

SELECTED WORKS OF

Stephen Vincent

BENÉT

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VOLUME ONE  
POETRY

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## STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Of Mark Sabre, the hero of *If Winter Comes*, we are told that Byron's poems was "the first book he had ever bought 'specially'—not, that is, as one buys a bun, but as one buys a dog." I have a similar feeling for Stephen Vincent Benét's *Heavens and Earth* (his third volume of poems, following *Young Adventure*, and *Five Men and Pompey*, published while he was still at school). For that was the first book I ever bought on the strength of a review—and I wish my own reviews were always as reliable as that one proved to be. It appeared in *The Yale Literary Magazine*; I was a schoolboy at Taft at the time, and read the *Lit* much more religiously than I did when I got to Yale. What chiefly struck me in it was a comparison to William Morris, a current idol of mine, and a number of quotations, excellently chosen, which showed me that here was one of my predestined books. I bought it the first day of the following vacation (it was one of the curious features of secondary education as then practiced that while at school it was made as difficult as possible to read any books) and found all that I had been looking for and more besides. The resemblance to William Morris in certain poems was plain enough; in his first novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, which belongs to what he has elsewhere described as "the required project in those days, a school and college novel," Benét says of the boy who is not quite himself that one of his first outpourings was "a long and bloodily bad ballad stewed from the bones of William Morris"; but it was resemblance to Morris where he is least dangerous as an influence, in the mood of mediaevalism combined with brutal realism of "Shameful Death" or "The Haystack in the Floods"—and, making allowance for some youthful romanticism, the mood, here, of "Three Days' Ride."

But there was of course a great deal more than that. Even in that one poem, there was also, for instance, a technical device to take your breath away—literally, the way the *pnigos* in Aris-tophanes took away the breath of the actor—if (as you should) you read it aloud. It is that innocent refrain,

From Belton Castle to Solway side,  
Hard by the bridge, is three days' ride,

which, at each repetition, becomes more menacing, until in its final form,

From Belton Castle to Solway side,  
Though great hearts break, is three days' ride,

the beating stresses give you a feeling in the chest which you will recognize from the last time you ran five miles.

There were other matters of technique, too, to fascinate a school-boy who had recently discovered the subject. There is the dirge in "The First Vision of Helen"—which he would not let me include here, with the oversevere judgment of a creator who has gone on to something else. God, I suppose, admires the dinosaurs less than we do. The poem is in various metres; one section begins:

Close his eyes with the coins; bind his chin with the shroud.

That line, you will notice, is made of the musical phrase *tum ti tum ti ti tum* twice repeated; and that, with what the books call anacrusis and anacalasis, is the metrical unit of the entire lament. It was not until freshman year at Yale when I read *Prometheus Bound* that I learned to call it a dochmiac; but I was able to recognize it as a single foot, and a complete and rare one. (Gilbert Murray and another have used it to render Greek choruses; as far as I know it occurs nowhere else in English.) A good deal later I was able to ask Steve Benét, "M. Jourdain, did you know that in that passage you were writing in dochmiacs?" He replied honestly that he did not know whether he had ever encountered the foot or not, but he believed he had just felt that anapaests were "too curly."

Whether he found or invented it, it is the perfect measure for the sway of the bearers ("Slow as the stream and strong, answering knee to knee"); and the accommodation of the line to the breath in these two poems is the promise of what he achieves in *John Brown's Body* when he attacks one of the primary problems of verse in our day, the finding of a form which may bear the same relation to our easygoing talk that, presumably, blank verse did to the more formal speech of an earlier generation. Half a dozen poets are attempting it; Benét was one of the first in the field, and I think is the most successful, with the long, loose, five- or six-beat

line that carries the bulk of *John Brown's Body*. It will be improved in the later poems; in *John Brown's Body* it is sometimes a little too loose, coming perilously near prose; yet it can carry casual conversations without incongruity, or at need can deepen without any sense of abrupt transition into blank verse for the nobility of Lincoln or Lee, or even slip into rhyme for the romantics of the Wingates. And it passes the great test for existence as a metre: single lines of it stay in your memory, existing by themselves.

It is over now, but they will not let it be over.

Professor Procrustes could explain that as an iambic or an anapaestic line, and name its variations; but to plain common sense it is neither. It is in a metre of its own; one of our time; one which Benét has given us.

There was more, too, in that thin purple book with a gilt demi-Pegasus on the cover, to meet one halfway and lead one out of the Pre-Raphaelite dreamland. There was an impish humor, which appeared not only in the openly grotesque poems, but was likely to crop up anywhere—in the tempting quotation, for instance, which begins “Young Blood,” and which, when you catch him with the question, Steve will blandly tell you that he invented. It is this quality, by the way, which is most readily apparent when you know him. He is given a puckish air by his habit of twisting his legs round his chair, by his round glasses, and his squeaky voice—which I always hear, in “Nightmare with Angels,” giving his own peculiarly emphatic intonation to the conclusion “In fact, you will not be saved.” In talk he seems to “make fun” of everything, not in the sense of ridicule, but with the humor that comes from looking at anything with a really original mind. His talk ranges over everything he has read (and he has read everything) building pyramids in the air, and, like his own “Innovator,” turning them upside down to see how they look; while from time to time his wife Rosemary puts in a wise and charming word as she sits serenely sewing—looking like an unusually humorous version of the housewifely Athena, as Steve behind his spectacles looks like an unusually humorous version of Athena’s owl.

That is the Benét of the dry comments in *John Brown's Body*, upon McClellan—

He looked the part—he could have acted the part

Word perfectly. He looked like an empire-builder.  
But so few empire-builders have looked the part—

or upon Wendell Phillips—

He did his part,  
Being strong and active, in all ways shaped like a man,  
And the cause being one to which he professed devotion,  
He spoke. He spoke well, with conviction, and frequently.

It is the Benét of the fantasies and fables, of the extraordinary "Nightmares," which deepen from the fantastic-amusing to the fantastic-terrifying. It's the author who can rewrite an old fairy tale for today in the much-reprinted "King of the Cats," or can write a new legend so perfect that it seems to have been always a part of our folklore—for the Devil and Daniel Webster ought forever to haunt New Hampshire as solidly as Rip Van Winkle and his gnomes haunt the Hudson. And the Benét who turns pyramids upside down in talk is the one who writes with imagination. The popular magazines are filled with stories that have invention, and ingenuity, and even a sort of conjurer's illusion; but the rarest thing in the world there or anywhere else is real imagination, which is real magic—such as you find in that astonishing piece of what-if, "The Curfew Tolls," or that haunting evocation of the feeling of certain quiet city backwaters, "Glamour." It is also one of the marks of imaginative insight that it can have an Einsteinian view of both sides of a solid at once; can see Napoleon as a good deal of a scoundrel and also as a great man; can destroy all the traditional witchery of the traditional Southern belle, and yet leave her, somehow, mistress of a more undeniable spell than before.

And then, of course, in *Heavens and Earth* there was a section, The Tall Town, which showed that there was poetry in New York; and in Benét's previous volume, *Young Adventure*, to which *Heavens and Earth* sent me back, there was "The Hemp," a ballad laid in Virginia. He was to write finer celebrations of New York, in prose and in verse, in "All Around the Town," and his city poems, in visions of its decay and resurrection; and he was to write greater ballads about America; but he had already declared that delight in his city and country which was to be a major theme in his work.

Americanism is so much in fashion now that Benét's Ameri-



canism, for all its brilliance of technical achievement, its breadth of sympathy, and its depth of feeling, is apt, now that the intellectual climate of the day has caught up with it, to seem less remarkable than it is. It is worth remembering that when other young men of his age were writing rondeaux and villanelles and tales of far away and long ago, Benét was already turning the ballad to American themes; and that at the end of the tinsel twenties, when it was the fashion to say that American life was rootless, drab, and everywhere the same, Benét was already writing *John Brown's Body*, with its sensitive feeling for half a dozen countryside and racial strains, and for the American wilderness and the old English songs that frame the exquisite idyll of Jack Ellyat and Melora Vilas. (That story always reminds me somewhat of another idyll in the midst of a martial epic, the episode of Angelica and Medoro in the *Orlando Furioso*, and sets me to wondering about what the unconscious mind may do. I once asked Steve whether the line in *John Brown's Body*,

He danced with me. He could dance rather well. He is dead.

was intended to translate, as it so perfectly does, the epitaph on a Roman dancing boy: *Saltavit. Placuit. Mortuus est*. He replied that he had not intended it, but he knew the Latin line well—it was a favorite with Monty Woolley, who gave delight and a supply of anecdotes to generations of Yale actors—and, said Steve, “the unconscious does queer things.” I have often wondered if his unconscious brought him the name of Melora, altered from Ariosto. Melora—Medoro: it might be.) And from the crowd of novels which try to add realism to historical fiction by getting up all the details of a campaign and not letting you off a single one of them, it is a pleasure to turn back to *Spanish Bayonet*, a historical novel which attains reality by the simple and difficult device of making the hero a real person.

There is no one to touch Benét in the variety and skill of his treatment of American themes; yet even his Americanism is only the outcome of something deeper. If he says, “Dear city of Cecrops,” it is because that is the nearest earthly approach to the dear city of God. He loves New York as the communal achievement of the spirit of man; he loves America because there every man can most freely become what God meant him to be. One can perceive his feeling, in reverse, in his two grotesque nightmares, the ones which express a horror of insects and of machines; for

they are the two things that have no right to be so intelligent—and so inhuman. And because he loves man he loves man's life. Life, one feels as one reads here, is too good to waste in holding a grudge like the Die-Hard, or in philandering, like the man to whom everybody was very nice, and too good to waste in being rich and proper, like the magnificent sheep who were Schooner Fairchild's classmates; and eternity is too good, as Doc Mellhorn found, to waste playing a harp.

When the free life of man is threatened by the cult of death, by those who deliberately make their souls eunuchs for the sake of the kingdoms of this earth, it is such a man who has both the surest guard against ultimate despair, and the most tragic sense of immediate peril. The spirit of man, he knows, is indestructible; the last of the legions goes, and Britain falls, but England rises; the savage by the waters of Babylon begins the hazardous mountaineering toward civilization; the refugee going into Egypt says, "We have been in exile before." But between there lies gaping the gulf of the Dark Ages; and the man who feels the tragedy of the waste of one Napoleon Bonaparte will be the one who can feel and make us feel the horror of the waste of whole generations of lives. If (in spite of the angel in the nightmare) we are to be saved, it will be in great part by the writings that show us all what we have to live for, and the good life that we could make.

BASIL DAVENPORT

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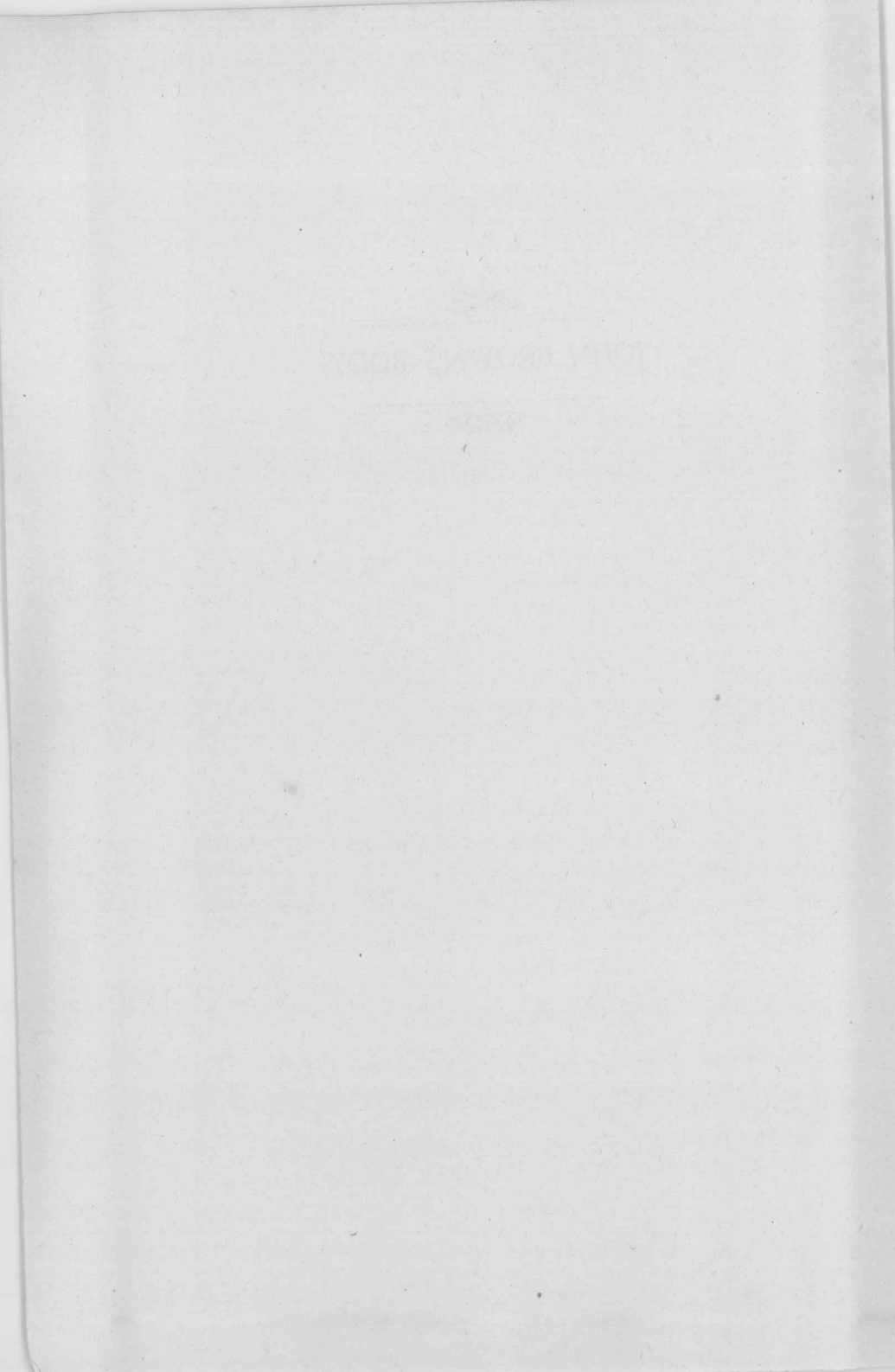


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JOHN BROWN'S BODY

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# *John Brown's Body*

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## INVOCATION

**A**ERICAN muse, whose strong and diverse heart  
So many men have tried to understand  
But only made it smaller with their art,  
Because you are as various as your land,

As mountainous-deep, as flowered with blue rivers,  
Thirsty with deserts, buried under snows,  
As native as the shape of Navajo quivers,  
And native, too, as the sea-voyaged rose.

Swift runner, never captured or subdued,  
Seven-branched elk beside the mountain stream,  
That half a hundred hunters have pursued  
But never matched their bullets with the dream,

Where the great huntsmen failed, I set my sorry  
And mortal snare for your immortal quarry.

You are the buffalo-ghost, the broncho-ghost  
With dollar-silver in your saddle-horn,  
The cowboys riding in from Painted Post,  
The Indian arrow in the Indian corn,

And you are the clipped velvet of the lawns  
Where Shropshire grows from Massachusetts sods,  
The grey Maine rocks—and the war-painted dawns  
That break above the Garden of the Gods.

The prairie-schooners crawling toward the ore  
And the cheap car, parked by the station-door.



Where the skyscrapers lift their foggy plumes  
Of stranded smoke out of a stony mouth  
You are that high stone and its arrogant fumes,  
And you are ruined gardens in the South

And bleak New England farms, so winter-white  
Even their roofs look lonely, and the deep  
The middle grainland where the wind of night  
Is like all blind earth sighing in her sleep.

A friend, an enemy, a sacred hag  
With two tied oceans in her medicine-bag.

They tried to fit you with an English song  
And clip your speech into the English tale.  
But, even from the first, the words went wrong,  
The catbird pecked away the nightingale.

The homesick men begot high-cheekboned things  
Whose wit was whittled with a different sound  
And Thames and all the rivers of the kings  
Ran into Mississippi and were drowned.

They planted England with a stubborn trust.  
But the cleft dust was never English dust.

Stepchild of every exile from content  
And all the disavouched, hard-bitten pack  
Shipped overseas to steal a continent  
With neither shirts nor honor to their back.

Pimping grandee and rump-faced regicide,  
Apple-cheeked youngers from a windmill-square,  
Puritans stubborn as the nails of Pride,  
Rakes from Versailles and thieves from County Clare,

The black-robed priests who broke their hearts in vain  
To make you God and France or God and Spain.

These were your lovers in your buckskin-youth.  
And each one married with a dream so proud  
He never knew it could not be the truth  
And that he coupled with a girl of cloud.