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Poetae Patriae Amantes: A Tribute in Five Scenes

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*Address by Professor R. Bedford Watkins
on the occasion of the
Century Club Dinner
April 30, 1976
Memorial Student Center
Illinois Wesleyan University*

*Dr. Watkins had been chosen by the faculty,
students and administration as recipient of the
Century Club Award for 1976*

POETAE PATRIAE AMANTES:
A Tribute in Five Scenes
by R. Bedford Watkins

In this year of 1976 we are celebrating the accomplishments of our 200-year history as a nation. In scholarly word, popular song and banal T.V. commercial we are reminded of our victories in war, our successes at the peace table, our technological supremacy and our collective strength and ingenuity. The countries of the world, and most of our own citizens as well, would consider our military, industrial and technological prowess as the most impressive achievements of our history as a nation. Throughout this history, however, there have been writers and poets who have chronicled the deeds, good and bad, humorous and tragic, of this developing nation. Often speaking prophetically, they have enriched the mind and spirit and have helped to shape the ideals of our people. They spoke of freedom, equality, the dignity of the common man, and the belief in the sacred rights of each individual. Through the years a body of literature was created which has become a vital part of our heritage as a nation. Much of the *poetry* which we would classify as patriotic is not of the highest literary quality. In fact, it is frequently overly sentimental and occasionally pure doggerel. But as an outpouring of zealous fervor in the cause of freedom or love of country it often achieves a primitive eloquence in its impassioned utterance.

I would like to call attention to this facet of America's greatness by paying tribute to five American poets who, as my title indicates—**Poetae Patriae Amantes**—were poets who loved their country.

Louis Kramer, a contemporary literary critic, has said that "poetry, like karate, is a means of self-defense in a time when crime rates are rising sharply: men write and read poems because poems

may save them in some dark alley." I believe that poetry can serve as a self-defense in the dark alleys of the mind because, like its sister art, music, it can refine the sensibilities to grasp a truth.

The contemporary poet Robert Graves has provided a moving testimony to the power of poetry in his assertion that writing a poem actually saved his life. Referring to an experience during World War I he says:

After getting a lung wound—a fragment of shell went right through—I had returned to the trenches too soon and nearly died of bronchitis. Then when, a year later, the Army demobilized me and I rejoined my wife and newly-born daughter, I arrived home with so-called "Spanish influenza," alias septic pneumonia, the epidemic which killed twenty million people throughout the world, three times as many as the war itself. My temperature rose to 105, and both lungs were affected. The overworked doctor said I had no chance, the household wept openly, but one thing kept me alive: the obstinate intention of getting my poem right. It had already gone into several drafts, and I wasn't going to be beaten by it. The technical problem was how to make a sonnet read as though it were not a sonnet, while keeping the rules.

By the thirty-fifth draft I had all but solved this, and was tottering about on a stick. "The Troll's Nosegay" saved my life and I'm grateful.

Poetry, like music, has filled a vital need in my life by providing an aesthetic pleasure unavailable from any other source and by infusing a strength, *literally*, to meet those times of despondency and personal disaster which it is our inevitable lot as human beings to face.

As my modest tribute to our nation's poets, I have composed *Five Disparate Songs*, each quite different as the title indicates, setting the words of five disparate American poets who in their poetry have expressed their love for this country.

So let me invite you into my workshop and, like a craftsman demonstrating and describing his most recent creation to a prospective buyer, let me set each scene by telling you briefly about each poet and explain what I have tried to do in setting his poem.

Scene I

The Battle of the Kegs

Francis Hopkinson was a prominent jurist, writer, inventor, musician, composer, poet and signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was best known during Revolutionary War times for his stinging, satirical verse which helped to stay the struggling colonists in their desperate fight for freedom.

In November, 1776, British General Sir William Howe was advancing across New Jersey in pursuit of the fast retreating troops of General George Washington. In June 1777, he entered New York. About the same time General Burgoyne appeared before Ticonderoga, N.Y., with 10,000 British troops poised to advance south on the lower Hudson River in an attempt to cut the insurrectionist colonies in two. The cause of the patriots looked bleak indeed. As one historian has written, we tend to forget the real danger the colonies were in at the time and just how very near we came to being defeated.

The satirical humor of Francis Hopkinson was a welcome relief to the ever-present fear of the expected British campaign. In July 1777, from his camp at Ticonderoga, Burgoyne issued a pompous proclamation beginning with a magnificent list of his own titles, offices and honors calculated to bring the wretched Americans to their knees in fear. Hopkinson promptly replied with a counter-proclamation, complete with high-sounding titles and honors in a "most delicious burlesque" of Burgoyne's manifesto. Colonists everywhere read it amid roars of laughter and healthy derision of the hated general. Similar bits of humorous satire flowed from his pen at numerous critical times during the war years.

When, in September and October of 1777, Howe defeated Washington at Brandywine and Germantown and occupied Philadelphia, an incident occurred which gave Hopkinson the occasion for his most successful stroke as a humorous writer. General Howe, known to be fond of pretty women and gala living took the opportunity to indulge these appetites in Philadelphia while waiting for the summer to resume the campaign. The surrounding inhabitants vented their hatred of the fearsome general and his troops by many ingenious harrassing antics. One such prank is

described in Hopkinson's own words:

Certain machines in the form of kegs, charged with gunpowder, were sent down the river to annoy the British shipping at Philadelphia. The danger of these machines being discovered, the British manned the wharves and shipping and discharged their small arms and cannons at everything they saw floating down the river during the ebb tide.

The enemy troops expended a large quantity of ammunition in this frantic activity and provided an amusing spectacle to the Philadelphians who gathered at the wharves to watch. Commemorating the incident, Hopkinson wrote a ballad entitled "The Battle of the Kegs" describing the British panic on seeing the kegs coming down the river. One soldier declared the kegs "were filled with armed rebels, who were to issue forth in the dead of night, as the Grecians did of old from their wooden horse at the siege of Troy, and take the city by surprise—asserting that they had seen the points of their bayonets through the bungholes of the kegs."

This story, printed as the sober testimony of an eyewitness in Philadelphia and recounting in seeming sincerity one of the most ludicrous battles ever fought, prepared the people everywhere to fully savor the biting satire of Hopkinson's ballad on the incident. The poem flew from colony to colony in those grim early months of 1778, giving the weary and anxious people the luxury of genuine and hearty laughter in scorn of the enemy. Tyler, in his *Literary History of the American Revolution*, states that "to the cause of the Revolution, it was perhaps worth as much, just then, by the way of emotional tonic and of military inspiration, as the winning of a considerable battle would have been."

Literarily, "The Battle of the Kegs" is doggerel and far below the quality of Hopkinson's best work. Nevertheless, it became in his day the best known of all his writings.

I have set this poem in a humorous manner which it obviously requires. I first devised a pseudo-folk-tune to the first stanza and,



realizing that 22 stanzas would be quite a burden on one tune, not to mention the listener, I composed three more to provide variety. In addition, some of the verses suggested that they might be spoken rather than sung. So, you will hear some stanzas spoken and some



sung to four different, but related, tunes. To afford the performer and the listener alike opportunities to breathe occasionally, there are interludes between some of the verses which come out sounding a bit like out-of-tune fiddle playing—which seemed to me to be appropriate in the context.



The Battle of the Kegs

*Gallants attend and hear a friend,
Trill forth harmonious ditty,
Strange things I'll tell which late befel
In Philadelphia city.*

*'Twas early day, as poets say
Just when the sun was rising,
A soldier stood on a log of wood
And saw a thing surprising.*

*As in amaze he stood to gaze,
(The truth can't be denied, sir,)
He spy'd a score of kegs or more
Come floating down the tide, sir.*

A sailor, too, in jerkin blue,
This strange appearance viewing,
First damn'd his eyes, in great surprise,
Then said 'Some mischief's brewing:

These kegs, now hold, the rebels bold,
Pack'd up like pickl'd herring;
And they're come down t'attack the town
In this new way of ferry'ng.'

The soldier flew, the sailor too,
And, scar'd almost to death, sir,
Wore out their shoes, to spread the news,
And ran till out of breath, sir.

Now up and down throughout the town,
Most frantic scenes were acted;
And some ran here and others there,
Like men almost distracted.

Some fire cry'd, which some denied,
But said the earth had quaked;
And girls and boys, with hideous noise,
Ran thro' the streets half naked.

Sir William he, snug as a flea,
Lay all this time a snoring,
Nor dream'd of harm as he lay warm,
In bed with Mrs. Loring.

Now in a fright, he starts upright,
Awak'd by such a clatter;
He rubs both eyes, and boldly cries,
'For God's sake, what's the matter?'

At his bedside he then espy'd,
Sir Erskine at command, sir,
Upon one foot, he had one boot,
And th'other in his hand, sir.

'Arise, arise,' Sir Erskine cries,
'The rebels-more's the pity-
'Without a boat are all afloat,
'And rang'd before the city.

'The motley crew, in vessels new,
'With Satan for their guide, sir,
'Pack'd up in bags, or wooden kegs,
'Come driving down the tide, sir.

*'Therefore prepare for bloody war,
'These kegs must all be routed,
'Or surely we despised shall be
'And British courage doubted.'*

*The royal band, now ready stand
All rang'd in dread array, sir,
With stomach stout to see it out,
And make a bloody day, sir.*

*The cannons roar from shore to shore,
The small arms make a rattle;
Since wars began I'm sure no man
E'er saw so strange a battle.*

*The rebel dales, the rebel vales,
With rebel trees surrounded;
The distant wood, the hills and floods,
With rebel echoes sounded.*

*The fish below swam to and fro,
Attack'd from every quarter;
Why sure (thought they), the devil's to pay,,
'Mongst folks above the water.*

*The kegs, 'Tis said, tho' strongly made,
Of rebel staves and hoops, sir,
Could not oppose their powerful foes,
The conqu'ring British troops, sir.*

*From morn to night these men of might
Display'd amazing courage;
And when the sun was fairly down,
Retir'd to sup their porridge.*

*An hundred men, with each a pen,
Or more, upon my word, sir,
It is most true would be too few,
Their valor to record, sir.*

*Such feats did they perform that day,
Against these wick'd kegs, sir,
That years to come, if they get home,
They'll make their boasts and brags, sir.*

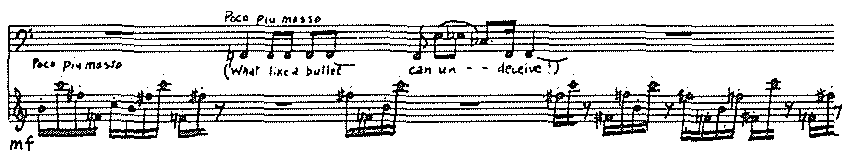
Francis Hopkinson

Scene II

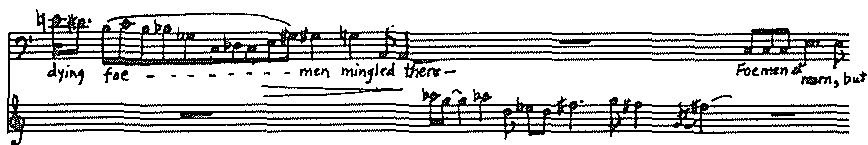
Shiloh: A Requiem (April 1862)

Readily acknowledged as one of our country's greatest novelists, Herman Melville also left a considerable body of poetry. The collection entitled "Battle Pieces" was written during the Civil War and published shortly after in 1866. One poem from this collection, frequently excerpted and anthologized, has long been a favorite of mine as it most nearly expresses the inexplicably poignant feelings I have about that particular conflict. The poem reflects for me the elegiac hush that hovers over military cemeteries and old battlefields where, to imaginative minds, the spirits of those who perished violently still seem to restlessly ruminate. I have tried to capture this mood with solo voice and oboe.

The Battle of Shiloh took place around the old wooden church at Shiloh near Pittsburg Landing in Tennessee on April 6 and 7, 1862. It resulted in 13,047 Union casualties and 10,694 Confederate losses—one of the bloodiest battles of the war. The church itself was used as a hospital, apparently, and Melville alludes to this fact in the poem. Although one critic gives as many as three possible climaxes in the poem, the magnificent parenthetical statement near the end—"(*what like a bullet can undeceive:*)" seems to me the strongest one and I have set it differently from the main body of the poem by surrounding it with quicker notes in the oboe and supplying the words with the lowest notes in the voice part in the whole



song. This, in an attempt to stress the powerful cynicism of this phrase. The emotional and musical climax I have suborned to the word "dying" followed by a sort of wail on the word "foemen." The



closing lines of the poem refer back to the beginning in both mood and in the repetition of specific words. The music similarly recapitulates the quiet reflection of the beginning in which the oboe might be described as suggesting distant bugle calls from long ago.



SHILOH A Requiem (April, 1862)

*Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched one stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there—
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undecieve!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.*

Herman Melville

Scene III next to of course god america i

Of the works of e. e. cummings, Allen Tate has said “the two modes of his poetry, lyricism and satire, he joined in a unified vision of the modern world; in this he was unique.” A painter as well as a poet, cummings once referred to himself as “an author of pictures, a draughtsman of words.” In the poem I have chosen to set, written in 1926, he has painted a brilliant word-picture of the self-styled, flag-waving American patriot, a spread-eagle American who hasn’t the faintest idea of true patriotism—stereotyped recently in the character of one Archie Bunker. In setting this poem I have tried to musically parody this shallow Americanism just as the words of the poem do. I’m certain you will recognize in the distorted harmonisa-



tion a well-known tune at the beginning and end of the piece. The last note of the piano is intended to be a pianistic raspberry. In all honesty I must admit to paying homage in this piece to one of America’s most innovative and creative composers, Charles Ives, and confess the tremendous influence his music and aesthetic has exerted upon contemporary composers, myself included. Incidentally, he left an ingenious and hilarious set of variations for organ on the same tune you will hear in this song.

next to of course god america i

*“next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims’ and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn’s early my
country ’tis centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in very language even deafanddumb*

*thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful
than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"*

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

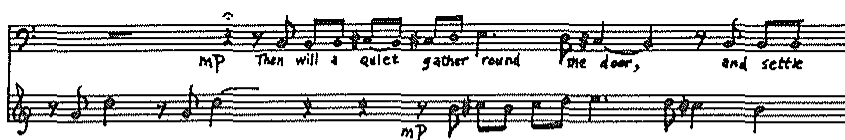
e. e. cummings

Scene IV

Beyond Wars: For the League of Nations

In 1919, at the end of World War I, the Paris Peace Conference was convened. Breaking all precedent, President Woodrow Wilson traveled to Europe to provide leadership for that conference and to make certain that the treaty would include provisions to establish a league of nations designed to insure that the war just ended would truly be the war to end all wars. On January 10, 1920, after months of negotiation, the covenant of the League of Nations was adopted. Wilson returned to America and with high hopes submitted the plan to the U.S. Senate. The proposal met with strong opposition, however, and on March 19, 1920, the motion for confirmation was defeated.

In a poem entitled "Beyond Wars: For the League of Nations" David Morton, a little-known journalist and poet expressed the longing of the common man for the peace and serenity of a simple life after emerging from a catastrophic war. I came across this poem in an outdated anthology some months ago and I have been able to find only meager biographical information about the poet. This song, like the second one in the set, is also for solo voice and oboe. The mood of the two songs is somewhat similar as well, providing some symmetry to the form of the song cycle as a whole, being placed second and fourth in a group of five. I have divided the setting into three parts as suggested by the text. The first and third



sections are in a reflective mood of quiet longing for peace and the second is in a somewhat happier vein suggested by the reference to the happy sound of children's feet.



BEYOND WARS For the League of Nations

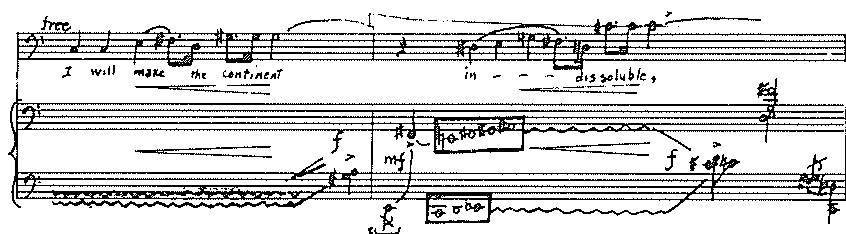
*Then will a quiet gather round the door,
And settle on those evening fields again,
Where women watch their slow, home-coming
men
Across brown acres hoofed and hurt no
more,
The sound of children's feet be on the floor,
When lamps are lit, and silence deeper falls,
Unbroken, save where cattle in their stalls
Keep munching patiently upon their store.
Only a scar beside the pasture gate,
A torn and naked tree upon the hill,
What times remembered, will remind them
still
Of long disastrous days they knew of late;
Till these, too, yield for sweet, accustomed
things,—
And a man plows, a woman sews and sings.*

David Morton

Scene V

For You, O Democracy

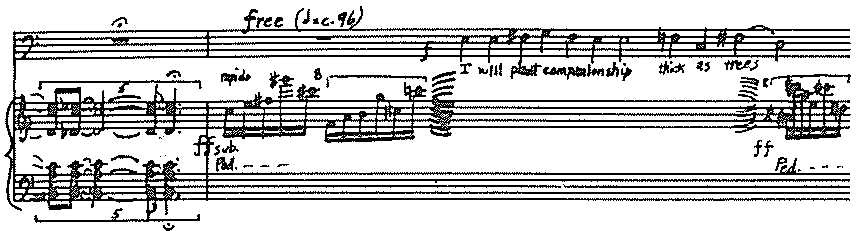
Walt Whitman, perhaps America's most original poet, was a self-educated, free thinking, rugged individualist. He sang of the dignity of the common man and the beauty of common things. He glorified the human body, preached divinity in all created things and considered everything as suitable material for poetry. He felt a semi-religious calling to be the spokesman and champion of democratic nationalism and his patriotism shines forth from many of his works. His nationalistic optimism, strained though it was during his agonizing experiences in field hospitals during the Civil War, is vigorously reflected in the poem I have chosen to close the cycle. The accompaniment is characterized by dissonant chord clusters and disjunct intervals which could be said to describe the thrashing energy and impetuosity of a young nation in the throes of its development. After I completed the song, I realized that practically every phrase had an upward thrust near the end of it toward a higher intensity of pitch which heightened each similarly shaped,



poetic statement. This bold vitality is arrested only twice in the poem by the words "with the love of comrades" which I have set identically both times to different rhythms in the voice and piano



and with an abrupt change of mood. The middle section is a kind of recitative and consequently comparatively rhythmically free.



FOR YOU, O DEMOCRACY

*Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.*

*I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers
of America, and along the shores of the great lakes,
and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each
other's necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.*

*For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma
femme!*

For you, for you I am trilling these songs.

Walt Whitman

So those are the songs, my modest Bicentennial tribute to five American poets who loved their country and served her in such various ways. I have tried to bring a unity to their strong diversity through the symmetrical mirroring of mood, instrumental texture

and vocal treatment of the five songs, and to provide artistic contrast within the bounds of the innate unity of each poem. Even such an attempt, it seems to me, can be considered a reflection of the strength of America, a strength which lies in a diversity of political, social and religious interests molded into a unity of purpose. An America who, with all her faults, represents the most successful political experiment in preserving the individual freedom and the essential dignity of man in recorded history.

This lecture is the seventeenth in a series prepared by Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members for presentation at the annual Century Club Dinner. Flora Harris Armstrong, president of the club, was Master of Ceremonies.

PAST CENTURY CLUB HONOREES

- 1960 William T. Beadles, Insurance
- 1961 Wayne W. Wantland, Biology
- 1962 R. Dwight Drexler, Piano
- 1963 Elizabeth H. Oggel, English
- 1964 Rupert Kilgore, Art
- 1965 Dorothea S. Franzen, Biology
- 1966 Joseph H. Meyers, English
- 1967 Marie J. Robinson, Speech
- 1968 Bunyan H. Andrew, History
- 1969 Wendell W. Hess, Chemistry
- 1970 Jerry Stone, Religion
- 1971 Doris C. Meyers, Philosophy
- 1972 John Ficca, Drama
- 1973 Robert W. Burda, English
- 1974 Max A. Pape, Sociology
- 1975 Lucile Klauser, Education
- 1976 R. Bedford Watkins, Piano
- 1977 Harvey Beutner, English-Journalism