



The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson

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This classic book contains the poems and prose of the well-known Ernest Dowson, and would make an excellent addition to the bookshelf of anyone with a passion for poetry and short literature. Many of the earliest books, particularly those dating back to the 1900s and before, are now extremely scarce and increasingly expensive. We are republishing these classic works in affordable, high quality, modern editions, using the original text and artwork.

The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson Details

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From Reader Review The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson for online ebook

Jack says

"I have been faithful to thee Cynara!, in my fashion." This poem and the memoir by Alfred Symons are worth 5 stars alone.

Eb Daniels says

Two haunting phrases - "gone with the wind" and "days of wine and roses" - have entered English vernacular courtesy of Ernest Dowson, but few are familiar with this esoteric poet's small but powerful corpus. In this reprinted collection, modern readers are exposed to the intensity and passion of a poet who, while not a genius, rallied such talent as he possessed to express, in beautiful verbiage, the depths of his soul. The result is a body of poetry and prose that is spectral, memorable, and remarkable.

Often criticized for being overly flowery and emotional, Dowson's writing actually walks an incredibly fine line between the profanity of saccharine drivel and the sublimity of lyrical exposition. His sense of composition and tempo is positively musical, and his poetry benefits greatly from being read aloud. His subject matter, while invariably dwelling upon the loss of something - innocence, love, time, etc. - offers up a sense of melancholic ennui rather than mere melodrama. Dowson thus presents the chimaera of a less technically rigid Philip Stanhope Worsley and a more florid Andrew Marvell. One of the most impressive features of Dowson's work, however, is that despite the fact that one can usually tell in what direction the narrative is headed, this foresight comes across, not as cliched, but as fatal: a palpable fatalism pervades Dowson's work, which is fitting for a man who died so young.

Naturally, Dowson is not without his flaws. The repetition of theme tends to blend many of his poems together, and reliance upon a too common vocabulary furthers this effect. There is also an uneven quality in Dowson's writing, and it can be jarring to move from poems which are merely good to poems that are superlative. One gets the sense of a poet whose unbridled skill required further tempering, which Dowson, alas, never received.

To some degree, however, this primitive passion of part of Dowson's appeal. I would recommend his works to any fans of Romantic and 19th century English poetry, especially those who are fans of Worsley and the Aesthetic poets.

Angela Montgomery says

Wonderful poetry but execrable prose, which I will presume he wrote so he could afford to indulge the poetry. I don't know why this poet is not better known (at least among us non-English majors), since there are some classics within the collection (e.g. Cynara, Carthusians).

Alexis Hall says

I'm weirdly into Dowson, though he died young (I think literally in a Parisian gutter - so he's a good one for Tragic Poet Bingo) and left very little behind. He was fragile and alcoholic and melancholy and I've filed him under 'queer' I think erroneously because I'm not sure there's any actual evidence of it. Or interest on his part.

He just looks like a gayer to me:

In fact, I think he was kind of into little girls.

Not in the, uh, active sense. Just in the sense of writing creepy poetry about the beauties of lost innocence.

Like the dude himself, Dowson's verse is fragile and sad and sensual and usually about the LOSS OF ALL THE STUFF. But there's a technical precision and a musicality to him that I find really rather lovely.

His most famous poem is probably this one:

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was grey:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind,
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;

And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Its most famous line, of course, being 'gone with the wind'.

To me this epitomises decadent poetry - the juxtaposition of the fleeting (pale lost lilies) and the decidedly base ('bought red mouth'), the deep themes of loss and disappointment, coupled with an overwrought sensuality that at once seduces and wearies.

Timothy Muller says

“They are not long, the days of wine and roses:”

Perhaps the line was never truer of anyone than the one who wrote it.

The poetry of Ernest Dowson presents a problem for any attempt to assess his work. All poets have greater and lesser work, but with Dowson the gap between the best poems and the rest is especially large. There are a handful of the finest lyrics in the language among sizable group of mediocre poems. But if a poet is judged on the best, then Dowson, though not in the first rank, is not very far behind.

A few quotes from his best poems for anyone not acquainted with Dowson (and for my own pleasure in quoting him):

“Wine and woman and song,
Three things garnish our way:
Yet the day is over long.”

“All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.”

I will try (and probably fail) to show why his weaker poems are weak and why the magic that characterizes his best poetry is so often lacking. Sometimes it is just that the theme is weak as in “Ad Manus Puellae” (To a Girl’s Hands). As beautiful as women’s hands can be, Dowson’s lavish poem is to much for the subject matter. But the more important failure has to do with an excess of words which I think is tied to his infatuation with the beauty possible in the English language. Take the following poem, “Dregs:”

“THE fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof
(This is the end of every song man sings!)
The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,
Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;
And health and hope have gone the way of love

Into the drear oblivion of lost things.
Ghosts go along with us until the end;
This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:
This is the end of all the songs man sings."

I have taken the liberty of paring it down to what I think would make a better poem:

The fire is out;
The wine is drunk, the dregs remain;
Ghosts go along with us until the end;
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:

I think it is a case of less is more.

Nevertheless, the lesser poetry is worth reading, not perhaps so much because of the quality of the verse, but because of the person who shows through. I think that this is the case with a number of poets, i.e., that their poetry is not of a very high quality, but the person revealed in the verse is very appealing and not only appealing, but instructive. Dowson the man is very interesting; his careening between alcohol and prostitutes on the one hand and his repeated penitential returning to the Catholic Church on the other, his lost love, his final collapse and early death are a great relief from the typical middle class life, of his time, and ours. His poetry shows a real person grappling with life (and art) - failing perhaps - but alive - a person who thinks his own thoughts and feels his own feelings. His take on life is his own and not a kind of second-hand or hand-me-down version - at the same time one that is worthy of our attention, a rare combination.

Leila McGrath says

He's a good, romantic poet, maybe not a master. I realized my 1911 copy is signed by the London publisher as a gift to Madeline Edison, very possibly the daughter of Thomas Edison, who traveled with the family to Europe in 1911. Very cool!

Amethyst-y says

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