

There are no fictional characters, places
or events in this narrative. It is set down in
memorializing salute to

Mildred Fish Harnack, American; native
of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; beheaded February 16, 1943, at Plötzensee, near Berlin;

Arvid Harnack, native of Germany, her
husband; hanged, Berlin, December 22, 1942 -
for organizing resistance to Adolf Hitler, Nazism, and
the prosecution of the war; in the hope of wresting
from their and all the other needless deaths of these
years, at least some meaning for humanity.

C.L.

:

TO AND FROM THE GUILLOTINE

B Clara Leiser

So then -
So then it's true
The final word has come,
Certifying the price that you,
Woman of gentile American birth, have paid
For working, quietly unafraid,
Against an evil which you knew
Would fell not only some
Dismissed as "Jew, filthy Jew,"
They were few -
- then so few - Mere index to the sum

Of suffering humankind would spew
Upon itself. No desert overlaid
By far mirage that beckons toward seeming shade
Through cruelly receding hue,
Or promises, for feet tired numb,
Refreshing dew
To lend new
Strength to pursue
Progressive vacuum,
Ever deceived a traveller's view
More dismally than spurious hopes betrayed
The stunted arrogance of creed, and made
The millions unashamed to mew
Themselves behind the thrum
Of "Jew, Jew."
Soon it grew to
"Eradicate the scum.
Kill the dirty bolshevik Jew."
As though a global sickness could be stayed
By choosing to murder millions for the way they prayed.

That this pestilential brew
Distilled by Nazidom
Would accrue
Bitter rue
In all who
Blindly, failed to plumb
The lethal wrongness of a view
That required the raising of a barricade
To reason itself, needing the baren aid
Of total foulness - this you knew.
And scorning to succumb,
Your husband and you -
Arvid and you,
Together, you -
You -- two - - - - -

So now -

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So now I sit here with this letter, friend,
And read - read and tremble - tremble and stare
At words I do not want to comprehend,
For if I do I must let go the fair
Hope I held so long - that fate might bend
In your favor still, let you share

The fall of evil incarnate, witness the end
Of slaughter, help weary nations prepare
A scaffolding for peace, start to mend
Brutally broken lives, fill out spare
Bodies, heal spirits torn; lend
Ultimate meaning to carnage. Now I dare,
Accepting this proof that as earthling your life is done,
To record its valor, for others to build upon.

I never knew a room could be so still -
Or a heart. Who would think that tears,
So often proved how futile in these years
So big with grief - could once more fill
Tired eyes, long since drained by stark
Accounts of what at last was done to those
Whose quiet labor, as most dangerous foes
To Nazidom, demanded the cautious dark
Of secrecy as absolute as death.
As noiseless too. Of what I knew, no breath -
Lest it endanger you - could dare find voice.
This doubles grief; and yet I had no choice.
But now your Nazi-guillotined throat makes mine
Cry out, to let your silenced bravery shine.

I had been stunned by other war-borne grief
Before this confirmation came today
Of how your gallantry, by one brief
Stroke of official arm, was made to pay
The bill for shoddy raiment carelessly bought,
At cost of honor, by short-sighted men
Content to make a bargain - so they thought -
For sleazy coverlet shielding a regiment
Which from the very first felt free to boast
Expediency guided it; the just
Was secondary. Of the opposing host
You were nearest to me. Now I must
Inform the world it owes you a solemn debt
Which I, as friend, cannot let it forget.

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Such memories crowd round me here where I
Sit looking out at dingy New York walls,
Though still the lilting glance may yearn toward sky
Throughout the war uncharged by whirring calls
Of warning that all who wished to live must rush
For shelter impregnable to bomb and strafe.

None got acquainted, here, with the sombre hush
Pervading the atmosphere when it was safe
Once more to stumble out, and by dim light
Of pocket lamp, or blinking at blazing sun,
Falter in search of the beloved site
Which always had spelt home until just one
Example of human perversion of natural power
Pulverized all, in a crashing fraction of an hour.

There is a difference about the dead
Of this enormous war (how dare we call
It 'Great?'). So many thousands died ahead
Of those in uniform. Under a pall
Of anonymity unlike that spread
Over muted millions whose needless fall
Is counted in when general prayers are said,
Those other nameless, clearest-eyed of all,
Offered the chalice of their vision, born
Of anxious insight into the mortal wrong
Darkly being contrived for untold numbers
Of their fellows. Now they are jointly shorn
Of physical power to fight, peaceful the long
Quiet of their communalized slumbers.

We, still unaccompanied with the worm,
Heirs to the chance to build a golden life,
Sit here shielding eyes and ears, and squirm
At seeing, hearing - second-hand - how knife,
Gun, bomb, bayonet, axe or rope
Mangled those who in the flesh endured
The agony. They leaned upon the hope
That their raw martyrdom at least insured
A resolution in the rest of us
To rip the props of obsequious charity
From flimsy social structure, and truss
A nobler edifice with clarity
Of human purpose. Work on, is all they ask,
At our hard but comprehended task.

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Oh Mildred, did your soft blonde hair get soiled?
Did your own bright blood spurt up into your face?
The executioner - had he the grace
To see what luminous beauty had been despoiled?
For never could his noose have been assigned
A fairer jewel - or his beheading block.

Reader, forgive this unaccustomed shock
To tender sensibilities or mind.
Easier far to read than to undergo;
But Mildred did not whimper at the blow.
And I am unprepared to join the weak
Who lack not the gift but only the courage to speak.
She was my friend, you see. And she was yours.
Bear with me now. Read how her spirit endured.

Lying before me is the last post card she sent,
'Spending a day or so in London,' it said.
A book I'd referred to had at length been read,
And she had found it good. What that meant -
Like the purport of the rest - this I
Alone could construe. Take, 'Power
to you!' That was a reference to our
Hopeful plans for a book explaining why
Women especially had to be aroused
To understanding what it really meant
To cope with the horror of Nazi government
Nor was it feminism we espoused -
We simply believed how women fare in a nation
Is index to its stage of civilization.

'Better not write, but don't forget me, friend.
Love ever, M_____ ' was the end
Of the message proper, amended with
'I am not untrue to Meredith.'
Now that cryptic P.S. invokes the far
Innocent days when in a seminar
Led by wise Professor Sunny Pyre
We learned what Meredith had sought to inspire
In the women of the world. More brain
Must be mixed with elemental passion,
Was the theme, more brain if we would gain
Stature of soul adequate to fashion
Coming generations that would grace
The evolution of the human race.

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The midwest city where we studied lies
So fair among small lakes and gentle hills,
That musing, here, on years when the very skies
Seemed nearer than the social ills
Glanced at in our texts, even now recalls
The sense of simple peace. And when

We blithely sprang the walls of lecture halls,
Truanting into the spacious open, then
How close to our young needs the poets came -
Caressing romantic hearts with lyrical beauty,
Urging toward truth, calling to courage and duty,
Almost as though they hailed us each by name
Ungessed by youth what healing may be wrested
From poets' truth when Life by Death is tested.

Two outing-spots imparted a dewy feeling
Of near communion with the Arnoldian best
That has been thought and said by men. Stealing
Away from airtight classrooms, drifting at rest
In rented canoe to Picnic Point, we teased
The fancy to hear in chirping the silvery trills
Of poets' birds, could see in sun-twinked leas
Ophelia's daisies, Wordsworth's daffodils.
Beyond Lake Wingra's marsh, at Sunset Point,
Cliff-edged vistas challenged bolder choice
Of newly-embraced phantasy. To speak
Our need we'd first with lesser verse anoint
The indulgent air, then in reverent voice
Attempt thalassic roll of Homer's Greek.

Sometimes on Observatory Hill
The Oversoul of Emerson became
The burden of young thought. In the still
Wintery evening air the austere name
Seemed less remote than in the crowded room
Where students strove in ponderous phrase to vie
With the instructor, shrivelling the bloom
From fruit the unsure mind had stretched so high
To reach in private reading of the great
New England thinker. Under starlight, though,
It was easier to meditate
His meaning - dazzling as the crunching snow
The starlight made to glisten. How fire
Drawn from stars can help the soul aspire!

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Not by any calculated plan
Of architect - for building or for mind -
Did wind-blown Lake Mendota come to span
Horizons of awareness. Yet there, behind
The gardened walls along the far shore,
Purblindly safe, live those with impaired brain;

Here keen professorial minds explore
Science, art, philosophy, sustain
New theories and old about man's place
In the cosmic scheme, can even show
His progress as supreme creation - and face
This glaring truth: in spite of all they know,
Neither these savants nor any others
Can hinder men from slaughtering their brothers --

Unless the unique symbolism found
In this same Madison I briefly limn
Is ultimately realized all around
The earth. For there, in sculptural interim
Between the buildings where the learned few
Light up the knowledge garnered from all ages,
And Statehouse where more 'practical' men construe
The rights of citizens from law-book pages,
Sits gaunt Abe, revered Emancipator -
- As Union of a World were now his cause -
A statued but benevolent refractor
Of light from scholar's brain to legislator,
Raying that moral no less than physical laws
Posit a beating heart as primal factor.

Dear Mildred - in memory your beauty gleams as bright
As ever it glowed in older, happier days
When on those walks in Madison autumn haze
We talked of love - vowing, with girlish fight,
Never would we forsake our larger right
To think, to do. We wouldn't want to gaze
At life, we said, through calf-love eyes. We'd blaze
Through all the dross, and claim the soul's full might.
Women are virgins till men love their minds, we cried,
Echoing another's protest in wounded pride -
All unaware how rapture can wondrously spread,
Like sunburst, from warming womb into heart and head
Blending dissonant three into harmonious One,
To sound Life's music, till life itself be done.

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Time came to leave the halls of learning,
Storm into Life, embrace our eager spate
Of practical work, bank the schoolgirlish burning
To 'revolutionize poor woman's fate,'
And when, in Europe, we met again, what fun
It was to find that now congenial four

Could roam the High Tatra, soak up the Riviera sun,
Take flight from Riga, or Lucerne, and soar
Over Alps, over Spain - then, 'Let's go to Prague again.'
But punting the Cam, or adrift the leisurely Rhine,
Our talk grew thoughtful, grave, soon tinged with fear;
For who looked and listened well could tell that men
Of monstrous will were weaving a monstrous design
That would blanket a world with blood. And the evil was near.

Englishman, German, and you and I 'from the States' -
What carefree plans we four laid as we quaffed
Some cool white wine, munched home-made bread, and laughed
As we read from a book that said, 'All must choose mates
Who can replenish the pure blond Aryan stock
Of our Holy Fatherland, whose destined power
Is approaching its greatest, most glorious hour,
'Rubbish!' the Briton exploded, then grinned, 'What a shock!
My Yorkshire blood and American Margaret's, here,
Though rather well nourished with food more healthful than beer
Is flowing through what miserably inferior veins!
Just read again this insult to Anglo-American brains!
We snickered, we three. Not Arvid. 'Mildred,' he sighed,
'There's trouble ahead we two can't afford to deride.'

His face had lost its usual winning smile,
Quietly troubled it seemed, tired, sad,
As though by unfathomed instinct he knew that he had
Exact foreknowledge of what in so short a while
Would surely happen. 'And you, my ebullient friend' -
He paused - 'That book you're quoting with such scorn,
Marks merely timid beginning, not end, of a trend
Toward madness not only my land but a world will mourn.
We dare not believe, because we four are not Jews,
What happens to Jews wherever is not our concern,
For as Hitlerites plan, none on earth may long choose
To stay coolly or gaily aloof. This means battle so stern
That hillsides and seas will belch blood. From skies may fall
Death to smash all - or, haply, help mankind stand tall.

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'Now Margaret, here, seems to love, as though
She owned them both, two lands.' 'Because,' I replied,
'They both own me. America (my pride
Is not of self - plain luck decreed it so -)
Blessed me with the dayspring of urgent life
Grown so exciting I sometimes wince at a thirst

To probe all its meaning - best and searing worst -
Whether flowering from bliss or fiercely blasted from strife.
Sweet promise stirs the grandeur of our wealth.
Riches of field, mine, shop, we could make bold
To ennoble labor, to increase the joy and health
Of living, to gentle the leisure of those grown old.
If only our zestful prowess in the great world-mart
Were tempered by depth along with warmness of heart.

'And I love England. Its air. Its rivers that curl
Through meadows like curiously liquefied mother-of-pearl,
Or curve round a greening hill like a shimmering sash
Gently shielding the waist of a young, shy girl.
I love English rivers that rush down rocks, dash
Into a welcoming sea, then wearily splash
Their futile spray against cliffs that edge
Squashy downs where seagulls swoop - and flash -
And swirl in tireless hunt for food, no kedge
Inviting enough to quell the instinctive pledge
That impels the birds to fledge their tender young,
Whether in mountain aerie or woodsy hedge
I do love England, and would not leave unsung
Some of its beauties I have been happy among.'

'The moors, dear heart?' came a whisper to my ear.
Taking my hand with eager warmth that surged
For England and alien woman held equally dear,
'You love our brooding moors?' my Briton urged.
'Ah - I'd known summer and winter in the Serpentine,
Morning in the Mall, the dignity of Belgrave Square;
Had found Paris in Regent Street, and I knew there
Was peace in the Temple Gardens. All this was mine.
I'd seen Soho, "The Tempest" in Regent's Park,
Strolled happily on the Embankment and remember yet
The riotous flowers. And who could ever forget
The Cenotaph by day or in the dark.
But mystical London I never knew until
By night you showed me the sight from Primrose Hill.

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'Thus my devotion to London took increase from yours,
And your love nourished mine for lonely moors.
For so often you said, as we wandered together
Over Chilterns, or Dartmoor, along Thames, Goring Reach, in heather,
"Me you can't really know till you know the York wolds
And learn the rough splendor my dour North Country holds."

Remember that day when your too faithful thundering
Of the down-Irish Mail cry of old set passengers wondering
Whether "Change for Wigan - Preston - and the North!"
Was an echo still of the ancient challenge roared forth
By lusty trainmen when the London-North-Western reached Crewe,
And how silly they looked when they learned it was only you
Preparing me for the tingling robust air
Of the North, and the large bleak beauty we'd find there?'

'Now I who had watched so many English gardens
Gorgeously flower from seeds dropped in English soil,
Saw how the aspect of man and landscape hardens
Up North, where mills and collieries claim toil
That grooves the softness from kindly human faces,
Relentlessly as wind and sun bleach bare
Each limestone terrace adorning those moorland spaces
Lending to semi-wilderness a rare
Light; to every melancholy crag,
Purple beauty, befitting the regal strength
Of the Pennine Chain, which no exhausted slag
Defiles; nor do inhabitants of its length
Yield to the harsh life-winds that round them storm -
Their homing hearts by homely hearths kept warm.

'Round Ingleton, where heather makes way for soft
Lush youngling grass, and the loneliness
Feels strangely soldier-like -- being grim - and far --
There, from eerie emptiness aloft
You hear, not bird-notes sprinkled as from a star,
But the raven's dismal caw and the pitiless
Squeal of the buzzard. And this sets awaft
In the mind a wonder such harshness does not scar
The total beauty of this compact isle.
But north or south, no stridency can mar
The peace of vales enlacing mile on mile
Of heath or meadows where children laugh the while
An echo of Shelley's and Meredith's skylark meets
The plaintive song of the nightingale heard by Keats.'

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Then you, Mildred, asked, in some surprise,
How it was that in reciting why's
For loving England I named the poets so late;
Suggesting we remember how the great
Poet transcends the merely lilting song;
Hunts for the meaning of his long

Embrace of remembered joy or woeful youth --
Knows that the endless search for meaning and truth
Allows recall of ecstasy but not
Over-fondling of it, lest it rot;
Probes beneath the darker nadir of pain
To find, in quiet deeps, the golden vein
That tenderly alloys a stony grief
Which else might harden into foundrous reef.

'Here in Germany,' you said, 'I
Have found as much to love as you across
The Dover Strait. I've heard the skylark toss
Such jubilant song toward such a radiant sky,
As made it seem that somewhere on its flight
Into the breast of heaven it had caught
A sudden glimpse it never could have sought
Of visions we in childhood-time invite
To vague companionship in searching dreams
Of what they mean who tell us one we love
Can never die, but has been "called above
To join a holy choir," and it then seems
That where that one has gone all must be mirth
Since there is none at all left here on earth.

'And walking in Thuringian Forest hush,
Pondering the ominous turmoil of our age,
I've heard such sobbing-singing by a thrush,
It seemed the very words still mourned the sage
Of Weimar. How would that great one now gauge
The weight of darkness closing in around
His native land? How would Goethe wage
Against the phantom fears, the ignorance found
In governmental seats, the curdling sound
Of inhuman cries rent from human throats
Choked off because their courage would expound
The tenets of humanity? Could moats
Yawning along electric-barbed-wire cramp
Him into fear? Could concentration camp?'

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One day, in contrapuntal argument
(Which made our Stammtisch neighbors look around
To see who dared thus taint with merriment
A conversation touching the profound),
We tumbled into fourfold recitation
Of long-loved lines that seemed to us to mold

The marrow of poetic affirmation
Concerning Life - citing modern and old
To show how poet strikes fire from poet across
The struggling, mounting centuries,
Relumes each earlier bard, tips with flame
His reading of Earth, and furnishes helpful gloss.
For greatness brooks no trivial rivalries;
And deepest wisdom boasts no single name.

'Didn't Goethe say the blinding light
Of Shakespeare's poetry was what had rent
The shackles from him, soul and body, sent
Him rushing out-of-doors, as in delight
Of testing the power of new-found hands and feet?'
The Briton asked it only half in pride,
And winked a warming smile when Arvid replied,
'Yes! and your George Meredith, it's meet
I should remind you, wrote that he had learned
Most from "the noble Goethe.'" Then Mildred turned
To Arvid - 'He learned from your father, too,
My dear. I've read his letters. But though he knew
Germany better than most men of his age,
Even he could not foresee this foul outrage.'

'Die Zukunft riecht nach Juchten, nach Blut --' began
Our Briton, but giving up in mock despair,
'This guttural tongue eludes a Yorkshireman
Like me,' he groaned. 'But there's this passage where
Heinrich Heine sounded a harrowing note
Of prophecy. If time proves him right,
And his and your predictions are less remote
Than even we fear, more than Goethean might
In analytics will be needed to climb
From self-wrought ruin to self-salvation. We'll want
The integrity of mind held sublime
By Emerson and' - 'And womanly brain, I vaunt
With Meredith. Agreed?' Mildred prodded.
'Aye - and grace of heart,' the Englishman nodded.

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That day haunts me still, and that talk, that hour;
Not for the modest prescience revealed -
This was shared by many, though even our
Small knowledge was enough to have congealed
The blood in terror of the future. Nor yet
That we had talked of poetry so much;

Great poetry is more than amulet
To those who have been privileged to touch
Even its shimmering rim; and we four
Had learned from fortunate teaching in our youth
To probe a poet's music for his truth.
And nearly every soul could open a door
On mountain-days towering its prairied years
Moon-far -- and far too beautiful for tears;

As when a singer, following many a year
Of earned applause for mastery of art,
One festive evening can reappear,
And walk the same and look the same, and start
His concert just as simply as before,
Yet gradually the soaring euphony
Seems to a deeply listening heart to pour
Into a personalized symphony,
Vibrating slumbering young tenderness,
Old fragrances, the grace of a lingering glance,
Wistful hope that a mellowing sorrow may bless
And subtly reveal to his peers in the audience
That enlarging love has been the singer's gain
Or he has somehow conquered an ancient pain.

So the substance of an awaited letter,
Briefly confirming a bitter human loss,
Clarifies my duty as friendship's debtor,
Its stabbing imagery cutting across
Quivering reticence shielding an older hurt
To which this later news gives fresh impact.
For a single grief may leave a heart inert
But sorrow compounded can drive that heart to act
In consort with its brain. So may my hope
Accrue that laying bare the unyielding stand
Held to their death by personal friends may telescope
Into a larger view the ghastly toll
That war's own power must command all war's surcease,
If Earth is to evolve in stately peace.

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One sentence has now power to catalyze
My years-long contemplation of events
Abroad and here at home? To summarize
The accelerating letter: It documents
Respective dates when Arvid and Mildred Harnack
Were executed - as noxious instruments

Of opposition to the Nazi rack
Anguishing the earth. It laments
Their loss to a land - a world - where Freedom, moaning
To breath, had need of their valiant aid. It cites
Informed predictions which Arvid wrote - owning
But three hours more in which to burn the lights
Of moral power into the wrongs that blight
The human spirit, demeaning its noble right.

And then it tells how Mildred, bivouacked
In lonely waiting for her own hour
Of death, sustained by some exalted power,
Rejected - in that bleakest entr'acte
Between the muffled parting with her dead
And her rejoining him - the drug Despair.
Not for one like her, whose golden hair
Symbolized a golden heart, to dread
Impending death more than a flabby fright
Before the cause inciting the dread doom.
So even in her death-cell she made room
To raise an unchurched altar to the bright
Power of reason. Pitilessly slain
In her adopted land. Reason again

Must rise. And from the energizing brain
Of that great German poet who could stir
Belief in man's advance, and still maintain
'So long as man aspires he must err,'
Mildred drew deep strength; from stilling heart
Bequeathed us all a pulsing legacy
Of Goethe-verse, rendered a goodly part
Into our English tongue. So poignancy
In loss of glowing life transmutes to glow
Of pride that one so soon to be denied
The light of life itself, still could show
The way to lighted truth - from beside
Her tomb, could sound the Goethe cry that saves:
'Over the graves, Forward! -- Over -- the -- graves --

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Three of the four who on those days I hymn
Talked and laughed and worried away the hours,
Sleep in graves decreed by Nazi powers.
One is marked by marble over a slim
Plot of earth hard by a Yorkshire moor,
Swept by winds that murmur as though they blow

His love for England - and would tell him so.
But you other two, what of your
Resting places? Later I shall tell.
Now my task is sterner. For the war
Has left me sole survivor of us four,
And I would do your work. What befell
You, silenced friends, once turned my blood to ice.
The future must redeem your sacrifice.

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PART II

[p. 16]

The Yorkshireman could not have meditated
The meaning of his death - so swift it came -
But Arvid, Mildred, you two, as you waited
For what was called a trial - though it shame
The name of justice - did you think again
Of lustrous hours we spent, we four, expounding
The beacon-truths discerned by poet-men?
Recall the boding lines that now come pounding
Into my brain in timbrelled alternation,
Linking European and American?
Heine, griever in anticipation
Is Hesperus to a radiant caravan
Of thinkers who in deathless poets' art
Have drawn a wisdom-sharing living-chart.

'When I think of Germany at night' -
Heine, how many millions shared your weeping
When German fury, of which you warned aright,
Found not France alone but a whole world sleeping! -
Schiller - could you know, how when 'Sire,
Give us freedom of thought' rang from the lips
Of actors in 'Don Carlos,' that could inspire
Resistance to tyranny worse than Spanish Philip's! -
George Meredith - you warned in sober mood,
'When nations gain the pitch where rhetoric
Seems reason they are ripe for cannon's food.'
Today, too, pessimism is heretic:
For bigoted rivalry still awhile may storm,
But 'We are the lords of life, and life is warm.'

Milton! the hour is here for us to show
We understand your truth: 'Who overcomes
By force hath overcome but half his foe.'
Now scientific prowess nearly numbs
The latent wisdom of the human heart,
Transcending the star-ensplendoured heavens to dart
An eager pulse through atmosphere that girds
The rayless planet regnant in the night,
Exulting in the faintly echoing hum
Whereby she grants their boundary-crashing might.
Not everyone can understand - and some
Inquire if treading a moon so cold and bare
Is more urgent than making Earth more fair.

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'The stainless majesty of heaven,' said
Time-aureoled Sophocles, 'can not be soiled
By men.' How should he dream the years ahead
Would breed a race of men who, having toiled
With subtle tools and bold intelligence
To track the power of Nature to its source,
Could seize the province of the elements,
Then wielding imitated primordial force
Flood the nighted sky and a mountain range
With blaze of soaring cosmic fire, so bright
That a hundred desert-miles away, a strange
Sensation as of never yet known light
Would pierce the sightless eyes of a girl who
In trembling wonder, asking, 'What was that?'

No ancient could forespeak man's god-like power
To mimic sun and storm and split apart
The earth itself. None could have dreamed man's dower
Of talents ever would be used to chart
Destruction on such terrifying scale
As when, in that tremendous point of time,
The isle of Honshu (neighbor to the pale
'Island of Light'), stirring after climb
Of morning sun, startled in second sun-fire -
Sky-crowding boil of dust - nerve-bursting thunder --
Becoming, in tenth-of-a-millionth-of-a-second, a pyre
Of people, city, trees - breeding wonder
That man, whom pagan gods once made afraid,
Now must fear the gods himself has made.

Can anyone understand what it means to freeze
Who need only move a lever to start a fire?
Or accurately parse 'to starve' whose knees
Have never collapsed in weakness owed to dire
Want of simplest food? And who dare feel
He has the right to enjoy his own child's faith
Who lets the woe of a far-off waif conceal
The reflected appeal of his own child's muted wraith?
They talk calmly of death who have not known
Its deepest wrench. They shun reminders of war
Whose nostrils were never assailed by the stench blown
Across black shambles that were homes before
Instruments conceived in human mind
Loosed awesome miracles to dispatch mankind.

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They've heard enough of brutal battles, some say;
Enough about dirt and pain. They would as lief
Now the fighting is over, pay their brief
Respect to the unknowing dead, then flutter away
To enjoy a peace they somehow feel they earned
By buying bonds or listening to a speech.
But boys who died on some embattled beach
Across the seas from us, and those who burned
To death in flames, high in the once-clean air,
Or whom an ocean claimed, or a mountain top,
Had they no right to feel they were more than sop
To selfish men's uneducable flair
For coupling greed with sickly vanity,
To spawn despoilers of Humanity?

If now in this portentous aftermath
Of a war whose cost is not computed yet,
We shrug that we have done our share, and fret
At delay in comerce, content with abortive wrath
Against selected 'criminals of war,'
Or with giving excess food and clothing
To the hungry, the cold, who may betray no loathing
Of alms, because their sufferings are more
Than they have strength left to endure alone -
Shall rejecting revenge mean we condone
Conniving at lust for power and gain, ignore
The basic human ills that lead to war?
Then who will care to claim the grim distinction
Of having helped along humankind's total extinction?

[p. 19: NOTES]

PART II will proceed with reference to Isaiah, seeking to draw a kind of parallel between the dethroning of one set of mythical gods by the dawn of the Christian era and the dethroning of a different set of human beliefs which the ushering in of the atomic era requires; will then work back to Goethe, to an American's (Mildred's) reminder of Goethean wisdom and its Americanistic humanizing in Emersonian concepts, bringing the narrator to the point of leaving the "foursome" of the poem and addressing the still-living who were unconcerned at the growth of Nazism and need now to hear

"What happened when the dreaming beauty of Oxford spires Blurred in the smoke from ominous Reichstag fires."

PART III: What happened in pre-war Nazified Germany (not omitting its - or our - aid to Franco in the Spanish Civil War) -- using not merely "headline" material but the gradual dehumanizing effects of Nazism - with special verses for certain mass trials, the Nuremberg Party Congresses (which I was twice "privileged" to attend), etc. etc.

(Part III may be in blank verse; I don't know yet; but if so, then the later sections will work back into sonnets, followed by something balancing the form of rhyme and rhythm I found it necessary to invent for the opening section. In any case the poem will have a balanced architecture.)

PART IV: The war itself; special stanzas for particular phases of it and particular battles and events; Dunkerque and the Battle of Britain, Lidici, and other razed towns; Stalingrad, Warsaw, Rotterdam, the Nazi entrance into Paris and Athens; our entry into the war; our specially grievous losses in Italy and in the Pacific; the death of President Roosevelt; the "end" of the war.

PART V: The post-war months and the economic and spiritual chaos here at home; special stanzas for war-trials; for concentration camp horrors revealed; for military cemeteries; for returning veterans and the bereaved; for famine and freezing; for the old and the newer hate-mongers. The continuing war against the peace. The world's children. Then the vision

and wisdom of the great poets will again be drawn upon for future - and humanity-pointing references.

This, in general, is the substance and the order now contemplated. I can't tell at this point JUST how it will work out. Light - and forwardness - are the large themes.

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(The three stanzas which follow this were composed well before the beginning of Part II, and will probably come towards the end of the final part.)

[Note: The three stanzas referred to here begin with "Can anyone understand what it means to freeze".]