

Davy Notebooks Project: Library Workshop

In this workshop, we will read and discuss some of the poetry written by the early nineteenth-century chemist Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829). This poetry has been newly transcribed by thousands of volunteers working on the Davy Notebooks Project (<https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/davynotebooks/>) though some of the versions here are taken from John Davy's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.* 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1836). Davy is better known for his work isolating chemical elements, his invention of a miners' safety lamp, and for being the first man to inhale nitrous oxide. But he also wrote poetry throughout his life. He did not publish hardly any of his poems in his lifetime and many of them remain in manuscript. Absolutely no previous experience is necessary for this workshop.

1)

Many days have pass'd
Beloved scene, since last my wet eyes saw
The moonbeams gild thy whitely-foaming waves.
Ambitious then, confiding in her powers,
Spurning the prison, --- onward flew my soul,
To mingle with her kindred; --- in the breeze
That wafts upon its wings futurity,
To hear the voice of praise; --- and not in vain
Have these high hopes existed, --- not in vain
The dew of labour has oppress'd my brow,
On which the rose of pleasure never glow'd;
For I have tasted that sacred stream
Of science, whose delicious water flows
From Nature's bosom. I have felt the warmth,
The gentle influence of congenial souls,
Whose kindred hopes have cheer'd me; who have taught
My irritable spirit how to bear
Injustice; who have given
New plumes of rapture to my soaring wing
When ruffled with the sudden breath of storms.
Here, through the trembling moonshine of the grove,
My earliest lays were wafted by the breeze, ---
And here my kindling spirit learn'd to trace
The mystic laws from whose high energy
The moving atoms, in eternal change,
Still rise to animation.
Beloved rocks! thou ocean white with mist,
Once more with joy I view thee;
One more ye waken in my throbbing breast
The sympathies of nature. Now I go
Once more to visit my remember'd home,
With heartfelt rapture, --- there to mingle tears
Of purest love, --- to feel the ecstatic glow
Of warm affection, and again to view
The rosy light that shone upon my youth.

(From John Davy's *Memoirs*, i, 110-111.)

2) 'On breathing the Nitrous Oxide'

Not in the ideal dreams of wild desire

Have I beheld a rapture waking form
My bosom burns with no unhallowed fire
Yet is my cheek with rosy blushes warm
Yet are my eyes with sparkling lustre filled
Yet is my mouth implete with murmuring sound
Yet are my limbs with inward transports thrill'd
And clad with new born mightiness round –

(From Davy's notebook: RI HD 13C, pp. 4–6)

3)

1825

And when the light of life is flying
And darkness round us seems to close
Nought do us truly know of dying
Save sinking in a deep repose
And as in sweetest soundest slumber
The mind enjoys its happiest dreams
And as in stillest night we number
Thousands of worlds in starlight reams
So may we hope the undying spirit
In quitting its decaying form
Breaks forth new glory to inherit
As lightning from the gloomy storm.

(From Davy's notebook: RI MS HD 14E, p. 167)

4)

It is alone in solitude we feel
And know what powers belong to us.
By sympathy excited, and constrain'd
By tedious ceremony in the world,
Many who we are fit to lead we follow;
And fools, and confident men, and those who think
Themselves all knowing, from the littleness
Of their own talents and the sphere they move in,
Which is most little, — these do rule the world;
Even like the poet's dream of elder time,
The fabled Titans imaged to aspire
Unto the infinitely distant heaven,
Because they raised a pile of common stones,
And higher stood than those around them,
——— The great is ever
Obscure, indefinite; and knowledge still,
The highest, the most distant, most sublime,
Is like the stars composed of luminous points,
But without visible image, or known distance,
E'en with respect to human things and forms,
We estimate and know them but in solitude.
The eye of the worldly man is insect like,
Fit only for the near and single objects;
The true philosopher in distance sees them,

And scans their forms, their bearings, and relations.
 To view a lovely landscape in its whole,
 We do not fix upon one cave or rock,
 Or woody hill, out of the mighty range
 Of the wide scenery, — we rather mount
 A lofty knoll to mark the varied whole. —
 The waters blue, the mountains grey and dim,
 The shaggy hills and the embattled cliffs,
 With their mysterious glens, awakening
 Imaginations wild, — interminable!

(From John Davy's *Memoirs*, ii, 217-8)

5)

The Life of the Spinosist

~~The insensate dust is seen to~~
~~The dust insensate rises into life~~
~~The liquid dew is lovely in the flower~~
~~The liquid dew becomes the rosy flower~~
The Spinosist
 Lo o'er the earth the kindling spirits pour
 The ~~spark~~ ^{seeds} of life that ~~mighty~~ ^{bounteous} nature gives. —
 The liquid dew becomes the rosy flower
 The sordid dust awakes & moves & lives. —
 All, All is change, the renovated forms
 Of ancient things arise & live again.
 The light of suns the angry breath of storms
 The everlasting motions of the main
 Are but the engines of that powerful will. —
 The eternal link of thoughts where form resolves
 Has ever acted & is acting still
 Whilst age round age & world round world revolves.
 2 Linked to the whole the human mind displays
 1 No sameness & no ^{deep} identity ~~divine~~
 Changeful as the surface of the seas
 4 2 Impressible as is the ~~blue~~ moving sky
~~To scattered thoughts some unknown laws are given~~
~~By which they join and move in circling life. —~~
 Being of aggregate the power of love
 Gives it ~~the life~~ the joy of moments bids it rise
 In the wild forms of mortal things to move
 Fix'd to the earth below the eternal skies
 To breath ^{the} ether; & to feel the form
 Of orb'd beauty through its organs thrill
 To press the limbs of life with rapture warm
 And drink of transport from a living rill. —
 To view the heavens with ~~solar~~ morning radiance ~~white~~ bright
 Majestic mingling with ^{the} ~~still blue ocean~~ ocean blue. —
~~Filled by a thousand silver streams~~
~~& played upon by ten thousand cloudless breezes~~
 To view the ~~meadows~~ ^{forests} green the mountains white
 The peopled plains of rich and varied hue. —
 To feel the social flame to give to man
 Ten thousand signs of ~~kindling~~ burning energy,

The nothingness of human words to scan
The nothingness of human ^{things} cares to fly. —
To live in forests mingled with ~~the whole~~
Of nature's forms, to ~~die beneath~~ ^{upon} feel the breezes play
O'er the parched forehead ^{brow} to see the planets roll
O'er their grey head their life diffusing ray
To die in agony & In many days
To give to Nature all her stolen powers
Ethereal fire to feed the solar rays
Ethereal dew to feed the earth in showers.

(From Davy's notebook: HD RI 13C, pp. 17–10)