

EMMA LAZARUS:
SELECTED POEMS AND
OTHER WRITINGS

edited by Gregory Eiselein



Ontario

broadview literary texts

2002

Like the weird cloud of death that falls apace
On the still features of the passive face.

Soothing and gentle as a mother's kiss,
The touch that stopped the beating of the heart.
A look so blissfully serene as this, 10
Not all the joy of living could impart.
Patient to bide, yet willing to depart,
With dauntless faith and courage therewithal,
The Master found her ready at his call.

On such a golden evening forth there floats, 15
Between the grave earth and the glowing sky
In the clear air, unvexed with hazy motes,
The mystic-winged and flickering butterfly,
A human soul, that drifts at liberty,
Ah! who can tell to what strange paradise, 20
To what undreamed-of fields and lofty skies!

February, 1871.

In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport.¹ (1871)

Here, where the noises of the busy town,
The ocean's plunge and roar can enter not,
We stand and gaze around with tearful awe,
And muse upon the consecrated spot.

No signs of life are here: the very prayers 5
Inscribed around are in a language dead;²
The light of the "perpetual lamp"³ is spent

¹ Touro Synagogue. In 1759 Congregation Yeshuat Israel (a Sephardic congregation founded in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1658) erected this synagogue, the oldest Jewish place of worship in the United States. It is also the subject of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," *The Courtship of Miles Standish and Other Poems* (1858).

² Hebrew.

³ Also known as the ner tamid, the perpetual lamp is kept continually burning in the synagogue, a reminder of the menorah that once burned in the Temple.

That an undying radiance was to shed.

10 What prayers were in this temple offered up,
Wrung from sad hearts that knew no joy on earth,
By these lone exiles of a thousand years,
From the fair sunrise land that gave them birth!

15 Now as we gaze, in this new world of light,
Upon this relic of the days of old,
The present vanishes, and tropic bloom
And Eastern towns and temples we behold.

20 Again we see the patriarch with his flocks,
The purple seas, the hot blue sky o'erhead,
The slaves of Egypt,—omens, mysteries,—
Dark fleeing hosts by flaming angels led.¹

A wondrous light upon a sky-kissed mount,
A man who reads Jehovah's written law,
'Midst blinding glory and effulgence rare,
Unto a people prone with reverent awe.

25 The pride of luxury's barbaric pomp,
In the rich court of royal Solomon—
Alas! we wake: one scene alone remains,—
The exiles by the streams of Babylon.²

30 Our softened voices send us back again
But mournful echoes through the empty hall;
Our footsteps have a strange unnatural sound,
And with unwonted gentleness they fall.
The weary ones, the sad, the suffering,

¹ This stanza recalls several images from Genesis and Exodus: the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the desert settings, slavery in Egypt, the ten plagues, prophetic dreams, and the presence of God as a pillar of fire leading the children of Israel.

² See Psalm 137. Following the Babylonian army's conquest of Judah, several thousand Israelites were forcibly resettled in Babylon from c. 585 to c. 538 BCE.

All found their comfort in the holy place,
And children's gladness and men's gratitude
Took voice and mingled in the chant of praise. 35

The funeral and the marriage, now, alas!
We know not which is sadder to recall;
For youth and happiness have followed age,
And green grass lieth gently over all. 40

Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,
With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod.
Take off your shoes as by the burning bush,¹
Before the mystery of death and God.

July, 1867.

Heroes.

In rich Virginian woods,
The scarlet creeper reddens over graves,
Among the solemn trees enlooped with vines;
Heroic spirits haunt the solitudes,—
The noble souls of half a million braves, 5
Amid the murmurous pines.²

Ah! who is left behind,
Earnest and eloquent, sincere and strong,
To consecrate their memories with words
Not all unmeet? with fitting dirge and song 10
To chant a requiem purer than the wind,
And sweeter than the birds?

Here, though all seems at peace,
The placid, measureless sky serenely fair,

¹ See Exodus 3.5.

² Approximately 620,000 soldiers died in the Civil War.