

Two poems by Victor Hugo

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Jeanne Was on Bread and Water...

Jeanne was on bread and water in solitary
For some crime or other, and, failing in duty,
I went to see the offender in blatant breach
And slid into the shadows some jam, peach,
Against the law. Every solid citizen
On whom reposes my town's salvation
Was indignant, and Jeanne said in a voice soft as roses
"From now on, I won't pick my noses.
"And I won't tease kitty 'til she scratches."
But they protested: "This kid's got your number;
"She knows that you're spineless and weak
"She sees you laugh when angrily we speak.
"Ungovernable. Early and late
"You cause disorder, and authority deflates;
"More rule of law. The child has no borders,
Walks all over you." And as my head lowered
I said: "I've nothing by way of retort,
"I'm wrong. Yes, with indulgence of that sort
"We always lead people to their downfall
"You should put me on dry bread." "You deserve it all.
We'll put you on it." Jeanne, then, still in the hole
Whispered and raised her lovely eyes, all soul,
With all the authority of the gentle lamb
"Well, then, so I'll bring you jam."

Whose Fault Is It?

- You've just burned the National Library?

- Yes.

I set the fire there.

- But this is an unbelievable crime!

A crime you've committed against yourself, and must bear it!

You've just killed the light of your own spirit!

It's your own torch you've chosen to suffocate!

That which your insane rage dares incinerate,

It is your possession, your treasure, your gift, your heritage

The book, hostile to enslavement and so to your advantage.

The book has always taken up your case.

A library is an act of faith.

Dark generations that on and on

Give night's testimony to the dawn.

Look! Into this venerable mass of verities

Into these chefs-d'oeuvres that flash lightning clarities
Into this tomb where time becomes a directory,
Into the centuries, into human antiquity, into history,
Into the past, the lesson that spells out the future,
Into that which began so as never to be over,
Into the poets! look, into this canyon of holy tracts,
Into the divine heap of ancient dramatist artifacts,
Of Homers, of Jobs, standing on the horizon,
Into Moliere, Voltaire, and Kant, into reason,
You throw, you wretch, flaming timber!
Of all human spirit you make cinders!
Have you forgotten that there on high,
The book is your liberator, standing nigh;
It gleams; because it shines and illuminates from within,
It destroys the scaffold, war, famine
It speaks, more than the slave and more than the pariah.
Open a book. Plato, Milton, Beccaria.
Read these prophets, Dante, or Shakespeare, or Corneille
Their immense spirit awakes in you today;
Dazzled, you feel you are the same as them all
In reading you become serious, pensive, and thoughtful;
You feel all these great men in your soul to grow
They teach you this way that the dawn's aglow,
As in your heart they penetrate, they strive,
With their warm light to calm you, bring you more alive;
Your examined soul is ready to reply
You now see yourself as good, then better; you melt away
Like snow on fire, your pride, your fury,
The bad, prejudices, kings, empiry!
Because human learning comes first.
Then comes light, then comes liberty.
It's down to you, understand, the light you kill!
The goals you dream of, in books they're real.
The book enters your thoughts, it there unties
That which ravel's truth with sundry lies.
All conscience is a Gordian knot.
It is your medicine, your guide and guardian against the fraught.
Your hatred, it cures it; your madness, it quenches the flame.
That's what you lose, alas, and by your own blame.
The book is your own inner wealth! It's education,
Law, truth, virtue, obligation,
Progress, reason that dissipates illiterate delirium.
And you destroy this, you!

- I don't know how to read.