

John Howard Bell,
with kind regards,
George Herbert Clarke

HYMN TO THE SPIRIT ETERNAL

BY GEORGE HERBERT CLARKE

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Queen's University at Kingston

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When Thy storm-bugles blow across the sky
The still pools leave their sleep in Ocean's caves,
Stir and exult, and soon the warring waves
Deploy in their might to that imperious cry:
They swell, they spire in foam, retreat and roar
In maelstrom diapasons; then, self-renewed,
With hurricane lift and leap, hour after hour,
They charge the scarpéd shore,
Whelming the warder-rocks with buffets rude,
And pounding the granite walls with awful power.

Who knows save Thee the rhythm of their rise
And swift decline? They are not and they are—
Surgent, resurgent! From scented Malabar
To the bleak Arctic, each billow wheels and dies
Within Thy tidal cycle: the flying spume
Fulfils the wave, the wave the striving sea,
In change concordant and unfailing plan;
Thy firmamental womb
Conceived them, uttered them and bade them be
Lords of the deluge and leviathan.

With what slow progress Earth engirds the Sun,
Spinning and circling year after patient year,—
Yet from the watery spawn that did appear
Upon Time's threshold till Man's last day is done
Is but a fleeting moment in Thy mind.
Two thousand million circuits she has made
Since hurled to the Void, like rebel Lucifer,
Companioned by his kind,
And still shall ride her orbit, that changing shade
And light, and heat and cold, may temper her.

Thou hast borne creatures of a kindred race—
Gigantic suns of unimagined heat
Whose radiant hearts intensely burn and beat
In the bleak vacancies of desert Space;
For æons through their glowing arteries
Thy life hath coursed: all nuclear suns Thy breath
Hath whirled, with each electron satellite;
For Thou hast fashioned these
In Thy vast Foundry, where Nature laboureth—
A tireless foreman—to do Thy will aright.

Within a confine of Thy cloudy Tower—
Unwalled and roofless and not made with hands—
A giant star, guided by Thy commands,
Neared our enamoured Sun: the stranger's power
Quickened her fiery tides, but soon he passed,
While she—abandoned, cheated of her bliss—
In love and wrath commingled, suddenly rent
Her passionate breast, and cast
Its vital substance forth into the abyss:
To still her sorrow half her life was spent.

So Thy intention brought new orbs to birth—
Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, ardent Mars,
Uranus, Neptune, all the neighbouring stars
That circle the Sun; but this our midget Earth,
One of the least among that cluster, swings
On a propitious arc, for seeds of life
Have sprung and flourished in many an insect clan,
In skyey carollings,
Sea-shadows dim and furtive jungle strife,
And in her lordly guest, aspiring Man.

What then is Man that Thou, Eternity,
Art mindful of him? Is he a purposed part
Of the unwearied weavings of Thine art—

Thy reach and thrust toward fuller Life-to-be—
Or some ambiguous presence that must fade
And be forgotten?— Cousin to the brute,
He would transcend him; but do other worlds rejoice
In nobler kinsmen, made
Clearlier in Thine image, resolute
To find Thy ways, and fit to hear Thy voice?

No answer comes. Perchance Man may not climb
Higher than Pisgah on the mountain road
That twists and loops and narrows, for a load
Of fear cumpers his heart, and sweat and grime
Blind him. Benighted, he may mistake the trail,
Retreat, recover it not, sink down and say:

“I have adventured and am addressed to die;
Let my last accent hail
Thee, Light of Light, shining too far away:
‘Great Flame, farewell!’ let me have strength to cry!”

Ten thousand generations Earth hath seen
Crumbled and wasted in their catacombs,
In obscure graves or pyramidic tombs,—
Motionless, mute, as though they had not been;
So many pits the dead have digged for the dead
That Earth is but a crypt beneath our feet,
And Ocean shrouds full many a sepulchre,—
Yet joyfully overhead
The skylark sings, the clouds in the soft heat
Float idly, and the sweet Spring is astir.

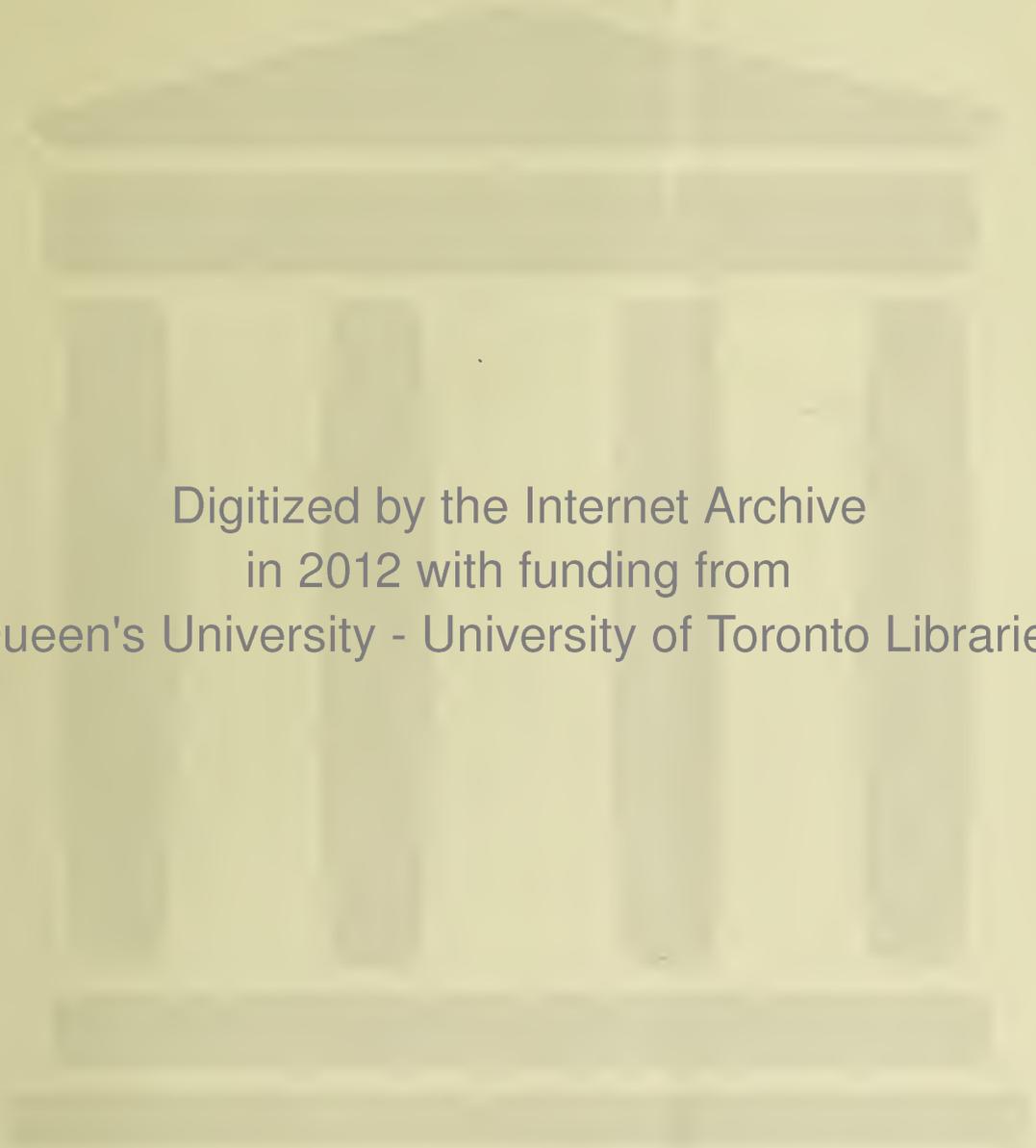
The vestibules of being—birth and death—
Bear interchanging legends. Who teacheth him—
The unborn child—his need of sense and limb
In the quick sequel? So may the fitful breath
And groping reason of inceptive Man
Resolve his way to Thee, Eternal Soul,

From the gestation of his mortal hour,
Till with new sight he scan
The multitudinous galaxies unroll
The pageant of Thine ever-kindling power.

No man hath seen Thee, none Thy voice hath heard:
Visible Beauty veils Thy mystic form;
Rumours of Thee are urgent in the storm,
Or sift through silence—still we wait Thy word.
Shall we behold Thee? Shall any dream of Thine
Dissolve away forever, and come to nought?
Or do *we* dream delusion—we, who must
All that we know, divine?—
Nay, in the lovingkindness of Thy thought,
Though Thou shalt slay us, we will put our trust.

The Soul we know not. If there be a Soul,
Its essence dwells in Thee, Eternal One,
Whose writ doth through all universes run,
Who weareth suns and moons for aureole;
Before the primeval Past Thou wert, and art
Beyond the last horizons of stars unborn;—
But we—who count the pendulum-beats of Time—
Even we—ere we depart—
Would praise the loveliness Thy skies have worn,
All the ongoing of Thy thought sublime.

The cycles of the atom and the star
Are two in scale, but one in harmony:
Man yet may mount to higher Man, set free
From Time, and sweep an orbit strange and far;
If he may serve Thee thus, O shape and grain
Him to Thy widening purpose, though Earth cease
And all her memories; but if he rise
Not, and if never again
Thou quicken him, then let his end be peace—
The peace of shadowy pools and sunset skies!



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