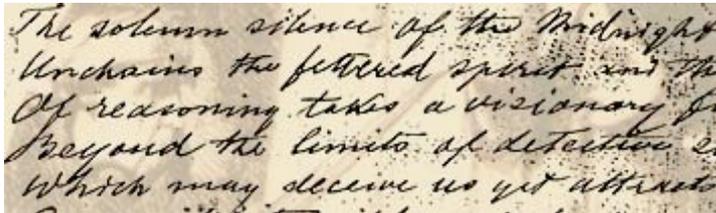


[Version 2: lines in italics from v. 1]

Night-thoughts



The solemn silence of the midnight hour
Unchains the fettered spirit, and the power
Of Reasoning takes a visionary flight
Beyond the limits of detective sight,
Which may deceive us, yet attracts the soul
Even with its wild and daring uncontrol.
T'is then the mind, which care no more absorbs,
In search of God ascends his glowing orbs,
Or grapples with the mysteries which surround
Creation's work within a narrower bound;
For clearer than in distant worlds we find
The hand of Nature and her magic mind
Remirrored here: the structure of a grain
Has tasked the wisdom of th' Almighty's brain,
And there's an infinite which measures nought
Yet masters Space – the infinite of Thought.
Before that Shrine in deep humility
The awestruck spirit bows; but what to Thee
Great Principle of the things is human prayer
Or human worship more than empty air?
Thou canst not change the dread, eternal law
Whereby Thy stern decree has sanctioned woe;
And sadly he thy ways misunderstands
Who seeks relief at thy unfeeling hands.

*We'll not degrade our human dignity
By l[oo]king up for selfish ends to thee
But [o]nly worship in thy wonders wrought
The [God]ly essence of thy boundless Thought.*

T'is deeply and irrevocably graven
On every mite below as all that moves in heaven.
Clear is the writ, but mystic is the hand
Which wrote eternal suffering's stern command,
And vainly does the searching soul aspire
To fathom its unfathomable ire;
Though countless visions flit before the mind
They but perplex, and leave us doubly blind.
Was there a time when fair Creation lay
Untouched by God, an incoherent clay
Of endless desolation, void of light
To break the gloom of its eternal night?
Or was there no beginning? will there be
A future as a past infinity
Of busy worlds without creative cause?
That cannot be and yet our judgement knows
No clearer reading of the mystic spell
Which dark and darker grows the more we dwell
Upon its mystery, yet we love to ponder
With prying soul o'er that unfathomed wonder;
And questions maddening with their deep conceit
O'erstep the bar where Reason must retreat.

Who made the World? Religion answers: "He!"
But who made Him? Was it eternity,
Or Space, or Chaos that produced the seed
Of that immortal essence? could they breed
With darkest night, themselves inanimate,
The ruling power of universal Fate?
Or is Creation's spirit but a part

Of the crude matter? could that rubbish start,
Unconscious of itself, the wondrous Whole,
And set a seal as of immortal soul
On endless worlds, so overwhelming grand
That grasping thought, unable to expand
Beyond the compass of its sphere assigned
Backs all distracted on the searching mind.
Such is the Atheist's cold and barren creed
Which Love and Hope reject: do we not read
In Nature's face the lines of Nature's thought,
And Cause must be for what Conception wrought
Though vague and shapeless to the mind. Some call
It God, some Power, some Universal Soul;
Some clothe it in a human form, and raise
To abject deities their abject praise.
But deeper minds reject that grovelling lie
And learn from thought and study to defy
The stupid mummeries of a darker age,
Of baleful priests the woeful heritage,
Which pesters with contagious touch the mind
And leaves the dregs of Ignorance behind.
'Tis true eternal darkness hovers round
The Source of things, but in its works are found
Sufficient hints to teach a purer creed
Than nursery tales for which the Clergy plead.

Away with them! the inward eye decries
The wilderness before Creation's rise,
When the Almighty's embryo slowly woke
To free the World from Death and Chaos' yoke,
That Moulder's clay even we can comprehend
Has had no birth as it can have no end,
Like God coeval with Eternity
And why 'Tis there perhaps a mystery

To Him as us. As far as mortal eyes
By aid of glasses can review the skies
We see no end to worlds, and thence conclude
That Matter stretches to Infinitude,
Which is a word we often use amiss
But try to fathom what its meaning is;
Try to conceive an atom's littleness –
Some trillions in a grain the Muse can guess –
Then gauge the astral systems and compare
Those relative proportions – if you dare;
Your reason faints with that your eye can see,
Yet that's an atom of Infinity,
Or less for grandeur has a limit too,
A foiled conjecture wanders on anew
To trace perhaps an end of rolling spheres,
But Chaos still when Cosmos disappears,
Since to be infinite it must expand
Beyond the reach of the great Moulder's hand.
Imagination stretches onward though
While humbled Reason grovels doubly low.

Worlds have their life and death the same as we
And snatch existence from Eternity.
And stars there are whose light for ever spent
Has left them corpses in the firmament;
Which proves that Chaos is the final urn
Where cosmic ashes must at length return,
While God, retreating from advancing night
Into fresh matter breathes life and light,
Till Death, which finally must reign o'er all,
Spreads o'er that too its universal pall.
Alas! The doom of life is to decay:
Those orbs on high have but a longer day
And all the Wonders bred in Nature's womb

Flutter betwixt their cradle and their tomb.

Thus comets are the infants of the sky,
Their swaddling-clothes the tails which we descry
And from their fumbling on the road we see
That they must learn to walk as well as we.
Yet never are they hurt though left at large
For Nature watches o'er her helpless charge,
Averting dangers, until, planets grown,
They walk the sky in a more narrow zone.
The virgin world, now ready for the seed
Which she receives from God, begins to breed,
And living beings, starting as from naught,
Proclaim the presence of creative thought.
Thus far 'tis wonderful, but uncombined
Chaotic matter cannot be defined,
A dust impalpable, unseen, unknown,
Yet out of such the Universe is grown!
It triumphs now, the Principle of light
O'er death and chaos in their endless strife;
But times will be when planets, ours as well,
Ring with the echoes of Creation's knell,
When reeking suns have spent their final light
And Death triumphant lords it o'er the Night.

But spleeny thoughts should not anticipate
The dark forebodings of a final fate.
Still teems Creation with that mystic power,
Born with the matter or its godly dower,
Which glues the atoms and preserves their mould
To make them fit for uses manifold.
It is that power which keeps the distant suns
In quiet motion where their journey runs,
The leading strings in Nature's ruling hand

To keep the infinite at her command.
We trace it in the meanest object nigh
As well as in those orbs which gleam on high:
We trace it in the dust strewed o'er the ground,
Else to the earth how can that dust be bound;
We trace it in the Comets where they dash,
Else what prevents those roving stars to clash
And grind to atoms whatsoever they meet
Till rolls the Universe a wreck complete.
Who ever sees iron to iron cling
As if a soul were in that lifeless thing
But feels his mind in wild amazement stare
And turn to God to read the riddle there,
Or body forth his wonder into prayer.

How can the mind conceive that handless grasp
Which draws the iron to the magnet's clasp?
How can it picture to itself a chain
Without a link, yet able to retain
Each prisoned star in the unbounded cell
Where those immeasurable glow-worms dwell?
Nor ever swerve they from their course assigned
And yet unseen the chain that thus can bind.
Imagination's self dares not pursue
Attraction's source to trace Creation's clue
But pauses wildered on its awful brink,
Fit to adore though impotent to think.

And yet a man, the greatest of all men,
For butcher kings are no comparison,
Dared in an apple's downfall to retrace
The very power which masters endless space,
Dared to conceive that Nature has no law
To rule a planet but what rules a straw,

That in a dew-drop as the boundless whole
The matter sparkles with its Maker's soul.
Thou wondrous Newton! nothing like to thee
Has e'er laid claim to immorality!
A time may come when England owes its fame
To man's remembrance of thy hallowed name,
For if one mind could leave so wide a trace
It speaks the nation too a gifted race.
It is though selfishness and pride are weeds
Which somewhat check the growth of better seeds.
Few know, though many prate of Newton's mind,
How much his genius has left behind,
How vast the knowledge he has brought to light,
How far his eagle-spirit winged its flight;
But those who know will turn, and oft return
To kneel before the ashes of his urn;
There, as they bend them o'er the sacred clay,
Recall the glories of a former day,
Live, as it were, with mighty spirits fled
And echo back the voices of the dead,
Till glows their bosom with reflected glow
And pants their heart with Feeling's overflow;
Then raise their spirits from the great of yore
To their mysterious Maker, and explore
His realms where ever Fancy's wing can bear
While foiled Inquiry dwindles into prayer.
So Newton's did, so all must do who read
The awful pages of the thinker's creed.

Even as the atom and the sun obey
Attraction's laws – so does the living clay:
It only takes a sweeter form and name
When heart draws heart – its workings are the same.
The magnet clings to its opposing pole

With all the fervour of a living soul;
Or turn that pole, t'will serve to illustrate
The darker features of dislike and hate.
Love much the same, that glittering, unseen chain
Which drags us on to pleasure or to pain,
While hoodwinked reason lets it lord the will
Or boasts of freedom under passion's drill.
Thus far a close and strange resemblance lies
Between inanimate and human ties
Which points a moral pride disdains to see
Though deep its lesson of humility.

But Love has wings which bear the heart on high
To wed the goddess of its fancied sky;
And weans us for awhile from Care and Truth,
Those dreary drawbacks on the joys of youth,
And lights a sunshine of its own whose ray
Can give the heart a sweeter holiday
Than wealth, or power, or vanities create
When Fortune lures us with her tempting bait.
Long may that heartshine beam on you and me,
And smooth our passage to Eternity
Till drops the curtain at its mystic gate
And robes in darkness our impending fate.
But if the soul may quit the confined clay
To face its Maker on a brighter day
Are we to dwell as shapeless spirits there
Or take such forms as Fancy may prefer?
Are we to love and drain eternal bliss
From lips whose only office is to kiss?

'Twere vain to guess: it may be that there are
Inhabitants like us on every star,
Or brighter forms of winged seraphim

As pure of guile as Virtue's fondest dream;
 It may be that their clayless forms are free
 To flit like sunbeams through Eternity,
 Or that those heavenly sentinels are sent
 To trim the star-lamps on the firmament;
 It may be that they have their sexes too,
 Their airy maids for airy men to woo,
 Or that their loves, though void of sensual joy
 Have deeper raptures too refined to cloy;
 It may be that they watch o'er us and pour
 Angelic balm on Suffering's rankling sore,
 And joy when virtue triumphs o'er desire,
 And grieve when vice is fanning passion's fire.
 But let us quit their fancied paradise
 And drop the curtain o'er enticing lies
 Which form the basis of that pious school
 Wherein the knave is taught to gull the fool.
 Turn we to Earth again; its love is more
 Than we have skill or leisure to explore,
 And it has joys description fails to trace
 Save where you read it in a loving face,
 And there are Angels here I would not lose
 For all the Houris, were I free to choose.

There's one at least –

[v. 1]

*There's one at least – hers is no perfect mould,
 And you can deem her features stern and cold,
 But gaze again: when soul-beams illumine*
 That noble face her beauties are divine.
 They come and go as light and shade vary
 When clouds are floating in the sunlit sky
 So that the eye relieved can never tire
 Of rays which stir but fever not desire.
 Though beauty dazzles t'is the soul that wins*

*And deep regard and deepfelt Love are twins.
The marble beauty we so much admire
Seems almost pregnant with Canovas fire,
[But] yet that realized ideal wants
[The] heaving bosom for which Feeling pants.
[Wh]at then if Nature's fairest work he left
[So] cold a thing of sympathy bereft,
[W]e gaze admiring on that work of art
[B]ut marble features cannot touch the heart.
Still less the polished mind careful for her
Whose limping intellect is apt to stare
At every trifle which attracts her eye,
That sparkling mirror of futility.
Give me the fair who with a fairy soul
Subjects her feelings to her self-control
And I will trust her nobleness of mind –
No human compact is so sure to bind.*

**[AN: "it should be illuminated
but the slip is a poetic licence"] AN*