Canto Two

The Gospel of Death and Vanity of the Ideal

Then pealed the calm inexorable voice:
Abolishing hope, cancelling life’s golden truths,
Fatal its accents smote the trembling air.
That lovely world swam thin and frail, most like
Some pearly evanescent farewell gleam
On the faint verge of dusk in moonless eves.
“Prisoner of Nature, many-visioned spirit,
Thought’s creature in the ideal’s realm enjoying
Thy unsubstantial immortality
The subtle marvellous mind of man has feigned,
This is the world from which thy yearnings came.
When it would build eternity from the dust,
Man’s thought paints images illusion rounds;
Prophesying glories it shall never see,
It labours delicately among its dreams.
Behold this fleeing of light-tasselled shapes,
Aerial raiment of unbodied gods;
A rapture of things that never can be born,
Hope chants to hope a bright immortal choir;
Cloud satisfies cloud, phantom to longing phantom
Leans sweetly, sweetly is clasped or sweetly chased.
This is the stuff from which the ideal is formed:
Its builder is thought, its base the heart’s desire,
But nothing real answers to their call.
The ideal dwells not in heaven, nor on the earth,
A bright delirium of man’s ardour of hope
Drunk with the wine of its own fantasy.
It is a brilliant shadow’s dreamy trail.
Thy vision’s error builds the azure skies,
Thy vision’s error drew the rainbow’s arch;
Thy mortal longing made for thee a soul.
This angel in thy body thou callst love,
Who shapes his wings from thy emotion’s hues,
In a ferment of thy body has been born
And with the body that housed it it must die.
It is a passion of thy yearning cells,
It is flesh that calls to flesh to serve its lust;
It is thy mind that seeks an answering mind
And dreams awhile that it has found its mate;
It is thy life that asks a human prop
To uphold its weakness lonely in the world
Or feeds its hunger on another’s life.
A beast of prey that pauses in its prowl,
It crouches under a bush in splendid flower
To seize a heart and body for its food:
This beast thou dreamst immortal and a god.
O human mind, vainly thou torturest
An hour’s delight to stretch through infinity’s
Long void and fill its formless, passionless gulfs,
Persuading the insensible Abyss
To lend eternity to perishing things,
And trickst the fragile movements of thy heart
With thy spirit’s feint of immortality.
All here emerges born from Nothingness;
Encircled it lasts by the emptiness of Space,
Awhile upheld by an unknowing Force,
Then crumbles back into its parent Nought:
Only the mute Alone can for ever be.
In the Alone there is no room for love.
In vain to clothe love’s perishable mud
Thou hast woven on the Immortals’ borrowed loom
The ideal’s gorgeous and unfading robe.
The ideal never yet was real made.
Imprisoned in form that glory cannot live;
Into a body shut it breathes no more.
Intangible, remote, for ever pure,
A sovereign of its own brilliant void,
Unwillingly it descends to earthly air
To inhabit a white temple in man’s heart:
In his heart it shines rejected by his life.
Immutable, bodiless, beautiful, grand and dumb,
Immobile on its shining throne it sits;
Dumb it receives his offering and his prayer.
It has no voice to answer to his call,
No feet that move, no hands to take his gifts:
Aerial statue of the nude Idea,
Virgin conception of a bodiless god,
Its light stirs man the thinker to create
An earthly semblance of diviner things.
Its hued reflection falls upon man’s acts;
His institutions are its cenotaphs,
He signs his dead conventions with its name;
His virtues don the Ideal’s skiey robe
And a nimbus of the outline of its face:
He hides their littleness with the divine Name.
Yet insufficient is the bright pretence
To screen their indigent and earthy make:
Earth only is there and not some heavenly source.
If heavens there are they are veiled in their own light,
If a Truth eternal somewhere reigns unknown,
It burns in a tremendous void of God;
For truth shines far from the falsehoods of the world;
How can the heavens come down to unhappy earth
Or the eternal lodge in drifting time?
How shall the Ideal tread earth’s dolorous soil
Where life is only a labour and a hope,
A child of Matter and by Matter fed,
A fire flaming low in Nature’s grate,
A wave that breaks upon a shore in Time,
A journey’s toilsome trudge with death for goal?
The Avatars have lived and died in vain,
Vain was the sage’s thought, the prophet’s voice;
In vain is seen the shining upward Way.
Earth lies unchanged beneath the circling sun;
She loves her fall and no omnipotence
Her mortal imperfections can erase,
Force on man’s crooked ignorance Heaven’s straight line
Or colonise a world of death with gods.
O traveller in the chariot of the Sun,
High priestess in thy holy fancy’s shrine
Who with a magic ritual in earth’s house
Worshippest ideal and eternal love,
What is this love thy thought has deified,
This sacred legend and immortal myth?
It is a conscious yearning of thy flesh,
It is a glorious burning of thy nerves,
A rose of dream-splendour petalling thy mind,
A great red rapture and torture of thy heart.
A sudden transfiguration of thy days,
It passes and the world is as before.
A ravishing edge of sweetness and of pain,
A thrill in its yearning makes it seem divine,
A golden bridge across the roar of the years,
A cord tying thee to eternity.
And yet how brief and frail! how soon is spent
This treasure wasted by the gods on man,
This happy closeness as of soul to soul,
This honey of the body’s companionship,
This heightened joy, this ecstasy in the veins,
This strange illumination of the sense!
If Satyavan had lived, love would have died;
But Satyavan is dead and love shall live
A little while in thy sad breast, until
His face and body fade on memory’s wall
Where other bodies, other faces come.
When love breaks suddenly into the life
At first man steps into a world of the sun;
In his passion he feels his heavenly element:
But only a fine sunlit patch of earth
The marvellous aspect took of heaven’s outburst;
The snake is there and the worm in the heart of the rose.
A word, a moment’s act can slay the god;
Precarious is his immortality,
He has a thousand ways to suffer and die.
Love cannot live by heavenly food alone,
Only on sap of earth can it survive.
For thy passion was a sensual want refined,
A hunger of the body and the heart;
Thy want can tire and cease or turn elsewhere.
Or love may meet a dire and pitiless end
By bitter treason, or wrath with cruel wounds
Separate, or thy unsatisfied will to others
Depart when first love’s joy lies stripped and slain:
A dull indifference replaces fire
Or an endearing habit imitates love:
An outward and uneasy union lasts
Or the routine of a life’s compromise:
Where once the seed of oneness had been cast
Into a semblance of spiritual ground
By a divine adventure of heavenly powers
Two strive, constant associates without joy,
Two egos straining in a single leash,
Two minds divided by their jarring thoughts,
Two spirits disjoined, for ever separate.
Thus is the ideal falsified in man’s world;
Trivial or sombre, disillusion comes,
Life’s harsh reality stares at the soul:
Heaven’s hour adjourned flees into bodiless Time.
Death saves thee from this and saves Satyavan:
He now is safe, delivered from himself;
He travels to silence and felicity.
Call him not back to the treacheries of earth
And the poor petty life of animal Man.
In my vast tranquil spaces let him sleep
In harmony with the mighty hush of death
Where love lies slumbering on the breast of peace.
And thou, go back alone to thy frail world:
Chastise thy heart with knowledge, unhood to see,
Thy nature raised into clear living heights,
The heaven-bird’s view from unimagined peaks.
For when thou givest thy spirit to a dream
Soon hard necessity will smite thee awake:
Purest delight began and it must end.
Thou too shalt know, thy heart no anchor swinging,
Thy cradled soul moored in eternal seas.
Vain are the cycles of thy brilliant mind.
Renounce, forgetting joy and hope and tears,
Thy passionate nature in the bosom profound
Of a happy Nothingness and worldless Calm,
Delivered into my mysterious rest.
One with my fathomless Nihil all forget.
Forget thy fruitless spirit’s waste of force,
Forget the weary circle of thy birth,
Forget the joy and the struggle and the pain,
The vague spiritual quest which first began
When worlds broke forth like clusters of fire-flowers,
And great burning thoughts voyaged through the sky of mind
And Time and its aeons crawled across the vasts
And souls emerged into mortality.”

But Savitri replied to the dark Power:
“A dangerous music now thou findst, O Death,
Melting thy speech into harmonious pain,
And flut’st alluringly to tired hopes
Thy falsehoods mingled with sad strains of truth.
But I forbid thy voice to slay my soul.
My love is not a hunger of the heart,
My love is not a craving of the flesh;
It came to me from God, to God returns.
Even in all that life and man have marred,
A whisper of divinity still is heard,
A breath is felt from the eternal spheres.  
Allowed by Heaven and wonderful to man  
A sweet fire-rhythm of passion chants to love.  
There is a hope in its wild infinite cry;  
It rings with callings from forgotten heights,  
And when its strains are hushed to high-winged souls  
In their empyrean, its burning breath  
Survives beyond, the rapturous core of suns  
That flame for ever pure in skies unseen,  
A voice of the eternal Ecstasy.  
One day I shall behold my great sweet world  
Put off the dire disguises of the gods,  
Unveil from terror and disrobe from sin.  
Appeased we shall draw near our mother’s face,  
We shall cast our candid souls upon her lap;  
Then shall we clasp the ecstasy we chase,  
Then shall we shudder with the long-sought god,  
Then shall we find Heaven’s unexpected strain.  
Not only is there hope for godheads pure;  
The violent and darkened deities  
Leaped down from the one breast in rage to find  
What the white gods had missed: they too are safe;  
A mother’s eyes are on them and her arms  
Stretched out in love desire her rebel sons.  
One who came love and lover and beloved  
Eternal, built himself a wondrous field  
And wove the measures of a marvellous dance.  
There in its circles and its magic turns  
Attracted he arrives, repelled he flees.  
In the wild devious promptings of his mind  
He tastes the honey of tears and puts off joy  
Repenting, and has laughter and has wrath,  
And both are a broken music of the soul  
Which seeks out reconciled its heavenly rhyme.  
Ever he comes to us across the years  
Bearing a new sweet face that is the old.
His bliss laughs to us or it calls concealed
Like a far-heard unseen entrancing flute
From moonlit branches in the throbbing woods,
Tempting our angry search and passionate pain.
Disguised the Lover seeks and draws our souls.
He named himself for me, grew Satyavan.
For we were man and woman from the first,
The twin souls born from one undying fire.
Did he not dawn on me in other stars?
How has he through the thickets of the world
Pursued me like a lion in the night
And come upon me suddenly in the ways
And seized me with his glorious golden leap!
Unsatisfied he yearned for me through time,
Sometimes with wrath and sometimes with sweet peace
Desiring me since first the world began.
He rose like a wild wave out of the floods
And dragged me helpless into seas of bliss.
Out of my curtained past his arms arrive;
They have touched me like the soft persuading wind,
They have plucked me like a glad and trembling flower,
And clasped me happily burned in ruthless flame.
I too have found him charmed in lovely forms
And run delighted to his distant voice
And pressed to him past many dreadful bars.
If there is a yet happier greater god,
Let him first wear the face of Satyavan
And let his soul be one with him I love;
So let him seek me that I may desire.
For only one heart beats within my breast
And one god sits there throned. Advance, O Death,
Beyond the phantom beauty of this world;
For of its citizens I am not one.
I cherish God the Fire, not God the Dream.”
But Death once more inflicted on her heart
The majesty of his calm and dreadful voice:
“A bright hallucination are thy thoughts.  
A prisoner haled by a spiritual cord,  
Of thy own sensuous will the ardent slave,  
Thou sendest eagle-poised to meet the sun  
Words winged with the red splendour of thy heart.  
But knowledge dwells not in the passionate heart;  
The heart’s words fall back unheard from Wisdom’s throne.  
Vain is thy longing to build heaven on earth.  
Artificer of Ideal and Idea,  
Mind, child of Matter in the womb of Life,  
To higher levels persuades his parents’ steps:  
Inapt, they follow ill the daring guide.  
But Mind, a glorious traveller in the sky,  
Walks lamely on the earth with footsteps slow;  
Hardly he can mould the life’s rebellious stuff,  
Hardly can he hold the galloping hooves of sense:  
His thoughts look straight into the very heavens;  
They draw their gold from a celestial mine,  
His acts work painfully a common ore.  
All thy high dreams were made by Matter’s mind  
To solace its dull work in Matter’s jail,  
Its only house where it alone seems true.  
A solid image of reality  
Carved out of being to prop the works of Time,  
Matter on the firm earth sits strong and sure.  
It is the first-born of created things,  
It stands the last when mind and life are slain,  
And if it ended all would cease to be.  
All else is only its outcome or its phase:  
Thy soul is a brief flower by the gardener Mind  
Created in thy matter’s terrain plot;  
It perishes with the plant on which it grows,  
For from earth’s sap it draws its heavenly hue:  
Thy thoughts are gleams that pass on Matter’s verge,  
Thy life a lapsing wave on Matter’s sea.  
A careful steward of Truth’s limited means,
Treasing her founded facts from the squandering Power,
It tethers mind to the tent-posts of sense,
To a leaden grey routine clamps Life’s caprice
And ties all creatures with the cords of Law.
A vessel of transmuting alchemies,
A glue that sticks together mind and life,
If Matter fails, all crumbling cracks and falls.
All upon Matter stands as on a rock.
Yet this security and guarantor
Pressed for credentials an impostor proves:
A cheat of substance where no substance is,
An appearance and a symbol and a nought,
Its forms have no original right to birth:
Its aspect of a fixed stability
Is the cover of a captive motion’s swirl,
An order of the steps of Energy’s dance
Whose footmarks leave for ever the same signs,
A concrete face of unsubstantial Time,
A trickle dotting the emptiness of Space:
A stable-seeming movement without change,
Yet change arrives and the last change is death.
What seemed most real once, is Nihil’s show.
Its figures are snares that trap and prison the sense;
The beginningless Void was its artificer:
Nothing is there but aspects limned by Chance
And seeming shapes of seeming Energy.
All by Death’s mercy breathe and live awhile,
All think and act by the Inconscient’s grace.
Addict of the roseate luxury of thy thoughts,
Turn not thy gaze within thyself to look
At visions in the gleaming crystal, Mind,
Close not thy lids to dream the forms of Gods.
At last to open thy eyes consent and see
The stuff of which thou and the world are made.
Inconscient in the dumb inconscient Void
Inexplicably a moving world sprang forth:
Awhile secure, happily insensible,
It could not rest content with its own truth.
For something on its nescient breast was born
Condemned to see and know, to feel and love,
It watched its acts, imagined a soul within;
It groped for truth and dreamed of Self and God.
When all unconscious was, then all was well.
I, Death, was king and kept my regal state,
Designing my unwilled, unerring plan,
Creating with a calm insentient heart.
In my sovereign power of unreality
Obliging nothingness to take a form,
Infallibly my blind unthinking force
Making by chance a fixity like fate’s,
By whim the formulas of Necessity,
Founded on the hollow ground of the Inane
The sure bizarrerie of Nature’s scheme.
I curved the vacant ether into Space;
A huge expanding and contracting Breath
Harboured the fires of the universe:
I struck out the supreme original spark
And spread its sparse ranked armies through the Inane,
Manufactured the stars from the occult radiances,
Marshalled the platoons of the invisible dance;
I formed earth’s beauty out of atom and gas,
And built from chemic plasm the living man.
Then Thought came in and spoiled the harmonious world:
Matter began to hope and think and feel,
Tissue and nerve bore joy and agony.
The inconscient cosmos strove to learn its task;
An ignorant personal God was born in Mind
And to understand invented reason’s law,
The impersonal Vast throbbed back to man’s desire,
A trouble rocked the great world’s blind still heart
And Nature lost her wide immortal calm.
Thus came this warped incomprehensible scene
Of souls emmeshed in life's delight and pain
And Matter's sleep and Mind's mortality,
Of beings in Nature's prison waiting death
And consciousness left in seeking ignorance
And evolution's slow arrested plan.
This is the world in which thou mov'st, astray
In the tangled pathways of the human mind,
In the issueless circling of thy human life,
Searching for thy soul and thinking God is here.
But where is room for soul or place for God
In the brute immensity of a machine?
A transient Breath thou takest for thy soul,
Born from a gas, a plasm, a sperm, a gene,
A magnified image of man's mind for God,
A shadow of thyself thrown upon Space.
Interposed between the upper and nether Void,
Thy consciousness reflects the world around
In the distorting mirror of Ignorance
Or upwards turns to catch imagined stars.
Or if a half-Truth is playing with the earth
Throwing its light on a dark shadowy ground,
It touches only and leaves a luminous smudge.
Immortality thou claimest for thy spirit,
But immortality for imperfect man,
A god who hurts himself at every step,
Would be a cycle of eternal pain.
Wisdom and love thou claimest as thy right;
But knowledge in this world is error's mate,
A brilliant procuress of Nescience,
And human love a posturer on earth-stage
Who imitates with verve a faery dance.
An extract pressed from hard experience,
Man's knowledge casked in the barrels of Memory
Has the harsh savour of a mortal draught:
A sweet secretion from the erotic glands
Flattering and torturing the burning nerves,
Love is a honey and poison in the breast
Drunk by it as the nectar of the gods.
Earth’s human wisdom is no great-browed power,
And love no gleaming angel from the skies;
If they aspire beyond earth’s dullard air,
Arriving sunwards with frail waxen wings,
How high could reach that forced unnatural flight?
But not on earth can divine wisdom reign
And not on earth can divine love be found;
Heaven-born, only in heaven can they live;
Or else there too perhaps they are shining dreams.
Nay, is not all thou art and doest a dream?
Thy mind and life are tricks of Matter’s force.
If thy mind seems to thee a radiant sun,
If thy life runs a swift and glorious stream,
This is the illusion of thy mortal heart
Dazzled by a ray of happiness or light.
Impotent to live by their own right divine,
Convinced of their brilliant unreality,
When their supporting ground is cut away,
These children of Matter into Matter die.
Even Matter vanishes into Energy’s vague
And Energy is a motion of old Nought.
How shall the Ideal’s unsubstantial hues
Be painted stiff on earth’s vermilion blur,
A dream within a dream come doubly true?
How shall the will-o’-the-wisp become a star?
The Ideal is a malady of thy mind,
A bright delirium of thy speech and thought,
A strange wine of beauty lifting thee to false sight.
A noble fiction of thy yearnings made,
Thy human imperfection it must share:
Its forms in Nature disappoint the heart,
And never shall it find its heavenly shape
And never can it be fulfilled in Time.
O soul misled by the splendour of thy thoughts,
O earthly creature with thy dream of heaven,
Obey, resigned and still, the earthly law.
Accept the brief light that falls upon thy days;
Take what thou canst of Life’s permitted joy;
Submitting to the ordeal of fate’s scourge
Suffer what thou must of toil and grief and care.
There shall approach silencing thy passionate heart
My long calm night of everlasting sleep:
There into the hush from which thou cam’st retire.”

END OF CANTO TWO