

Sonnets and Poems
with
Renditions from Tu Fu (杜甫) :

Exercises

by

a teacher of English

to learn some more of his trade

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Preface

Because it is not usual with a person in my position to write and publish poems, I think it imperative to explain myself at some length. I even fear I may be called to account for doing what I must *not* do. I am expected to teach and study English and English literature, but tacitly I am supposed to remain within that territory and never make bold to undertake anything like creative writing, unless perhaps for a practical joke. I remember a look that appeared in an elder friend's face on my once showing him a piece for judgment—he looked as if he had been shown an improper picture. Well, I feel like apologizing here, too. But am I doing something improper? Apart from his suspicion of the inadequacy peculiarly mine, there was, no doubt, the assumption that friend shared with most of us that poetry is something sacred, something not to

be irreverently dabbled in. I do share the same view, and I hate anyone who thinks of poetry any otherwise. But at the same time, I do not like to think of it as something untouchable, something on the other side. For me at least, there is no sharp distinction between criticism or study and creative writing, both being reverently to be handled, and inevitably some degree of self-expression with a secret pleasure of self-suppression. And if I am convicted of sacrilege for my poems, I should also be so convicted for my treatises.

Anyway, my poems are an extended part of my study of English or English literature. Or it may be that I cannot study it except in such a way as they become its natural extension. I do not naturally pretend to be a poet, which if I did would be ridiculous. A dozen or so of sonnets will not make a poet any more than a swallow will make a summer, anyway. My poems are part of my study, because I can clearly say that I had been unable to read so well, so closely and deeply, in such an unexpected light, until I began trying to write. What is more, now I do what I never did before—enjoy poems for their own sake without caring about who wrote them. From this point of view, the worth of my poems does not matter, since they have done their work. To learn to read actively, not merely passively, seems to me essential. This at least is the truth I got from my experience, scanty as it is. The truth, moreover, covers the fact that there are poetical works worth reading and not worth reading, that the fusion of psychic profundity and high technique does not seem frequently to occur even in the long history of English poetry—though I am saying it chiefly in regard to sonnets.

Now I must explain why I adhere to such a strict verse form as

sonnet, now apparently in disfavour. The fact is simply that I cannot *afford* to write free verse. The stricter the form, the better—not to say easier—to me. Nothing so scares me as freedom. And this I take to be proof enough that I am *not* a poet. That is the chiefest of the drawbacks of the foreigner, one who was not born to the language. And I may be a specially interesting case because I have never been abroad (a fact I am often blamed as well as pitied for). But suppose I had been much more exposed to spoken English, I am not sure I would take to free verse. My temperament is classical, to use a big word, tending to form, balance, stoic control. And my aesthetics demands a poet to use his own language as a foreign language or a dead language (dead for a higher life). But this is making a virtue of necessity, and I confess that I cannot appreciate the subtlety Eliot speaks of between form and freedom, “this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse,” the quality he charges Swinburne with not having.¹⁾

Some words may be needed about Tu Fu. Tu Fu (712—770) is admittedly the greatest of Chinese poets, outstanding in the unrivalled feat of unifying the emotional and the formal rigour. He excelled mainly in the two forms of verse: the five-character eight-line verse (五言律詩) and the seven-character eight-line verse (七言律詩). The former I rendered into a kind of shortened sonnet, rhyming *abab cdcd ee*, and the latter into the sonnet, either Shakespearian or Italian. In both of the Chinese verse forms there are some very strict rules to be observed, the most important of which are that

1) T. S. Eliot, “Reflections on *Vers Libre*” (*To Criticize the Critic* (Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 185.)

every second line must rhyme, and that there must be more than two coupled lines (*coupled* meaning having the same syntax, not couplets because they do not rhyme).

Naturally, my rendering is not literal translation, but some, I think, are fairly close to the original poems. I often attempted to render Li Po (李白), the other big figure and rival of Tu Fu, but I could not bring myself to, they are so different. This, I hope, only means that I am not doing a mere scholarly work.

About my own sonnets and poems I refrain from saying much. Only this much I judge it better to say: that they are chronologically ordered, the first two sonnets about figure-skating being more than ten years old, in fact, a by-product of the Sapporo Olympics for Winter through TV; that I leave most of them undated, for the failure of memory, but in some cases for policy, to keep away detectives; but that the better part of them, including Tu Fu pieces, were written during the past three years.

I might incidentally mention that Japanese men of letters have traditionally been excellent writers of Chinese poems. Natsume Soseki, one of the main figures in the history, and who also wrote some English poems, once deplored that, though he devoted immeasurably more time to the study of English poetry than he did to Chinese poetry which he read as a child, yet it was Chinese poetry, not English poetry, that he was more versed in. I lack Soseki's erudition, but I share his diffidence with him. I cannot really go into English poetry, and it is in a large measure to persuade myself that I can that I write English poems.

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The Arab Horse of Captain Fang

(From Tu Fu's 房兵曹胡馬)

Well is this steed the boast of wild Far West:
 Its lines and coigns compose the finest frame,
 All surplus pruned to stand the nicest test;
 Its ears are sharply slashed bamboos—would claim
 The fleetest winds to cleave, which only lend
 It speed and power to sweep or fly as fast;
 Before its hooves all space and distance end,
 And sure one's lot with this horse can be cast.
 When such a prancing spirit's given the rein,
 What unknown world unconquered could remain?

房兵曹胡馬

萬	驍	眞	所	風	竹	鋒	胡
里	騰	堪	向	入	批	稜	馬
可	有	託	無	四	雙	瘦	大
橫	如	死	空	蹄	耳	骨	宛
行	此	生	濶	輕	峻	成	名

房兵曹の胡馬
 胡馬 大宛の名あり
 鋒稜 瘦骨成る
 竹批ぎて双耳峻ち
 風入りて四蹄輕し
 向う所 空濶無く
 眞に死生を託するに堪えたり
 驍騰なること此くの如き有れば
 万里も横行す可し

The Painted Hawk

(From Tu Fu's 畫鷹)

What winds, what storms, are threatened on this sheet
 Of snowy silk? What art, what wingèd craft,
 Could leave here terror's form poised on its seat?
 It dreams of cunning hares to strike as a shaft,
 Has eyes of a Persian lost in mournful dream;
 Its glittering ring and leash is cold to touch;
 A call, and it would rush down from that beam.
 What lowly birds could hope to 'scape its clutch,
 When once at large it winged the deep blue sky,
 Their doom some littered field with blood to dye?

毛	何	軒	條	側	攬	蒼	素	
血	當	楹	鏃	目	身	鷹	練	畫鷹
灑	擊	勢	光	似	思	畫	風	
平	凡	可	堪	愁	狡	作	霜	
燕	鳥	呼	摘	胡	兔	殊	起	

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The Foreign Sword

(From Tu Fu's 蕃劍)

What furnace wild of uncouth land in throes
 Of fiery birth could bring forth this cold steel?
 It is undecked with stones and free from shows
 Of finery, yet nightly do I feel
 A presence as of someone there and wake
 To see its point give forth an eerie light.
 What spirit dwells within will some day break,
 A tiger or a dragon, and ride the night.
 I'll seek far to present it to a sage
 To lay the evil storms that still do rage.

蕃劍

致此自僻遠
 又非珠玉裝
 如何有奇怪
 每夜吐光芒
 虎氣必騰上
 龍身寧久藏
 風塵苦未息
 持汝奉明王

蕃劍

此れを致すは僻遠よりす
 又た珠玉の装あるに非ず
 如何ぞ奇怪有りて
 毎夜 光芒を吐くや
 虎氣 必ず騰上せん
 龍身 寧ぞ久しく蔵れん
 風塵 未だ息まざるに苦しむ
 汝を持して明王に奉ぜん

Spring View

(From Tu Fu's 春望)

Though war has devastated towns and souls,
 Those mountains, rivers, woods remain unchanged,
 And spring has greened the broken Changan walls;
 One weeps o'er flowers because of those estranged,
 And songs of birds add gall to sorrows old;
 The raging fire has run well into March,
 Letters from home are worth a stack of gold;
 Now land and heart and hair are left to parch:
 What whiff of hair I have won't hold a pin,
 Which violently I scratch as from my sin.

渾	白	家	烽	恨	感	城	國	春
欲	頭	書	火	別	時	春	破	望
不	搔	抵	連	鳥	花	草	山	
勝	更	萬	三	驚	澗	木	河	
簪	短	金	月	心	淚	深	在	

春望
 國破山河在
 城春草木深
 感時花濺淚
 恨別鳥驚心
 烽火連三月
 家書抵萬金
 白頭搔更短
 渾欲不勝簪
 欲
 不勝簪

渾欲不勝簪
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 家書抵萬金
 烽火連三月
 恨別鳥驚心
 感時花濺淚
 城春草木深
 國破山河在

Facing the Snow

(From Tu Fu's 對雪)

Snow falls, and from afar I hear the wails
 Upon the wind of soldiers newly slain;
 Stray flakes come in through windows driven by gales,
 And mutinous clouds hang low beyond the plain.
 An aged soul as unappeased, alone
 I sit oppressed by sorrow in the dusk,
 Where in the hearth the glow is all but gone,
 And cups are dry upon an empty cask.
 Now means are lost of contact everywhere,
 And I but sit and write in empty air.

對雪

戰 哭 多 新 鬼
 愁 吟 獨 老 翁
 亂 雲 低 薄 暮
 急 雪 舞 迴 風
 瓢 棄 樽 無 綠
 爐 存 火 似 紅
 數 州 消 息 斷
 愁 坐 正 書 空

雪に對して

戰哭 新鬼多く

愁吟するはひとり老翁

亂雲 薄暮に低れ

急雪 廻風に舞う

瓢は棄れられて樽に緑無く

炉に存して火は紅なるに似たり

數州 消息は断ゆ

愁え坐して正に空に書す

Seeing a Friend Off

(From Tu Fu's 送遠)

"Wherefore must thou be gone so far away,
 When men-at-arms where'er thou goest swarm?"
 His dear ones clung, entreated him to stay,
 And wailed to winds to see his mounted form
 Steer forth into the wilderness and grow
 Into a dancing speck, then lost to sight.
 Now grass is hoary-dry and sun runs low,
 Rivers he crosses must stretch glittering white.
 'Twas yesterday in such a grief they parted
 As they have borne since man and sorrow started.

因	別	關	草	鞍	親	胡	帶	
見	離	河	木	馬	朋	爲	甲	送
古	已	霜	歲	去	盡	君	滿	遠
人	昨	雪	月	孤	一	遠	天	
情	日	清	晚	城	哭	行	地	

遠きを送る
 帯甲 天地に満つるに
 胡為れぞ君遠く行くや
 親朋 尽とく一哭し
 鞍馬 孤城を去る
 草木 歲月晩れ
 関河 霜雪清し
 別離は已に昨日
 因りて古人の情を見る

On the Tower

(From Tu Fu's 登高)

The wind is high, the skies are deep, the cries
 Of monkeys full of sorrow, clean the shore
 With pure bright sand, whose whiteness makes me sore;
 A solitary bird in circles flies.
 The trees shed leaves with ceaseless rustling sighs,
 The Yangtze comes on from its endless store.
 A sickly traveller have I been for more
 Than fifty autumns. Now I cast my eyes,
 Climbing this tower, as on my wasted life,
 Unwise, so full of grievances, forlorn,
 And blown about like tumbleweed, at strife
 With the age and with myself, so grey and worn—
 I stop the lifted glass—grief cuts as knife.
 How can wine cure a soul so blasted, torn?

潦 倒 新 亭 濁 酒 杯	艱 難 苦 恨 繁 霜 鬢	百 年 多 病 獨 登 臺	萬 里 悲 秋 常 作 客	不 盡 長 江 滾 滾 來	無 邊 落 木 蕭 蕭 下	渚 清 沙 白 鳥 飛 迴	風 急 天 高 猿 嘯 哀	登 高
うとう あら あた とう た は	かんなん はなは うら はんそう ひん	ひくねん たひよう ひと だい のぼ	ばんり ひしゅう つね かく な	ふじん ちようこう こんたん きた	むへん らふく しやうしやう お	なまきよ すなしろ ちやうひめく	かぜきゆう てんたか えんしやうかな あし	とう こう
潦倒 新亭 濁酒 の杯	艱難 苦恨 繁霜 の鬢	百年 多病 獨り 台上 に登る	万里 悲秋 常に 客と 作り	不尽 の長江 は滾滾 として 来る	無辺 の落木 は蕭蕭 として 下ち	渚清 く沙白 くして 鳥飛 廻る	風急 に天高 くして 猿嘯 哀し	

Night

(From Tu Fu's 夜)

Now dew begins to fall from deepened skies,
 The breath of night's serene in vacant hills;
 A spirit sharpened by a void, one lies
 Awake for hours till heart with wildness fills.
 A new moon hangs, and faintly lit in gloom
 A lone boat sleeps—the sound of fulling block.
 Twice have I seen chrysanthemum in bloom
 In alien soil. The fabled birds but mock
 A sick old man and bring no news. I pace
 About upon a stick and by the eaves
 See the wet Dipper tipped towards my face;
 And then meseems my soul the body leaves,
 And with the Silver River rushing forth,
 Falls in a thunder on to Changan north.

銀漢は遙かに 應に鳳城に接する なるべし	籬燈 猶お懸りて 双杵鳴る	新月 猶お懸りて 双杵鳴る	南菊に再び逢いて 人は病に臥し	北書は至らず 雁は情無し	籬燈 猶お懸りて 双杵鳴る	新月 猶お懸りて 双杵鳴る	南菊に再び逢いて 人は病に臥し	北書は至らず 雁は情無し	空山 独夜 旅魂驚く	露下り天高く して秋気清し	夜	露下 天高 秋気 清	空山 獨夜 旅魂 驚	疎燈 自照 孤帆 宿	新月 猶懸 雙杵 鳴	南菊 再逢 人臥 病	北書 不至 雁無 情	步籬 倚杖 看牛 斗	銀漢 遙應 接鳳 城
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Winter Solstice

(From Tu Fu's 冬至)

How often must the day come round to mark
 The year's sap at its lowest and to bring
 This melancholy with the general dark,
 To kill the aged exile with its sting?
 I walk the riverside, a cloud forlorn,
 Wondering how it is I could so grow
 Conformed to the alien ways of the outmost bourn,
 And halt to view the valley after snow.
 This stick to prop the withered bag of bones,
 I fondly dream, might be a courtier's staff,
 And I at this day's rites as morning dawns;—
 This crazy thought I spurn at once as chaff,
 And faced with bitter facts I lose my mind:
 My homeward way I seek and never find.

路は迷う	心折	鳴玉	杖藜	天涯	江上	忽忽	年年	冬	路	心	鳴	杖	天	江	忽	年	冬
何の処か	此時	朝来	雪後	の風俗	の形容	たる窮	年	至	迷	折	玉	藜	涯	上	忽	年	至
是れ三秦なる	無一寸	紫宸に散ぜん	丹壑に臨む	自のずから相い親しむ	吾れ独り老い	愁は人を泥殺す	長に客と為り	至	何	此	朝	後	風	形	窮	日	長
									是	無	散	臨	俗	容	愁	長	為
									三	一	紫	丹	自	吾	泥	為	客
									秦	寸	宸	壑	相	獨	殺	客	
													親	老	人		

To a Prize-Winning Figure Skater (I)

O midwinter flower on the ice full blown!
O sweet defeat of words in emulation,
Of all dialectics final destination,
Something we all possessed yet had not known!
Wasn't Plato silent, light-bedazzled, thrown
In stupor, before beauty's consummation?
Was beauty ever born of laceration?
(Enough of crippled artists' stillborn clown!)
O mock, mock those weak minds that knowingly
Discriminate the seeing from the seen,
Those bastard sons of Science pent in a sty.
To me who burn with you your dance has been
A purgatorial fire—and I am none,
For we, consumed in Beauty, are grown one.

To a Prize-Winning Figure Skater (II)

I grope and try to find a name for this
Commotion, this unwonted state of mind
You've thrown me in— Envy, indeed it is,
But not that kind that its poor prey will grind,
Nor's envy ever known thus to exalt;
I envy you, ah, not your fame, applause,
Nor even your graceful ways so free of fault,
But that fine art of yours which leaves no flaws
In one tight whole of you and your own work.
O Artist with your work incorporate,
Witness to blessed powers that in us lurk,
That we in fire of life participate!
O, who will know the quick of truth but muscles
That concentrate and leap above world's bustles?

Fishing Alone in a Mountain Stream

—*in imitation of Robert Frost's*

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"—

A sudden ill luck makes me stand:
A boulder tips on which I land
And brings me down to kiss the stream
With, oh, my broken rod in hand.

I sit still long until I seem
To have this happen in a dream,
Watching the pool roll down a stone,
Where twilight reigns with scarce a beam.

The sounds I hear are those I've known:
Some human voice through waters' tone
I've often heard, and now I hear
That same strange old voice like my own.

And though to me the voice is dear,
I know I will not give it ear;
I know I will not give it ear,
However deep the stream, and clear.

After Emily Dickinson

Beauty, as Pain, has its limit—
Beyond is a numbèd Tract—
The bewitched Rower down the river
Foreknows that Cataract—

The faster Flow—the louder Noise—
Send Terror in his blood—
Yet something whispers, "Let go the Oars!"
And down he goes like Lead—

The Trees flitting—the Boat reeling—
His Doom now close at hand—
In Ecstasy caught up yet falling—
He clings—Hair on end—

Only to know—for Bliss or Curse—
No wakeful Fall can be
The human Lot—nor yet to die
The Ultimate to see—

To Mr. Hachiya: A Valediction

How, their master gone, can forsaken sheep
Rejoice o'er food he left for them to eat,
Night falling, cold, not knowing where to sleep
Under black clouds where they but huddle and bleat?

Yet since they chide the wind and cry in vain,
There's nothing left to do but make the best
Of what mischance they have to turn to gain
And guess, as flocks can, what lies in his breast.

Who knows but on some hill or by the brook
Or deep in that cave where he used to lie,
Some swain may find a weather-beaten book
On which he makes out: *Imitatio Christi*.

O come, my little death, to the older view
I'll die, for mine are inner pastures new.

March 1981

To _____

(Musing in Retrospect on Our Visit to *Muroö-ji*)

Did we not know, my dear, when that cold day
 We climbed those ancient steps for topmost shrine
 And sat there silent wishing time to stay,
 While early snow was falling, snow so fine
 That holy trees were all in mist and dim,
 And we in absolute seclusion felt
 Our bosom's cup could overflow the brim,
 As we had frozen flowers about to melt—
 Did we not know as animals know their fate
 That as we reached the top of sacred hill,
 We brought our dear communion to a state
 Where all at giddy crisis must stop still,
 That once we gained the peak we must descend,
 And fading in fine snow our love must end?

To _____

If love that cannot but be faithless still
Must live and will perform like faithful love,
Till break of day do let it have its fill,
And then be cast out like an unpaired glove;
Or let it learn to live on honey made
With herb or bile so bitter it must get
Its palate changed or else fast to a shade
And die. Let such a tortured love forget
All tastes of human sweetness, let it seek
Where scornful hungry birds know how to live,
Where twinèd lynx if severed will not squeak,
Or dams for weaklings have no milk to give.
So mortified, love casts its older skin
And comes alive made finer from within.

To Naomi Uemura, the Mountaineer and
Explorer Who Disappeared in Mount
McKinley Early in 1984

Let people fuss about what you have done
As much as they like; deaf to such a din,
Or half ashamed of the fame you have won,
You always left our world where you have been
Uneasy, not yourself, all miserable,
And ever sought death—courting cold or height.
Brother, though dumb you were, I sure can tell
What glowed within your heart: you had no right
To live except where none could live, no right
To do except what none dared do. —No knell
Be tolled, though you disappeared in pure white snow.
I know how with a glorious sense of guilt,
The well of power, the shrine in heart's depth built,
You still through blinding blizzards fight and go.

On Seeing an Extremely Ugly Woman
in a Bus

That nature could her custom so transgress,
And from her womb produce what nature flees!
Not from a burn or man-dealt injuries
This woman bears her curse of worst distress.
A wild desire possessed me to redress
The wrong, undo the nature's freak, to seize
The throat—of what I knew not, remedies
Being in no one's hand. What ugliness
Within myself and all the world was then
Revealed! A blow it was to tear the veil
That hides the crime, the shame, the uncured pain,
The dark old beast that in our flesh we trail.
Awe-struck, upon my face I could have lain,
And as before the highest beauty wail.

A Dream

A dream most strange and vivid haunts me still:—
I was in a restaurant of some populous place;
Before me was a boy with an idiot face,
Eating, whose idiot smiling made me ill,
Fed by his father trying not to spill
Or soil, an expert feeder keeping pace
With this slow-eating boy almost with grace,
Lovingly stern, yet patient to refill;
I could not take my eyes from this sore sight
I wished rid of for worlds—a sudden light
Then gushed, my eyes were full; here was no show
Nor stealth, only an easy letting go,
A suffering free as day, so bright and calm,
A life with God! —It rings still like a psalm.

April 7, 1985

On the Sonnet

A sonnet when conceived—a dubious light—
A fancied child—a worry—a torment then—
A fear, despair, that I may try in vain,
(Poor-witted filling girl in secret plight)
And yet a haunting sense of debt—a fight
With my own ridicule—Why, are you sane?
You waste time where futility is plain—
Until a shape forms, looming in the night:
A foetus—half moon—fish with two big eyes,
A spine in jelly—hope that it may grow—
And grow it must to measure or it dies,
Which need dictates the course of water's flow,
Which yet must be the way I want to go—
Then, a quickening—to myself a surprise—

To a Friend

Why meddle with this foreign song, you ask,
Unheard, unheeded, should, by any chance,
I sing or sound like Keats. You say one's task
Lies elsewhere, with one's tongue, to sing and dance
In one's own shoes. —I blush and smile and say
I've danced with English strumpets as their beau,
A menial scurrying where their pleasure lay,
Praising their eyes, their arms, from tip to toe;
But, haughty strumpets as they were, I'd been
Kept off their privy bower, till driven mad,
I one day rose and went to tear the screen
That held in mystery their brothel god,
And strip protesting, screaming bitches bare
That they might not flout me with knowing air.

Salieri on Mozart

(On seeing a movie called “Amadeus”)

How could I but hate him, Lord, when I knew
You chose that ribald boy in your design
To make you known, and I with ears as fine
Or finer, better slave all will to do
Whate'er you bid, to fast and pray if you
Should grant me half his talent, now must pine
Away with unappeased desire, decline
To dust, a failure doomed for e'er to woo?

Yet how I loved him! None could weep as I
For love, who, envy-choked, with adders nursed,
Could feel like guiltless martyr fit to die
For you, when on my ears that sweetness burst,
That God-sent ease, that sadness like blue sky,
And I no longer knew the blessed from cursed.

When I Awake at Midnight

When I awake at midnight from a dream
Of rosy hue, a boon to soul's repose,
Which yet but falsifies the brighter rose
That choked me in my youth till I could scream,
That bliss that drowns the dreamer towards a gleam,
A hint that there may clear outside these shows
Be Beauty, which to voice is up to those
Initiated, such as I did seem, —
Then I sit dazed awhile at the embers' glow
Of what has been my secret guide, and fear
That if, with few more years to live, I go
And end, denying vent to heart's sole dear,
I may not rest in peace for what I owe,
But moan till I could have my conscience clear.

A Child's Prolonged Wail

Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself that makes this void.

—Simone Weil

A child's prolonged wail made me unawares
 Sad in a silent street—a rare thing now
 Children don't much cry—and reminded how
 Our street now wears its festive mask; it wears
 No rags, puts madmen out of sight, nor stares
 That hungry eye from under the sneaky brow
 Which stared at you of old. It won't allow
 Disgrace to show which in its bones it bears.

Now hunger's killed, those crying children stilled,
 And lordly manners learned, it does not know
 What next to do—what more can it receive?—
 And wonders if it should have been so filled.
 When misery cried and prayed, was it for maw,
 Or more than maw, for heaven's leave to grieve?

W. B. Yeats

Pardon, departed soul, if kindred passion
Disturb you in your night's marmoreal peace,
Free from all dregs of consciousness that fashion
Postmortem troubled dreams, where all souls cease
To be, diffused into one Soul, the sea,
As you believed, for pilgrims at perfection,
Thus forcing you back to the memory
Of mire and blood in untimed resurrection.

Yet I invoke you to declare you live
Again, not through the homage of your fleas
But in my guts, transformed and nutritive,
As rabbit in the guts of lion is.

How else pay tribute? I would do you wrong
Unless you died to live and speak my tongue.