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MARS AND THE MUSES

A Study in the
Poetry of War

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MARS AND THE MUSES

The march of Mars and the sounds of his mailed legions, always have been echoed in the rhythms of metered speech. In the olden days it was the glory of war that was celebrated; its lustrous deeds; its heroisms. Realists that we are, poetry today tells more of war's cruelties, of its barbarism, and of its seeming inevitability.

Ten centuries before the birth of Christ, a poet-warrior was born, also in Bethlehem. He was to write:

> Why do the heathen rage?
> And the people imagine a vain thing?

He was to call upon the Lord to smite his (David's) enemies, who were automatically regarded as the Lord's enemies, but finally the shepherd-king was to exclaim:

> Behold how good and how pleasant it is
> For brethren to dwell together in unity.

A century later, Homer was to write so thrillingly of the heroes of the Trojan wars that the "Iliad" was to become an immortal classic. Later, vying as his birthplaces,

> Seven towns claimed Homer dead
> Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

Some of our great world anthologists have thought fit to omit Homer from their selections, and we shall follow their illustrious examples, for it is hard to choose from a long dramatic poem anything that would be typical and representative. Yet Homer was one of the first great poets of war,-- war considered as something heroic and, of course, inevitable.

> It was also of arms and of Troy--
> (Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris)

of whom Vergil sang, to the delight of scholars and the despair of high school Latinists.

And Vergil certainly must have been speaking of war correspondents and the breed of Washington commentators, when he penned that sententious line:

Fama, malum qua non alid velocius ullum,

"Rumor, than which there is no evil on this earth more swift."

In about the sixth century B.C. flourished the Greek poet, Anacreon, and those of you who know your classics will exclaim, "Surely you are not going to adduce him as a poet of war." Not at all, but I think we might remember his poem, speaking as the Epicure, which ends

Crown me with roses whilst I live,--
Now your wines and ointments give;
After death I nothing crave.
Let me alive my pleasure have! (and he closes with the pungent epigram:)
All are Stoics in the grave.

I say we may remember Anacreon, here, because of his amusing invocation of a Muse of war who just would n't be quite bellicose. He said, to quote Abraham Cowley's bright translation:

I'll sing of heroes and of kings,
In mighty numbers, mighty things.
Begin, my Muse! but lo! the strings
To my great song rebellious prove;
The strings will sound of naught but love.
****I broke them all, and put on new;
---This, this, or nothing, now will do.
"These sure", said I, "will me obey;
These, sure, heroic notes will play."
Straight I began with thundering Jove
And all th' immortal powers; but Love,
Love smiled; and from my enfeebled lyre
Came gentle airs, such as inspire
Melting love and soft desire.---
Farewell, then, heroes! farewell, kings!
And mighty numbers, mighty things!
Love tunes my heart just to my strings.

I think we may be glad that Anacreon left war to his sterner compatriots and devoted himself to a gentler Muse, for which he had a definite flair.

It worked out as it did for the modern English novelist, essayist and sometime poet, Hilaire Belloc, who wrote this clever couplet:

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.'

But now let us go back to something very ancient. It is a

PSALM of Battle

God is praise and glory;
Therefore glory and praise be unto Him
Who led me by the hand in stony places,
Who gave me a treasure of gold and a throne of gold
And set a sword of victory in my hand,

(all this (sounds like a ~~dream~~ vision come true for the modern dreamers of empire)

To go on:

He covered the earth with the shadow of my kingdom,
And fed me when I was a stranger
Among strange peoples;
When I was lowly He accounted me
And He has bound my brow about with triumph.

His enemies fled before my face like cattle;
The Lord breathed upon them and they were not!....

We died, we died in the battle,
But He has set us upon happy grass
Beside an eternal river of scented honey.

It sounds very much like one of the psalms of David, does it not? Yet it is from an Arabian poet, probably 2300 years later, one represented in the "Thousand and One Nights." These Oriental bards all speak alike, even when the centuries divide them. In the same "Thousand and One Nights" we find, too, the lament of a woman for a poet-warrior, her brother, which has all the fine sincerity, the true expression of grief, that we find in Tennyson's yet inspired more labored elgy to his very dear friend, Arthur Hallam.

Around the sixth century B.C. flourished the Greek poet, Anacreon, who, like the many anonymous poets of the perennially lovely Greek Anthology, liked to sing of Cupid stung by a bee; of the happiness of the grasshopper, and of the pleasures of the epicure, who cried

Crown me with roses while I live,--
"Now your wines and ointments give;
After death I nothing crave.
Let me alive my pleasures have!
(closing with the pungent epigram)
All are Stoics in the grave.

Now once Anacreon tried to write a poem of war and its amusing heroes and it is ~~amusing~~ to note how it turned out. He wrote:

¶ like Anacreon and the many poets of the immortal Greek Anthology, a few

I'll sing of heroes and of kings,
In moght numbers, mighty things.
Begin, my Muse!--but lo, the strings
To my great song rebellious prove;
The strings will sound of nought but love.
--I broke them all and put on new;
--'Tis this, or nothing, now will do.
"These, sure," said I, "will me obey;
These, sure, heroic notes will play."
Straight I began with thundering Jove
And all th' immortal Powers; but Love,
Love smil'd; and from my enfeebles lyre
Came gentle airs, such as inspire
Melting love and soft desire.--
Farewell, then, heroes! farewell, kings!
And mighty numbers, mighty things!
Love tunes my heart just to my strings.

Few of the Latin poets were particularly warlike, and certainly the Italians, even as late as Dante, gave very little thought to war. Go through the many sonnets of Dante and the others by his idolatrous followers and you will find scarcely a note about conflict. Among the latter, however, one will find a notable exception in the poet, Albizzi, of the 13th Century, who wrote a sixteen-line sonnet, which we have in the translation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It was inspired by the troops returning from the battles around Milan, and it might have been written today, except that the wagons would have been motorized:

If you could see, fair brother, how dead beat
The fellows look who came through Rome today,--
Black, yellow, smoke-dried visages,--you'd say
They thought their haste at going all too fleet.
Their empty victual-wagons up the street,
Over the bridge, dreadfully sound and sway;
Their eyes, as hanged men's, turning the wrong way;
And nothing on their backs, or heads, or feet.
One sees the ribs and all the skeletons
Of their gaunt horses; and a sorry sight
Are the torn saddles, crammed with straw and stones.
They are ashamed and match throughout the night;
Stumbling, for hunger, on their marrowbones;
Like barrels rolling, jolting, in this plight.
Their arms all gone; not even their swords are saved;
And each as silent as a man being shaved.

(and any wife knows how silent that is!)

The necessity or the inevitability of war has been preached by many, both in prose and verse, one of the most ardent apostles in the former medium being Nietzsche. "It is mere illusion and pretty sentiment," he observed, "to expect much (even anything at all) from mankind, if it forgets how to make war." Now he was an anti-Christian, but the pious field marshal, Count von Moltke, also said: "Perpetual peace is a dream, and it is not even a beautiful dream. War is an element in the order of the world ordained of God." Such were the teachings nearly a century ago in a militaristic state, whose present leaders and doctrines most of the civilized world is trying to extirpate.

Yet, at the close of his famous "Outline of History" Mr. Wells recalled that it had been not more than 500 years since the great empire of the Aztecs believed that it could live only by the shedding of blood which involved tearing out the heart of the still living victim. "The day may be close at hand", he wrote only 21 years ago," when we shall no longer tear out the hearts of men, even for the sake of our national gods,"

And it was Mr. Bernard Shaw, in a conversation with Mr. Archibald Henderson, his biographer, who admitted that the first world war had been a horror and that "everybody was the worse for it, except the people who were so narrowly selfish that even a war improved them."

But these men are historians and dramatists, and poetry takes its origin, (from) of Wordsworth is right, "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Therefore most of our poets simply record the emotions of men or their own emotions, sometimes setting them down white-hot, and not lingering for that tranquil moment awaited by the bard with whom the "world was too much" but who, sometimes, was not too much with the world."

Now to go back to 1918, as early as January, we come upon some fragments of a poetic work called "The Twelve" by Alexander Blok, who died in his prime a few years after the war. In this outstanding poem

of the Proletarian Revolution, we find rejoicing for what the Revolution had done and a dream of what should come after. Just a few lines suggest the mood and the design:

The ~~night~~ wind is a ~~wgirl~~ swirl, the snow is a dance,
In the wind twelve men advance.

Black, narrow rifle-straps,
Cigarets, tilted caps,

A convict's stripes would fit their backs.
Fires mark their nightly tracks.

Freedom, ekh, freedom--
Unhallowed, unblessed!
Trah--tah-tah!....

Fires blaze upon their track.
Their rifle straps are gleaming black.

March to the revolution's pace;
We've a fierce enemy to face.

More daring, friends, take aim, the lot!
At Holy Russia let's fire a shot.

At h u t t e d Russia,
Fat-rumped and solid,
Russia, the stolid!

Ekh, ekh, unhallowed, unblessed.....

Block painted scenes realistically and he saw visions, too, for in his prophetic last lines he exclaimed:

"Christ marches on. And twelve are led."

At least in ~~the~~ this poet's mind the wave of irreligion that later hit our present noble ally had not ~~xxxx~~ yet reared its unhallowed head.

It's the same in any land, at any time. As Lowell put it in his "Present Crisis", that pre-civil-war poem, (which my sainted mother once gave me a gold watch to ~~commit~~ memorize), as he says:

"When a deed is done for Freedom, through the
broad earth's aching breast,
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from
east to west...

And then he pictured how the slave "felt the soul within him climb."

I know it has become fashionable with some of our

latter day critics to reckon Poe and Whitman as about the only great American poets of our nineteenth century. But Lowell had some great moments, too, and my chief quarrel with the otherwise brilliant and monumental World Anthology of Mark Van Doren is that he gives Russell Lowell not even a single line, but grants four or five pages to Miss Amy, the sweet singer of Back Bay. In his Commemoration Ode, one of the noblest odes written by any American, he gave us some lines which, before long, God willing, we Americans shall be saying again:

O Beautiful! My Country! ours once more!
Smoothing thy gold of war-dishevelled hair
O'er such sweet brows as never other wore,
And letting thy set lips,
Freed from wrath's pale eclipse,
The rosy edges of their smile lay bare,——
What words divine of lover or of poet
Could tell our love and make thee know it,
Among the Nations bright beyond compare?
What were our lives without thee?
What all our lives to save thee?
We reck not what we gave thee;
We will not dare to doubt thee,
But ask whatever else, and we will dare!

Poe of course died in 1849, and so witnessed only the gathering shadows of our civil war, and Whitman, great as he was, wrote little in verse about it, umless we except his two memorable poems on Lincoln, to which we must add his touching pictures of war hospital experiences, mostly done in prose.

There are many interesting poems inspired by that war, of the 60's, but few that we should call great. One of them that many people loved, because they liked the idea back of it, was "The Blue and the Gray" by Finch.

No more shall the war cry sever
Or the winding rivers be red;
They banish our anger forever
When they laurel the graves of our dead!
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Love and tears for the Blue.
Tears and love for the Gray.

Will Henry Thompson, who was only a boy in his early teens when the battle was fought, painted in later years a picture of it in his "High Tide at Gettysburg", which recited some of the outstanding moments of the Gray and included in its fifteen graphic stanzas many of the names of

the generals at Gettysburg

both of the North and the South.

And then there was Thomas Buchan Read who could write dreamfully

"My soul today
Is far away,
Sailing the Vesuvian Bay...."

and yet who penned one of our most zestful poems, "Sheridan's Ride", which somehow runs in our mind parallel with Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix." Read's picture of the gallant general and his big black steed,.now 20, now 15, now ten, now five miles away, saving the retreat near Winchester, captured the imagination of the 90's and the early 1900's, as it had in the days of the author, who survived, by scarcely a decade, the event he celebrated.

And then there was Henry Holcomb Bennett, who was born in the third year of the War Between the States, He wrote a poem whom our beloved Osman C. Hooper used to like to quote:

Hats off!
Along the street there comes
A blare of bugles, a ruffle of drums;
And loyal hearts are beating high:
Hats off!
The flag is passing by!

It was a good poem, for there were other stanzas that pictured what the flag really meant to us; what it, symbolically, stood for.

Superb in its imagination and noble in its expression is Vachel Lindsay's "Abraham Limcoln Walks at Midnight", which tells how the spirit of the great man walks, lamenting the woes of the world:

His head is bowed. He thinks on men and kins.
Yea, when the sick world cries, how can he sleep?
Too many peasants fight, they know not why,
Too many homesteads in black terror weep.

The sins of all the war-lords burn his heart.
He sees the dreadnaughts scouring every main.
He carries on his shawl-wrapped shoulders now
The bitterness, the folly and the pain.

He cannot rest until a spirit-dawn
Shall come:--the shining hope of Europe free:
The league of sober folk, the Workers' Earth,
Bringing long peace to Cornland, Alp and Sea.

It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,
That all his hours of travail here for men
Seem yet in vain. And who will bring white peace

that he may sleep upon his hill again?

(This was written after the last war, but its stanzas are almost word for word, and line for line, applicable today.)

Now this present paper does not attempt to be chronological and it cannot be, in any broad sense, all-inclusive. But we do want to go back for a moment to make a gesture to two or three of our earlier poets, especially to Joseph Rodman Drake, born when our nation was not a quarter century old and who lived but a quarter century himself.

When Freedom from her mountain height
Unfurled her standard to the air,
She tore the azure robe of night
And set the stars of glory there.

Its lines are familiar to all of you, maybe some of you have recited them in school, up to the stout finale,

Forever float that standard sheet!
Where breathes the foe but falls before us,
With Freedom's soul beneath our feet,
And Freedom's banner streaming o'er us?

It was of Drake that his friend and comrade, Fitz-Greene Halleck, wrote the words that lately closed --and how appropriately-- the ministerial eulogy over the body of our beloved Billy Graves:

None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise

It was Halleck of course who wrote also the tribute to the Greek patriot, (who gave his life just three years after the death of Rodman Drake), the tribute to Marco Bozzaris. It is a rather high blown apostrophe, but closes with an epigrammatic line to Bozzaris,

One of the few, the immortal names,
That were not born to die.

This is another poem which used to shine in school and college rhetoricals. I recall one in a small southern Ohio college (not my own alma mater, but One I knew) where this was recited by a young man whose memory, it seems, was not too secure. You will remember the poem began.

"At midnight in his guarded tent,
The Turk was dreaming of the hour
When Greece, her knee in suppliance bent,
Should tremble at his power....

The lad began:

~~When~~ At midnight in his guarded tent,
The Turk was dreaming of the hour
When Greece, her knee...

His memory faltered....

Then He repeated:

When Greece, her knee...

Whereupon the speech professor, who was sitting near, suggested kindly, "Greece her again, George, and maybe she'll go this time."

Perhaps this is as good a time as any to remark that there is a ~~deal~~ bit of humor in war, grim as ~~ikxmay~~ the battle itself may be, and a great ~~much~~ deal of it has found its way into poetry. Much of it is fugitive , and may not ~~even~~ be recollected even in Wordsworthian tranquillity? Some of it I found neatly collated ~~for me~~ in the Oxford Book of Light Verse.(And, by the way, six of the treasured volumes I should carry out first ,from a fire, would be those Oxford anthologies, including Bliss Carman's excellent one of American verse.) death of Quiller-Couch.

One of these lighter poems, written by that versatile and ubiquitous gentleman, Anon, is "The British Grenadiers", which is in the form of a song. Part of it goes like this:.

Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules,
Of Conon and Lysander,and some Miltiades
But of all the world's brave heroes, there's none that can compare
With a tow, row, row,row,row, to the British Grenadiers.

(And then the chorus rpeats, "But of all the world's brave heroes," etc

None of those ancient heroes e'er saw a cannonball
Or knew the force of powder to slay their foes withal.
But our brave boys do know it,& banish all their fears,
With a tow,row,row,row,row, the British Grenadiers.

Another stanzax now to show how these well schooled British versifers bristle with classical allusions.

The Godx of War was pleased, and great Bellona smiles,
To see these noble heroes of our British Isles;
And all the Gods celestial, descending from their spheres,
Beheld with admiration the British Grenadiers.

Perhaps this next is n't a war ppem, but, in a sense it is, for the south, at least of Ireland, was always at war with ~~kkm~~ Mother Brittania. It is in one of the lighter moods of that oft-classical, and seldom trivial, Walter Savage Landor:

Ireland never was contented.
Say you so? You are demented.
Ireland was contented when
All could use the sword and pen,
And when Tara rose so high
That her turrets split the sky,
And about her courts were seen
Liveried angels robed in green,
Wearing , by St. Patrick's bounty,
Emeralds big as half the county.

(Or, in fewer words, she will be contented, when the millenium arrives.)

Among the songs of the sea-dogs of Britain is one about "The Death of Lord Nelson" and it has a suggestion of lightness about it, though Nelson is about a secure in the Hall of Fame as any British hero. One of the later poems, about the ghost of Nelson walking London, is reminiscent of Vachel ~~kimmsi~~ Lindsay's "Abr-Lincoln Walks at Midnight."

Immortal among the war ballds, which have been set to music, is Kipling's about the soldier who had shot a comrade sleeping. That is of course "Danny Deever", which is too well known to bear quotation of more than the ~~kwo~~ two final lines--

Ho! the young recruits are shakin' and they'll want their beer today
After hangin' Danny Deever in the mornin.'

Apropos of our American Revolution and the events that impelled us to it, Edmund C. Bentley said a mouthful in these 17 words:

George the Third
Ought never to have occurred.
One can only wonder
At so grotesque a blunder

~~(for Kit Kat only)~~

~~And then good old Anon wrote this one some years ago:~~

A hand some young airman lay dying
And as on the aerodrome he lay,
To the mechanics round him came sighing
These last dying words he did say:

'Take the cylinders out of my kidneys,
The connecting-rod out of my brain,
Take the cam-shaft from out of my backbone,
And assemble the engine again.

But in this war when aviators have been doing so much, and when the deaths of so many have come so close to us, this does n't seem quite as funny as it did, even five years ago.

Siegfried Sassoon, the British ppet, now in his late 50's, has written much beautiful verse. But some of his war poems have in them the bite of acid. As, for instance, that one about The General:

'Good morning; good morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead.
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack,
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

(above) But he did for them both with his plan of attack.

A sly suggestion as to the soldier's indiscriminate amours is in the ballad, "Soldier, Won't You Marry Me"(authorship anonymous) which certainly should be set to music, ~~if it has n't been, already:~~ and I found that it had been. I thought for a friend of mine says she used to sing it as a lullaby. It goes thus:

Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?
It's O a fife and a drum.
How can I marry such a pretty girl as you
When I've got no hat to put on?

Off to the tailor she did go
As hard as she could run,
Brought him back the finest was there.
Now, soldier, put it on.

Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?
It's O a fife and a drum.
How can I narry such a pretty girl as you
When I've got no coat to put on?

Off to the tailor she did go
As hard as she could run,
Brought him back the finest was there.
Now, soldier, put it on.

Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?
It's O a fife and a drum.
How can I marry such a pretty girl as you
When I've got no shoes to put on?

Off to the shoe shop she did go
As hard as she could run,
Brought him back the finest was there.
Now, soldier, put them on.

Soldier, soldier, won't you marry me?
It's O a fife and a drum.
How can I marry such a pretty girl as you
And a wife and baby at home?

(Can't you imagine Lawrence Tibbett or James Melton singing that?)

Soldiers are soldiers, sailors are sailors, but there are all kinds. Some are soldiers of fortune, loving adventure, loving fighting for its own sake; some are mercenaries, fighting for a living; some get emotionally into the army and then find, after the excitement is over, that they can't get out.

Irvin Cobb used to tell about such a one. He was a colored private in a regiment from a southern state in the war that was to "make the world safe for democracy." He was homesick when he landed in France and the longer he stayed the more homesick he became. He hailed word of the Armistice with joy, but, to his chagrin, nothing was said about mustering him out and sending him back to the States. On the contrary, supplies on the docks at Brest continued to pile up and he and the other members of his labor battalion continued to work, harder, if anything, than they had when the war was on.

He appealed to the brawny sergeant of his squad. "Say, look heah," he asked. "I'se gittin' plum wore out wid all dis yere liftin', and onliftin'. Looks lak to me dey oughter be shippin' me back whar I come frum. Hit's des de same ez de wah, and I on'y 'listed fer de duration."

"Boy," said the towering sergeant, fixing him with a cold eye, "heah me an' heed me. (An' de res' uv you niggahs mout ez well heah whut I'se sayin.') De WAH is done ovah, but fer sich as you, de duration ain't hardly commenced yit."

. . . . . .

And, during the actual hostilities, there are others who have not their heart in the battle. General Patton was trying to reckon with

some whom he ~~reckoned~~ figured to be of this type, ~~and what did it get him? He's to go to England to train soldiers, instead of leading them to the front line.~~

Seamus (Shāmus) O'Sheel had some of them in mind, too.

They went forth to battle but they always fell;
Their eyes were fixed above the sullen shields;
Nobly they fought and bravely but not well,
-- And sank, heart-wounded by a subtle spell.
They knew not fear that to the foeman yields,
They were not weak as one who vainly wields
A futile weapon; yet the sad scrolls tell
How on the hard-fought field they always fell.

* * *

Their might was not the might of lifted spears
Over the battle-clamor came a spell
Of troubling music, and they fought not well,
Their wreaths are willows, and their tribute tears;
Their names are old, sad stories in men's ears;
Yet they ~~went forth~~ will scatter the red hordes of Hell,
Who went to battle forth and always fell.

Then there are the soldiers who fight simply for the love of it. I know it is the fashion of the sophisticates to lift the eyebrow when the name of Robert W. Service is mentioned but in his "Rhymes of a Red Cross Man" is his "Song of the Soldier Born". which describes that type in language anyone can understand. It is verse that, doubtless many of his critics would be proud to sign.

Give me to live and love in the old, bold fashion;
A soldier's billet at night and a soldier's ration;
A heart that leaps to the fight with a soldier's passion.

For I hold as a simple faith there's no denying:
The trade of a soldier's the only trade worth ~~playing~~ playing;
The death of a soldier's the only death worth dying.

So let me go and leave your safety behind me;
Go to the spaces of hazard where nothing shall bind me;
Go till the word is War--and then you will find me.

Then you will call me and claim me, because you will need me;
Cheer me and gird me and into the battle-wrath speed me...
And when it's over, spurn me and no longer heed me.

For guile and a purse gold-greased are the arms you carry;
With deeds of paper you fight and with pens you parry;
You call on the hounds of war your foes to harry.

You with your "Art for its own sake" posing and prinking;
You with your "Live and be merry", eating and drinking;
You with your "Peace at all hazard", from bright blood shrinking.

Fools! I will tell you now: though the red rain patters,
And a million men go down, it's little it matters...
There's the Flag unflung to the stars, tho it streams in tatters.

There's a glory gold never can buy to yearn and to cry for;
There's a hope that's as old as the sky to suffer and sigh for;
There's a faith that out-dazzles the sun to martyr and die for.

Ah, no! it's my dream that War will never be ended;
That men will perish like men, and valor be splendid;
That the Flag by the sword will be served, and honor defended.

That the tale of my fights will never be ancient story;
That, tho my eye may be dim, and my beard be hoary,
I'll die as a soldier dies on the Field of Glory.

So give me a strong right arm for a wrong's swift righting;
Stave of a song on my lips as my sword is smiting;
Death in my boots, may-be, but fighting, fighting.

(There is your soldier who a born campaigner, whether he fights for a free Spain, or a free China, or just freedom as a general proposition.)

Two poets there were, in the last war, who captured the imagination of the world, especially, one British, one American. One was Rupert Brooke, who was only 28 when he fought to his death in 1915. He, too, had a premonition.

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware;
Gave, once her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

(Yes, Rupert Brooke is still "a pulse in the eternal mind, no less.")

And the other one, the American, was Alan Seeger, who was born on July 4, 1916 in New York and who died in some spirited fighting at Belloy-en-Santerre, in France, just a few weeks after he had reached his 28th birthday.

He fell, fighting with the Foreign Legion. As he fell, William Watson, in a brief sketch recalled that he was singing from an old marching song: (quote) "Accents of ours were in the fierce melee." (end quote)

The words are, however, in an ode that Seeger wrote to the American volunteers which he was to have read in Paris that summer.

We still remember Alan Seeger by the words which turned prophetic:

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air--
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he will take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath---
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear...
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips North again this year,
And I to my pledged word ~~are~~ am true:
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

(And he kept it almost literally as he said. (Mrs. C's friend tell story)

Perhaps too belatedly we come to the poems inspired by the present war, and I must tell you how informed and stimulated I was by "The New Treasury of War Poetry," edited by Professor George Herbert Clarke, of Oxford, who did a similar service to poetry on the first world war. I came on this volume recently but ~~a fortnight ago~~ and it was like an answer to a prayer. Dipping into it, Truly, I was "silent upon a peak in Darien." Included are poems by Miss Millay, Miss Struther, Wm. Rose Benet, Masefield, Robert Nathan, Robinson Jeffers, many known writers, many of only parochial fame.
It covers the allied nations all, the spectacles of raids, the tragedy of Dunkirk, the flyers, the dictators, the reflective soldiers, women and the war, and the bright, beautiful dream of peace. It has works from over 100 poets. It is indeed ~~and is~~ one of the most perfectly chosen and edited of modern anthologies.

[omit] → Harry Brown, a staff sergeant serving abroad with the American Engineers, wrote "The Drill," when he was in training in Virginia.

I watched them on the drill field, the awkward and the grave,
The slow to action and the easily incensed,
The tall plowboys, the pale clerks, the fast men with a dollar,
The frightened adolescents, and those whose eyes explode
~~Like bombs~~
Like bombs or, like exhausted coals, lie dead.

turn page

They wheel and turn. The eternal convolutions
Of close-order drill--Right Flank or To the Rear--
Hold them as though, somnambulists, they moved
In the imposing caverns of some recurring dream
Where the only escape is to awake. But the night is very long.

The feet march on through the heavy summer morning.
The bodies are anonymous in their cotton khaki clothes,
And the faces, too, are all of a piece. Concealed at last from life
Are the weak chin, the nose too large, the forehead rutted and worn,
And the eyes too small, and the lips too fleshy or thin.

For the moment the accounts are all settled, the goods have all been sold,
The last delivery made, the last essay sent to the printer,
The elevator gone on its last strict voyage, the truck turned the
last corner,
The last issue of bonds taken up, the last class attended,
The last row planted, the last payment made on the house.

The platoon moves past me on the field of summer,
The gray dust rising from the grassless ground,
Each man with his rifle resting on his shoulder,
Each man with his bayonet slapping his thigh, each man
With his eyes fixed on the man ahead, the corporals counting cadence.

The platoon moves past me into the mists of summer
And disappears into the darkness of our time,
A body of men, none known, none recognized,
Crossing my road for a little space. They go
Into the sun and the summer and the waiting war.

Seen for an instant and gone. Yet I felt between us
A bond not of country but of faith and love,
And I thought of an old phrase: 'Whither thou goest,
I will go.' And it seemed that the summer morning
Spoke out in a voice like song, that the air was full of singing.

And something said, 'They come and they go away,
The patient and the small. They go away into the sun,
Their names are forgotten and their few works also,
But when they go they take their weapons with them,
And they leave behind them houses heavy with honor.'

And I thought: It is enough. As I stood in a field
In Virginia in deep summer, while all around me
The trees dipped and the grass rustled, I heard the sound
Of platoons of men marching toward the crouching future,
And the voices of our approaching generations.

(What an observing eye and what a discerning mind has young Staff Sgt. Harry Brown, of the U.S.Army Engineers!)

resume

Five novels and three books of verse have come from Frederic Prokosch, one of the most expressive of the younger bards. I should like to read you the dozen or more stanzas in his wartime poem, "The Festival", but shall give you only a few phrases.

Of a concert audience he says, (suggestive of moronic matrons, this line.)

Sleek in their velvet squat the seven sins.

On the banks of the Danube he sees

"archaic trees
Among whose pillars still the restless dead
Dispel their homesick odours on the breeze."

Floating through a garden gate, he hears

"The fretful elegance of the mandolin."

And note this as a picture of a war-time scene in an Austrian city:

Each hungry orphan climbs into his bed
Afraid to face the usual midnight dread;
Across the cobbles, past the pock-marched church,
The hags go hustling with their crusts of bread,

The cripples stumble slowly up the stairs
And toss their curses on the stuffy airs;
The cellar-eyed, the sleepers in the ditches,
(slow) Mutter their simple paranoiac prayers.

You will find this and many other fine poems in one of his latest volumes entitled "Death at Sea." The name is Frederic Prokosch (p-r-o-k-o-s-c-h)

Everyone in America who knows poetry knows Joseph Auslander, lecturer on poetics at Columbia and chief of the poetry division in the Library of Congress, whose libraian, Archibald McLeish, is also a considerable bard. Auslander has written an eloquent poem on France, inspired by its heroic past. A prayer it is to "Jeanne of France", as he styles her, or Joan of Arc. It is too long to quote but it is noble in its inspiration, passionate in expression. To Joan he says:

France is one vast Bastille;
The people are turning and twisting under a vicious heel
Your France, whose blood-soaked pikestaff banners gave
New hope to the opprest, the prisoner, & the slave;
Your France, that raised the heart like Lazarus from the grave,
Bends now her neck in the vile dust to kiss
A monstrous parody of peace.

And there are the heroines of the home front,--the women who stay at home and write and hope and pray; and sometimes they weep. Recalling that poignant lyric of Emily Dickinson's with the lines

Parting is all we know of heaven
and all we need of hell

is the short poem by an English poetess, Ada Jackson, called "Widow-Mother":

Soldier boy, soldier boy,
Gallantly you go--
Head erect and shoulders squared,
Marching heel and toe.

The tale repeats itself, my dear.
I stood thus, smiling so,
To watch your father marching--five
And twenty years ago.

And I am proud again. Again
A tear comes full and slow.
Can a heart be broken twice?
Presently I'll know.

The Canadians, the English, the Americans, the Scotch, the Irish and the Welsh, they have all written stimulating and beautiful poetry during the five years past in this global war. And one of the groups, from whom and about whom, much graphic material in really memorable verse, is coming, is the fliers. When never before in history, as the epigrammtic British leader says, "have so many owed so much to so few", we are bound to hear much about those monumental few.

~~To your admirable and discerning program chairman, Miss Reynard, I am indebted for the next poem.~~

Noel Coward has been a wit and a clever fellow; his plays have skated gleefully over the surfaces of life. But the war has stirred him to his depths. Our debt--and the even more incalculable debt of the beleaguered countries--to the men of the air is shown in these lines; which appeared from his pen in last October's Atlantic:

Lie in the dark and listen.
It's clear tonight, so they're flying high,
Hundreds of them, thousands perhaps,
Riding the icy, moonlit sky,
Men, machinery, bombs, and maps,
Altimeters and guns and charts,
Coffee, sandwiches, fleece-lined boots,
Bones and muscles and minds and hearts,
English saplings with English roots
Deep in the earth they've left below.
Lie in the dark and let them go;
Lie in the dark and listen.

Lie in the dark and listen.
They're going over in waves and waves
High above villages, hills, and streams,
Country churches and little graves
And little citizens' worried dreams;
Very soon they'll have reached the sea
And far below them will lie the bays
And cliffs and sands where they used to be
Taken for summer holidays.
Lie in the dark and let them go;

Theirs is a world we'll never know.
Lie in the dark and listen.

Lie in the dark and listen.
City magnates and steel contractors,
Factory workers and politicians,
Soft, hysterical little actors,
Ballet dancers, reserved musicians,
Safe in your warm civilian beds,
Count your profits and count your sheep--
Life is passing above your heads,
Just turn over and try to sleep.
Lie in the dark and let them go;
There's one debt you'll forever owe.
Lie in the dark and listen.

But in the realm of the high ether, there has been no poem quite so inspired in this war as one that many, perhaps most of you, already have read. It is by Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, jr. of the Royal Canadian Air Force, born in Shanghai, the son of two American missionaries. He did his preparatory work at Rugby, then came to the States in '39 and gave up a scholarship at Yale to enlist in the R.C.A.F. the next year. He served overseas and was killed in action with a Spitfire squadron just two years ago this month, at the age of 19. Keats would have been glad to sign this sonnet, written after a flight into the stratosphere:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds--and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of--wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Never were youth and high adventure and aspiration more burningly expressed, and so effortlessly that they seem, like a poetic Spitfire, almost to scorn the conventional limits of a strict poetic form.

* * * *

In fact, there is much to inspire and much to compel in the war poetry of this present day. We need two or three hours to compass even its higher altitudes.

The war has been long for Europe and it is already beginning to seem long for us. And perhaps "there's a long, long trail a-winding" before we reach that land of dreams, which is peace. And already the poet, no less than the economist and the international lawyer and the business magnate, is warning us that the dangers of peace are no less threatening than those of war. Our country has done well in the war so far, and we all hope and pray that it may do not less well in the post-bellum councils, which mean so much for the world at large. As we Americans look forward, I think we do well to have that state of mind which Richard Hovey indicated, many years ago, in his "U n m a n i f e s t Destiny":

To what new fates, my country, far
And unforseen of foe or friend,
Beneath what unexpected star,
Compelled to what unchosen end,

Across the sea that knows no beach
The Admiral of Nations guides
Thy blind obedient keels to reach
The harbor where thy <u>future</u> rides!

The guns that spoke at Lexington
Knew not that God was planning then
The trumpet word of Jefferson
To bugle forth the rights of men.

To them that wept and cursed Bull Run,
What was it but despair and shame?
Who saw behind the cloud the sun?
Who knew that God was in the flame?

Had not defeat upon defeat,
Disaster on disaster come,
The slave's emancipated feet
Had never marched behind the drum.

There is a Hand that bends our deeds
To mightier issues than we planned,
Each son that triumphs, each that bleeds,
My country, serves <u>Its</u> dark command.

I do not know beneath what sky
    Nor on what seas shall be thy fate;
I only know it shall be high,
    I only know it shall be great.

****

Post-script

General Pershing was fond of quoting this little poem to members of his staff with the A.E.F. in World War I:

The Lord gave us two ends to use:
One to think with, one to sit with.
The war depends on which we choose:
Heads we win, tails we lose.

War alone keys up all human energies to their maximum tension and sets the seal of nobility on those people who have the courage to face it. --Benito Mussolini in his book on Fascism.

(wonder if he still feels that way about it?)

What are we going to do, what are the soldiers going to do, after the war? An English writer, Virginia Graham, was thinking about that in something rather felicitous that she wrote for Punch. With that I shall end my postscript:

When there is peace again, soldier, what will you do?
I shall go back to the job I had before
Behind the counter at the hardware store--
That's what I'll do.

And you, sailor, when you have left the sea?
I shall go back to my job as a plumber's mate,
And lean of an evening on my garden gate
That'll suit me.

What will you do, brave man with the silver wings?
I shall return, I hope, to my pre-war life,
To my dog, and my week-end golf, and my wife,
And such-like things.

And I myself, what is my heart's desire?
I want to go back to a house that is all mine,
To lie in one of my own chairs on my spine
By the fire.

Back, back, is where all of us want to go,
Each to his little,well-worn,well-loved spot;
So who in the wide world's going forward, is what
I'd like to know.
