**POEM ON THE LISBON DISASTER; Or an Examination of the Axiom, “All is Well”**[**↩**](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/349#toc)

* + Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
  + Affrighted gathering of human kind!
  + Eternal lingering of useless pain!
  + Come, ye philosophers, who cry, “All’s well,”
  + And contemplate this ruin of a world.
  + Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
  + This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
  + These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts—
  + A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
  + Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
  + Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
  + In racking torment end their stricken lives.
  + To those expiring murmurs of distress,
  + To that appalling spectacle of woe,
  + Will ye reply: “You do but illustrate
  + The iron laws that chain the will of God”?
  + Say ye, o’er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
  + “God is avenged: the wage of sin is death”?
  + What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
  + That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother’s breast?
  + Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
  + Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
  + In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.
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  + Tranquil spectators of your brothers’ wreck,
  + Unmoved by this repellent dance of death,
  + Who calmly seek the reason of such storms,
  + Let them but lash your own security;
  + Your tears will mingle freely with the flood.
  + When earth its horrid jaws half open shows,
  + My plaint is innocent, my cries are just.
  + Surrounded by such cruelties of fate,
  + By rage of evil and by snares of death,
  + Fronting the fierceness of the elements,
  + Sharing our ills, indulge me my lament.
  + “’T is pride,” ye say—“the pride of rebel heart,
  + To think we might fare better than we do.”
  + Go, tell it to the Tagus’ stricken banks;
  + Search in the ruins of that bloody shock;
  + Ask of the dying in that house of grief,
  + Whether ’t is pride that calls on heaven for help
  + And pity for the sufferings of men.
  + “All’s well,” ye say, “and all is necessary.”
  + Think ye this universe had been the worse
  + Without this hellish gulf in Portugal?
  + Are ye so sure the great eternal cause,
  + That knows all things, and for itself creates,
  + Could not have placed us in this dreary clime
  + Without volcanoes seething ’neath our feet?
  + Set you this limit to the power supreme?
  + Would you forbid it use its clemency?
  + Are not the means of the great artisan
  + Unlimited for shaping his designs?
  + The master I would not offend, yet wish
  + This gulf of fire and sulphur had outpoured
  + Its baleful flood amid the desert wastes.
  + God I respect, yet love the universe.
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  + Not pride, alas, it is, but love of man,
  + To mourn so terrible a stroke as this.
  + Would it console the sad inhabitants
  + Of these aflame and desolated shores
  + To say to them: “Lay down your lives in peace;
  + For the world’s good your homes are sacrificed;
  + Your ruined palaces shall others build,
  + For other peoples shall your walls arise;
  + The North grows rich on your unhappy loss;
  + Your ills are but a link in general law;
  + To God you are as those low creeping worms
  + That wait for you in your predestined tombs”?
  + What speech to hold to victims of such ruth!
  + Add not such cruel outrage to their pain.
  + Nay, press not on my agitated heart
  + These iron and irrevocable laws,
  + This rigid chain of bodies, minds, and worlds.
  + Dreams of the bloodless thinker are such thoughts.
  + God holds the chain: is not himself enchained;
  + By his indulgent choice is all arranged;
  + Implacable he’s not, but free and just.
  + Why suffer we, then, under one so just?[1](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/349#lf0029_footnote_nt074)
  + There is the knot your thinkers should undo.
  + Think ye to cure our ills denying them?
  + All peoples, trembling at the hand of God,
  + Have sought the source of evil in the world.
  + When the eternal law that all things moves
  + Doth hurl the rock by impact of the winds,
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  + With lightning rends and fires the sturdy oak,
  + They have no feeling of the crashing blows;
  + But I, I live and feel, my wounded heart
  + Appeals for aid to him who fashioned it.
  + Children of that Almighty Power, we stretch
  + Our hands in grief towards our common sire.
  + The vessel, truly, is not heard to say:
  + “Why should I be so vile, so coarse, so frail?”
  + Nor speech nor thought is given unto it.
  + The urn that, from the potter’s forming hand,
  + Slips and is shattered has no living heart
  + That yearns for bliss and shrinks from misery.
  + “This misery,” ye say, “is others’ good.”
  + Yes; from my mouldering body shall be born
  + A thousand worms, when death has closed my pain.
  + Fine consolation this in my distress!
  + Grim speculators on the woes of men,
  + Ye double, not assuage, my misery.
  + In you I mark the nerveless boast of pride
  + That hides its ill with pretext of content.
  + I am a puny part of the great whole.
  + Yes; but all animals condemned to live,
  + All sentient things, born by the same stern law,
  + Suffer like me, and like me also die.
  + The vulture fastens on his timid prey,
  + And stabs with bloody beak the quivering limbs:
  + All ’s well, it seems, for it. But in a while
  + An eagle tears the vulture into shreds;
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  + The eagle is transfixed by shaft of man;
  + The man, prone in the dust of battlefield,
  + Mingling his blood with dying fellow-men,
  + Becomes in turn the food of ravenous birds.
  + Thus the whole world in every member groans:
  + All born for torment and for mutual death.
  + And o’er this ghastly chaos you would say
  + The ills of each make up the good of all!
  + What blessedness! And as, with quaking voice,
  + Mortal and pitiful, ye cry, “All ’s well,”
  + The universe belies you, and your heart
  + Refutes a hundred times your mind’s conceit.
  + All dead and living things are locked in strife.
  + Confess it freely—evil stalks the land,
  + Its secret principle unknown to us.
  + Can it be from the author of all good?
  + Are we condemned to weep by tyrant law
  + Of black Typhon or barbarous Ahriman?[1](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/349#lf0029_footnote_nt075)
  + These odious monsters, whom a trembling world
  + Made gods, my spirit utterly rejects.
  + But how conceive a God supremely good,
  + Who heaps his favours on the sons he loves,
  + Yet scatters evil with as large a hand?
  + What eye can pierce the depth of his designs?
  + From that all-perfect Being came not ill:
  + And came it from no other, for he ’s lord:
  + Yet it exists. O stern and numbing truth!
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  + O wondrous mingling of diversities!
  + A God came down to lift our stricken race:
  + He visited the earth, and changed it not!
  + One sophist says he had not power to change;
  + “He had,” another cries, “but willed it not:
  + In time he will, no doubt.” And, while they prate,
  + The hidden thunders, belched from underground,
  + Fling wide the ruins of a hundred towns
  + Across the smiling face of Portugal.
  + God either smites the inborn guilt of man,
  + Or, arbitrary lord of space and time,
  + Devoid alike of pity and of wrath,
  + Pursues the cold designs he has conceived.
  + Or else this formless stuff, recalcitrant,
  + Bears in itself inalienable faults;
  + Or else God tries us, and this mortal life
  + Is but the passage to eternal spheres.
  + ’T is transitory pain we suffer here,
  + And death its merciful deliverance.
  + Yet, when this dreadful passage has been made,
  + Who will contend he has deserved the crown?
  + Whatever side we take we needs must groan;
  + We nothing know, and everything must fear.
  + Nature is dumb, in vain appeal to it;
  + The human race demands a word of God.
  + ’T is his alone to illustrate his work,
  + Console the weary, and illume the wise.
  + Without him man, to doubt and error doomed,
  + Finds not a reed that he may lean upon.
  + From Leibnitz learn we not by what unseen
  + Bonds, in this best of all imagined worlds,
  + Endless disorder, chaos of distress,
  + Must mix our little pleasures thus with pain;
  + [261]
  + Nor why the guiltless suffer all this woe
  + In common with the most abhorrent guilt.
  + ’T is mockery to tell me all is well.
  + Like learned doctors, nothing do I know.
  + Plato has said that men did once have wings
  + And bodies proof against all mortal ill;
  + That pain and death were strangers to their world.
  + How have we fallen from that high estate!
  + Man crawls and dies: all is but born to die:
  + The world ’s the empire of destructiveness.
  + This frail construction of quick nerves and bones
  + Cannot sustain the shock of elements;
  + This temporary blend of blood and dust
  + Was put together only to dissolve;
  + This prompt and vivid sentiment of nerve
  + Was made for pain, the minister of death:
  + Thus in my ear does nature’s message run.
  + Plato and Epicurus I reject,
  + And turn more hopefully to learned Bayle.
  + With even poised scale Bayle bids me doubt.
  + He, wise and great enough to need no creed,
  + Has slain all systems—combats even himself:
  + Like that blind conqueror of Philistines,
  + He sinks beneath the ruin he has wrought.[1](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/349#lf0029_footnote_nt076)
  + What is the verdict of the vastest mind?
  + Silence: the book of fate is closed to us.
  + [262]
  + Man is a stranger to his own research;
  + He knows not whence he comes, nor whither goes.
  + Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,
  + Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.
  + But thinking atoms, whose far-seeing eyes,
  + Guided by thought, have measured the faint stars,
  + Our being mingles with the infinite;
  + Ourselves we never see, or come to know.
  + This world, this theatre of pride and wrong,
  + Swarms with sick fools who talk of happiness.
  + With plaints and groans they follow up the quest,
  + To die reluctant, or be born again.
  + At fitful moments in our pain-racked life
  + The hand of pleasure wipes away our tears;
  + But pleasure passes like a fleeting shade,
  + And leaves a legacy of pain and loss.
  + The past for us is but a fond regret,
  + The present grim, unless the future ’s clear.
  + If thought must end in darkness of the tomb,
  + All will be well one day—so runs our hope.
  + All *now* is well, is but an idle dream.
  + The wise deceive me: God alone is right.
  + With lowly sighing, subject in my pain,
  + I do not fling myself ’gainst Providence.
  + Once did I sing, in less lugubrious tone,
  + The sunny ways of pleasure’s genial rule;
  + The times have changed, and, taught by growing age,
  + And sharing of the frailty of mankind,
  + Seeking a light amid the deepening gloom,
  + I can but suffer, and will not repine.
  + A caliph once, when his last hour had come,
  + This prayer addressed to him he reverenced:
  + [263]
  + “To thee, sole and all-powerful king, I bear
  + What thou dost lack in thy immensity—
  + Evil and ignorance, distress and sin.”
  + He might have added one thing further—hope.