**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.’ |