men may make war and money, mischief and love—  
But about us are colours and the sky above.  
Yes, here, where the golden domes ring clear,  
And the planes patiently, hopefully renew  
Their green refrain from year to year  
To the dim spring burden of London's husky blue,  
Here he could see the folly of it. How?

Confine a boundless possible within  
The prison of an ineluctable Now?  
Go slave to pain, woo forth original sin  
Out of her lair—and all by a foolish Act?  
Madness! But now, Wordsworth of Leicester Square,  
He'd learnt his lesson, learnt by the mere fact  
Of the place existing, so finely unaware  
Of syphilis and the restless in and out  
Of public lavatories, and evening shout  
Of winners and disasters, races and war.  
Troubles come thick enough. Why call for more  
By suiting action to the divine Word?  
His spleen was chronic, true; but he preferred  
Its subtle agony to the brute force  
That tugged the barbs of deep-anchored remorse.  
The sunlight wrapped folds of soft golden silk  
About him, and the air was warm as milk  
Against his skin. Long sitting still had made  
Cramped soreness such a pleasure, he was afraid  
To shift his tortured limbs, lest he should mar  
Life's evenness. London's noise from afar  
Smoothed out its harshness to soothe his thoughts asleep,  
Sound that made silence much more calm and deep.  
The domes of gold, the leaves, emerald bright,  
Were intense, piercing arrows of delight.  
He did not think; thought was a shallow thing  
To his deep sense of life, of mere being.  
He looked at his hand, lying there on his knee,  
The blue veins branching, the tendons cunningly  
Dancing like jacks in a piano if he shook

A knot-boned finger. Only to look and look,  
Till he knew it, each hair and every pore—  
It seemed enough: what need of anything more?  
Thought, a blind alley; action, which at best  
Is cudgelling water that goes back to rest  
As soon as you give over your violences.  
No, wisdom culls the flowers of the five senses,  
Savouring the secret sweetness they afford:  
Instead of which he had a Medical Board  
Next week, and they would pass him fit. Good Lord!  
Well, let all pass.  
But one must outdo fate,  
Wear clothes more modish than the fashion, run  
Faster than time, not merely stand and wait;  
Do in a flash what cannot be undone  
Through ten eternities. Predestinate?  
So would God be—that is, if there were one:  
General epidemic which spoils nobody's fun.  
Action, action! Quickly rise and do  
The most irreparable things; beget,  
In one brief consummation of the will,  
Remorse, reaction, wretchedness, regret.  
Action! This was no time for sitting still.  
He crushed his hat down over his eyes  
And walked with a stamp to symbolise  
Action, action—left, right, left;  
Planting his feet with a slabby beat,  
Taking strange Procrustean steps,  
Lengthened, shortened to avoid  
Touching the lines between the stones—

A thing which makes God so annoyed.

Action, action! First of all

He spent three pounds he couldn't afford

In buying a book he didn't want,

For the mere sake of having been

Irrevocably extravagant.

Then feeling very bold, he pressed

The bell of a chance house; it might

Disclose some New Arabian Night

Behind its grimy husk, who knows?

The seconds passed; all was dead.

Arrogantly he rang once more.

His heart thumped on sheer silence; but at last

There was a shuffling; something behind the door

Became approaching panic, and he fled.

VIII

"MISERY," he said, "to have no chin,

Nothing but brains and sex and taste:

Only ommissively to sin,

Weakly kind and cowardly chaste.

But when the war is over,

I will go to the East and plant

Tea and rubber, and make much money.

I will eat the black sweat of niggers

And flagellate them with whips.

I shall be enormously myself,

Incarnate Chin."

The anguish of thinking ill of oneself

(St. Paul's religion, poignant beyond words)

Turns ere you know it to faint minor thirds

Before the ritualistic pomps of the world—  
The glass-grey silver of rivers, silken skies unfurled,  
Urim and Thummim of dawn and sun-setting,  
And the lawn sleeves of a great episcopal cloud,  
Matins of song and vesperal murmuring,  
Incense of night-long flowers and earth new-ploughed;  
All beauties of sweetness and all that shine or sing.  
Conscience is smoothed by beauty's subtle fingers  
Into voluptuousness, where nothing lingers  
Of bitterness, saving a sorrow that is  
Rather a languor than a sense of pain.  
So, from the tunnel of St. Martin's Lane  
Sailing into the open Square, he felt  
His self-reproach, his good resolutions melt  
Into an ecstasy, gentle as balm,  
Before the spire, etched black and white on the calm  
Of a pale windless sky, St. Martin's spire,  
And the shadows sleeping beneath the portico  
And the crowd hurrying, ceaselessly, to and fro.  
Alas, the bleached and slender tower that aches  
Upon the gauzy sky, where blueness breaks  
Into sweet hoarseness, veiled with love and tender  
As the dove's voice alone in the woods: too slender,  
Too finely pencilled—black and bleaching white  
On smoky mist, too clear in the keen light  
Of utmost summer: and oh! the lives that pass  
In one swift stream of colour, too, too bright,  
Too swift—and all the lives unknown,

Alone.

Alas. . . .



A truce to summer and beauty and the pain  
Of being too consciously alive among  
The things that pass and the things that remain,  
(Oh, equal sadness!) the pain of being young.  
Truce, truce. . . . Once again he fled;-  
All his life, it seemed, was a flight;-  
Fled and found  
Sanctuary in a cinema house.  
Huge faces loomed and burst,  
Like bubbles in a black wind.  
He shut his eyes on them and in a little  
Slept; slept, while the pictures  
Passed and returned, passed once more and returned.  
And he, like God in the midst of the wheeling world,  
Slept on; and when he woke it was eight o'clock.  
Jenny? Revenge is sweet; he will have kept  
Dear Jenny waiting.

IX

TALL straight poplars stand in a meadow;  
The wind and sun caress them, dappling  
The deep green grass with shine and shadow;  
And a little apart one slender sapling  
Sways in the wind and almost seems  
Conscious of its own supple grace,  
And shakes its twin-hued leaves and gleams  
With silvery laughter, filling the place  
Where it stands with a sudden flash of human  
Beauty and grace; till from her tree  
Steps forth the dryad, now turned woman,  
And sways to meet him. It is she.

Food and drink, food and drink:

Olives as firm and sleek and green  
As the breasts of a sea god's daughter,  
Swimming far down where the corpses sink  
Through the dense shadowy water.  
Silver and black on flank and back,  
The glossy sardine mourns its head.  
The red anchovy and the beetroot red,  
With carrots, build a gorgeous stair—  
Bronze, apoplexy and Venetian hair—  
And the green pallor of the salad round  
Sharpens their clarion sound.

De lady take hors d'œuvres? and de gentleman too?

Per due! Due! Echo answers: Du' . . .

"So, Jenny, you've found another Perfect Man."

"Perfect, perhaps; but not so sweet as you,  
Not such a baby." "Me? A baby. Why,  
I am older than the rocks on which I sit. . . ."

Oh, how delightful, talking about oneself!  
Golden wine, pale as a Tuscan primitive,  
And wine's strange taste, half loathsome, half delicious:  
Come, my Lesbia, let us love and live.  
What though the mind still think that one thing's vicious  
More than another? If the thought can give  
This wine's rich savour to our laughing kiss,  
Let us preserve the Christian prejudice.  
Oh, there are shynesses and silences,  
Shynesses and silences!  
But luckily God also gave us wine.  
"Jenny, adorable—" (what draws the line

At the mere word "love"?) "has anyone the right  
To look so lovely as you look to-night,  
To have such eyes, such a helmet of bright hair?"  
But candidly, he wondered, do I care?  
He heard her voice and himself spoke,  
But like faint light through a cloud of smoke,  
There came, unreal and far away,  
Mere sounds utterly empty—like the drone  
Of prayers, crumbe repetita, prayers and praise,  
Long, long ago, in the old School Chapel days;  
Senseless, but so intrusive on one's own  
Interior life one couldn't even think . . .  
O sweet, rare, perilous, retchy drink!  
Another glass . . .

X

HOW cool is the moonless summer night, how sweet  
After the noise and the dizzy choking heat!  
The bloodless lamps look down upon their own  
Green image in the polished roadway thrown,  
And onward and out of sight the great road runs,  
Smooth and dark as a river of calm bronze.  
Freedom and widening space: his life expands,  
Ready, it seems, to burst the iron bands  
Of self, to fuse with other lives and be  
Not one but the world, no longer "I" but "She."  
See, like the dolorous memory  
Of happy times in misery,  
An aged hansom fills the street  
With the superannuated beat  
Of hollow hoofs and bells that chime

Out of another quieter time.

"Good-night," the last kiss, "and God bless you, my dear."

So, she was gone, she who had been so near,

So breathing-warm-soft mouth and hands and hair-

A moment since. Had she been really there,

Close at his side, and had he kissed her? It seemed

Unlikely as something somebody else had dreamed

And talked about at breakfast, being a bore:

Improbable, unsubstantial, dim, yet more

Real than the rest of life; real as the blaze

Of a sudden-seen picture, as the lightning phrase

With which the poet-gods strangely create

Their brief bright world beyond the reach of fate.

Yet he could wonder now if he had kissed

Her or his own loved thoughts. Did she exist

Now she was history and safely stowed

Down in the past? There (with a conscious smile),

There let her rest eternal. And meanwhile,

Lamp-fringed towards meeting parallels, the road

Stretched out and out, and the old weary horse,

Come from the past, went jogging his homeward course

Uphill through time to some demoded place,

On ghostly hoofs back to the safe Has-Been:-

But fact returns insistent as remorse;

Uphill towards Hampstead, back to the year of grace

Nineteen hundred and seventeen.

XI

BETWEEN the drawing of the blind

And being aware of yet another day . . .

The end