

Canto Seven

The Descent into Night

A MIND absolved from life, made calm to know,
A heart divorced from the blindness and the pang,
The seal of tears, the bond of ignorance,
He turned to find that wide world-failure's cause.
Away he looked from Nature's visible face
And sent his gaze into the viewless Vast,
The formidable unknown Infinity,
Asleep behind the endless coil of things,
That carries the universe in its timeless breadths
And the ripples of its being are our lives.
The worlds are built by its unconscious Breath
And Matter and Mind are its figures or its powers,
Our waking thoughts the output of its dreams.
The veil was rent that covers Nature's depths:
He saw the fount of the world's lasting pain
And the mouth of the black pit of Ignorance;
The evil guarded at the roots of life
Raised up its head and looked into his eyes.
On a dim bank where dies subjective Space,
From a stark ridge overlooking all that is,
A tenebrous awakened Nescience,
Her wide blank eyes wondering at Time and Form,
Stared at the inventions of the living Void
And the Abyss whence our beginnings rose.
Behind appeared a grey carved mask of Night
Watching the birth of all created things.
A hidden Puissance conscious of its force,
A vague and lurking Presence everywhere,
A contrary Doom that threatens all things made,
A Death figuring as the dark seed of life,
Seemed to engender and to slay the world.

Then from the sombre mystery of the gulfs
And from the hollow bosom of the Mask
Something crept forth that seemed a shapeless Thought.
A fatal Influence upon creatures stole
Whose lethal touch pursued the immortal spirit,
On life was laid the haunting finger of death
And overcast with error, grief and pain
The soul's native will for truth and joy and light.
A deformation coiled that claimed to be
The being's very turn, Nature's true drive.
A hostile and perverting Mind at work
In every corner ensconced of conscious life
Corrupted Truth with her own formulas;
Interceptor of the listening of the soul,
Afflicting knowledge with the hue of doubt
It captured the oracles of the occult gods,
Effaced the signposts of Life's pilgrimage,
Cancelled the firm rock-edicts graded by Time,
And on the foundations of the cosmic Law
Erected its bronze pylons of misrule.
Even Light and Love by that cloaked danger's spell
Turned from the brilliant nature of the gods
To fallen angels and misleading suns,
Became themselves a danger and a charm,
A perverse sweetness, heaven-born malefice:
Its power could deform divinest things.
A wind of sorrow breathed upon the world;
All thought with falsehood was besieged, all act
Stamped with defect or with frustration's sign,
All high attempt with failure or vain success,
But none could know the reason of his fall.
The grey Mask whispered and, though no sound was heard,
Yet in the ignorant heart a seed was sown
That bore black fruit of suffering, death and bale.
Out of the chill steppes of a bleak Unseen
Invisible, wearing the Night's grey mask,

Arrived the shadowy dreadful messengers,
Invaders from a dangerous world of power,
Ambassadors of evil's absolute.
In silence the inaudible voices spoke,
Hands that none saw planted the fatal grain,
No form was seen, yet a dire work was done,
An iron decree in crooked uncials written
Imposed a law of sin and adverse fate.
Life looked at him with changed and sombre eyes:
Her beauty he saw and the yearning heart in things
That with a little happiness is content,
Answering to a small ray of truth or love;
He saw her gold sunlight and her far blue sky,
Her green of leaves and hue and scent of flowers
And the charm of children and the love of friends
And the beauty of women and kindly hearts of men,
But saw too the dreadful Powers that drive her moods
And the anguish she has strewn upon her ways,
Fate waiting on the unseen steps of men
And her evil and sorrow and last gift of death.
A breath of disillusion and decadence
Corrupting watched for Life's maturity
And made to rot the full grain of the soul:
Progress became a purveyor of Death.
A world that clung to the law of a slain Light
Cherished the putrid corpses of dead truths,
Hailed twisted forms as things free, new and true,
Beauty from ugliness and evil drank
Feeling themselves guests at a banquet of the gods
And tasted corruption like a high-spiced food.
A darkness settled on the heavy air;
It hunted the bright smile from Nature's lips
And slew the native confidence in her heart
And put fear's crooked look into her eyes.
The lust that warps the spirit's natural good
Replaced by a manufactured virtue and vice

The frank spontaneous impulse of the soul:
Afflicting Nature with the dual's lie,
Their twin values whetted a forbidden zest,
Made evil a relief from spurious good,
The ego battened on righteousness and sin
And each became an instrument of Hell.
In rejected heaps by a monotonous road
The old simple delights were left to lie
On the wasteland of life's descent to Night.
All glory of life was dimmed, tarnished with doubt;
All beauty ended in an aging face;
All power was dubbed a tyranny cursed by God
And Truth a fiction needed by the mind:
The chase of joy was now a tired hunt;
All knowledge was left a questioning Ignorance.

As from a womb obscure he saw emerge
The body and visage of a dark Unseen
Hidden behind the fair outsides of life.
Its dangerous commerce is our suffering's cause.
Its breath is a subtle poison in men's hearts;
All evil starts from that ambiguous face.
A peril haunted now the common air;
The world grew full of menacing Energies,
And wherever turned for help or hope his eyes,
In field and house, in street and camp and mart
He met the prowl and stealthy come and go
Of armed disquieting bodied Influences.
A march of goddess figures dark and nude
Alarmed the air with grandiose unease;
Appalling footsteps drew invisibly near,
Shapes that were threats invaded the dream-light,
And ominous beings passed him on the road
Whose very gaze was a calamity:
A charm and sweetness sudden and formidable,
Faces that raised alluring lips and eyes

Approached him armed with beauty like a snare,
But hid a fatal meaning in each line
And could in a moment dangerously change.
But he alone discerned that screened attack.
A veil upon the inner vision lay,
A force was there that hid its dreadful steps;
All was belied, yet thought itself the truth;
All were beset but knew not of the siege:
For none could see the authors of their fall.

Aware of some dark wisdom still withheld
That was the seal and warrant of this strength,
He followed the track of dim tremendous steps
Returning to the night from which they came.
A tract he reached unbuilt and owned by none:
There all could enter but none stay for long.
It was a no man's land of evil air,
A crowded neighbourhood without one home,
A borderland between the world and hell.
There unreality was Nature's lord:
It was a space where nothing could be true,
For nothing was what it had claimed to be:
A high appearance wrapped a specious void.
Yet nothing would confess its own pretence
Even to itself in the ambiguous heart:
A vast deception was the law of things;
Only by that deception they could live.
An unsubstantial Nihil guaranteed
The falsehood of the forms this Nature took
And made them seem awhile to be and live.
A borrowed magic drew them from the Void;
They took a shape and stuff that was not theirs
And showed a colour that they could not keep,
Mirrors to a phantasm of reality.
Each rainbow brilliance was a splendid lie;
A beauty unreal graced a glamour face.
Nothing could be relied on to remain:

Joy nurtured tears and good an evil proved,
But never out of evil one plucked good:
Love ended early in hate, delight killed with pain,
Truth into falsity grew and death ruled life.
A Power that laughed at the mischiefs of the world,
An irony that joined the world's contraries
And flung them into each other's arms to strive,
Put a sardonic rictus on God's face.
Aloof, its influence entered everywhere
And left a cloven hoof-mark on the breast;
A twisted heart and a strange sombre smile
Mocked at the sinister comedy of life.
Announcing the advent of a perilous Form
An ominous tread softened its dire footfall
That none might understand or be on guard;
None heard until a dreadful grasp was close.
Or else all augured a divine approach,
An air of prophecy felt, a heavenly hope,
Listened for a gospel, watched for a new star.
The Fiend was visible but cloaked in light;
He seemed a helping angel from the skies:
He armed untruth with Scripture and the Law;
He deceived with wisdom, with virtue slew the soul
And led to perdition by the heavenward path.
A lavish sense he gave of power and joy,
And, when arose the warning from within,
He reassured the ear with dulcet tones
Or took the mind captive in its own net;
His rigorous logic made the false seem true.
Amazing the elect with holy lore
He spoke as with the very voice of God.
The air was full of treachery and ruse;
Truth-speaking was a stratagem in that place;
Ambush lurked in a smile and peril made
Safety its cover, trust its entry's gate:
Falsehood came laughing with the eyes of truth;

Each friend might turn an enemy or spy,
The hand one clasped ensleaved a dagger's stab
And an embrace could be Doom's iron cage.
Agony and danger stalked their trembling prey
And softly spoke as to a timid friend:
Attack sprang suddenly vehement and unseen;
Fear leaped upon the heart at every turn
And cried out with an anguished dreadful voice;
It called for one to save but none came near.
All warily walked, for death was ever close;
Yet caution seemed a vain expense of care,
For all that guarded proved a deadly net,
And when after long suspense salvation came
And brought a glad relief disarming strength,
It served as a smiling passage to worse fate.
There was no truce and no safe place to rest;
One dared not slumber or put off one's arms:
It was a world of battle and surprise.
All who were there lived for themselves alone;
All warred against all, but with a common hate
Turned on the mind that sought some higher good;
Truth was exiled lest she should dare to speak
And hurt the heart of darkness with her light
Or bring her pride of knowledge to blaspheme
The settled anarchy of established things.

Then the scene changed, but kept its dreadful core:
Altering its form the life remained the same.
A capital was there without a State:
It had no ruler, only groups that strove.
He saw a city of ancient Ignorance
Founded upon a soil that knew not Light.
There each in his own darkness walked alone:
Only they agreed to differ in Evil's paths,
To live in their own way for their own selves
Or to enforce a common lie and wrong;

There Ego was lord upon his peacock seat
And Falsehood sat by him, his mate and queen:
The world turned to them as Heaven to Truth and God.
Injustice justified by firm decrees
The sovereign weights of Error's legalised trade,
But all the weights were false and none the same;
Ever she watched with her balance and a sword,
Lest any sacrilegious word expose
The sanctified formulas of her old misrule.
In high professions wrapped self-will walked wide
And licence stalked prating of order and right:
There was no altar raised to Liberty;
True freedom was abhorred and hunted down:
Harmony and tolerance nowhere could be seen;
Each group proclaimed its dire and naked Law.
A frame of ethics knobbed with scriptural rules
Or a theory passionately believed and praised
A table seemed of high Heaven's sacred code.
A formal practice mailed and iron-shod
Gave to a rude and ruthless warrior kind
Drawn from the savage bowels of the earth
A proud stern poise of harsh nobility,
A civic posture rigid and formidable.
But all their private acts belied the pose:
Power and utility were their Truth and Right,
An eagle rapacity clawed its coveted good,
Beaks pecked and talons tore all weaker prey.
In their sweet secrecy of pleasant sins
Nature they obeyed and not a moralist God.
Inconscient traders in bundles of contraries,
They did what in others they would persecute;
When their eyes looked upon their fellow's vice,
An indignation flamed, a virtuous wrath;
Oblivious of their own deep-hid offence,
Moblike they stoned a neighbour caught in sin.
A pragmatist judge within passed false decrees,

Posed worst iniquities on equity's base,
Reasoned ill actions just, sanctioned the scale
Of the merchant ego's interest and desire.
Thus was a balance kept, the world could live.
A zealot fervour pushed their ruthless cults,
All faith not theirs bled scourged as heresy;
They questioned, captived, tortured, burned or smote
And forced the soul to abandon right or die.
Amid her clashing creeds and warring sects
Religion sat upon a blood-stained throne.
A hundred tyrannies oppressed and slew
And founded unity upon fraud and force.
Only what seemed was prized as real there:
The ideal was a cynic ridicule's butt;
Hooted by the crowd, mocked by enlightened wits,
Spiritual seeking wandered outcasted, —
A dreamer's self-deceiving web of thought
Or mad chimaera deemed or hypocrite's fake,
Its passionate instinct trailed through minds obscure
Lost in the circuits of the Ignorance.
A lie was there the truth and truth a lie.
Here must the traveller of the upward Way —
For daring Hell's kingdoms winds the heavenly route —
Pause or pass slowly through that perilous space,
A prayer upon his lips and the great Name.
If probed not all discernment's keen spear-point,
He might stumble into falsity's endless net.
Over his shoulder often he must look back
Like one who feels on his neck an enemy's breath;
Else stealing up behind a treasonous blow
Might prostrate cast and pin to unholy soil,
Pierced through his back by Evil's poignant stake.
So might one fall on the Eternal's road
Forfeiting the spirit's lonely chance in Time
And no news of him reach the waiting gods,
Marked "missing" in the register of souls,

His name the index of a failing hope,
The position of a dead remembered star.
Only were safe who kept God in their hearts:
Courage their armour, faith their sword, they must walk,
The hand ready to smite, the eye to scout,
Casting a javelin regard in front,
Heroes and soldiers of the army of Light.
Hardly even so, the grisly danger past,
Released into a calmer purer air,
They dared at length to breathe and smile once more.
Once more they moved beneath a real sun.
Though Hell claimed rule, the spirit still had power.
This No-man's-land he passed without debate;
Him the heights missioned, him the Abyss desired:
None stood across his way, no voice forbade.
For swift and easy is the downward path,
And now towards the Night was turned his face.

A greater darkness waited, a worse reign,
If worse can be where all is evil's extreme;
Yet to the cloaked the uncloaked is naked worst.
There God and Truth and the supernal Light
Had never been or else had power no more.
As when one slips in a deep moment's trance
Over mind's border into another world,
He crossed a boundary whose stealthy trace
Eye could not see but only the soul feel.
Into an armoured fierce domain he came
And saw himself wandering like a lost soul
Amid grimed walls and savage slums of Night.
Around him crowded grey and squalid huts
Neighbouring proud palaces of perverted Power,
Inhuman quarters and demoniac wards.
A pride in evil hugged its wretchedness;
A misery haunting splendour pressed those fell
Dun suburbs of the cities of dream-life.

There Life displayed to the spectator soul
The shadow depths of her strange miracle.
A strong and fallen goddess without hope,
Obscured, deformed by some dire Gorgon spell,
As might a harlot empress in a bouge,
Nude, unashamed, exulting she upraised
Her evil face of perilous beauty and charm
And, drawing panic to a shuddering kiss
Twixt the magnificence of her fatal breasts,
Allured to their abyss the spirit's fall.
Across his field of sight she multiplied
As on a scenic film or moving plate
The implacable splendour of her nightmare pomps.
On the dark background of a soulless world
She staged between a lurid light and shade
Her dramas of the sorrow of the depths
Written on the agonised nerves of living things:
Epics of horror and grim majesty,
Wry statues spat and stiffened in life's mud,
A glut of hideous forms and hideous deeds
Paralysed pity in the hardened breast.
In booths of sin and night-repairs of vice
Styled infamies of the body's concupiscence
And sordid imaginations etched in flesh,
Turned lust into a decorative art:
Abusing Nature's gift her pervert skill
Immortalised the sown grain of living death,
In a mud goblet poured the bacchic wine,
To a satyr gave the thyrsus of a god.
Impure, sadistic, with grimacing mouths,
Grey foul inventions gruesome and macabre
Came televised from the gulfs of Night.
Her craft ingenious in monstrosity,
Impatient of all natural shape and poise,
A gape of nude exaggerated lines,
Gave caricature a stark reality,

And art-parades of weird distorted forms,
And gargoyle masques obscene and terrible
Trampled to tormented postures the torn sense.
An inexorable evil's worshipper,
She made vileness great and sublimated filth;
A dragon power of reptile energies
And strange epiphanies of grovelling Force
And serpent grandeurs couching in the mire
Drew adoration to a gleam of slime.
All Nature pulled out of her frame and base
Was twisted into an unnatural pose:
Repulsion stimulated inert desire;
Agony was made a red-spiced food for bliss,
Hatred was trusted with the work of lust
And torture took the form of an embrace;
A ritual anguish consecrated death;
Worship was offered to the Undivine.
A new aesthesis of Inferno's art
That trained the mind to love what the soul hates,
Imposed allegiance on the quivering nerves
And forced the unwilling body to vibrate.
Too sweet and too harmonious to excite
In this regime that soiled the being's core,
Beauty was banned, the heart's feeling dulled to sleep
And cherished in their place sensation's thrills;
The world was probed for jets of sense-appeal.
Here cold material intellect was the judge
And needed sensual prick and jog and lash
That its hard dryness and dead nerves might feel
Some passion and power and acrid point of life.
A new philosophy theorised evil's rights,
Gloried in the shimmering rot of decadence,
Or gave to a python Force persuasive speech
And armed with knowledge the primaeval brute.
Over life and Matter only brooding bowed,
Mind changed to the image of a rampant beast;

It scrambled into the pit to dig for truth
And lighted its search with the subconscious's flares.
Thence bubbling rose sullyng the upper air,
The filth and festering secrets of the Abyss:
This it called positive fact and real life.
This now composed the fetid atmosphere.
A wild-beast passion crept from secret Night
To watch its prey with fascinating eyes:
Around him like a fire with sputtering tongues
There lolled and laughed a bestial ecstasy;
The air was packed with longings brute and fierce;
Crowding and stinging in a monstrous swarm
Pressed with a noxious hum into his mind
Thoughts that could poison Nature's heavenliest breath,
Forcing reluctant lids assailed the sight
Acts that revealed the mystery of Hell.
All that was there was on this pattern made.

A race possessed inhabited those parts.
A force demoniac lurking in man's depths
That heaves suppressed by the heart's human law,
Awed by the calm and sovereign eyes of Thought,
Can in a fire and earthquake of the soul
Arise and, calling to its native night,
Overthrow the reason, occupy the life
And stamp its hoof on Nature's shaking ground:
This was for them their being's flaming core.
A mighty energy, a monster god,
Hard to the strong, implacable to the weak,
It stared at the harsh unpitying world it made
With the stony eyelids of its fixed idea.
Its heart was drunk with a dire hunger's wine,
In others' suffering felt a thrilled delight
And of death and ruin the grandiose music heard.
To have power, to be master, was sole virtue and good:
It claimed the whole world for Evil's living room,

Its party's grim totalitarian reign
The cruel destiny of breathing things.
All on one plan was shaped and standardised
Under a dark dictatorship's breathless weight.
In street and house, in councils and in courts
Beings he met who looked like living men
And climbed in speech upon high wings of thought
But harboured all that is subhuman, vile
And lower than the lowest reptile's crawl.
The reason meant for nearness to the gods
And uplift to heavenly scale by the touch of mind
Only enhanced by its enlightening ray
Their inborn nature's wry monstrosity.
Often, a familiar visage studying
Joyfully encountered at some dangerous turn,
Hoping to recognise a look of light,
His vision warned by the spirit's inward eye
Discovered suddenly Hell's trademark there,
Or saw with the inner sense that cannot err,
In the semblance of a fair or virile form
The demon and the goblin and the ghoul.
An insolence reigned of cold stone-hearted strength
Mighty, obeyed, approved by the Titan's law,
The huge laughter of a giant cruelty
And fierce glad deeds of ogre violence.
In that wide cynic den of thinking beasts
One looked in vain for a trace of pity or love;
There was no touch of sweetness anywhere,
But only Force and its acolytes, greed and hate:
There was no help for suffering, none to save,
None dared resist or speak a noble word.
Armed with the aegis of tyrannic Power,
Signing the edicts of her dreadful rule
And using blood and torture as a seal,
Darkness proclaimed her slogans to the world.
A servile blinkered silence hushed the mind

Or only it repeated lessons taught,
While mitred, holding the good shepherd's staff,
Falsehood enthroned on awed and prostrate hearts
The cults and creeds that organise living death
And slay the soul on the altar of a lie.
All were deceived or served their own deceit;
Truth in that stifling atmosphere could not live.
There wretchedness believed in its own joy
And fear and weakness hugged their abject depths;
All that is low and sordid-thoughted, base,
All that is drab and poor and miserable,
Breathed in a lax content its natural air
And felt no yearning of divine release:
Arrogant, gibing at more luminous states
The people of the gulfs despised the sun.
A barriered autarchy excluded light;
Fixed in its will to be its own grey self,
It vaunted its norm unique and splendid type:
It soothed its hunger with a plunderer's dream;
Flaunting its cross of servitude like a crown,
It clung to its dismal harsh autonomy.
A bull-throat bellowed with its brazen tongue;
Its hard and shameless clamour filling Space
And threatening all who dared to listen to truth
Claimed the monopoly of the battered ear;
A deafened acquiescence gave its vote,
And braggart dogmas shouted in the night
Kept for the fallen soul once deemed a god
The pride of its abysmal absolute.

A lone discoverer in these menacing realms
Guarded like termite cities from the sun,
Oppressed mid crowd and tramp and noise and flare,
Passing from dusk to deeper dangerous dusk,
He wrestled with powers that snatched from mind its light
And smote from him their clinging influences.

Soon he emerged in a dim wall-less space.
For now the peopled tracts were left behind;
He walked between wide banks of failing eve.
Around him grew a gaunt spiritual blank,
A threatening waste, a sinister loneliness
That left mind bare to an unseen assault,
An empty page on which all that willed could write
Stark monstrous messages without control.
A travelling dot on downward roads of Dusk
Mid barren fields and barns and straggling huts
And a few crooked and phantasmal trees,
He faced a sense of death and conscious void.
But still a hostile Life unseen was there
Whose deathlike poise resisting light and truth
Made living a bleak gap in nullity.
He heard the grisly voices that deny;
Assailed by thoughts that swarmed like spectral hordes,
A prey to the staring phantoms of the gloom
And terror approaching with its lethal mouth,
Driven by a strange will down ever down,
The sky above a communiqué of Doom,
He strove to shield his spirit from despair,
But felt the horror of the growing Night
And the Abyss rising to claim his soul.
Then ceased the abodes of creatures and their forms
And solitude wrapped him in its voiceless folds.
All vanished suddenly like a thought expunged;
His spirit became an empty listening gulf
Void of the dead illusion of a world:
Nothing was left, not even an evil face.
He was alone with the grey python Night.
A dense and nameless Nothing conscious, mute,
Which seemed alive but without body or mind,
Lusted all beings to annihilate
That it might be for ever nude and sole.
As in a shapeless beast's intangible jaws,

Gripped, strangled by that lusting viscous blot,
Attracted to some black and giant mouth
And swallowing throat and a huge belly of doom,
His being from its own vision disappeared
Drawn towards depths that hungered for its fall.
A formless void oppressed his struggling brain,
A darkness grim and cold benumbed his flesh,
A whispered grey suggestion chilled his heart;
Haled by a serpent-force from its warm home
And dragged to extinction in bleak vacancy
Life clung to its seat with cords of gasping breath;
Lapped was his body by a tenebrous tongue.
Existence smothered travailed to survive;
Hope strangled perished in his empty soul,
Belief and memory abolished died
And all that helps the spirit in its course.
There crawled through every tense and aching nerve
Leaving behind its poignant quaking trail
A nameless and unutterable fear.
As a sea nears a victim bound and still,
The approach alarmed his mind for ever dumb
Of an implacable eternity
Of pain inhuman and intolerable.
This he must bear, his hope of heaven estranged;
He must ever exist without extinction's peace
In a slow suffering Time and tortured Space,
An anguished nothingness his endless state.
A lifeless vacancy was now his breast,
And in the place where once was luminous thought,
Only remained like a pale motionless ghost
An incapacity for faith and hope
And the dread conviction of a vanquished soul
Immortal still but with its godhead lost,
Self lost and God and touch of happier worlds.
But he endured, stilled the vain terror, bore
The smothering coils of agony and affright;

Then peace returned and the soul's sovereign gaze.
To the blank horror a calm Light replied:
Immutable, undying and unborn,
Mighty and mute the Godhead in him woke
And faced the pain and danger of the world.
He mastered the tides of Nature with a look:
He met with his bare spirit naked Hell.

END OF CANTO SEVEN