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GEORGE ELIOT



SELECTED ESSAYS, POEMS AND OTHER WRITINGS

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY A. S. BYATT

PENGUIN BOOKS



Brother and Sister Sonnets

(from *Jubal and Other Poems*, 1874)

This sequence of Shakespearean sonnets was written in 1869 though not published until 1874. The material that Eliot draws on is her childhood relationship with her estranged brother, Isaac, which is also at the centre of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). She wrote to William Blackwood about it in April 1874, in answer to his account of a children's picnic.

I hope that the brother and sister love each other very dearly: life might be so enriched if that relation were made the most of, as one of the highest forms of friendship. A good while ago I made a poem, in the form of sonnets after the Shakspeare type, on the childhood of a brother and sister . . . little descriptive bits on the mutual influences in their small lives. This was always one of my best-loved subjects. And I was proportionately enraged about that execrable discussion raised in relation to Byron. The deliberate insistence on the subject was a worse crime against society than the reputed fact (*Letters*, Vol. V, pp. 402-3).

The poems very successfully embody ideas that recur in the novels: the childhood relationship as 'My present Past, my root of piety' and the learning of love in the recognition of the limitations on the self imposed by the recognition of others:

Widening its life with separate life discerned,
A Like unlike, a Self that self restrains.

(Sonnet 9)

I

I CANNOT choose but think upon the time
When our two lives grew like two buds that kiss
At lightest thrill from the bee's swinging chime,
Because the one so near the other is.

He was the elder and a little man
Of forty inches, bound to show no dread,
And I the girl that puppy-like now ran,
Now lagged behind my brother's larger tread.

I held him wise, and when he talked to me
Of snakes and birds, and which God loved the best,
I thought his knowledge marked the boundary
Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest.

If he said 'Hush!' I tried to hold my breath
Wherever he said 'Come!' I stepped in faith.

2

Long years have left their writing on my brow,
But yet the freshness and the dew-fed beam
Of those young mornings are about me now,
When we two wandered toward the far-off stream

With rod and line. Our basket held a store
Baked for us only, and I thought with joy
That I should have my share, though he had more,
Because he was the elder and a boy.

The firmaments of daisies since to me
Have had those mornings in their opening eyes,
The bunchèd cowslip's pale transparency
Carries that sunshine of sweet memories,

And wild-rose branches take their finest scent
From those blest hours of infantine content.

3

Our mother bade us keep the trodden ways,
 Stroked down my tippet, set my brother's frill,
 Then with the benediction of her gaze
 Clung to us lessening, and pursued us still

Across the homestead to the rookery elms,
 Whose tall old trunks had each a grassy mound,
 So rich for us, we counted them as realms
 With varied products: here were earth-nuts found,

And here the Lady-fingers in deep shade;
 Here sloping toward the Moat the rushes grew,
 The large to split for pith, the small to braid;
 While over all the dark rooks cawing flew,

And made a happy strange solemnity,
 A deep-toned chant from life unknown to me.

4

Our meadow-path had memorable spots:
 One where it bridged a tiny rivulet,
 Deep hid by tangled blue Forget-me-nots;
 And all along the waving grasses met

My little palm, or nodded to my cheek,
 When flowers with upturned faces gazing drêw
 My wonder downward, seeming all to speak
 With eyes of souls that dumbly heard and knew.

Then came the copse, where wild things rushed unseen,
 And black-scathed grass betrayed the past abode
 Of mystic gypsies, who still lurked between
 Me and each hidden distance of the road.

A gypsy once had startled me at play,
 Blotting with her dark smile my sunny day.

5

Thus rambling we were schooled in deepest lore,
 And learned the meanings that give words a soul,
 The fear, the love, the primal passionate store,
 Whose shaping impulses make manhood whole.

Those hours were seed to all my after good;
 My infant gladness, through eye, ear, and touch,
 Took easily as warmth a various food
 To nourish the sweet skill of loving much.

For who in age shall roam the earth and find
 Reason for loving that will strike out love
 With sudden rod from the hard year-pressed mind?
 Were reasons sown as thick as stars above,

'Tis love must see them, as the eye sees light:
 Day is but Number to the darkened sight.

6

Our brown canal was endless to my thought;
 And on its banks I sat in dreamy peace,
 Unknowing how the good I loved was wrought,
 Untroubled by the fear that it would cease.

Slowly the barges floated into view
 Rounding a grassy hill to me sublime
 With some Unknown beyond it, whither flew
 The parting cuckoo toward a fresh spring time.

The wide-arched bridge, the scented elder-flowers,
 The wondrous watery rings that died too soon,
 The echoes of the quarry, the still hours
 With white robe sweeping-on the shadeless noon,

Were but my growing self, are part of me,
 My present Past, my root of piety.

7

Those long days measured by my little feet
 Had chronicles which yield me many a text;
 Where irony still finds an image meet
 Of full-grown judgements in this world perplex.

One day my brother left me in high charge,
 To mind the rod, while he went seeking bait,
 And bade me, when I saw a nearing barge,
 Snatch out the line, lest he should come too late.

Proud of the task, I watched with all my might
 For one whole minute, till my eyes grew wide,
 Till sky and earth took on a strange new light
 And seemed a dream-world floating on some tide –

A fair pavilioned boat for me alone
 Bearing me onward through the vast unknown.

8

But sudden came the barge's pitch-black prow,
 Nearer and angrier came my brother's cry,
 And all my soul was quivering fear, when lo!
 Upon the imperilled line, suspended high,

A silver perch! My guilt that won the prey,
 Now turned to merit, had a guerdon rich
 Of hugs and praises, and made merry play,
 Until my triumph reached its highest pitch

When all at home were told the wondrous feat,
 And how the little sister had fished well.
 In secret, though my fortune tasted sweet,
 I wondered why this happiness befell.

'The little lass had luck,' the gardener said:
 And so I learned, luck was with glory wed.

9

We had the self-same world enlarged for each
 By loving difference of girl and boy:
 The fruit that hung on high beyond my reach
 He plucked for me, and oft he must employ

A measuring glance to guide my tiny shoe
 Where lay firm stepping-stones, or call to mind
 'This thing I like my sister may not do,
 For she is little, and I must be kind.'

Thus boyish Will the nobler mastery learned
 Where inward vision over impulse reigns,
 Widening its life with separate life discerned,
 A Like unlike, a Self that self restrains.

His years with others must the sweeter be
 For those brief days he spent in loving me.

10

His sorrow was my sorrow, and his joy
 Sent little leaps and laughs through all my frame;
 My doll seemed lifeless and no girlish toy
 Had any reason when my brother came.

I knelt with him at marbles, marked his fling
 Cut the ringed stem and make the apple drop,
 Or watched him winding close the spiral string
 That looped the orbits of the humming top.

Grasped by such fellowship my vagrant thought
 Ceased with dream-fruit dream-wishes to fulfil;
 My æery-picturing fantasy was taught
 Subjection to the harder, truer skill

That seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line,
 And by 'What is,' 'What will be' to define.

School parted us; we never found again
 That childish world where our two spirits mingled
 Like scents from varying roses that remain
 One sweetness, nor can evermore be singled.

Yet the twin habit of that early time
 Lingered for long about the heart and tongue:
 We had been natives of one happy clime,
 And its dear accent to our utterance clung.

Till the dire years whose awful name is Change
 Had grasped our souls still yearning in divorce,
 And pitiless shaped them in two forms that range
 Two elements which sever their life's course.

But were another childhood-world my share,
 I would be born a little sister there.



FROM *IMPRESSIONS*
 OF *THEOPHRASTUS SUCH*
 (1879)