

Centennial Ode

*To DePauw University**

MAX EHLMANN

Your Alma Mater speaks, my children everywhere,
Whose steps have wandered round the girdle of the earth.
In thought return to me and hear, while I lay bare
My heart, that we may have a glorious rebirth.¹

Can it be true a hundred years have slipped away
Since first I nursed to thought your forebearers in this place!
I marvel much how many loved me in their day,
I sent them forth so ill-prepared to run the race.

Had I the tears, now could I weep when I recall
How sometimes new-discovered truth filled me with fright;
The while my Children, drinking falsehood's bitter gall,
Trudged, footsore, over trackless wastes in moonless night.

I failed in many things; but in the task supreme
I did not fail. Than this, what greater gift to make:
Into receptive minds I placed a lovely dream,
To guide their steps until their bonds with life shall break—

A lovely dream to make of earth a paradise!
The times are new, the problems new. Let us bring light.
Through love and learning make a worthy sacrifice
For men and women wandering in their hopeless night.

What is this thing called learning if it lead nowhere
But to the shrill harangues of parlor dissonance?
Wake up, far-scattered Sons and Daughters, do your share
To turn the sordid scenes of life into romance!

Think you these sturdy pioneers who gave me birth
Were babblers in a super-heated drawing-room?
In high sincerity they trod the sunlit earth.
Shall we today sit listless in a cloistered gloom?

* This Centennial Ode, by Max Ehrmann, was read on Alumni Day (1937) at DePauw by Prof. Dewey Annakin of Indiana State Teachers College. Mr. Ehrmann, a well known poet of Terre Haute, was commissioned in 1936 to write the Ode for DePauw's centennial celebration. The appeal is general in relation to the contacts of college teachers and students of all institutions—hence the appropriateness of publishing it in the *Indiana Magazine of History*.—EDITOR

¹ Throughout the poem DePauw University (*Alma Mater*) is represented as speaking to all her students of a century.

A hundred years of love and labor made this place;
Though sometimes dim, the quest of truth is on each page.
With courage, like unto our forebears, we will face
The front, pursue the truth, whatever stormwinds rage.

Upon their mediaeval learning we have frowned.
But earnestness they had and noble rage to right
The wrong. Today amid the "rackets" that abound
Let us arouse ourselves to measure to their height!

All laggards fail me who in smug indifference
Look listless at the godless forces in the land:
Man grinding down his brother man, with loud pretense,
"Ye have the poor always," as if by God's command.

As spirits weep, so have I wept when some had gone
From here: smooth speaking, nimble-fingered foes of man.
But lofty pride is mine when others carry on,
That all have peace and plenty in their earthly span.

In glad remembrance, through these hundred years, are they
Who planned and toiled, had fortitude to risk and dare
In fiercely fought commercial strife, so that one day
They might bring oil to keep aflame the torch I bear.

The artistry that makes the earth so fair a sight,
The moon with borrowed gold, and many a caravan
Of suns meandering along the lanes of night—
All murmur mystical assurances for man.

A just apportionment of toil's reward should bring
To man the gift of leisure and the tender dream,
The upward look that inward prompts the stars to sing
The wonder of this cosmic thought-pervading scheme.

To subtle, syllogistic quibbles give no head—
The thisness and the thatness of salvation's plan.
But write across your consciousness the sacred creed:
Man's love of God is measured by his love of man.

How wonderful is man, how mystic human lives,
Exalted dust that knows the thrill of consciousness!
Of all our thoughts and deeds perhaps but that survives
Which lifts mankind above its inborn selfishness.

Of metaphysic certitude make no pretense;
But, silent and in awe, gaze on the cosmic sight,
Ennobled by humility and reverence,
As science pushes back the curtains of the night.

When you, in bitter spirit, stamp across the stage
Of that inner theater where so many parts you played,
May there be faith (to soften down your childish rage)
That He who wrote the manuscript knows well His trade.

With sorrow we behold relentless years efface
Things loved. New arts and dialectics here will reign.
Should you return sometime, you would not know the place.
All will be changed, all will be gone; but I remain.

Not even I remain, and grass and trees will grow
Where buildings stood, my name posterity will ban,
If you, my Sons and Daughters, fail to see and know
Which is the vanguard, which the rear, in the march of man.

O shame that life is held to have so little worth!
Affrighted millions gasp beneath war's bloody heel.
Four wars your fathers fought to make a nobler earth.
Fight now for understanding ere you fight with steel!

I am the spirit-mother of this lovely place.
With soundless words unceasingly I speak to you;
And you will hear my voice when all the world seems base
(The voice within), take courage, carry on anew.

From heights I showed you how the human landscape lay.
With care I nursed you through the pangs of mental birth.
Go forth, put heart into the heartless game men play;
Go forth to justify us both to all the earth!

Other unnumbered centuries will come and go
In man's adventure on this restless grain of dust.
Why all this learning, if we do not strive to know
The Road, the Inn at Night, the Keeper that we trust?

To all my own who love this place, here learned to brood
On life, and here lit passionate fires for noble deed
To elevate the churlish world to happier mood—
To all my own dispersed through all the earth, Godspeed!²

² The copy here reprinted appeared in the *Terre Haute Tribune and Star* of June 20 (Sunday), 1937.