

Suggested poetry

Contents

Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto IV

John Wilmot, “A Satyr Against Reason and Mankind”

Ezra Pound, “The Seafarer”

Stephen Spender, “Ultima ratio regum”

John Scott of Amwell, “The Drum”

Allen Ginsberg, “America”

Edward Estlin Cummings, “I sing of Olaf glad and big”

William Wordsworth, “The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts and Its Commencement”

Walt Whitman, “I Hear America Singing”

“The Internationale”

Martin Niemöller, “First They Came...”

Bertolt Brecht, “On the Terms of Exile”

Wislawa Szymborska, “Utopia”

Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Conversation with Comrade Lenin”

Osip Mandelstam, “The Stalin Epigram”

Anna Akhmatova, “Requiem”

William Butler Yeats, “Politics”, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”

Constantine P. Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians”

The Road Not Taken

by
Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Source:

Frost, Robert. (1969). *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Retrieved from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

Inferno, Canto IV

by
Dante Alighieri

*The First Circle. The Borderland
Unbaptized Worthies. Illustrious Pagans*

A heavy thunder-clap broke the deep sleep
within my head, so that I roused myself,
as would a person who is waked by force;
and standing up erect, my rested eyes
I moved around, and with a steady gaze
I looked about to know where I might be.

Truth is I found myself upon the verge
of pain's abysmal valley, which collects
the thunder-roll of everlasting woes.
So dark it was, so deep and full of mist,
that, howsoe'er I gazed into its depths,
nothing at all did I discern therein.

"Into this blind world let us now descend!"
the Poet, who was death-like pale, began,
"I will be first, and thou shalt second be."

And I, who of his color was aware,
said: "How am I to come, if thou take fright,
who 'rt wont to be my comfort when afraid?"

"The anguish of the people here below,"
he said to me, "brings out upon my face
the sympathy which thou dost take for fear.

Since our long journey drives us, let us go!"
Thus he set forth, and thus he had me enter
the first of circles girding the abyss.

Therein, as far as one could judge by list'ning,
there was no lamentation, saving sighs
which caused a trembling in the eternal air;

and this came from the grief devoid of torture
felt by the throngs, which many were and great,
of infants and of women and of men.

To me then my good Teacher: "Dost not ask
what spirits these are whom thou seest here?
Now I would have thee know, ere thou go further,
that these sinned not; and though they merits have,
't is not enough, for they did not have baptism,
the gateway of the creed believed by thee;
and if before Christianity they lived,
they did not with due worship honor God;
and one of such as these am I myself.
For such defects, and for no other guilt,
we 're lost, and only hurt to this extent,
that, in desire, we live deprived of hope."

Great sorrow filled my heart on hearing this,
because I knew of people of great worth,
who in that Borderland suspended were.

"Tell me, my Teacher, tell me, thou my Lord,"
I then began, through wishing to be sure
about the faith which conquers every error;

"came any ever, by his own deserts,
or by another's, hence, who then was blest?"

And he, who understood my covert speech,
replied: "To this condition I was come
but newly, when I saw a Mighty One
come here, crowned with the sign of victory.
From hence He drew the earliest parent's shade,
and that of his son, Abel, that of Noah,
and Moses the law-giver and obedient;
Abram the patriarch, and David king,
Israel, with both his father and his sons,
and Rachel, too, for whom he did so much,
and many others; and He made them blest;
and I would have thee know that, earlier
than these, there were no human spirits saved."

Because he talked we ceased not moving on,
but all the while were passing through the wood,
the wood, I mean, of thickly crowded shades.
Nor far this side of where I fell asleep

had we yet gone, when I beheld a fire,
which overcame a hemisphere of gloom.
Somewhat away from it we were as yet,
but not so far, but I could dimly see
that honorable people held that place.

“O thou that honorest both art and science,
who are these people that such honor have,
that it divides them from the others’ life?”

And he to me: “The honorable fame,
which speaks of them in thy live world above,
in Heaven wins grace, which thus advances them.”

And hereupon a voice was heard by me:
“Do honor to the loftiest of poets!
his shade, which had departed, now returns.”
And when the voice had ceased and was at rest,
four mighty shades I saw approaching us;
their looks were neither sorrowful nor glad.

My kindly Teacher then began to say:
“Look at the one who comes with sword in hand
before the three, as if their lord he were.
Homer he is, the sovereign poet; Horace,
the satirist, the one that cometh next;
the third is Ovid, Lucan is the last.
Since each of them in common shares with me
the title which the voice of one proclaimed,
they do me honor, and therein do well.”

Thus gathered I beheld the fair assembly
of those the masters of the loftiest song,
which soareth like an eagle o’er the rest.

Then, having talked among themselves awhile,
they turned around to me with signs of greeting;
and, when he noticed this, my Teacher smiled.
And even greater honor still they did me,
for one of their own company they made me,
so that amid such wisdom I was sixth.

Thus on we went as far as to the light,
talking of things whereof is silence here
becoming, even as speech was, where we spoke.

We reached a noble Castle's foot, seven times
encircled by high walls, and all around
defended by a lovely little stream.
This last we crossed as if dry land it were;
through seven gates with these sages I went in,
and to a meadow of fresh grass we came.
There people were with slow and serious eyes,
and, in their looks, of great authority;
they spoke but seldom and with gentle voice.
We therefore to one side of it drew back
into an open place so luminous
and high, that each and all could be perceived.
There on the green enamel opposite
were shown to me the spirits of the great,
for seeing whom I glory in myself.

I saw Electra with companions many,
of whom I knew both Hector and Aeneas,
and Caesar armed, with shining falcon eyes.
I saw Camilla with Penthesilea
upon the other side, and King Latinus,
who with Lavinia, his own daughter, sat.
I saw that Brutus who drove Tarquin out,
Lucretia, Julia, Martia and Cornelia,
and, all alone, I saw the Saladin.

Then, having raised my brows a little higher,
the Teacher I beheld of those that know,
seated amid a philosophic group.
They all look up to him, all honor him;
there Socrates and Plato I beheld,
who nearer than the rest are at his side;
Democritus, who thinks the world chance-born,
Diogenes, Anaxagoras and Thales,
Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Zeno;
of qualities I saw the good collector,
Dioscorides I mean; Orpheus I saw,
Tully and Livy, and moral Seneca;
Euclid, the geometer, and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen,
Averrhoës, who made the famous comment.

I cannot speak of all of them in full,
because my long theme drives me on so fast,
that oft my words fall short of what I did.

The sixfold band now dwindles down to two;
my wise Guide leads me by a different path
out of the calm into the trembling air;
and to a place I come, where naught gives light.

Source:

Alighieri, Dante. (1918). *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1: Inferno*, translated by Courtney Langdon. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/alighieri-the-divine-comedy-vol-1-inferno-english-trans>

A Satyr Against Reason and Mankind

by
John Wilmot

Were I (who to my cost already am
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, man)
A spirit free to choose, for my own share
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,
I'd be a dog, a monkey, or a bear,
Or anything but that vain animal,
Who is so proud of being rational.

The senses are too gross, and he'll contrive
A sixth, to contradict the other five,
And before certain instinct, will prefer
Reason, which fifty times for one does err;
Reason, an *ignis fatuus* of the mind,
Which, leaving light of nature, sense, behind,
Pathless and dangerous wand'ring ways it takes
Through error's fenny bogs and thorny brakes;
Whilst the misguided follower climbs with pain
Mountains of whimseys, heaped in his own brain;
Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down
Into doubt's boundless sea where, like to drown,
Books bear him up awhile, and make him try
To swim with bladders of philosophy;
In hopes still to o'ertake th' escaping light;
The vapour dances in his dazzling-sight
Till, spent, it leaves him to eternal night.
Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long,
That all his life he has been in the wrong.
Huddled in dirt the reasoning engine-lies,
Who was so proud, so witty, and so wise.

Pride drew him in, as cheats their bubbles-catch,
And made him venture to be made a wretch.
His wisdom did his happiness destroy,
Aiming to know that world he should enjoy.
And wit was his vain, frivolous pretense
Of pleasing others at his own expense.

For wits are treated just like common whores:
First they're enjoyed, and then kicked out of doors.
The pleasure past, a threatening doubt remains
That frights th' enjoyer with succeeding pains.
Women and men of wit are dangerous tools,
And ever fatal to admiring fools:
Pleasure allures, and when the fops escape,
'Tis not that they're beloved, but fortunate,
And therefore what they fear, at heart they hate.

But now, methinks, some formal band-and beard
Takes me to task. Come on, sir; I'm prepared.

“Then, by your favor, anything that's writ
Against this gibing, jingling knack called wit
Likes me abundantly; but you take care
Upon this point, not to be too severe.
Perhaps my muse were fitter for this part,
For I profess I can be very smart
On wit, which I abhor with all my heart.
I long to lash it in some sharp essay,
But your grand indiscretion bids me stay
And turns my tide of ink another way.

“What rage ferments in your degenerate mind
To make you rail at reason and mankind?
Blest, glorious man! to whom alone kind heaven
An everlasting soul has freely given,
Whom his great Maker took such care to make
That from himself he did the image take
And this fair frame in shining reason dressed
To dignify his nature above beast;
Reason, by whose aspiring influence
We take a flight beyond material sense,
Dive into mysteries, then soaring pierce
The flaming limits of the universe,
Search heaven and hell, Find out what's acted there,
And give the world true grounds of hope and fear.”

Hold, mighty man, I cry, all this we know
From the pathetic pen of Ingelo;
From Patrick's *Pilgrim*, Sibbes' soliloquies,
And 'tis this very reason I despise:
This supernatural gift, that makes a mite
Think he's an image of the infinite,
Comparing his short life, void of all rest,

To the eternal and the ever blest;
This busy, puzzling stirrer-up of doubt
That frames deep mysteries, then finds 'em out,
Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools
Those reverend bedlam, colleges and schools;
Borne on whose wings, each heavy sot can pierce
The limits of the boundless universe;
So charming ointments make an old witch fly-
And bear a crippled carcass through the sky.
'Tis this exalted power, whose business lies
In nonsense and impossibilities,
This made a whimsical philosopher
Before the spacious world, his tub prefer,-
And we have modern cloistered coxcombs who
Retire to think 'cause they have nought to do.

But thoughts are given for action's government;
Where action ceases, thought's impertinent:
Our sphere of action is life's happiness,
And he that thinks beyond, thinks like an ass.
Thus, whilst against false reasoning I inveigh,
I own-right reason, which I would obey:
That reason which distinguishes by sense
And gives us rules of good and ill from thence,
That bounds desires, with a reforming will
To keep 'em more in vigour, not to kill.
Your reason hinders, mine helps to enjoy,
Renewing appetites yours would destroy.
My reason is my friend, yours is a cheat;
Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat;
Perversely, yours your appetite does mock:
This asks for food, that answers, "What's o'clock?"
This plain distinction, sir, your doubt secures:
'Tis not true reason I despise, but yours.

Thus I think reason righted, but for man,
I'll ne'er recant; defend him if you can.
For all his pride and his philosophy,
'Tis evident beasts are, in their own degree,
As wise at least, and better far than he.
Those creatures are the wisest who attain,
By surest means, the ends at which they aim.
If therefore Jowler finds and kills the hares
Better than Meres supplies committee chairs,
Though one's a statesman, th' other but a hound,
Jowler, in justice, would be wiser found.

You see how far man's wisdom here extends;
Look next if human nature makes amends:
Whose principles most generous are, and just,
And to whose morals you would sooner trust.
Be judge yourself, I'll bring it to the test:
Which is the basest creature, man or beast?
Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey,
But savage man alone does man betray.
Pressed by necessity, they kill for food;
Man undoes man to do himself no good.
With teeth and claws by nature armed, they hunt
Nature's allowance, to supply their want.
But man, with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise,
Inhumanly his fellow's life betrays;
With voluntary pains works his distress,
Not through necessity, but wantonness.

For hunger or for love they fight and tear,
Whilst wretched man is still in arms for fear.
For fear he arms, and is of arms afraid,
From fear, to fear successively betrayed;
Base fear, the source whence his best passions came:
His boasted honor, and his dear-bought fame;
The lust of power, to which he's such a slave,
And for the which alone he dares be brave;
To which his various projects are designed;
Which makes him generous, affable, and kind;
For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,
And screws his actions in a forced disguise,
Leading a tedious life in misery
Under laborious, mean hypocrisy.
Look to the bottom of his vast design,
Wherein man's wisdom, power, and glory join:
The good he acts, the ill he does endure,
'Tis all from fear, to make himself secure.
Merely for safety, after fame we thirst,
For all men would be cowards if they durst.

And honesty's against all common sense:
Men must be knaves, 'tis in their own defence.
Mankind's dishonest; if you think it fair
Among known cheats to play upon the square,
You'll be undone.
Nor can weak truth your reputation save:
The knaves will all agree to call you knave.

Wronged shall he live, insulted o'er, oppressed,
Who dares be less a villain than the rest.

Thus sir, you see what human nature craves:
Most men are cowards, all men should be knaves.
The difference lies, as far as I can see,
Not in the thing itself, but the degree,
And all the subject matter of debate
Is only: Who's a knave of the first rate?

All this with indignation have I hurled
At the pretending part of the proud world,
Who, swollen with selfish vanity, devise
False freedoms, holy cheats, and formal lies
Over their fellow slaves to tyrannize.

But if in Court so just a man there be
(In Court, a just man, yet unknown to me)
Who does his needful flattery direct,
Not to oppress and ruin, but protect
(Since flattery, which way soever laid,
Is still a tax on that unhappy trade);
If so upright a statesman you can find,
Whose passions bend to his unbiased mind,
Who does his arts and policies apply
To raise his country, not his family,
Nor, whilst his pride owned avarice withstands,
Receives close bribes through friends' corrupted hands—

Is there a churchman who on God relies;
Whose life, his faith and doctrine justifies?
Not one blown up with vain prelatic pride,
Who, for reproof of sins, does man deride;
Whose envious heart makes preaching a pretense,
With his obstreperous, saucy eloquence,
To chide at kings, and rail at men of sense;
None of that sensual tribe whose talents lie
In avarice, pride, sloth, and gluttony;
Who hunt good livings, but abhor good lives;
Whose lust exalted to that height arrives
They act adultery with their own wives,
And ere a score of years completed be,
Can from the lofty pulpit proudly see
Half a large parish their own progeny;
Nor doting bishop, who would be adored
For domineering at the council board,

A greater fop in business at fourscore,
Fonder of serious toys, affected more,
Than the gay, glittering fool at twenty proves
With all his noise, his tawdry clothes, and loves;

But a meek, humble man, of honest sense,
Who preaching peace, does practice continence;
Whose pious life's a proof he does believe
Mysterious truths, which no man can conceive.
If upon earth there dwell such God-like men,
I'll here recant my paradox to them,
Adore those shrines of virtue, homage pay,
And, with the rabble world, their laws obey.

If such there be, yet grant me this at least:
Man differs more from man, than man from beast.

Source:

Wilmot, John. (1942). *A Satire Against Mankind: and other poems*. Norfolk: New Directions.
Retrieved from: <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/mankind.html>

The Seafarer

by
Ezra Pound

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.
Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
Known on my keel many a care's hold,
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head
While she tossed close to clifffs. Coldly afflicted,
My feet were by frost benumbed.
Chill its chains are; chafing sighs
Hew my heart round and hunger begot
Mere-weary mood. Lest man know not
That he on dry land loveliest liveth,
List how I, care-wretched, on ice-cold sea,
Weathered the winter, wretched outcast
Deprived of my kinsmen;
Hung with hard ice-flakes, where hail-scur flew,
There I heard naught save the harsh sea
And ice-cold wave, at whiles the swan cries,
Did for my games the gannet's clamour,
Sea-fowls, loudness was for me laughter,
The mews' singing all my mead-drink.
Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern
In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed
With spray on his pinion.
Not any protector
May make merry man faring needy.
This he little believes, who aye in winsome life
Abides 'mid burghers some heavy business,
Wealthy and wine-flushed, how I weary oft
Must bide above brine.
Neareth nightshade, snoweth from north,
Frost froze the land, hail fell on earth then
Corn of the coldest. Nathless there knocketh now
The heart's thought that I on high streams
The salt-wavy tumult traverse alone.
Moaneth alway my mind's lust
That I fare forth, that I afar hence

Seek out a foreign fastness.
For this there's no mood-lofty man over earth's midst,
Not though he be given his good, but will have in his youth greed;
Nor his deed to the daring, nor his king to the faithful
But shall have his sorrow for sea-fare
Whatever his lord will.
He hath not heart for harping, nor in ring-having
Nor winsomeness to wife, nor world's delight
Nor any whit else save the wave's slash,
Yet longing comes upon him to fare forth on the water.
Bosque taketh blossom, cometh beauty of berries,
Fields to fairness, land fares brisker,
All this admonisheth man eager of mood,
The heart turns to travel so that he then thinks
On flood-ways to be far departing.
Cuckoo calleth with gloomy crying,
He singeth summerward, bodeth sorrow,
The bitter heart's blood. Burgher knows not —
He the prosperous man — what some perform
Where wandering them widest draweth.
So that but now my heart burst from my breast-lock,
My mood 'mid the mere-flood,
Over the whale's acre, would wander wide.
On earth's shelter cometh oft to me,
Eager and ready, the crying lone-flyer,
Whets for the whale-path the heart irresistibly,
O'er tracks of ocean; seeing that anyhow
My lord deems to me this dead life
On loan and on land, I believe not
That any earth-weal eternal standeth
Save there be somewhat calamitous
That, ere a man's tide go, turn it to twain.
Disease or oldness or sword-hate
Beats out the breath from doom-gripped body.
And for this, every earl whatever, for those speaking after —
Laud of the living, boasteth some last word,
That he will work ere he pass onward,
Frame on the fair earth 'gainst foes his malice,
Daring ado, ...
So that all men shall honour him after
And his laud beyond them remain 'mid the English,
Aye, for ever, a lasting life's-blast,
Delight mid the doughty.
Days little durable,
And all arrogance of earthen riches,
There come now no kings nor Cæsars

Nor gold-giving lords like those gone.
Howe'er in mirth most magnified,
Whoe'er lived in life most lordliest,
Drear all this excellence, delights undurable!
Waneth the watch, but the world holdeth.
Tomb hideth trouble. The blade is layed low.
Earthly glory ageth and seareth.
No man at all going the earth's gait,
But age fares against him, his face paleth,
Grey-haired he groaneth, knows gone companions,
Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven,
Nor may he then the flesh-cover, whose life ceaseth,
Nor eat the sweet nor feel the sorry,
Nor stir hand nor think in mid heart,
And though he strew the grave with gold,
His born brothers, their buried bodies
Be an unlikely treasure hoard.

Source:

Pound, Ezra. (2005). *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*. London: Penguin. Retrieved from:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44917/the-seafarer>

Ultima ratio regum

by
Stephen Spender

The guns spell money's ultimate reason
In letters of lead on the spring hillside.
But the boy lying dead under the olive trees
Was too young and too silly
To have been notable to their important eye.
He was a better target for a kiss.

When he lived, tall factory hooters never summoned him.
Nor did restaurant plate-glass doors revolve to wave him in.
His name never appeared in the papers.
The world maintained its traditional wall
Round the dead with their gold sunk deep as a well,
Whilst his life, intangible as a Stock Exchange rumour, drifted outside.

O too lightly he threw down his cap
One day when the breeze threw petals from the trees.
The unflowering wall sprouted with guns,
Machine-gun anger quickly scythed the grasses;
Flags and leaves fell from hands and branches;
The tweed cap rotted in the nettles.

Consider his life which was valueless
In terms of employment, hotel ledgers, news files.
Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a man.
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified
On the death of one so young and so silly
Lying under the olive tree, O world, O death?

Source:

Spender, Stephen. (2004). *New Collected Poems of Stephen Spender*. London: Faber and Faber.
Retrieved from: <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/ultima-ratio-regum>

The Drum

by

John Scott of Amwell

I hate that drum's discordant sound,
Parading round, and round, and round:
To thoughtless youth it pleasure yields,
And lures from cities and from fields,
To sell their liberty for charms
Of tawdry lace, and glittering arms;
And when Ambition's voice commands,
To march, and fight, and fall, in foreign lands.

I hate that drum's discordant sound,
Parading round, and round, and round:
To me it talks of ravag'd plains,
And burning towns, and ruin'd swains,
And mangled limbs, and dying groans,
And widow's tears, and orphans moans;
And all that misery's hand bestows,
To fill the catalogue of human woes.

Source:

Walter, Matthew George (ed.). (2006). *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. London: Penguin. Retrieved from: <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8568191-The-Drum-by-John-Scott--of-Amwell>

America

by
Allen Ginsberg

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January
17, 1956.
I can't stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me.
I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the grave?
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
America why are your libraries full of tears?
America when will you send your eggs to India?
I'm sick of your insane demands.
When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I
need with my good looks?
America after all it is you and I who are perfect not
the next world.
Your machinery is too much for me.
You made me want to be a saint.
There must be some other way to settle this argument.
Burroughs is in Tangiers I don't think he'll come back
it's sinister.
Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical
joke?
I'm trying to come to the point.
I refuse to give up my obsession.
America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.
America the plum blossoms are falling.
I haven't read the newspapers for months, everyday
somebody goes on trial for murder.
America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.
America I used to be a communist when I was a kid
I'm not sorry.
I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses
in the closet.

When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.
You should have seen me reading Marx.
My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.
I won't say the Lord's Prayer.
I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.
America I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle
Max after he came over from Russia.
I'm addressing you.
Are you going to let your emotional life be run by
Time Magazine?
I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.
I read it every week.
Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner
candy store.
I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.
It's always telling me about responsibility. Business
men are serious. Movie producers are serious.
Everybody's serious but me.
It occurs to me that I am America.
I am talking to myself again.

Asia is rising against me.
I haven't got a chinaman's chance.
I'd better consider my national resources.
My national resources consist of two joints of
marijuana millions of genitals an unpublishable
private literature that jetplanes 1400 miles an hour
and twenty-five-thousand mental institutions.
I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of
underprivileged who live in my flowerpots
under the light of five hundred suns.
I have abolished the whorehouses of France, Tangiers
is the next to go.
My ambition is to be President despite the fact that
I'm a Catholic.

America how can I write a holy litany in your
silly mood?
I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as
individual as his automobiles more so they're all
different sexes.
America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your old strophe
America free Tom Mooney
America save the Spanish Loyalists
America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die

America I am the Scottsboro boys.
America when I was seven momma took me to
 Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a
 handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the
 speeches were free everybody was angelic and
 sentimental about the workers it was all so
 sincere you have no idea what a good thing the
 party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand
 old man a real mensch Mother Bloor the Silk-strikers'
 Ewig-Weibliche made me cry I once saw the Yiddish orator
 Israel Amter plain. Everybody must have been a spy.
America you don't really want to go to war.
America its them bad Russians.
Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen.
And them Russians.
The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power
 mad. She wants to take our cars from out our garages.
Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red *Reader's Digest*.
Her wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy
 running our fillingstations.
That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers. Hah. Her make us
all work sixteen hours a day. Help.
America this is quite serious.
America this is the impression I get from looking in
the television set.
America is this correct?
I'd better get right down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes
in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and
 psychopathic anyway.
America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

Berkeley, January 17, 1956

Source:

Ginsberg, Allen. (2001). *Selected Poems 1947-1995*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
Retrieved from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49305/america-56d22b41f119f>

I sing of Olaf glad and big

by

Edward Estlin Cummings

XXX

i sing of Olaf glad and big
whose warmest heart recoiled at war:
a conscientious object-or

his wellbelovéd colonel(trig
westpointer most succinctly bred)
took erring Olaf soon in hand;
but--though an host of overjoyed
noncoms(first knocking on the head
him)do through icy waters roll
that helplessness which others stroke
with brushes recently employed
anent this muddy toiletbowl,
while kindred intellects evoke
allegiance per blunt instruments--
Olaf(being to all intents
a corpse and wanting any rag
upon what God unto him gave)
responds,without getting annoyed
“I will not kiss your fucking flag”

straightway the silver bird looked grave
(departing hurriedly to shave)

but--though all kinds of officers
(a yearning nation’s blueeyed pride)
their passive prey did kick and curse
until for wear their clarion
voices and boots were much the worse,
and egged the firstclassprivates on
his rectum wickedly to tease
by means of skilfully applied
bayonets roasted hot with heat--
Olaf(upon what were once knees)
does almost ceaselessly repeat
“there is some shit I will not eat”

our president, being of which
assertions duly notified
threw the yellowsonofabitch
into a dungeon, where he died

Christ (of His mercy infinite)
i pray to see; and Olaf, too

preponderatingly because
unless statistics lie he was
more brave than me: more blond than you.

Source:

Cummings, E. E. (1979). *The Complete Poems*. New York: Liveright Publishing. Retrieved from: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-sing-olaf-glad-and-big>

The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts and Its Commencement

by

William Wordsworth

Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchantress—to assist the work
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
(As at some moment might not be unfehl
Among the bowers of paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
What temper at the prospect did not wake
To happiness unthought of? The inert
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
The playfellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtilty, and strength
Their ministers,—who in lordly wise had stirred
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And dealt with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it;—they, too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves;—
Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
Were called upon to exercise their skill,
Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world

Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

Source:

Wordsworth, William. (1859). *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Volume II*. Boston: Little Brown and Company. Retrieved from:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45518/the-french-revolution-as-it-appeared-to-enthusiasts-at-its-commencement>

I Hear America Singing

by
Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe
and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off
work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the
deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the
morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at
work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Source:

Whitman, Walt. (2004). *I Hear America Singing: Poems of Democracy, Manhattan and the Future*. Manchester: Carcanet Press. Retrieved from: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-hear-america-singing>

The Internationale

by
Eugène Pottier

Arise ye workers from your slumbers
Arise ye prisoners of want
For reason in revolt now thunders
And at last ends the age of cant.
Away with all your superstitions
Servile masses arise, arise
We'll change henceforth the old tradition
And spurn the dust to win the prize.

Chorus (x2):

So comrades, come rally
And the last fight let us face
The Internationale unites the human race.

No more deluded by reaction
On tyrants only we'll make war
The soldiers too will take strike action
They'll break ranks and fight no more
And if those cannibals keep trying
To sacrifice us to their pride
They soon shall hear the bullets flying
We'll shoot the generals on our own side.

Chorus (x2):

So comrades, come rally
And the last fight let us face
The Internationale unites the human race.

No saviour from on high delivers
No faith have we in prince or peer
Our own right hand the chains must shiver
Chains of hatred, greed and fear
E'er the thieves will out with their booty
And give to all a happier lot.
Each at the forge must do their duty
And we'll strike while the iron is hot.

Chorus (x2):

So comrades, come rally
And the last fight let us face
The Internationale unites the human race.

Source:

Pottier, Eugène. (1871). The Internationale. Retrieved from:
<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/international.htm>

First They Came...

by
Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Source:

Niemöller, Martin. First They Came for the Socialists.... *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Retrieved from:

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>

On the Terms of Exile

by
Bertolt Brecht

No need to drive a nail into the wall
To hang your hat on;
When you come in, just drop it on the chair
No guest has sat on.

Don't worry about watering the flowers—
In fact, don't plant them.
You will have gone back home before they bloom,
And who will want them?

If mastering the language is too hard,
Only be patient;
The telegram imploring your return
Won't need translation.

Remember, when the ceiling sheds itself
In flakes of plaster,
The wall that keeps you out is crumbling too,
As fast or faster.

Source:

Brecht, Bertolt. (2011). Translated by Adam Kirsch. *Poetry*, Retrieved from:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/54759/on-the-term-of-exile>

Utopia

by
Wislawa Szymborska

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Source:

Szymborska, Wislawa. (1995). *A View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*. Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanaugh. San Diego: Harcourt. Retrieved from:
https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-poems-1-e.html

Conversation with Comrade Lenin

by
Vladimir Mayakovsky

Awhirl with events,
 packed with jobs one too many,
the day slowly sinks
 as the night shadows fall.

There are two in the room:

I and Lenin-

a photograph
on the whiteness of wall.
The stubble slides upward

The stubble slides upward
above his lip

as his mouth
jerks open in speech

The tense
creases of brow
hold thought
in their grip,
immense brow
matched by thought immense.

A forest of flags,
 raised-up hands thick as grass....

Thousands are marching
beneath him...

Transported,

alight with joy,
—L. M. 3

I rise from
eager to see him,
holding

hail him,
report to him!

“Comrade Lenin,
I report to you -
(not a dictate of office,
the heart’s prompting alone)

This hellish work
that we're out to do
will be done
and is already being done.

and give light to the needy,
the quotas
for coal
and for iron
fulfill,

but there is
any amount
of bleeding

muck
and rubbish
around us still.

Without you,
there's many
have got out of hand,
all the sparring
and squabbling
does one in.

There's scum
in plenty
hounding our land,
outside the borders
and also
within.

Try to
count 'em
and
tab 'em -
it's no go,
there's all kinds,
and they're
thick as nettles:

kulaks,
red tapists,
and,
down the row,
drunkards,
sectarians,
lickspittles.

They strut around
proudly
as peacocks,
badges and fountain pens
studding their chests.
We'll lick the lot of 'em -
but
to lick 'em

is no easy job
at the very best.
On snow-covered lands
and on stubbly fields,
in smoky plants
and on factory sites,
with you in our hearts,
Comrade Lenin,
we build,
we think,
we breathe,
we live,
and we fight!"
Awhirl with events,
packed with jobs one too many,
the day slowly sinks
as the night shadows fall.
There are two in the room:
I
and Lenin -
a photograph
on the whiteness of wall.

Source:

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. (1985). *Selected Works in Three Volumes, Volume 1 (Selected Verse)*. Translated by Irina Zhelezovna. USSR: Raduga Publishers. Retrieved from: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/mayakovskv/1929/conversation-comrade-lenin.htm>

The Stalin Epigram (The Kremlin Highlander)

by
Osip Mandelstam

Our lives no longer feel ground under them.
At ten paces you can't hear our words.

But whenever there's a snatch of talk
it turns to the Kremlin mountaineer,

the ten thick worms his fingers,
his words like measures of weight,

the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip,
the glitter of his boot-rims.

Ringed with a scum of chicken-necked bosses
he toys with the tributes of half-men.

One whistles, another meows, a third snivels.
He pokes out his finger and he alone goes boom.

He forges decrees in a line like horseshoes,
One for the groin, one the forehead, temple, eye.

He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.
He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home.

Source:

Mandelstam, Osip. (1974). *Selected Poems*. Translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin.
New York: Atheneum. Retrieved from: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/stalin-epigram>

Requiem

by
Anna Akhmatova

*No, neither under an alien sky nor
Under the protection of alien wings—
I remained with my own people then,
Where my people, in their misfortune, were.*

1961

Instead of a Preface

During the terrifying years of the Yezhov repressions, I spent seventeen months in Leningrad prison lines. One time, someone thought they recognized me. Then a woman standing behind me, who of course had never heard my name, stirred from her own, though common to all of us, stupor and asked in my ear (there, all spoke in a whisper):
—Could you describe this?

And I said:

—I can.

Then, something akin to a smile slipped across what once had been her face.

April 1, 1957, Leningrad

DEDICATION

Before such trials all mountains crumble,
A mighty river ceases to flow to the sea,
Yet a dungeon's barred gates remain rigid,
Beyond which gape the prisoners' cells
And the deathly isolation of loneliness.
For one living, a brisk wind freshly fans,
For someone else, a sunset's sweet caress—
We know none of these, the same everywhere:
We only hear the stilled screech of the keys
And the thundering pacing of the guards.
Arising as though for an early Mass
We tramped the capital, reverting to wild,
To meet up, with the breathlessness of the dead,
The sun risen lower, the Neva more fogged-in,

With hope's sirens singing, invisibly distant.
Sentence passed . . . The floodgates flung open;
She is now already cut off from all the rest,
As though with pain, life's excised from the heart,
As though rudely knocked over on her back,
She walks on . . . Staggering . . . Entirely alone. . . .
Where are they now, my unwilling girlfriends
Of these past two gone-to-the-devil years?
What hallucination in the Siberian blizzard,
What apparition haunts their lunar disk?
To them I send regards, this last farewell.

March 1940

PROLOGUE

This occurred when only a dead man
Would smile, taking pleasure in rest.
And like a useless appendage Leningrad
Swayed in the vicinity of its prisons.
When, bereft of mind from torture,
Marched divisions already condemned,
The short and sweet song of parting
And the trains' railing whistles,
The stars of death hanging over us,
Writhing in pain, innocent Russia
Under the bloody soles of the boots,
Under the tires of the Black Marias.

1

They led you away before sunrise.
After you, as at a bearing out, I trudged,
In the dim chamber children whimpered,
And Mary's candle was snuffed out.
Upon your lips was an icon's iciness,
And death's sweat was on your brow.
Don't forget! I will, like the mutineers'
Wives under Kremlin's crenels, weep.

November 1935, Moscow

2

The quiet Don is flowing quietly
And the yellow moon enters my house.

He enters wearing his hat askew and
Meets a shadow, the yellow moon.
This woman is not well,
This woman is all alone.
Husband in the grave, son jailed,
Please offer a prayer for me.

1938

3

This isn't me, someone else suffers.
I couldn't survive that. And what happened,
May it be covered in coarse black cloth,
Let them carry away the streetlights . . .
Night.

1939

4

Shall I show you then, my dearest mocker
And the dear beloved of all of your friends,
You, Tsarskoe Selo's carefree sinner,
What will soon become of your life—
Three hundredth in line, care package in hand,
Under The Crosses prison wall you'll stand
And with the heated waters of your tears
Dissolve the surface of Christmas-time ice.
How the prison poplar sways side to side
Without a sound—how many innocent lives
This very moment come there to an end...

1938

5

For seventeen months straight I scream,
Calling for you to come home, please,
Throwing myself at the executioner's feet;
You are my son and also my nightmare.
Now, everything is confused for the ages.
Now I will never manage to untangle
Who is an animal and who a human being,
Nor how long I'll wait till the death sentence
Is carried out. Only the dust-covered flowers,

And the ringing of the censer, and the tracks
Into some unknown realm of uncertainty.
Staring in my face, directly into my eyes,
It threatens me with an impending death,
That all-engulfing and engorged star.

1939

6

The lighthearted weeks are flying by,
What's happened, I'll never understand.
How did the white nights, my dear son,
Peek through the window of your cell,
And now how again they glance
With their inflamed predator eyes
At your cross, set there on the high place,
And mutter about the end of your days.

Spring 1939

7

SENTENCE

And the stony logos lapsed
Upon my still-living breast.
No matter what, I was prepared,
I would survive with this some way.
I have so many things to do today.
I must slaughter memory to the end,
I need for my soul to turn to stone,
I must once again relearn to live.
But not that . . . Summer's fevered rustle,
As though a holiday beyond my window.
So long ago I had a premonition of this,
A bright day, and a house grown empty.

June 22 1939, Fontanka House

8

TO DEATH

You will come anyway—why not today?
I wait for you—with great difficulty.

I turned out the light and opened the door
For you, so simple and yet so mysterious.
You may take any disguise you like.
Barge in as a poison gas bombshell
Or like a criminal creep with a dumbbell.
Or infect me with a dose of typhus.
Or come, a fairy tale, invented by you
And so familiar it brings on nausea—
That I may see the top of a blue cap,
And the pale from fright apartment super.
All's the same to me now. The Yenisei
Eddies and the North Star shines brightly.
Like a sky-blue spark in beloved eyes
The final horror takes me under its cover.

August 19, 1939, Fontanka House

9

Already madness with its wing
Has blanketed half of my soul
And feeds me on its fiery wine,
And tempts into its black valley.
I understood that I must yield
To him, must admit his victory,
Attending more carefully to my own,
As though to someone else's, delirium.
It will not permit me neither to carry
Away with me nor to retain anything
(No matter how I try to persuade him,
No matter I pester with supplications):
No, not my son's terrifying eyes—
Suffering that has become stone,
Not the day the thunder arrived,
Not the hour of the prison visit,
Not the dear to me coolness of hands,
Not the linden trees' shadow trembling,
Not the remote and liberating sound—
The words of his final consolations.

May 4, 1940, Fontanka House

10

CRUCIFIXION

Do not weep for Me, Mother,
seeing as I am in the grave.
An angel's choir glorified the blessed hour,
And the skies dissolved in the living flame.
He to His Father: "Why hast Thou forsaken Me!"
And to His Mother: "Do not weep for Me. . . ."

1938

Mary Magdalene beat her breast and wept,
Her beloved disciple turned white as stone,
And there, where His Mother stood silent,
Not a soul dared to cast their glance.

1940, *Fontanka House*

EPILOGUE

I

I know now how the faces have fallen,
How from under lids peeks out terror,
How cuneiform's coarse pages are
Incised by suffering upon their cheeks,
How curls from ashen and black turn
In a single moment completely silver,
And a smile withers on defeated lips,
And in dry laughter shudders fear.
So that now I pray not for myself alone
But for all of us, who stood there with me
In the intense cold and in July's heat
Under that red and blinded wall.

II

Yet once again nears the funeral hour.
I see, I hear, I sense you are all here.
The one they barely led to the window,
One who, though born, doesn't walk the earth,
One who, having shook her beautiful head,
Said: "I arrive here as though I am home."
How I wish I could name them all,
But the list, confiscated, cannot be found.
For them I have sewn this broad shroud from
Words, though poor, yet borrowed from them.
I remember them always and everywhere,

Nor will I forget them in needs' new hour.
And should they shut my tortured mouth
From which a hundred million people shout,
Then let them remember me as well
On the anniversary of my funeral.
And if they ever in this, our country,
Consider erecting to me a monument,
I give my whole-hearted consent,
But with one condition—do not
Put it by the sea where I was born;
My last connection with the sea is torn.
Not in Tsar's Garden, by the famous stump,
Where an unrequited shade searches for me,
But here, where I stood three hundred hours
And where for me the gate opened never.
Because even in blessed death, I am afraid
I will forget the Black Maria's thundering.
Forget how, the frozen door slamming shut,
An old woman like a wounded beast howled.
And may from under immobile bronze lids
A flood of tears run as a stream of snowmelt,
And a prisoner's pigeon coo in the distance,
And on the Neva River ships glide quietly.

Approx. March 10, 1940, Fontanka House

Source:

Akhmatova, Anna. (2016). Requiem. Translated by Alex Cigale. *The Hopkins Review*, 9 (3), 339-347. Retrieved from: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/626924>

Politics

by

William Butler Yeats

“In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.”

THOMAS MANN.

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has both read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

Source:

Yeats, W. B. (1939). *Lost Poems (1938-1939)*. New York: Simon and Shuster. Retrieved from:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57588/politics-56d23b40c4ed6>

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

by

William Butler Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Source:

Yeats, W. B. (1919). *The wild swans at Coole, and other poems*. New York: Macmillan.
Retrieved from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57311/an-irish-airman-foresees-his-death>

Waiting for the Barbarians

by

Constantine P. Cavafy

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

Source:

Cavafy, C. P. (1975). *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keely and Philip Sherrard. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Retrieved from:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51294/waiting-for-the-barbarians>