

The Best
Poems

of the

ENGLISH
LANGUAGE

FROM CHAUCER THROUGH FROST

Selected and with Commentary by

HAROLD BLOOM

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THE BEST POEMS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR THE MOST PART, I have employed modernized texts, with only a few major exceptions: Chaucer, Spenser, Raleigh, Crashaw, and one or two others. Chaucer loses too much when we abandon his Middle English, while Spenser and Raleigh are deliberately archaic, as is Crashaw in his celebrations of Saint Teresa of Avila.

My introduction explains the concept and purpose of this book, but the center, for me, of my commentaries here is to be found in the essay "The Art of Reading Poetry."

The headnotes to poets and to poems vary greatly in length, and may sometimes appear disproportionate in regard to how fully the poets are represented. Thus, the discussions of Ezra Pound and of H. D. range widely, and give a total vision of their work. I have refrained from analyzing my selections from Shakespeare, as I do for Milton, because Shakespeare is more accessible to the common reader, while Milton requires mediation.

I acknowledge the debts owed to my research assistants: Brad Woodworth, Brett Foster, Deborah Kroplick, Jesse Zuba, and Stuart Watson. My wife, Jeanne, also aided in gathering together this volume.

Harold Bloom
Timothy Dwight College
Yale University
March 6, 2003

INTRODUCTION

THOUGH ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY, this vast book is intended for every kind of *personal* use, so that literary history is essentially irrelevant to its purposes, as are all considerations of political correctness and incorrectness. The best poems published by women before 1923 are here, chosen entirely on the basis of their aesthetic value. Poetry is in the first place poetry, a high and ancient art. It raises your consciousness of glory and of grief, of woe or wonder, as Shakespeare phrased it. Shakespeare spoke of “wonder-wounded hearers”: they are the readers this volume seeks to serve.

My chronological limits are set by Geoffrey Chaucer, born around 1343, and Hart Crane, born in 1899. If poets born in the twentieth century were included here, many would be from Canada, the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa, but because of the span covered, everyone here wrote in Great Britain or the United States.

I have included no poem or excerpt from a longer work that does not meet (in my judgment) the highest aesthetic and cognitive standards that poetry can exemplify. There are 108 poets represented in this book (aside from Anonymous), with about 24 given in something like their full abundance. Essentially, this is the anthology I’ve always wanted to possess. It reflects sixty years of deep and passionate reading, going back to my love of William Blake and Hart Crane, of William Shakespeare and John Milton, that vitalized my life from my twelfth year onward.

What is the use of great poetry for life? Wallace Stevens said that poetry was one of the enlargements of life. Oscar Wilde, marvelous critic and dramatist though a weak poet, remarked that all art was perfectly useless, an irony we need not literalize. Wilde knew, better than almost all of us, that Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Mozart are superbly useful: they give the more difficult pleasures that can persuade us to abandon pleasures that are too easy, to adopt Shelley's formulation of the Sublime mode.

Ultimately, we seek out the best poems because something in many, if not most, of us quests for the transcendental and extraordinary, however secular, however well within the realm of the natural. We long, as Wordsworth wrote, for "something evermore about to be." The marvelous comes to us, when it comes, in very different forms: ideally in another person, but sometimes by an otherness in the self.

THE BEST POEMS OF
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-------|
| Introduction | xxvii |
| THE ART OF READING POETRY | 1 |
| GEOFFREY CHAUCER | 30 |
| FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES | 32 |
| <i>from</i> The General Prologue | 32 |
| <i>from</i> The Wife of Bath's Prologue | 37 |
| <i>from</i> The Pardoner's Prologue | 46 |
| WILLIAM DUNBAR | 50 |
| Lament for the Makers | 50 |
| PETRARCHAN POETRY | 53 |
| SIR THOMAS WYATT | 55 |
| Whoso List to Hunt | 55 |
| They Flee from Me | 55 |
| SIR PHILIP SIDNEY | 56 |
| <i>from</i> Astrophel and Stella | 56 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| EDMUND SPENSER | 57 |
| THE CAVE OF MAMMON | 65 |
| THE BOWER OF BLISS | 67 |
| THE MUTABILITIE CANTOS | 69 |
| AMORETTI | 72 |
| <i>from</i> The Faerie Queene: The Gardens of Adonis | 73 |
| EPITHALAMION | 79 |
| Epithalamion | 80 |
| PROTHALAMION | 91 |
| Prothalamion | 92 |
| SIR WALTER RALEGH | 97 |
| <i>from</i> The Ocean to Cynthia | 99 |
| Answer to Marlowe | 102 |
| CHIDIOCK TICHBORNE | 103 |
| Tichborne's Elegy | 103 |
| ROBERT SOUTHWELL | 104 |
| The Burning Babe | 104 |
| CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE | 105 |
| <i>from</i> Tamburlaine | 106 |
| The Passionate Shepherd to His Love | 109 |
| MICHAEL DRAYTON | 110 |
| <i>from</i> Idea | 110 |
| WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE | 111 |
| The Phoenix and Turtle | 113 |
| <i>from</i> Hamlet | 115 |
| <i>from</i> Troilus and Cressida | 120 |
| <i>from</i> Measure for Measure | 122 |
| <i>from</i> King Lear | 124 |
| <i>from</i> The Tempest | 126 |
| Sonnets | 127 |
| XIX: "Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws," | 127 |
| XXX: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" | 127 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| LIII: "What is your substance, whereof are you made," | 128 |
| LV: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments" | 128 |
| LXXIII: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" | 128 |
| LXXXVI: "Was it the proud full sail of this great verse," | 129 |
| LXXXVII: "Farewell—thou art too dear for my possessing," | 129 |
| XCIV: "They that have power to hurt and will do none," | 130 |
| CVII: "Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul" | 130 |
| CXVI: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" | 130 |
| CXXI: "'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed," | 131 |
| CXXIX: "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame," | 131 |
| CXXX: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;" | 131 |
| CXLIV: "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair," | 132 |
| Songs | 132 |
| Dirge | 132 |
| When That I Was and a Little Tiny Boy | 133 |
| Autolycus' Song | 134 |
| Autolycus As Peddler | 134 |
| THOMAS NASHE | 135 |
| Litany in Time of Plague | 135 |
| THOMAS CAMPION | 136 |
| There Is a Garden in Her Face | 137 |
| When to Her Lute Corinna Sings | 137 |
| When Thou Must Home to Shades of Under Ground | 138 |
| JOHN DONNE | 138 |
| Song | 139 |
| A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day | 140 |
| The Ecstasy | 141 |
| Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness | 144 |
| A Hymn to God the Father | 145 |
| BEN JONSON | 145 |
| To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author | |
| Mr. William Shakespeare | 147 |
| Song: To Celia [1606] | 149 |
| Song: To Celia [1616] | 149 |
| Clerimont's Song | 150 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| TOM O' BEDLAM'S SONG | 150 |
| Tom o' Bedlam's Song | 151 |
| JOHN CLEVELAND | 154 |
| Mark Antony | 154 |
| JAMES SHIRLEY | 155 |
| Dirge | 156 |
| ROBERT HERRICK | 157 |
| To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time | 157 |
| Upon Julia's Clothes | 158 |
| Delight in Disorder | 158 |
| THOMAS CAREW | 159 |
| A Rapture | 159 |
| Song | 163 |
| RICHARD LOVELACE | 164 |
| La Bella Bona Roba | 165 |
| Song | 166 |
| To Althea, from Prison | 166 |
| SIR JOHN SUCKLING | 167 |
| Song | 168 |
| "Out upon it! I have loved" | 168 |
| EDMUND WALLER | 169 |
| Song | 169 |
| ANDREW MARVELL | 170 |
| To His Coy Mistress | 172 |
| THE MOWER POEMS | 173 |
| The Mower Against Gardens | 175 |
| THE MOWER TO THE GLOWWORMS | 176 |
| The Mower to the Glowworms | 177 |
| The Garden | 178 |
| An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland | 180 |

| | |
|--|---------|
| GEORGE HERBERT | 183 |
| The Collar | 185 |
| Jordan (I) | 186 |
| Jordan (II) | 186 |
| Church Monuments | 187 |
| Love (III) | 188 |
| RICHARD CRASHAW | 188 |
| The flaming Heart | 190 |
| HENRY VAUGHAN | 193 |
| Peace | 194 |
| The World | 194 |
| “They are all gone into the world of light!” | 196 |
| Cock-Crowing | 197 |
| THOMAS TRAHERNE | 199 |
| Shadows in the Water | 199 |
| JOHN MILTON | 201 |
| Sonnets | 208 |
| XVII: “When I consider how my light is spent,” | 208 |
| XVIII: “Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones” | 209 |
| XIX: “Methought I saw my late espousèd saint” | 209 |
| LYCIDAS | 210 |
| Lycidas | 217 |
| <i>from</i> Paradise Lost | 221 |
| <i>from</i> Samson Agonistes | 241 |
| JOHN DRYDEN | 243 |
| <i>from</i> Religio Laici | 246 |
| To the Memory of Mr. Oldham | 248 |
| Lines on Milton | 249 |
| JOHN WILMOT, EARL OF ROCHESTER | 249 |
| A Song of a young Lady | 250 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| ALEXANDER POPE | 251 |
| EPISTLE TO AUGUSTUS | 253 |
| THE RAPE OF THE LOCK | 255 |
| THE DUNCIAD | 259 |
| <i>from</i> The Dunciad | 261 |
| SAMUEL JOHNSON | 265 |
| The Vanity of Human Wishes | 266 |
| WILLIAM COLLINS | 275 |
| Ode, Written in the beginning of the Year 1746 | 276 |
| Ode to Evening | 276 |
| THOMAS GRAY | 278 |
| ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD | 278 |
| Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard | 283 |
| CHRISTOPHER SMART | 287 |
| <i>from</i> Jubilate Agno | 288 |
| WILLIAM COWPER | 290 |
| The Castaway | 291 |
| ROBERT BURNS | 293 |
| Address to the Deil | 294 |
| Holy Willie's Prayer | 297 |
| Scots Wha Hae | 300 |
| WILLIAM BLAKE | 301 |
| THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL | 307 |
| SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE | 308 |
| The Sick Rose | 309 |
| The Tyger | 309 |
| Ah! Sun-flower | 310 |
| London | 310 |
| THE MENTAL TRAVELLER | 311 |
| The Mental Traveller | 312 |
| The Crystal Cabinet | 315 |
| <i>from</i> The Four Zoas | 316 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>from</i> Milton | 317 |
| <i>from</i> Jerusalem | 319 |
| <i>from</i> The Gates of Paradise | 321 |
| WILLIAM WORDSWORTH | 321 |
| TINTERN ABBEY | 325 |
| Lines | 326 |
| THE LUCY POEMS | 330 |
| “Strange fits of passion have I known:” | 330 |
| “She dwelt among the untrodden ways” | 331 |
| “Three years she grew in sun and shower,” | 331 |
| “A slumber did my spirit seal;” | 332 |
| “I travelled among unknown men,” | 333 |
| RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE | 333 |
| Resolution and Independence | 334 |
| ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD | 338 |
| Ode | 340 |
| The Solitary Reaper | 346 |
| THE PRELUDE | 347 |
| <i>from</i> The Prelude | 348 |
| SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE | 353 |
| THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER | 357 |
| The Rime of the Ancient Mariner | 357 |
| KUBLA KHAN | 376 |
| Kubla Khan | 376 |
| CHRISTABEL | 379 |
| <i>from</i> Christabel | 379 |
| Dejection: An Ode | 389 |
| GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON | 393 |
| <i>from</i> Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, A Romaunt | 396 |
| DON JUAN | 401 |
| <i>from</i> Don Juan | 402 |
| On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year | 407 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY | 409 |
| PROMETHEUS UNBOUND | 411 |
| Ode to the West Wind | 412 |
| The Two Spirits: An Allegory | 415 |
| <i>from Epipsychidion</i> | 416 |
| ADONAIS | 419 |
| Adonais | 419 |
| <i>from Hellas</i> | 433 |
| With a Guitar, to Jane | 435 |
| Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici | 437 |
| THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE | 438 |
| The Triumph of Life | 439 |
| JOHN KEATS | 456 |
| On the Sea | 459 |
| La Belle Dame Sans Merci | 459 |
| Ode to Psyche | 461 |
| Ode to a Nightingale | 463 |
| Ode on a Grecian Urn | 465 |
| Ode on Melancholy | 466 |
| HYPERION | 467 |
| THE FALL OF HYPERION | 468 |
| The Fall of Hyperion | 469 |
| To Autumn | 482 |
| Bright Star | 483 |
| This Living Hand | 483 |
| WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR | 484 |
| [Rose Aylmer, 1779–1800] | 484 |
| Dirce | 484 |
| On His Seventy-fifth Birthday | 485 |
| THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK | 485 |
| Song by Mr. Cypress | 486 |
| The War-Song of Dinas Vawr | 486 |
| JOHN CLARE | 487 |
| <i>from Badger</i> | 488 |
| [John Clare] | 489 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| I Am | 490 |
| An Invite to Eternity | 490 |
| A Vision | 491 |
| Song [Secret Love] | 492 |
| GEORGE DARLEY | 493 |
| It Is Not Beauty I Demand | 493 |
| The Phoenix | 495 |
| THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES | 497 |
| Lines | 498 |
| Song | 498 |
| Song of the Stygian Naiades | 499 |
| WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT | 500 |
| To a Waterfowl | 501 |
| RALPH WALDO EMERSON | 502 |
| Uriel | 506 |
| Ode, Inscribed to W. H. Channing | 507 |
| Bacchus | 510 |
| Days | 512 |
| HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW | 512 |
| Snow-Flakes | 513 |
| The Cross of Snow | 514 |
| The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls | 514 |
| The Bells of San Blas | 515 |
| EDGAR ALLAN POE | 517 |
| Israfel | 518 |
| The City in the Sea | 520 |
| JONES VERY | 521 |
| The New Birth | 522 |
| The Dead | 522 |
| HENRY DAVID THOREAU | 523 |
| "My life has been the poem I would have writ," | 523 |
| "I am a parcel of vain strivings tied" | 523 |
| "Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird," | 525 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| JULIA WARD HOWE | 525 |
| Battle-Hymn of the Republic | 526 |
| WALT WHITMAN | 527 |
| SONG OF MYSELF | 530 |
| <i>from Song of Myself</i> | 531 |
| As Adam Early in the Morning | 549 |
| CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY | 549 |
| Crossing Brooklyn Ferry | 551 |
| THE "SEA-DRIFT" ELEGIES | 556 |
| <i>from Sea-Drift</i> | 556 |
| "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking," | 556 |
| "As I ebb'd with the ocean of life," | 562 |
| WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOM'D | 564 |
| When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd | 564 |
| The Last Invocation | 571 |
| HERMAN MELVILLE | 572 |
| The Portent | 573 |
| Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12th Century | 573 |
| The Maldive Shark | 574 |
| EMILY DICKINSON | 574 |
| "There's a certain Slant of light," | 579 |
| "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," | 580 |
| "From Blank to Blank—" | 580 |
| "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—" | 581 |
| "I started Early—took my Dog—" | 581 |
| "This Consciousness that is aware" | 582 |
| "Our journey had advanced—" | 583 |
| "The Tint I cannot take—is best—" | 583 |
| "Because I could not stop for Death—" | 584 |
| "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" | 584 |
| "A Light exists in Spring" | 585 |
| "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" | 586 |
| "In Winter in my Room" | 586 |
| "Because that you are going" | 587 |
| "A Pit—but Heaven over it—" | 588 |