# CHAPTER XVI

## SOME POEMS ON DEATH

THE term is drawing to a close and we shall hardly have time for any elaborate study; so I shall only attempt one more short lecture upon a special subject. Yesterday we were speaking of the classical and romantic spirit in poetry. It occurred to me that no subject could illustrate the differences of the two methods more forcibly than a selection of poems upon the subject of death. This, I need scarcely say, is the most serious of all subjects, naturally lending itself as an inspiration to the highest forms of sublime expression as well as to the most ordinary forms of simple pathos. It would seem to be especially fitted for classical treatment; indeed a majority of famous poems upon death are in classical form. The severe and constrained laws of classical composition would appear most suitable to a theme requiring solemnity and measured self-control. But I think that, opposite to almost any classical utterance upon this grim subject, I could place a romantic example that you would find much more touching and much more true to the real spirit of poetry. Let me now choose a couple of examples. The first I will take from Bryant's poem, "Thanatopsis," selected because it is perhaps more widely known than any other modern classical utterance which has achieved popularity in this relation. Bryant, you know, was an American poet, and he was almost the only American poet of real note who was frankly classical. Poe, Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson, Lowell,—these were all romanticists. Bryant has nothing of romance in his composition; but as a classic poet he was so far successful that some of his choice work now belongs to English literature as securely

as almost anything done by any minor English poet. These are the lines to which I refer:

> So live, that when thy summons comes to join
> The innumerable caravan, which moves
> To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
> His chamber in the silent halls of death,
> Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
> Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
> By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
> Like one that wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

These lines are beautiful in a cold way. They express a great religious and moral duty, in relation to death. The imagery has a certain grandeur, especially the dim picture of humanity passing from birth to death as a caravan passes over the surface of a desert. Now, the "quarry-slave" means a slave employed at cutting stone in a quarry. Formerly such slaves were treated like prisoners; they were beaten while at work, and beaten also on their march from their quarters to the place of labour and back again. Indeed, this is still the treatment of many slaves in Northern Africa under Arab or Moorish rule, and it is to such rule that the poet refers. His lesson is this: If you live well, you need not be afraid to die. Try to live such a good life that when death comes you can think of it merely as a man thinks of having a pleasant sleep. Wicked men, on the other hand, think of death as the slave thinks of his going and coming, with terror, under the lash of the master. The lesson is good, and consoling, but it is not particularly original; and the greatest merit of the composition is the well-sounding blank verse. Now this is exactly according to classical canons. The verse is sonorous, correct and cold. Perhaps classic verse ought to be in such cases a little cold. One must not show too much emotion, especially in treating any vast and solemn subject. I think you will admire the lines if you study them carefully; but I think

you will admire much more a little thing, a very, very small thing, about a dead child, which I am going to quote to you as an example of romantic methods. It is a mother's dream about her little dead boy. Perhaps this dream was inspired by an old superstition, common to many parts of Europe, that the tears of the living cause pain and sorrow to the dead. At all events it is a very natural little composition; and the poet is William Barnes, who wrote a great deal of touching poetry in the dialect of Dorsetshire. This poem is not in dialect, but it is not according to classical rules at all; it is almost colloquial in its form.

THE MOTHER'S DREAM

I'd a dream to-night
As I fell asleep,
Oh! the touching sight
Makes me still to weep:
Of my little lad,
Gone to leave me sad,
Aye, the child I had,
But was not to keep.

As in heaven high,
I my child did seek,
There, in train, came by
Children fair and meek,
Each in lily white,
With a lamp alight;
Each was clear to sight,
But they did not speak.

Then, a little sad,
Came my child in turn,
But the lamp he had,
Oh! it did not burn;
He, to clear my doubt,
Said, half turn'd about,
'Your tears put it out;
Mother, never mourn.'

Of course you may say of the comparison that it is not quite fair,—that in the one case we have a cosmic and didactic idea, and in the other only an individual fancy. That is true. But were I to compare a classic fancy only with a romantic fancy you would probably find the contrast still more powerful. A cosmic idea reinforced by moral sentiment ought to produce an emotional thrill. Do Bryant's lines produce such a thrill? I do not think that they do. But "The Mother's Dream" does produce a thrill of purely natural emotion, and though you may forget the words of the poem, you cannot forget the fancy. On the other hand, if you forget the actual words of Bryant's composition there is very little left to think about. The images are grand, but they are indistinct and dark and leave no impression upon the memory. Classical verse depends upon form; the essence of romantic verse may be independent of form. Probably no fervent believer in classic rules would agree with the poet in his choice of a five-syllable measure,—a very primitive measure indeed. Yet where there is true poetic feeling, the measure is a matter of secondary importance.

Can we mix the two systems together? Can we make a poem at once romantic and classic? Certainly, but it requires a particular emotional character to do this well. Very few succeed in it. However, on this very subject of death I have a little poem by one of Tennyson's brothers, Charles Tennyson-Turner. Here is a poem not only upon a very solemn subject, but even somewhat religious into the bargain, and written by a clergyman, and put into the severe form of the sonnet,—and yet it touches. It does not touch merely because it expresses a generous horror of the abominable doctrine that all persons who are not Christians must go to hell, and be burned alive for ever and ever; it touches really because it is full of true romantic spirit, full of warm human feeling, upon which no cold restraint or rule has been placed. It is about the mummy of an Egyptian girl. The poet lost in Egypt a daughter called

Mary. She had been taken to Egypt for the sake of the climate. Some time afterward the bereaved father was shown the mummy of a little girl probably dead for a thousand years before an English foot ever trod the land of Egypt. I suppose he then thought to himself, "Four or five thousand years ago the father and the mother of this little girl must have had the same pain that I and my wife now have. They embalmed their little daughter, no doubt, with many tears and prayers; and they buried with her a little scroll of Egyptian prayers and charms for the little spirit to repeat in the next world. How wicked it would be to think that all the faith and love of those millions who lived in times past have been of no moral value!" And then he wrote these lines:

> When the four quarters of the world shall rise,
> Men, women, children, at the Judgment-time,
> Perchance this Memphian girl, dead ere her prime,
> Shall drop her mask, and with dark new-born eyes
> Salute our English Mary, loved and lost;
> The Father knows her little scroll of prayer,
> And life as pure as His Egyptian air;
> For, though she knew not Jesus, nor the cost
> At which He won the world, she learn'd to pray;
> And though our own sweet babe on Christ's good name
> Spent her last breath, premonish'd and advised
> Of Him, and in His glorious Church baptized,
> She will not spurn the old-world child away,
> Nor put her poor embalméd heart to shame.

The beauty of this poem I find to be chiefly the struggle between the man's religious prejudices, his religious education, and the natural emotion that forces him to think more generously about matters of this kind than other clergymen might do. You will see that he thinks his own little daughter buried there will rise again at the Judgment Day, not in company with English sisters, but with the ghosts of the old Egyptian pagans, and very probably with the very little girl whose mummy he has been looking at. And he

thinks to himself, "Well, my daughter will love that little Egyptian girl and want to play with her. 'Tis true that the little girl was not a Christian, and my little girl was a very good Christian. But perhaps the father of all of us will find the Egyptian child to be quite as good and pure as my own; she must have been good; had she not learned to pray?" Now for a clergyman of the English church even to go thus far in the direction of religious generosity in poetry is rather remarkable; you may think that he must have been under deep emotion when he wrote. He wrote this with perfect classical correctness, but he infused into the poem an emotional warmth and colour that are quite contrary to classical tradition. As I said before, it is the suggestion of struggle between religion and love that makes for me the great beauty of the sonnet.

The best sonnet ever written by Longfellow, "Nature," shows the same blending of romantic feeling with classical elegance. The imagery is of the most ordinary kind; not so the refined verse which contains it. Although called "Nature," this is really a poem on death.

As a fond mother, when the day is o'er,
  Leads by the hand her little child to bed,
  Half willing, half reluctant to be led,
  And leave his broken playthings on the floor,
Still gazing at them through the open door,
  Nor wholly reassured and comforted
  By promises of others in their stead,
  Which, though more splendid, may not please him more;
So Nature deals with us, and takes away
  Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
  Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
Scarce knowing if we wished to go or stay,
  Being too full of sleep to understand
  How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

You have all seen such a universal incident as the poet here describes—at least all of you who remember your own childhood, or who have some little child brother or

child sister to remind you of it. The child is very sorry about the breaking of its toys, and keeps playing with the pieces until it is time to go to sleep. Then the mother comes and says, "Now dear, it is better for you to sleep: do not fret about your toys,—I will buy you a much nicer toy tomorrow." So the child goes away guided by the mother's hand, but still he looks back regretfully towards the place where the broken toy is lying, thinking to himself, "Yes—but the new toy will not be so pretty as the broken one, I think!" In the same way when men become old and their work is only half done—therefore broken, as it were—death comes and says, "It is time for you to sleep." A man regrets thus having to go, in spite of the promise religion makes to him about happier things and more beautiful things in the next world. But he is not able to think very much about the matter. The touch of death makes him too sleepy to be very much afraid or very sorry, just as the child is too sleepy at bed time even to talk about broken toys left behind. The kind of death here described is what has been called euthanasia, the fortunate or happy death that sometimes comes to men in extreme old age, and puts them to sleep quite gently, without any pain, never to wake again.

I have begun with these examples of the two methods only as illustrative. But you remember that the title of this lecture is "*Some* Poems on Death," and I am not going to attempt so vast a thing as a general lecture upon the subject of Death in English poetry. That would require years of lecturing. What I am going to talk about are only certain striking later poems upon this topic,—poems illustrating the later thoughts of the century about death scientifically or philosophically.

The poems which I am now going to cite will refer both to death as signifying change and to the dead as signifying a living influence—the inherited tendencies which shape character. For example, here is a little poem about the dead who continue to live with us. To you perhaps the

ideas in this poem will appear very old, but to Western thought they are new; and in any event the treatment of the idea is new. The title is "The Dead."

> The dead abide with us! Though stark and cold
> Earth seems to grip them, they are with us still;
> They have forged our chains of being for good or ill;
> And their invisible hands these hands yet hold.
> Our perishable bodies are the mould
> In which their strong imperishable will—
> Mortality's deep yearning to fulfil—
> Hath grown incorporate through dim time untold.
> Vibrations infinite of life in death,
> As a star's travelling light survives its star!
> So may we hold our lives, that when we are
> The fate of those who then will draw this breath,
> They shall not drag us to their judgment-bar,
> And curse the heritage which we bequeath.

This composition by Mathilde Blind, a great friend of the scientist Wallace and now widely known as a writer of verse upon scientific subjects, contains a full declaration of the evolutional doctrine of heredity. I suppose you know the wonderful fact here referred to about the light of the star continuing to live long after the star is dead. Astronomers have proved to us that we are still able to see in the skies an appearance of stars that really died many thousands of years ago. But those stars were so far away that it took their light all that time to reach this world; and thus we are still able to see the light, because it began to travel towards us before the stars died, and has not yet finished coming. The suggestion is that the will of the dead, in the meaning of tendency as well as in that of desire, survives the body and continues to act, much as the light of a dead star continues to travel.

Within late years the idea of this moral responsibility to the future and to the past has begun to make itself more and more felt in Western poetry. In Eastern poetry it is old; in Western poetry it is almost new. A hundred

years ago no person would have thought of writing such stanzas as these following, at least in a poem upon the brotherhood of nations with a common origin. The nations are England and the United States, and the poem, by Helen Gray Cone, is addressed to "Fair England."

> What! phantoms are we, spectre-thin,
> Unfathered, out of nothing born?
> Did Being in this world begin
> With blaze of yestermorn?
>
> Nay! sacred Life, a scarlet thread,
> Through lost unnumbered lives has run;
> No strength can tear us from the dead;
> The sire is in the son.

Such an utterance would have startled the English eighteenth century; perhaps the only poet of Johnson's time who could have found the meaning of it would have been Blake. But the idea that the will of the dead influences the acts and the thoughts of the living is not merely expressed in a general way in latter-day poetry. Sometimes fancy furnishes details, incidents, suggestions that touch us better than any general statement could do. Here I have a little poem by Richard Burton, called "The Forefather." It is interesting as a sign of the thought of the times. A young man in the country lying down to sleep at night is startled by the strange sensation of being in a battle. Everything about him is dark and silent; yet it seems to him that he can hear, as if it were in his own heart, the clash of arms, the shouting of the captains, all the clamour of a great contest; and he can even feel the excitement of battle within himself. Is he dreaming? No, he is awake; and these ideas and feelings come to him involuntarily. But let us quote his own words and his interpretation of the mystery:

> Here at the country inn,
> I lie in my quiet bed,
> And the ardent onrush of armies
> Throbs and throbs in my head.

Why, in this calm, sweet place,
  Where only silence is heard,
Am I ware of the crash of conflict,—
  Is my blood to battle stirred?

Without, the night is blessed
  With the smell of pines, with stars;
Within, is the mood of slumber,
  The healing of daytime scars.

'T is strange,—yet I am thrall
  To epic agonies;
The tumult of myriads dying
  Is borne to me on the breeze.

Mayhap in the long ago
  My forefather grim and stark
Stood in some hell of carnage,
  Faced forward, fell in the dark;

And I, who have always known
  Peace with her dove-like ways,
Am gripped by his martial spirit
  Here in the after days.

I cannot rightly tell:
  I lie, from all stress apart,
And the ardent onrush of armies
  Surges hot through my heart.

Perhaps you will have noticed the expression in the second stanza about silence being heard; and if you have never seen it before it may seem strange to you. Western poets often use this expression to signify the most intense silence. It is very much like another and commoner expression, "You could almost hear the night breathe." Such expressions imply only that in the great stillness sounds can be heard which are never heard in the daytime.

An Englishwoman, Alice Meynell, has produced a beautiful poem upon the topic we are discussing. It is called "The Modern Poet." The idea of the poem is less fantastic

than that of the one which I have given above, but it is more touching and more true; it is simply that power to see and to feel the beautiful, and the power to express the vision or the feeling in poetical language, comes to us from the dead. The poet can write beautiful things only because the thoughts and the impulses of thousands, perhaps millions, of poetical ancestors are in his blood. If he delights in the clear blue of a summer sky, or the snowy beauty of mountain peaks, or the dancing of sunlight upon the waters, it is because the dead within him loved all these things and rejoiced in the Nature that inspires him to sing. The beauty of this composition is not confined to the thought, however; the similes are remarkably effective and imposing.

I come from nothing; but from where
Come the undying thoughts I bear?
  Down through long links of death and birth,
  From the past poets of the earth.
My immortality is there.

I am like the blossom of an hour,
But long, long vanished sun and shower
  Awoke my breath i' the young world's air.
  I track the past back everywhere
Through seed and flower and seed and flower.

Or I am like a stream that flows
Full of the cold springs that arose
  In morning lands, in distant hills;
  And down the plain my channel fills
With melting of forgotten snows.

Voices I have not heard possessed
My own fresh songs; my thoughts are blessed
  With relics of the far unknown;
  And mixed with memories not my own
The sweet streams throng into my breast.

Before this life began to be,
The happy songs that wake in me

Woke long ago, and far apart
Heavily on this little heart
Presses this immortality.

We shall see how beautiful this is better by a paraphrase:

"You say that I am come from Nothing. But where do the immortal thoughts which I have, come from? I know where they come from; from the thousand generations of the past, from millions and millions of brains and hearts that are dust, from myriads of long-dead poets these beautiful thoughts must have come to me. Only in thought is there any real immortality, and by thought I know myself immortal.

"It is true that I am only like the flower that lives but for a little time. But the race of flowers to which I belong was brought into existence millions of years ago. Dead suns ripened it, the soil of long vanished worlds nourished the roots of it. I can trace back the past through all times, through all the beginnings, beyond all the blossomings.

"Or this life of mine might be compared to a river flowing full of cold water, cold and pure water, water that rose in the clear springs of mountains too far away to be seen, in countries too far away to be visited. And in the great plain through which I flow I feel my channel filled with the melting of snow that fell so far away, so long ago, that its falling cannot be remembered.

"I hear speaking within my heart, voices that are not mine; and these voices also speak in the songs that I write. My very thoughts are not my own thoughts; thoughts of the dead, thoughts of the things that have happened in times unknown, in places unknown, are mixed with them, and the feelings and the ideas belonging to other lives and the memories of other lives pour into my heart.

"Before ever I was born, the joyful imaginations that I expressed in my poems existed in other minds, in other lives, at long intervals of time. And the whole emotion of dead worlds, of dead generations, presses upon my life. Hard it is to bear within one the weight of the past."

You will see the beauty of this more and more each time that you read it over. The suggestions are of the most general kind; but they are not less grand for that. However, examples of imagination of the same kind are not wanting, and some of them are very remarkable.

A French boy named Henri-Charles Read, who died at the age of nineteen, was the author of some very curious poetry on this subject. Young as he was, the great mystery of life oppressed him, the new thought of the nineteenth century only increased the weight of the riddle that troubled him. He was not able in so short a life to master the teachings of the new philosophy in regard to the problem, but he was able to express that problem in a very simple and touching way.

I think that God resolved to be
  Ungenerous when I came on earth,
And that the heart *He* gave to me
  Was old already ere my birth.

He placed within my youthful breast
  A worn-out heart—to save expense!—
A heart long tortured by unrest
  And torn by passion's violence.

Its thousand tender scars proclaim
  A thousand episodes of woe;—
And yet I know not how it came
  By all those wounds which hurt it so!

Within its chambers linger hosts
  Of passion's memories, never mine,—
Dead fires—dreams faded-out—the ghosts
  Of suns that long have ceased to shine.

Perfumes, deliriously sweet,
  Of loves that I have never known,
It holds—and burns with maddening heat
  For beauty I may never own.

O weirdest fate!—most ghastly woe!
Anguish unrivalled!—peerless pain!—
To wildly love—and never know
The object wildly loved in vain!

That a young boy should have felt these things is not at all wonderful; what is wonderful only is that without scientific teaching he should have been able to express the feeling so wonderfully. Undoubtedly the lad was a natural genius, and would have been a very great poet if gifted with the strength to live. But he was early carried off by a disease of the lungs. His few but remarkable poems are now well known to thinkers in every country of Europe. The last stanza of the little composition intimates, of course, that the awakening of this frail and beautiful talent was coincident with the first change from boyhood to manhood.

But there is another way in which the dead live on besides the path of hereditary tendency. They live not only in the minds and the hearts of their descendants; art also sometimes furnishes them with a body. You know some of the old Greek stories on this subject, perhaps; certainly you know many Chinese and Japanese stories about pictures or statues having ghosts, living with the life of that which they represented. Western poetry has very little on this subject, but the little is interesting in more ways than one. I do not speak of such stories as that of Pygmalion, who made the statue of a beautiful woman and fell in love with it, so that the gods took pity on him and made the statue alive. That story has really nothing to do with the subject of which I am speaking. I mean the idea that in painting a picture or making a statue, something of the soul of the person represented entered into the work. This is rather an Eastern than a Western fancy; and as I say, it has been very little treated by Western poets, although Edgar Poe has a prose story about an artist who painted so perfectly the picture of a girl that all her soul went out of her body into the picture, and she died. But we have one modern, indeed very recent poem about a Greek vase, which em-

bodies this notion in a very pretty way. It is by an American poet called Sherman.

Divinely shapen cup, thy lip
  Unto me seemeth thus to speak:
"Behold in me the workmanship,
  The grace and cunning of a Greek!

"Long ages since he mixed the clay,
  Whose sense of symmetry was such,
The labor of a single day
  Immortal grew beneath his touch.

"For dreaming while his fingers went
  Around this slender neck of mine,
The form of her he loved was blent
  With every matchless curve and line.

"Her loveliness to me he gave
  Who gave unto herself his heart,
That love and beauty from the grave
  Might rise and live again in art."

And hearing from thy lips this tale
  Of love and skill, of art and grace,
Thou seem'st to me no more the frail
  Memento of an older race:

But in thy form divinely wrought
  And figured o'er with fret and scroll,
I dream, by happy chance was caught,
  And dwelleth now, that maiden's soul.

There is exactly such an idea in the old Chinese story about that god of porcelain, once a human workman who burnt himself in a furnace in order that the vase which he was making by command of the Emperor should become perfect. The legend says that his soul went into the vase, and that, when tapped with a finger, it would utter the name of its maker.

I suppose that we have now read a sufficient number of illustrative poems on this subject. Before concluding, I

want you to notice particularly that the thoughts in the poems which I have quoted are not, in most cases, Western thoughts, and that the poems belong to a new era of imagination. They represent exotic influence, especially Oriental influence—partly Indian, no doubt, but also in part Chinese and Japanese. It is a very interesting subject to which we may return again, this influence of Eastern thought upon Western poetry. I think that it is constantly growing, and that we shall see and hear much more of it. And I may say that even Tennyson was slightly affected by these new influences before he passed away. His swan-song, "Crossing the Bar," owes most of its beauties to fancies much more Oriental than Occidental. The infinite sea of which he speaks in that poem, that sea with the moving of whose tides worlds and lives come and go, what is it after all but the Oriental Sea of Death and Birth?—and the Bark, what is it as a symbol but the ancient Buddhist Vessel of Faith, in which the virtues may pass to the further shore? Yet Tennyson was, after all, somewhat old-fashioned. If even he was inspired to create so enchanting a thing as "Crossing the Bar" by the new influences from the thought of the East, we may be tolerably sure that the poets of the present century, the new era just beginning, will produce work much more akin in thought and feeling to Eastern philosophical poetry than their predecessors of the nineteenth century.