**The Poet and the Woodlouse**

***by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909)***

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| Said a poet to a woodlouse — ‘Thou art certainly my brother; I discern in thee the markings of the fingers of the Whole;And I recognize, in spite of all the terrene smut and smother, In the colours shaded off thee, the suggestions of a soul.‘Yea,’ the poet said, ‘I smell thee by some passive divination, I am satisfied with insight of the measure of thine house;What had happened I conjecture, in a blank and rhythmic passion, Had the aons thought of making thee a man, and me a louse.‘The broad lives of upper planets, their absorption and digestion, Food and famine, health and sickness, I can scrutinize and test;Through a shiver of the senses comes a resonance of question, And by proof of balanced answer I decide that I am best.‘Man, the fleshly marvel, alway feels a certain kind of awe stick To the skirts of contemplation, cramped with nympholeptic weight:Feels his faint sense charred and branded by the touch of solar caustic, On the forehead of his spirit feels the footprint of a Fate.’‘Notwithstanding which, O poet,’ spake the woodlouse, very blandly, ‘I am likewise the created,— I the equipoise of thee;I the particle, the atom, I behold on either hand lie The inane of measured ages that were embryos of me.‘I am fed with intimations, I am clothed with consequences, And the air I breathe is coloured with apocalyptic blush:Ripest-budded odours blossom out of dim chaotic stenches, And the Soul plants spirit-lilies in sick leagues of human slush.‘I am thrilled half cosmically through by cryptophantic surgings, Till the rhythmic hills roar silent through a spongious kind of blee:And earth’s soul yawns disembowelled of her pancreatic organs, Like a madrepore if mesmerized, in rapt catalepsy.‘And I sacrifice, a Levite — and I palpitate, a poet;— Can I close dead ears against the rush and resonance of things?Symbols in me breathe and flicker up the heights of the heroic; Earth’s worst spawn, you said, and cursed me? look! approve me! I have wings.‘Ah, men’s poets! men’s conventions crust you round and swathe you mist-like, And the world’s wheels grind your spirits down the dust ye overtrod:We stand sinlessly stark-naked in effulgence of the Christlight, And our polecat chokes not cherubs; and our skunk smells sweet to God.‘For He grasps the pale Created by some thousand vital handles, Till a Godshine, bluely winnowed through the sieve of thunderstorms,Shimmers up the non-existent round the churning feet of angels; And the atoms of that glory may be seraphs, being worms.‘Friends, your nature underlies us and your pulses overplay us; Ye, with social sores unbandaged, can ye sing right and steer wrong?For the transient cosmic, rooted in imperishable chaos, Must be kneaded into drastics as material for a song.‘Eyes once purged from homebred vapours through humanitarian passion See that monochrome a despot through a democratic prism;Hands that rip the soul up, reeking from divine evisceration, Not with priestlike oil anoint him, but a stronger- smelling chrism.‘Pass, O poet, retransfigured! God, the psychometric rhapsode, Fills with fiery rhythms the silence, stings the dark with stars that blink;All eternities hang round him like an old man’s clothes collapsed, While he makes his mundane music — AND HE WILL NOT STOP, I THINK.’  |