

THE POET AT BAY
To Wilfred Merton

YOU? much-respected married man!
I? whom all decent people ban!
You, of all people, come to me
And ask about my poetry?
For shame, sir! Well, if you insist!

Like an enamoured lutanist
Graven on some bishop's amethyst,
So there is graven by fate's steel
And polished by time's emery wheel
This passion that consumeth me,
Music that mars man's dignity!

My love is like an unhealed scar
That throbs and bleeds at the word war!
My love is like a masterless
Hound, running wide on a false scent.
I am the plaything of distress;
The marionette of the Event!

Yet this red lust that rots my sword
Is the same flame that tempered it.
Though my death be my birth's reward,
And folly be the prize of wit,
Life was, and laughter. Take the odds
Offered us by the gambling gods!

I saw a painted dancing-girl
Writhe, jerk, shake, snap her fingers, curl
Her lips into a lecherous leer
All night for sixpence and her beer.
I met her eyes. We knew each other,

In God's womb sister and twin brother!
She blazed. Each belly-twitch set swinging
The censers of the stars, set singing
The myriad choirs of cherubim.
All nature dived from sense, to swim
In that past-space past-period
Infinite ocean that is God.

Such luck be yours! You cannot tell
The pulse that makes my forehead swell.
You see me walk in clubs, not cloisters;
Eat not ambrosia, but oysters.
Nor shall it all avail you, though
You eat your heart for lust to know,
To watch these sparks of verse I throw
Cold ere they flame! For they attest
The anvil's ring, the hammer's zest,
The white-hot rage of steel, that is
My soul exulting in God's kiss
The hammer, and the anvil life. . . .

Go, and explain it to your wife!