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# **A Reading of Life, Other Poems**

George Meredith

# Imprint

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## Poem: A Reading of Life – The Vital Choice

### I.

Or shall we run with Artemis  
Or yield the breast to Aphrodite?  
Both are mighty;  
Both give bliss;  
Each can torture if divided;  
Each claims worship undivided,  
In her wake would have us wallow.

### II.

Youth must offer on bent knees  
Homage unto one or other;  
Earth, the mother,  
This decrees;  
And unto the pallid Scyther  
Either points us shun we either  
Shun or too devoutly follow.



## Poem: A Reading of Life – With The Huntress

Through the water-eye of night,  
Midway between eve and dawn,  
See the chase, the rout, the flight  
In deep forest; oread, faun,  
Goat-foot, antlers laid on neck;  
Ravenous all the line for speed.  
See yon wavy sparkle beck  
Sign of the Virgin Lady's lead.  
Down her course a serpent star  
Coils and shatters at her heels;  
Peals the horn exulting, peals  
Plaintive, is it near or far.  
Huntress, arrowy to pursue,  
In and out of woody glen,  
Under cliffs that tear the blue,  
Over torrent, over fen,  
She and forest, where she skims  
Feathery, darken and relume:  
Those are her white-lightning limbs  
Cleaving loads of leafy gloom.  
Mountains hear her and call back,  
Shrewd with night: a frosty wail  
Distant: her the emerald vale  
Folds, and wonders in her track.  
Now her retinue is lean,  
Many rearward; streams the chase  
Eager forth of covert; seen  
One hot tide the rapturous race.  
Quiver-charged and crescent-crowned,  
Up on a flash the lighted mound  
Leaps she, bow to shoulder, shaft  
Strung to barb with archer's craft,  
Legs like plaited lyre-chords, feet  
Songs to see, past pitch of sweet.  
Fearful swiftness they outrun,  
Shaggy wildness, grey or dun,

Challenge, charge of tusks elude:  
Theirs the dance to tame the rude;  
Beast, and beast in manhood tame,  
Follow we their silver flame.  
Pride of flesh from bondage free,  
Reaping vigour of its waste,  
Marks her servitors, and she  
Sanctifies the unembraced.  
Nought of perilous she reeks;  
Valour clothes her open breast;  
Sweet beyond the thrill of sex;  
Hallowed by the sex confessed.  
Huntress arrowy to pursue,  
Colder she than sunless dew,  
She, that breath of upper air;  
Ay, but never lyrist sang,  
Draught of Bacchus never sprang  
Blood the bliss of Gods to share,  
High o'er sweep of eagle wings,  
Like the run with her, when rings  
Clear her rally, and her dart,  
In the forest's cavern heart,  
Tells of her victorious aim.  
Then is pause and chatter, cheer,  
Laughter at some satyr lame,  
Looks upon the fallen deer,  
Measuring his noble crest;  
Here a favourite in her train,  
Foremost mid her nymphs, caressed;  
All applauded. Shall she reign  
Worshipped? O to be with her there!  
She, that breath of nimble air,  
Lifts the breast to giant power.  
Maid and man, and man and maid,  
Who each other would devour  
Elsewhere, by the chase betrayed,  
There are comrades, led by her,  
Maid-preserver, man-maker.

## Poem: A Reading of Life – With The Persuader

Who murmurs, hither, hither: who  
Where nought is audible so fills the ear?  
Where nought is visible can make appear  
A veil with eyes that waver through,  
Like twilight's pledge of blessed night to come,  
Or day most golden? All unseen and dumb,  
She breathes, she moves, inviting flees,  
Is lost, and leaves the thrilled desire  
To clasp and strike a slackened lyre,  
Till over smiles of hyacinth seas,  
Flame in a crystal vessel sails  
Beneath a dome of jewelled spray,  
For land that drops the rosy day  
On nights of throbbing nightingales.  
Landward did the wonder flit,  
Or heart's desire of her, all earth in it.  
We saw the heavens fling down their rose;  
On rapturous waves we saw her glide;  
The pearly sea-shell half enclose;  
The shoal of sea-nymphs flush the tide;  
And we, afire to kiss her feet, no more  
Behold than tracks along a startled shore,  
With brightened edges of dark leaves that feign  
An ambush hoped, as heartless night remain.  
More closely, warmly: hither, hither! she,  
The very she called forth by ripened blood  
For its next breath of being, murmurs; she,  
Allurement; she, fulfilment; she,  
The stream within us urged to flood;  
Man's cry, earth's answer, heaven's consent; O she,  
Maid, woman and divinity;  
Our over-earthly, inner-earthly mate  
Unmated; she, our hunger and our fruit  
Untasted; she our written fate

Unread; Life's flowering, Life's root:  
Unread, divined; unseen, beheld;  
The evanescent, ever-present she,  
Great Nature's stern necessity  
In radiance clothed, to softness quelled;  
With a sword's edge of sweetness keen to take  
Our breath for bliss, our hearts for fulness break.  
The murmur hushes down, the veil is rent.  
Man's cry, earth's answer, heaven's consent,  
Her form is given to pardoned sight,  
And lets our mortal eyes receive  
The sovereign loveliness of celestial white;  
Adored by them who solitarily pace,  
In dusk of the underworld's perpetual eve,  
The paths among the meadow asphodel,  
Remembering. Never there her face  
Is planetary; reddens to shore sea-shell  
Around such whiteness the enamoured air  
Of noon that clothes her, never there.  
Daughter of light, the joyful light,  
She stands unveiled to nuptial sight,  
Sweet in her disregard of aid  
Divine to conquer or persuade.  
A fountain jets from moss; a flower  
Bends gently where her sunset tresses shower.  
By guerdon of her brilliance may be seen  
With eyelids unabashed the passion's Queen.  
Shorn of attendant Graces she can use  
Her natural snares to make her will supreme.  
A simple nymph it is, inclined to muse  
Before the leader foot shall dip in stream:  
One arm at curve along a rounded thigh;  
Her firm new breasts each pointing its own way  
A knee half bent to shade its fellow shy,  
Where innocence, not nature, signals nay.  
The bud of fresh virginity awaits  
The wooer, and all roseate will she burst:  
She touches on the hour of happy mates;  
Still is she unaware she wakens thirst.

And while commanding blissful sight believe  
It holds her as a body strained to breast,  
Down on the underworld's perpetual eve  
She plunges the possessor dispossessed;  
And bids believe that image, heaving warm,  
Is lost to float like torch-smoke after flame;  
The phantom any breeze blows out of form;  
A thirst's delusion, a defeated aim.  
The rapture shed the torture weaves;  
The direst blow on human heart she deals:  
The pain to know the seen deceives;  
Nought true but what insufferably feels.  
And stabs of her delicious note,  
That is as heavenly light to hearing, heard  
Through shelter leaves, the laughter from her throat,  
We answer as the midnight's morning's bird.  
She laughs, she wakens gleeful cries;  
In her delicious laughter part revealed;  
Yet mother is she more of moans and sighs,  
For longings unappeased and wounds unhealed.  
Yet would she bless, it is her task to bless:  
Yon folded couples, passing under shade,  
Are her rich harvest; bidden caress, caress,  
Consume the fruit in bloom; not disobeyed.  
We dolorous complainers had a dream,  
Wrought on the vacant air from inner fire,  
We saw stand bare of her celestial beam  
The glorious Goddess, and we dared desire.  
Thereat are shown reproachful eyes, and lips  
Of upward curl to meanings half obscure;  
And glancing where a wood-nymph lightly skips  
She nods: at once that creature wears her lure.  
Blush of our being between birth and death:  
Sob of our ripened blood for its next breath:  
Her wily semblance nought of her denies;  
Seems it the Goddess runs, the Goddess hies,  
The generous Goddess yields. And she can arm  
Her dwarfed and twisted with her secret charm;  
Benevolent as Earth to feed her own.

Fully shall they be fed, if they beseech.  
But scorn she has for them that walk alone;  
Blanched men, starved women, whom no arts can plead.  
The men as chief of criminals she disdains,  
And holds the reason in perceptive thought.  
More pitiable, like rivers lacking rains,  
Kissing cold stones, the women shrink for drought.  
Those faceless discords, out of nature strayed,  
Rank of the putrefaction ere decayed,  
In impious singles bear the thorny wreaths:  
Their lives are where harmonious Pleasure breathes  
For couples crowned with flowers that burn in dew.  
Comes there a tremor of night's forest horn  
Across her garden from the insaner crew,  
She darkens to malignity of scorn.  
A shiver courses through her garden-grounds:  
Grunt of the tusky boar, the baying hounds,  
The hunter's shouts, are heard afar, and bring  
Dead on her heart her crimsoned flower of Spring.  
These, the irreverent of Life's design,  
Division between natural and divine  
Would cast; these vaunting barrenness for best,  
In veins of gathered strength Life's tide arrest;  
And these because the roses flood their cheeks,  
Vow them in nature wise as when Love speaks.  
With them is war; and well the Goddess knows  
What undermines the race who mount the rose;  
How the ripe moment, lodged in slumberous hours,  
Enkindled by persuasion overpowers:  
Why weak as are her frailer trailing weeds,  
The strong when Beauty gleams o'er Nature's needs,  
And timely guile unguarded finds them lie.  
They who her sway withstand a sea defy,  
At every point of juncture must be proof;  
Nor look for mercy from the incessant surge  
Her forces mixed of craft and passion urge  
For the one whelming wave to spring aloof.  
She, tenderness, is pitiless to them  
Resisting in her godhead nature's truth.

No flower their face shall be, but writhen stem;  
Their youth a frost, their age the dirge for youth.  
These miserably disinclined,  
The lamentably unembraced,  
Insult the Pleasures Earth designed  
To people and beflower the waste.  
Wherefore the Pleasures pass them by:  
For death they live, in life they die.  
Her head the Goddess from them turns,  
As from grey mounds of ashes in bronze urns.  
She views her quivering couples unconsolated,  
And of her beauty mirror they become,  
Like orchard blossoms, apple, pear and plum,  
Free of the cloud, beneath the flood of gold.  
Crowned with wreaths that burn in dew,  
Her couples whirl, sun-satiated,  
Athirst for shade, they sigh, they wed,  
They play the music made of two:  
Oldest of earth, earth's youngest till earth's end:  
Cunninger than the numbered strings,  
For melodies, for harmonies,  
For mastered discords, and the things  
Not vocable, whose mysteries  
Are inmost Love's, Life's reach of Life extend.  
Is it an anguish overflowing shame  
And the tongue's pudency confides to her,  
With eyes of embers, breath of incense myrrh,  
The woman's marrow in some dear youth's name,  
Then is the Goddess tenderness  
Maternal, and she has a sister's tones  
Benign to soothe intemperate distress,  
Divide despair from hope, and sighs from moans.  
Her gentleness imparts exhaling ease  
To those of her milk-bearer votaries  
As warm of bosom-earth as she; of the source  
Direct; erratic but in heart's excess;  
Being mortal and ill-matched for Love's great force;  
Like green leaves caught with flames by his impress.  
And pray they under skies less overcast,

That swiftly may her star of eve descend,  
Her lustrous morning star fly not too fast,  
To lengthen blissful night will she befriend.  
Unfailing her reply to woman's voice  
In supplication instant. Is it man's,  
She hears, approves his words, her garden scans,  
And him: the flowers are various, he has choice.  
Perchance his wound is deep; she listens long;  
Enjoys what music fills the plaintive song;  
And marks how he, who would be hawk at poise  
Above the bird, his plaintive song enjoys.  
She reads him when his humbled manhood weeps  
To her invoked: distraction is implored.  
A smile, and he is up on godlike leaps  
Above, with his bright Goddess owned the adored.  
His tales of her declare she condescends;  
Can share his fires, not always goads and rends:  
Moreover, quits a throne, and must enclose  
A queenlier gem than woman's wayside rose.  
She bends, he quickens; she breathes low, he springs  
Enraptured; low she laughs, his woes disperse;  
Aloud she laughs and sweeps his varied strings.  
'Tis taught him how for touch of mournful verse  
Rarely the music made of two ascends,  
And Beauty's Queen some other way is won.  
Or it may solve the riddle, that she lends  
Herself to all, and yields herself to none,  
Save heavenliest: though claims by men are raised  
In hot assurance under shade of doubt:  
And numerous are the images bepraised  
As Beauty's Queen, should passion head the rout.  
Be sure the ruddy hue is Love's: to woo  
Love's Fountain we must mount the ruddy hue.  
That is her garden's precept, seen where shines  
Her blood-flower, and its unsought neighbour pines.  
Daughter of light, the joyful light,  
She bids her couples face full East,  
Reflecting radiance, even when from her feast  
Their outstretched arms brown deserts disunite,

The lion-haunted thickets hold apart.  
In love the ruddy hue declares great heart;  
High confidence in her whose aid is lent  
To lovers lifting the tuned instrument,  
Not one of rippled strings and funeral tone.  
And doth the man pursue a tightened zone,  
Then be it as the Laurel God he runs,  
Confirmed to win, with countenance the Sun's.  
Should pity bless the tremulous voice of woe  
He lifts for pity, limp his offspring show.  
For him requiring woman's arts to please  
Infantile tastes with babe reluctances,  
No race of giants! In the woman's veins  
Persuasion ripely runs, through hers the pains.  
Her choice of him, should kind occasion nod,  
Aspiring blends the Titan with the God;  
Yet unto dwarf and mortal, she, submiss  
In her high Lady's mandate, yields the kiss;  
And is it needed that Love's daintier brute  
Be snared as hunter, she will tempt pursuit.  
She is great Nature's ever intimate  
In breast, and doth as ready handmaid wait,  
Until perverted by her senseless male,  
She plays the winding snake, the shrinking snail,  
The flying deer, all tricks of evil fame,  
Elusive to allure, since he grew tame.  
Hence has the Goddess, Nature's earliest Power,  
And greatest and most present, with her dower  
Of the transcendent beauty, gained repute  
For meditated guile. She laughs to hear  
A charge her garden's labyrinths scarce confute,  
Her garden's histories tell of to all near.  
Let it be said, But less upon her guile  
Doth she rely for her immortal smile.  
Still let the rumour spread, and terror screens  
To push her conquests by the simplest means.  
While man abjures not lustihead, nor swerves  
From earth's good labours, Beauty's Queen he serves.

Her spacious garden and her garden's grant  
She offers in reward for handsome cheer:  
Choice of the nymphs whose looks will slant  
The secret down a dewy leer  
Of corner eyelids into haze:  
Many a fair Aphrosyne  
Like flower-bell to honey-bee:  
And here they flicker round the maze  
Bewildering him in heart and head:  
And here they wear the close demure,  
With subtle peeps to reassure:  
Others parade where love has bled,  
And of its crimson weave their mesh:  
Others to snap of fingers leap,  
As bearing breast with love asleep.  
These are her laughters in the flesh.  
Or would she fit a warrior mood,  
She lights her seeming unsubdued,  
And indicates the fortress-key.  
Or is it heart for heart that craves,  
She flecks along a run of waves  
The one to promise deeper sea.  
Bands of her limpid primitives,  
Or patterned in the curious braid,  
Are the blest man's; and whatsoever he gives,  
For what he gives is he repaid.  
Good is it if by him 'tis held  
He wins the fairest ever welled  
From Nature's founts: she whispers it: Even I  
Not fairer! and forbids him to deny,  
Else little is he lover. Those he clasps,  
Intent as tempest, worshipful as prayer, -  
And be they doves or be they asps, -  
Must seem to him the sovereignty fair;  
Else counts he soon among life's wholly tamed.  
Him whom from utter savage she reclaimed,  
Half savage must he stay, would he be crowned  
The lover. Else, past ripeness, deathward bound,  
He reasons; and the totterer Earth detests,

Love shuns, grim logic screws in grasp, is he.  
Doth man divide divine Necessity  
From Joy, between the Queen of Beauty's breasts  
A sword is driven; for those most glorious twain  
Present her; armed to bless and to constrain.  
Of this he perishes; not she, the throned  
On rocks that spout their springs to the sacred mounts.  
A loftier Reason out of deeper founts  
Earth's chosen Goddess bears: by none disowned  
While red blood runs to swell the pulse, she boasts,  
And Beauty, like her star, descends the sky;  
Earth's answer, heaven's consent unto man's cry,  
Uplifted by the innumerable hosts.  
Quickened of Nature's eye and ear,  
When the wild sap at high tide smites  
Within us; or benignly clear  
To vision; or as the iris lights  
On fluctuant waters; she is ours  
Till set of man: the dreamed, the seen;  
Flushing the world with odorous flowers:  
A soft compulsion on terrene  
By heavenly: and the world is hers  
While hunger after Beauty spurs.  
So is it sung in any space  
She fills, with laugh at shallow laws  
Forbidding love's devised embrace,  
The music Beauty from it draws.

