

A Turning Point in Life

Oh Chronos, this is boring,
A billion years or more
Has Life been in the ocean,
Though just along the shore
Within the shallow water
We've seen stromatolites,
Accretionary structures
Formed by cyanophytes
Whose photosynthesizing
Now gives the atmosphere
Some oxygen, preparing
For Life a new frontier;
Things must evolve, whate'er the strife;
We've reached a turning point in Life.

Oh Zoë, don't be foolish;
Forget stromatolites.
The oxygen is trifling
That your cyanophytes
Emit, for 'tis but taken
By oxidizing rocks.
The atmosphere is toxic;
There's nothing there that blocks
The ultraviolet light
With which the sun does drench
The land; the radiation
Alone all life would quench.
Forget your plan; give up the strife;
There'll be no turning point in Life.

Oh Chronos, you're so boring!
For are you not aware
That rocks are saturated?
Free oxygen is there;
Already it is changing
The planet's atmosphere;
And ultraviolet rays
Are growing less severe,
For they split molecules
Of oxygen and make
A shielding layer of ozone
Their deadly power to slake.
We shall move on, whate'er the strife;
We've reached a turning point in Life.

Dear Zoë, this is folly,
For don't you understand
There's nought for life to feed on,
Nothing but rock and sand?
And won't life forms need water?
They'll dry up in no time.
Just stick with tidal margins
And stay with algae slime.
Be glad of teeming oceans;
The lands are not for you.
The problems are too many;
You haven't thought them through.
Admit defeat; give up the strife;
There'll be no turning point in Life.

Dear Chronos, please give over
And please don't patronize.
I think you'll find your scoffing
And mocking me unwise.
For have you seen the lichens,
Such clever symbionts?
For they can live on bare rocks
And simple are their wants;
Nor need they constant water;
They tolerate long droughts.
So put aside your mocking –
And put aside your doubts.
We have moved on, we'll brave the strife;
We've reached a turning point in Life.

You think you're very clever
With lichens, Zoë dear!
But hardly very vibrant!
Although I grant 'tis clear
A *lowly* sort of life form
Can grow upon the land.
But higher forms? Forget it!
Now leave the rocks and sand
To lichens. Be contented
With what you have achieved:
The other many problems
Remain; don't be deceived.
So be content – no further strife;
There's no great turning point in Life.

Some lichens, my dear Chronos,
Do now their rocks despoil
By chemical degradation
And are producing soil.
And see in cloudier, cooler
Environments how moss
Secretes organic acids
Reducing rock to dross
Which with dead cells is building
More soil upon the earth;
Thus nutrients are forming
And *new* plants shall have birth.
We still move on, we spurn the strife;
We've reached a turning point in Life.

I fear you are but clutching
At straws, my Zoë dear.
The soil is poor and meager
The land is too austere.
A world of moss and lichens?
'Tis not exactly fun.
'Tis silent without animals
Among the plants to run.
You've no real plants but mosses;
'Tis hopeless, you'll agree.
So stay where life's abundant;
Be happy with the sea.
The ocean's great – you need no strife;
There's no great turning point in Life.

The soil is not so meager,
Dear Chronos. Look and see
Cooksonia plants are growing;
Though still so small and wee,
They'll spread in several species
Across the many lands;
They'll make the soil richer.
You'll see how life expands.
And can you hear the scuttling
As arthropods creep out
And leave the tidal waters,
Find land and start to scout?
For yes, oh yes, 'twas worth the strife
To achieve this turning point in Life.

Oh Zoë, yes, I'm truly
 Surprised at your success.
And nematodes and other
 Small wórms, I do confess,
I see have left the oceans
 And now on land abound,
Recycling soil detritus
 As they enrich the ground.
But gravity must surely
 Ensure none larger than
The arthropods will ever
 Evolve. Was that your plan?
I grant you've won through patient strife
A *modest* turning point in Life.

Oh Chronos, stop your doubting,
 You diehard pessimist.
We've solved so many problems
 And we shall still persist
To evolve yet greater creatures:
 Both animals and plants.
This turning point's stupendous;
 I'll squander not this chance.
The continental masses
 Teeming with life will urge
Us ever, ever on till
 Intelligence emerge.
Make no mistake - 'twas worth the strife
To achieve this turning point in life.

Oh Zoë, ever hopeful,
 Always the optimist,
Continue with your dreaming;
 Go on, if you insist.
Attempt to evolve a creature
 With intellect and thought;
But if you should achieve this
 Beware of what you've wrought.
For hubris may entice it
 To plunder mineral wealth,
Pollute the air and ozone
 And wreck the planet's health.
I hope I'm wrong and all your strife
Is worth this turning point in life.