

# Hymn to the Sea\*

By William Watson

## I

GRANT, O regal in bounty, a subtle and delicate largess ;  
Grant an ethereal alms, out of the wealth of thy soul :  
Suffer a tarrying minstrel, who finds and not fashions his  
numbers,—

Who, from the commune of air, cages the volatile  
song,—

Here to capture and prison some fugitive breath of thy  
descant,

Thine and his own as thy roar lisped on the lips of a  
shell,

Now while the vernal impulsion makes lyrical all that hath  
language,

While, through the veins of the Earth, riots the ichor  
of Spring,

While,

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## Hymn to the Sea

While, with throes, with raptures, with loosing of bonds,  
with unsealings,—

Arrowy pangs of delight, piercing the core of the  
world,—

Tremors and coy unfoldings, reluctances, sweet agitations,—  
Youth, irrepressibly fair, wakes like a wondering rose.

## II

Lover whose vehement kisses on lips irresponsive are squandered,

Lover that wooest in vain Earth's imperturbable heart ;

Athlete mightily frustrate, who pittest thy thews against  
legions,

Locked with fantastical hosts, bodiless arms of the  
sky ;

Sea that breakest for ever, that breakest and never art broken,

Like unto thine, from of old, springeth the spirit of  
man,—

Nature's wooer and fighter, whose years are a suit and a  
wrestling,

All their hours, from his birth, hot with desire and with  
fray ;

Amorist

Amorist agonist man, that immortally pining and striving,  
Snatches the glory of life only from love and from  
war ;

Man that, rejoicing in conflict, like thee when precipitate  
tempest,

Charge after thundering charge, clangs on thy resonant  
mail,

Seemeth so easy to shatter, and proveth so hard to be  
cloven ;

Man whom the gods, in his pain, curse with a soul that  
endures ;

Man whose deeds, to the doer, come back as thine own  
exhalations

Into thy bosom return, weepings of mountain and vale ;

Man with the cosmic fortunes and starry vicissitudes tangled,  
Chained to the wheel of the world, blind with the dust  
of its speed,

Even as thou, O giant, whom trailed in the wake of her  
conquests

Night's sweet despot draws, bound to her ivory car ;

Man with inviolate caverns, impregnable holds in his nature,  
Depths no storm can pierce, pierced with a shaft of the  
sun ;

Man

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Man that is galled with his confines, and burdened yet more  
with his vastness,

Born too great for his ends, never at peace with his  
goal ;

Man whom Fate, his victor, magnanimous, clement in  
triumph,

Holds as a captive king, mew'd in a palace divine :

Wide its leagues of pleasance, and ample of purview its  
windows ;

Airily falls, in its courts, laughter of fountains at play ;

Nought, when the harpers are harping, untimely reminds  
him of durance ;

None, as he sits at the feast, whisper Captivity's name ;

But, would he parley with Silence, withdraw for awhile  
unattended,

Forth to the beckoning world 'scape for an hour and be  
free,

Lo, his adventurous fancy coercing at once and provoking,

Rise the unscalable walls, built with a word at the  
prime ;

Lo, immobile as statues, with pitiless faces of iron,

Armed at each obstinate gate, stand the impassable guards.

## III

Miser whose coffered recesses the spoils of eternity cumber,  
Spendthrift foaming thy soul wildly in fury away,—

We, self-amorous mortals, our own multitudinous image  
Seeking in all we behold, seek it and find it in  
thee :

Seek it and find it when o'er us the exquisite fabric of  
Silence

Briefly perfect hangs, trembles and dulcetly falls ;

When the aerial armies engage amid orgies of music,

Braying of arrogant brass, whimper of querulous reeds ;

When, at his banquet, the Summer is purple and drowsed  
with repletion ;

When, to his anchorite board, taciturn Winter repairs ;

When by the tempest are scattered magnificent ashes of  
Autumn ;

When, upon orchard and lane, breaks the white foam  
of the Spring :

When, in extravagant revel, the Dawn, a bacchante up-  
leaping,

Spills, on the tresses of Night, vintages golden and red ;

When,

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When, as a token at parting, munificent Day, for remembrance,

Gives, unto men that forget, Ophirs of fabulous ore ;

When, invincibly rushing, in luminous palpitant deluge,

Hot from the summits of Life, poured is the lava of noon ;

When, as yonder, thy mistress, at height of her mutable glories,

Wise from the magical East, comes like a sorceress pale.

Ah, she comes, she arises,—impassive, emotionless, bloodless,

Wasted and ashen of cheek, zoning her ruins with pearl.

Once she was warm, she was joyous, desire in her pulses abounding :

Surely thou lovedst her well, then, in her conquering youth !

Surely not all unimpassioned, at sound of thy rough serenading,

She, from the balconied night, unto her melodist leaned,—

Leaned

Leaned unto thee, her bondsman, who keepest to-day her  
commandments,  
All for the sake of old love, dead at thy heart though it  
lie.

## IV

Yea, it is we, light perverts, that waver, and shift our alle-  
giance ;  
We, whom insurgence of blood dooms to be barren  
and waste ;  
We, unto Nature imputing our frailties, our fever and  
tumult ;  
We, that with dust of our strife sully the hue of her  
peace.  
Thou, with punctual service, fulfillest thy task, being con-  
stant ;  
Thine but to ponder the Law, labour and greatly  
obey :  
Wherefore, with leapings of spirit, thou chantest the chant  
of the faithful,  
Chantest aloud at thy toil, cleansing the Earth of her  
stain ;

Leagued

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Leagued in antiphonal chorus with stars and the populous  
Systems,

Following these as their feet dance to the rhyme of the  
Suns ;

Thou thyself but a billow, a ripple, a drop of that Ocean,  
Which, labyrinthine of arm, folding us meshed in its  
coil,

Shall, as now, with elations, august exultations and ardours,  
Pour, in unfaltering tide, all its unanimous waves,  
When, from this threshold of being, these steps of the  
Presence, this precinct,

Into the matrix of Life darkly divinely resumed,  
Man and his littleness perish, erased like an error and can-  
celled,

Man and his greatness survive, lost in the greatness of  
God.