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As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

# THE FABLE OF THE GOATS

## AND OTHER POEMS

By  
E. J. PRATT

TORONTO: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF  
CANADA LIMITED, AT ST. MARTIN'S HOUSE  
1937

*TO MY SISTER CHARLOTTE*

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## THE FABLE OF THE GOATS

One half a continental span,  
The Aralasian mountains lay  
Like a Valkyrian caravan  
At rest along the Aryan Way.  
And central to the barrier,  
Rising in mottled columns, were  
The limestone ramparts of the heights—  
The Carolonian Dolomites.  
Over those scaffolds nothing passed  
But navigators of the sky:  
Those crags were taken only by  
The sun and moon and the wind's blast,  
By clouds and by the eagles' wings  
Out on their furthest venturings.  
So rooted in geography  
The natural frontier, it could be  
A theme for neither god nor beast  
To argue that one side was east  
And that the other side was west.  
Yet with this knowledge manifest,  
We must record a truth as strange  
As any fact or myth that can  
Inflict mortality on man.

The middle section of this range  
For endless centuries had been  
Earth's most dramatic *mise en scène*  
For lawless indeterminate fights.  
Both avalanche and cataract  
With Time compounding had attacked  
The lowest of the Dolomites  
With spring's recurrent cannonade;  
Had deepened crater and crevasse,  
Torn down the gorges and had laid  
The canyon of Saint Barnabas.  
Along this canyon's northern edge,  
One hundred feet in length, a ledge  
Of schist, known as the Capra Pass,  
Projected from the mountain wall.  
This slippery stretch might well appal  
The tread of cloven-footed things  
In their most cautious pedallings,  
But as a ground on which to stage  
The fortunes of a battle rage,

That ledge of Capra might reveal  
A tale which, for perversity,  
Could tame the Kyber Route or steal  
The title from Thermopylae.

The country which those peaks divide  
Was noted for its rich terrains,  
Its sweeping uplands and its wide  
Deltas and undulating plains.  
Millions of hornèd ruminants  
Roebucks and elks and argalis  
Upon this vast inheritance  
Had founded aristocracies,  
Which ruled the commons till, between  
Their slaughterous feuds internecine  
And foreign raids, they lost their lead  
To a lusty more enduring breed—  
A new totalitarian horn  
Known as the genus Capricorn.

The Aralasian country west,  
Described as Carob, was possessed  
By a remarkable race of goats  
With lyrate horns and shaggy coats.  
Unyielding individualists  
At first by nature they had learned  
The folly of obstructionists  
Within their tribal ranks and turned  
To federal virtues for the wise  
Conduct of a state enterprise.  
And of this wide domain the head  
Was Cyrus. It was he who led  
The bucks against the bulls in that  
Perfidious effort to profane  
The purity of the racial strain:  
'Twas he, the high-born aristocrat,  
Who rounded up intransigents,  
Drove out all civil disputants,  
And bent the proletariat  
Under a regimen of drill  
To his authoritarian will.

And on the east there was a spot  
As fertile as the Carob land,  
Where goats likewise had won command—  
The ancient dynasty of Gott.  
Straight-horned those tribes, of wiry coat,  
They had outmatched their canine foes,  
Then turned upon the yaks and smote  
The harts and put to shame the does.  
Inebriated by success,  
With numbers vastly multiplied,  
They built a citadel of pride  
About a national consciousness,

Outran their borders to possess  
Those lush exotic harvest yields  
Of hitherto unvanquished fields,  
Until they had from that wild shore  
Of the Fallopian corridor  
Down to the grey Ovidian Sea  
Established their hegemony.

Now when the veterans returned  
Flushed with their foreign victories,  
The hearts of all the generals burned  
With personal antipathies.  
All scrambled for the seats of power,  
Some wanted this, some wanted that,  
And some they knew not what—whereat  
Uprose the leader of the hour,  
A buck who by right of descent,  
As by his natural temperament,  
Had never recognized retreat.  
A scion of a Caliphate,  
He knew the strategy to beat  
The factions by a stroke of state  
And quell diversity of bleat,  
For of all lands, the realm of Gott  
Indubitably was polyglot.  
This stroke of state, this *coup d'état*  
Was nature's oldest formula.  
It was the leader's bright idea  
To send them forth to find their grub  
On fetid moors and desert scrub  
Where tuber roots of Ipomoea  
Purga—the standard panacea  
For disaffections of the mind—  
Became their diet, which, combined  
With seeds of Croton Tiglium,  
Restored their equilibrium.  
The mightiest hybrid of his race  
Was this ballista of the herd;  
The orient framework of his face  
Had been through generations blurred  
By a gigantic Ural trek—  
For unlike Cyrus, Prince of Carob,  
The Gottite leader's stream was stirred  
By elements from Turk and Arab:  
Tincture of Tartar, touch of Czech  
Lay in the great Abimelech.

So with the martial banners furled  
At all the frontiers in debate,  
It seemed as if the caprine world  
Might learn so to domesticate  
The gains imperial to release  
Their bucking energies for peace  
Under a wise duumvirate—

Two cousins far removed but loined  
From the same root, the god-like Pan,  
Abimelech and Cyrus joined  
In a world reconstruction plan!  
But goats like men have never found  
Much standing room on neutral ground,  
Once let a point of honour rise  
And death stalks in on compromise.  
Those Gottites and the Carobites  
Stood pat upon their natural rights,  
And here we must at once admit  
Three rocks on which a League might split.

It seemed that Nature had designed,  
When first she fixed a Gottite mind,  
Or pitched the Carob brain, and bent  
The bony bulwarks round about,  
Into a three-inch armament,  
That compromise should never find  
An alley either in or out.  
For when in any age was born  
A freak without a cloven hoof,  
Or with palmated frontal roof  
That blossomed points along the horn—  
Some civilized concessive goat  
Who carried democratic stripes  
Upon his softly textured coat—  
The uniformitarian types,  
Who strove to dominate the breed,  
Exiled him from the herds. Indeed,  
Had not one just appeared to show  
Progressive softening of the brain  
By urging tolerance towards the foe  
At the finish of a great campaign?  
Now, inasmuch as he was not  
Pure Carob or acknowledged Gott,  
But some form of a large jerboa  
Derived from stray spermatozoa,  
They tore his carcass joint from joint  
And sheared him to the fourteenth point.  
That goats were laid down for dissent  
Was clearly, whether right or wrong,  
An architectural intent.  
Those picket horns were three feet long—  
What was their purpose but reproof?  
And what the skull's, if not for shock?  
As axiomatic as the hoof  
For stance upon the mountain rock!

Moreover, had this quirky dame  
Implanted in their disposition  
A sacred but a smoky flame  
Of uncontrollable ambition.  
Nomads from zoologic time,

The race grew conscious that they must  
Give to an aimless wanderlust  
The sublimation of a climb.  
Valleys and plains were nurseries  
Which full-grown goats might leave behind  
For the wild gully routes that wind  
Up to the mountain crags and screes—  
Places of habitation where  
Ancestral bands of satyrs shook  
Lascivious lightnings from their hair.  
They marvelled with exalted look  
At things that voyaged through the air;  
They worshipped clouds and glorified  
The golden eagles as they took  
The solar orbit in their stride.

Joined with this instinct of ambition  
There was a problem called nutrition,  
A knotty, vexed consideration  
Not yet resolved by sublimation.  
Of all the animals that faced  
The question of a food supply,  
The goat had the most catholic taste  
That crops could ever satisfy.  
It could be proved by any test  
He had no rival at a feast.  
He craved the foliage of the west  
To vary pastures of the east,  
New barks and fresher rinds: the sight  
Of grasses inaccessible  
Was whetstone to the appetite.  
The more he had, the more he wanted;  
A taste unrecognized, a smell  
Still unappropriated, haunted  
The rumen like a ghostly spell.  
The eastern tribes had often stared  
Up at the peaks and wondered what  
Those vapours were their nostrils flared,  
What herbs and blossoms there might be—  
Was it goatleaf or bergamot,  
Red clover or sweet cicely?  
And likewise when the east wind blew  
Over the Carolonian summit,  
The herds from western uplands drew  
Intoxicating essence from it.  
Was that bay laurel, was it thyme  
That floated from the mountain span?  
Their eyes were fastened on the climb,  
Their noses quivered with the sniff,  
Yes, by the beard of the first Khan,  
There was no error in that whiff,  
They knew it, every buck and dam,  
'Twas lavender and marjoram.

On one crisp morning when the heights  
Were diamond brilliant with their snows,  
When Dawn had flushed with a deep rose  
The panels of the Dolomites,  
And atmospheric odours tart  
Made tonic impact on the heart,  
A common inspiration struck  
Concurrently each monarch buck:  
*It was the Ledge, the unconquered Ledge,  
The sanguinary Capra Pass,*  
That sent its challenge from the edge  
Of the canyon of Saint Barnabas.

Abimelech and Cyrus led  
Their troops up the opposing sides,  
Past fell and scaur and watershed,  
Over the small and great Divides.  
The marching bleat from every corps  
Combined into their battle roar,  
*Excelsior! Excelsior!*  
Such stout morale, such fine *élan*  
Was never seen since time began.  
By noon both tribes became aware  
Through subtle changes in the air  
Caused by the sharp reverberant sound  
Of hoofs upon untimbered ground,  
And by the Carob-Gottite smell,  
A mixture indescribable,  
That they might any moment close  
With their hereditary foes.  
They reached the hollow where the green  
Ledge like a boa lay between  
The twin peaks of the Dolomites.  
Massed by prophetic signals, kites  
And buzzards in a storm of wings  
Swept up and down the great ravine,  
Impatient for their scavengings.  
Upon that very ledge were fought  
Thousands of battles that had wrought  
The drama of a racial glory,  
With nothing in the strife more certain  
Than that each act of the long story  
Should close upon a carrion curtain.  
And yet—was there a goat dismayed  
In all that spiral cavalcade?  
No—not a buck, nor could there be  
From stock designed for battery  
And built like Carthaginian rams,  
Although that thousand feet of drop  
Sheer from the Carolonian top  
Put curds within the milcher dams.  
With pawing hoofs and sweating flanks,  
Each chieftain as the duellist  
Of his own herd stepped from the ranks

To try the quarrel on the schist.  
Abimelech himself had seen  
His sires, grandsires, and great-grands fall,  
Locked with the lyrates, down the wall,  
Plumb to the crypts in the ravine,  
Dropping like frenzied bacchanals,  
Hitting their corrugated globes  
So bloodily, the frontal lobes  
Came out through their occipitals.  
But so intense the patriot fire,  
And so magnificent the roll,  
The youth had felt the same desire  
Kindle the torches of his soul.  
And had not Cyrus felt as well  
The potent ritual of the spell,  
The phobias of his spirit burn  
In the white heat of discipline,  
As he had watched his kith and kin  
In their inexorable turn  
Perish? How splendidly they fell!  
And how the witenagemot  
Would hallow this immortal spot!  
And had he not gone back to tell  
The nursing dams who would convey  
To generations then unborn  
The story? How they would portray  
That plunge! And had not Cyrus sworn  
Upon the blood script of the laws,  
That on some sacrificial day  
He would go forth his father's way,  
Crusading downward to be torn  
By canyon jags and vulture claws,  
Maintening to the end The Cause,  
The exaltation of The Horn?  
And now the fatal hour had struck.  
Abimelech, that eastern buck  
With all the pride of a Mogul,  
His anger rising in a storm  
Of snorts, superbly true to form,  
Moved to the centre, lowered his skull—  
The famous Gottite cranium—  
To meet the Carobite Defender,  
The noble Cyrus who had come  
To die but never to surrender.

Come all ye hair-dividers, wise  
To ways of nature and of art,  
Who know how to anatomize  
The fine vagaries of the heart,  
Come bring your lore and make it plain—  
This riddle in the Carob brain.  
In that weird passage from the dark  
Matrix that shaped the Carobite  
And stratified his skull for fight,

Up to this present hour, the spark  
Had never failed the dynamite.  
Ye cannot say that Cyrus knew  
Just what he was about to do.  
For nowhere in his long descent  
Was there a trace of one rehearsal  
Which might account for this reversal  
Of military precedent.  
Folly it is to speculate  
Upon the food that Cyrus ate,  
That inland buds of evergreen  
With valley shoots could mitigate  
A million years of feudal hate  
From Irish Moss and carrageen;  
Or that the Adriatic weed  
By working on the thyroid freed  
The activators in his blood;  
That something in the morning cud  
Gentled his lymph towards his foes,—  
That steadying digitalis flip  
To the heart when he paused to nip  
The foxglove. Tell us he that knows.  
Or failing every shibboleth  
Of blood or ductless glands or such,  
Did reason enter in to touch  
The senses with the thought of death,  
And flash across goat-leaden eyes  
Glimpse of futitarian skies?  
The vultures with their ten-foot spread,  
Their hairless necks and crimson lids,  
Were at their business half-a-mile  
Below among the ancient dead  
Or roosting on the pyramids.  
And some were mounting the defile  
To flank the Pass of Capra where  
They lounged like lizards on the air;

And one black wing had come so near  
The Rock, its tip had brushed the coat  
Of the Carob leader as it passed.  
And had that brush, so leisured, cast  
The only one acknowledged fear  
Within the history of the goat?  
Or was it fear? Did Cyrus know  
That neither courage, strength nor will  
Behind the battle urge to kill  
Was proof against a flying foe?  
That every time when honour wronged  
Secured revenge upon the peaks,  
Inevitably the spoils belonged  
To the swiftest wings and sharpest beaks—  
The harpies and the cormorants  
Who, compensating for their theft  
Of blood and flesh and fat, had left

The glory to the ruminants?  
But do not reason why the mind  
Should save the soul or seek to find  
Within the evolutionary dream  
An optimistic phagocyte  
That cleaning up the corporate stream,  
Had scrubbed a conscience into light,  
The conscience of a Carobite—  
An Aryan working overtime  
Beating the Tartar to the climb!  
Ye cannot know what Cyrus felt;  
Ye only know that Cyrus knelt.  
Knelt! Hocks and knees! The body lay  
Prone—lengthwise—on the Capra Pass,  
As if beside his dam—the way  
He went to sleep in summer grass.

Now let pathologists explain  
What happened to the other brain.  
After a close look at the head,  
A momentary sniff at hoof  
And beard which gave Abimelech proof  
That Cyrus was by no means dead,  
A flash of understanding thrown  
Like a dagger of apocalypse,  
Had pierced the Gottite cranial bone  
And crashed his spiritual eclipse.  
Was it a glint of chivalry  
Nurtured under the eastern climes,  
A throw-back to the Gobi times,  
When someone in his ancestry  
Had set a fashion for the race,  
Made it a stigma of disgrace  
To foul a fallen enemy?  
Let him declare it who can tell  
Whether in Palestinian lands  
Some new conciliatory cell  
Had been evolved while roving bands  
Converged upon the desert sands  
To share the water from a well.

The chieftain saw the road was thrown  
Wide open: it was his alone  
To take possession in his stride—  
'Twas his alone, this flush of pride  
In a great conquest which would place  
Him as the hero of his race.  
But all the arrogance and scorn  
On which his tribal soul was bred,  
Spurn of the hoof, flaunt of the horn,  
That was Abimelech's had fled.  
And in its place a strangely warm  
Infusion—a considerate care  
That would not harm a single hair.

He sniffed once more the prostrate form  
Of Cyrus. Then as if he feared  
He might do violence to the head  
Or bring pollution to the beard,  
He stepped so lightly over, cleared  
Knees, hoofs and rump with that sure tread  
Which never yet had made him miss  
His foothold on a precipice.  
Clean over? Yes, beyond his foe!  
None could deny the deed was done,  
The Carolonian summit won,  
The Capra Pass without a blow!

Cyrus looked up and in his eyes  
Was an incredulous surprise.  
He could not find his enemy.  
He shook himself and blinked awhile,  
Then straightened up and gingerly  
He made the perilous defile.  
Reaching the safety of the bend,  
He stopped and, curious, craned his neck,  
Only to see Abimelech  
Watching him at the other end.  
The eyes of those two hierarchs  
Were four interrogation marks.  
No record in the family tree  
Illumined this epiphany.  
Five minutes motionless and mute  
They stood with that hypnotic stare  
That only puzzled goats could wear;  
And then in reverent salute  
As though their eyes had shed their scales,  
And each had recognized a brother  
Bidding Good Morning to the other,  
They waved their beards and stubby tails,  
And turning took their downward trails,  
Accompanied by their retinue,  
Alive to the redemptive clue—  
Cyrus to where the wild thyme grew,  
And where he could at his sweet beck  
Tread acres of the cistus-tree  
And lavender; Abimelech  
To bergamot and barberry,  
And where he could, up to his neck,  
Crop billowing leagues of cicely.

## THE BARITONE

He ascended the rostrum after the fashion of the Caesars:  
His arm, a baton raised oblique,

Answering the salute of the thunder,  
Imposed a silence on the Square.  
For three hours  
A wind-theme swept his laryngeal reeds,  
Pounded on the diaphragm of a microphone,  
Entered, veered, ran round a coil,  
Emerged, to storm the passes of the ether,  
Until, impinging on a hundred million ear-drums,  
It grew into the fugue of Europe.

Nickel, copper and steel rang their quotations to the skies,  
And down through the diatonic scale  
The mark hallooed the franc,  
The franc bayed the lira,  
With the three in full flight from the pound.  
And while the diapasons were pulled  
On the *Marseillaise*,  
The *Giovinezza*  
And the *Deutschlandlied*,  
A perfect stretto was performed  
As the *Dead March* boomed its way  
Through *God Save The King*  
And the *Star Spangled Banner*.

Then the codetta of the clerics  
(Chanting a ritual over the crosses of gold tossed into the  
crucibles to back the billion credit)  
Was answered by  
The clang of the North Sea against the bows of the destroyers,  
The ripple of surf on the periscopes,  
The grunt of the Mediterranean shouldering Gibraltar,  
And the hum of the bombing squadrons in formation under Orion.

And the final section issued from the dials,  
WHEN—  
Opposed by contrapuntal blasts  
From the Federated Polyphonic Leagues  
Of Gynecologists,  
Morticians,  
And the Linen Manufacturers—  
The great Baritone,  
Soaring through the notes of the hymeneal register,  
Called the brides and the grooms to the altar,  
To be sent forth by the Recessional Bells  
To replenish the earth,  
And in due season to produce  
Magnificent crops of grass on the battlefields.

## OBERON

Much have I longed for thy return, my sprite:  
This greenwood, once the stage of elfin pranks  
And welkin-splitting laughter, has become  
A desert in thy absence. Now these stories  
Burrow beneath my ribs and chase away  
The bile, for they reveal a madder world  
Than what Lysander knew and Hermia.  
Poor Bottom in his downiest moments saw  
No visions such as these that thou relatest—  
That fire should burn in water; mortals fly  
Throughout the empyrean on the backs  
Of birds; and whales with whirling fins should leave  
Their native element and take the air  
Across the land and sea with greater speed  
Than falcons; and that lovers could exchange  
Their vows in whispers at the self-same instant,  
Though separate a thousand ocean leagues—  
These tales would tax my own too credulous ears,  
As though I heard accounts of wrathful capons  
Tracking Hyrcanian tigers to their lairs.  
Hast thou another fable in thy scrip?

## PUCK

My Prince of Shadows, these reports I've brought  
Are more than fantasies that might disturb  
The reason through the love-juice of a herb.  
I saw the strangest duel ever fought—  
Sir Guy, Knight of the Garter, famous knight,  
Has challenged valiant Boris, famous count,  
To settle a reckoning in single fight.  
Boris not only questioned the amount,  
The nature and occasion of the debt,  
But forwarded a diplomatic note  
To the knightly challenger that, when they met,  
He would be pleased to take him by the throat,  
With many a courtly phrase which might imply  
His general opinion of Sir Guy.  
So, to collect, a journey was begun,  
Which, for the distance under broiling sun  
And pelting rain, had the same pith of sense  
As if a man might barter pounds for pence.  
At last when they appeared in mutual sight  
Upon two neighbouring hills where a ravine  
That ended in a quagmire lay between,  
The count began to bellow at the knight  
With fearful imprecations while Sir Guy  
Called Boris a bat, a polecat and a kite,  
A worm, an adder and a wart-hog—Why  
They should attack each other with such words  
I know not, but when finished with the birds

And all the noxious animals, they hurled  
The missiles of the vegetable world.  
And while they cursed they put more armour on  
Their steeds, beyond all war comparison,  
And on themselves already over-weight:  
For every oath they added some new plate  
To some new part of their anatomy,  
And when they had their beavers down, no hint  
Of mortal man escaped captivity  
Save through the eye-slits where the sovereign glint  
Of reason peered blasted with ecstasy.

OBERON

This is the visitation of the moon!  
But, prithee, how with such accoutrement  
Climbed they up to the saddles of their coursers?

PUCK

A dozen robust yeomen by main force  
Managed to get Sir Guy upon his horse.  
As many knights accomplished the same feat—  
Placing against the withers of the mount  
A ladder, they pushed up the angry count  
And got him fastened well astride his seat.  
Nor was this all: To see through their disguise  
And find the men, I had to rub my eyes.  
As though the armour were not yet complete,  
The henchmen brought another piece of mail  
Shaped like a conduit or a metal hose  
And screwed it to each gladiator's nose.  
Far-off it might have been a dragon's tail,  
But on a closer view it had the look  
Of an elephant's trunk, when it recurved  
On the cuirass—What was the purpose served?  
The devil knows; so crazed it was I shook  
With laughing paroxysms, then with fright,  
For suddenly the day became as night,  
The curses took on corporal form—so rank  
The poisonous emanations were, they swept  
Across the gap and up the hills and stank  
Like an Irish fen. The squires, they broke and wept;  
The knights, they choked; while I ran off for cover  
To an acorn cup and drew a rose-leaf over.

OBERON

Whither did all this lead, my gentle Puck?

Did they sit howling on those hills forever?

PUCK

I went to sleep within my nest of oak  
To rinse the portent through a dream, then woke,  
Uncuddled, and stole forth to banks I knew,  
Where violets, musk-rose and wild thyme grew:  
I filched them from their beds and sent them out  
(With a million glow-worms lighting up the air)  
To pour their distillation through the rout  
Of wind and stench. Anon, I looked and there  
Unmoved, the same infuriated pair—  
Sir Guy, rigid, barking his challenge still,  
And Boris booming, bellowing from the hill.

OBERON

This story would outwit all tricks of mirth  
Known to the gullible within my realm.  
Such folly falling on a broken mirror  
Could scarce distort its own insane grimaces.  
How were they loosened from their pedestals?

PUCK

My lord! I scouted round the clover fields  
And drove out from their lazy honey yields  
A furious colony of humble-bees.  
I fanned them up both hills and bade them squeeze  
Through rivet cracks and joints, and stick like leeches  
To the bare lard within the warriors' breeches.  
I then fled to a pine tree top and heard  
A pandemonium of oaths and screeches,  
And by the buckle creakings and the gird  
Of the loin plates upon their rusty hinges,  
I knew how well my squads clapped on the twinges.  
But this, my master, could not get them parted  
From their incorporate posts, and so I tried  
A prank that I devised one Hallowtide  
Which never failed to get two fighters started.  
Changing myself into a gamecock, I  
With bristling hackles, and my comb blood-red,  
Settled upon the helmet of Sir Guy,  
Until the proud arch of my neck and head  
Assumed the tartness of a Parthian bow.  
With such inflammatory mien, I crew  
Six notes contemptuous at Boris who  
Stiffened and took the insult like a blow.

In half a second, like a meteorite,  
I landed on the county's helm and shrilled  
The fiery syllables back at the knight.  
Thou shouldst have heard my clarion as I drilled  
Helmet and skull to pierce the globèd brain.  
Each lusty crow held triumph and disdain:  
I nearly tore my wattles when I blew it,  
For my restored ears still feel the pain.  
Zounds, sir, the way the count and knight went to it!

OBERON

The impact of those mighty opposites,  
Spurred to their wrath by such a vent of scorn,  
Must have, like an Olympian avalanche,  
Brought terror to the battlements of Jove.

PUCK

Nay, nay, your Majesty—'twas no such fun.  
Never indeed was there a tilt begun  
With heraldry like this, that ended so.  
The rivals did not strike a single blow.  
When once they started off, they could not stop.  
They did not seem to ride so much as drop  
To the solid earth, then rise, bound through the air,  
Which angry at their overweening pride  
Bounced them from knoll to knoll, made them collide  
With their own saddles, till the exhausted pair—  
Pitched from their stallions which, poor jades, were wrecked  
By the very iron bands meant to protect  
The fetlocks—took one final somersault  
Into the miry bottom of the vault.  
I watched them wallowing like drunken grooms,  
Pursuing a blind orbit in the mud,  
Only the gesture of their fighting blood  
Waving defiance from the bankrupt plumes.  
Count Boris' nozzle sent a farewell blast,  
Claiming a fatuous triumph, while a high  
Blue feather from the proud knob of Sir Guy,  
Striving to keep erect, gave up the last  
Frail effort of heroic pantomime,  
To fall like a snapped water-flag and lie  
Prone in the sea-green bubbles on the slime.

OBERON

Enough, my romping elf! I pray, enough!  
In these reports there's matter to regale

Titania through many a sulky moon.  
Had Nestor heard them, he'd have cracked his sides.  
The sport that night in the Athenian grove,  
Compared with this, was but episcopal.  
There's not a planet left that keeps its course;  
The distaff cracks; the dizzy earth is run  
By three inebriated witches—Stay!

#### PUCK

Another tale of men I could recite—  
Of wing-clipped human eagles living in holes  
Under the ground in envy of the moles...  
But I shall leave that for a winter night.

#### OBERON

I know not what thou hast in mind to say,  
But hold! It is not well those jests should come  
In troops—They have a boding sentry face  
And smell too strongly of mortality.

#### SILENCES

There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth like  
the silence under the sea;  
No cries announcing birth,  
No sounds declaring death.  
There is silence when the milt is laid on the spawn in the weeds  
and fungus of the rock-clefts;  
And silence in the growth and struggle for life.  
The bonitoes pounce upon the mackerel,  
And are themselves caught by the barracudas,  
The sharks kill the barracudas  
And the great molluscs rend the sharks,  
And all noiselessly—  
Though swift be the action and final the conflict,  
The drama is silent.

There is no fury upon the earth like the fury under the sea.  
For growl and cough and snarl are the tokens of spendthrifts  
who know not the ultimate economy of rage.  
Moreover, the pace of the blood is too fast.  
But under the waves the blood is sluggard and has the same  
temperature as that of the sea.

There is something pre-reptilian about a silent kill.

Two men may end their hostilities just with their battle-cries.

"The devil take you," says one.

"I'll see you in hell first," says the other.

And these introductory salutes followed by a hail of gutturals  
and sibilants are often the beginning of friendship,  
for who would not prefer to be lustily damned than  
to be half-heartedly blessed?

No one need fear oaths that are properly enunciated, for they  
belong to the inheritance of just men made perfect,  
and, for all we know, of such may be the Kingdom  
of Heaven.

But let silent hate be put away for it feeds upon the heart of  
the hater.

Today I watched two pairs of eyes. One pair was black and  
the other grey. And while the owners thereof, for  
the space of five seconds, walked past each other, the  
grey snapped at the black and the black riddled the  
grey.

One looked to say—"The cat,"

And the other—"The cur."

But no words were spoken;

Not so much as a hiss or a murmur came through the perfect  
enamel of the teeth; not so much as a gesture of  
enmity.

If the right upper lip curled over the canine, it went unnoticed.

The lashes veiled the eyes not for an instant in the passing.

And as between the two in respect to candour of intention or  
eternity of wish, there was no choice, for the stare  
was mutual and absolute.

A word would have dulled the exquisite edge of the feeling,

An oath would have flawed the crystallization of the hate.

For only such culture could grow in a climate of silence,—

Away back before the emergence of fur or feather, back to the  
unvocal sea and down deep where the darkness spills  
its wash on the threshold of light, where the lids  
never close upon the eyes, where the inhabitants slay  
in silence and are as silently slain.

## **A PRAYER-MEDLEY**

Lord, how wonderful is the power of man; how great his  
knowledge!

We have triumphed over the earth, the sea, the air and the ether.

We have made habitable the poisonous wastes of the world and  
built cities thereon, changed the courses of rivers and  
caused deserts to bloom.

We have explored the hidden lanes under the sea.

We have discovered the chemistry of the soil, and can toughen  
the hardihood of seeds to prevail over climates.

We have extracted gold even from dross-heaps,  
Our aeroplanes over mountains are as beautiful as eagles that  
bear the Dawn upon their backs.  
Our whispers, disdainful of the carriage of wires, are heard across  
continents with the instancy of light and are as  
immediately answered.  
Our greetings and warnings are exchanged before the smiles and  
frowns have left the faces of our statesmen.  
We have weighed suns and stars, made finite thine unbounded  
Universe, divided the Invisible and watched the race  
of solar chariots in an atom.  
We have invaded the lair of the thunder and placed our jockeys  
upon tides and cataracts.  
By taking thought, we have added cubits unto our stature.  
We can tell the signs of the seasons; and as for the winds, we  
know whence they come and whither they go, for  
we have pencil-traced the assemblage of storms  
thousands of miles off.  
How wonderful is the power of man; how great his knowledge!

\* \* \* \* \*

Lord, we praise thee for our Statutes, for our Reform Bills, for  
our Proclamations; for the march of Progress, for  
Our Days of Rest, for the shortening of the Hours of  
Labour.  
We no longer harness children to the carts in the black routes  
under the earth, nor whip them at the cotton mills as  
we did when their advocates were scarce at thy High  
Courts of Love.  
For thou didst soften the hearts of thy legislators when they  
decreed that no child under ten should work more  
than twelve hours a day in the damp and the dark.  
And thou didst further soften their hearts when, in their own  
time, their own good time, they lifted the lower  
limits of the years and reduced the sunless hours,  
until the child, the woman and the slave were made  
free by the Act of the Nation.

\* \* \* \* \*

The curse of labour is past.  
We have thrown the packs from our shoulders, wiped the sweat  
from our brows, yet multiplied the work which is  
not of our hands.  
Times were known when the labourers were heard to sing at  
their toil, when the spinning-wheel, the reaping-hook  
and the plough fitted into the measures of the  
verse, but the songs have died on our lips and the  
tunes are now sung by the motors and the dynamos.  
And the music is stern and defiant and absolute, for the machine,  
in the pride of its precision, answers the hungry  
discords outside of the doors and windows:

Keep out of the shops and our mills,  
With your unpredictable wills,  
And your clumsy fingers and thumbs;  
Out of the cloth we make  
Out of the bread we bake  
We fling you the rags and the crumbs.  
Keep out—for you will never achieve  
The pattern perfection of weave  
In the exquisite strength of our steel.  
Stay out—for you cannot restrain  
Fatigue of heart and of brain  
And the wayward blood you conceal.

And the song of the machine is answered by the call of the  
saboteur:

Burn, burn, burn,  
Cotton and coffee and wheat,  
For the wheels must cease to turn  
When there's too much food to eat,  
And the factory doors must shut  
On the looms with their market glut.

And both songs merge in the rugged antiphonal of the  
individualists:

Wait, wait, wait,  
Till the cycle rings the chime,  
When Supply begins to abate,  
And Demand is on the climb;  
  
Then brain and iron and brawn,  
And every man for himself,  
Will reinstate the Dawn  
Of Freedom, Power and Pelf.

Lord, we no longer torture for the faith,  
We no longer arrange the faggots around the knees of the  
heretic,  
We no longer crucify.

We praise thee that the days, long gone, when, as at  
Ephesus, the saints seized one another by the throats  
to vindicate the Godhead, were but nursery days  
when thy children scrambled up their picture-blocks  
in the vain attempt to puzzle out the features of  
thy face.

But now having become men, we have put away childish things.  
We still go as pilgrims on our perennial journeys to  
the Councils, but how orderly and admirable our  
conduct! We meet with the crossing of hands and  
wish one another well. We sit at our common  
tables, partake of burnt offerings of lambs and  
bullocks, and toast the royal and presidential healths  
with the blood of grapes; after which each one tells

of his desire for peace and amity with his cousins  
across the boundaries, favouring the stability and  
prosperity of the world.

Then we go into Committees: We adjourn, but we do not  
dissolve, for thou has not left thy delegates without  
hope that at some future date, at Geneva or London  
or maybe at Washington, we shall meet to confer  
again, to enter the halls full of wisdom, and to depart  
void of understanding. Meanwhile we return to our  
homes, some to report progress from the platform,  
some to suspend judgment, and others to sit in  
sackcloth and ashes.

It is true we live by faith. For, between the sessions, the  
chemist continues to brood over the gases, the  
bacteriologist over the microbes, the mechanic over the  
lathe, the nationalists over tariffs and trenches,  
boundaries and corridors, and the war secretaries turn the  
dials of the vaults upon the last design and the  
newest formula.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lord! Our spirits are kindled by the flash of phrases.

We are shaken by the cannonade of mottoes.

"It is sweet and becoming that one should die for his  
country."

"Come home with your shield or upon it."

"Saul hath slain his thousands, but David his tens of  
thousands."

"When shall their glory fade."

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

"I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed  
begging bread."

"In the multitude of counsellors there is safety."

But our cenotaphs bear no testimony to those who moulder  
ingloriously upon the mattress.

O Kali, Mother of Destruction!

Ahriman, of Darkness and Strife!

Loki, Spirit of Evil!

What is sown of Isis shall be reaped of Hecate, and made the  
bargain of Mammon, Gatherer of Spoil.

O Buddha, of the folded hands and silent lips!

Confucius, Sage of the Right Way!

Christ, Lord of Love, Lord of Life!

May the dream not entirely vanish from our sleep.

Our physicians can prescribe for the ills of their own families.  
They can cure individual diseases, and heal the hurt of the body.  
But they have found no remedy for the deep malaise in the  
communal heart of the world.

Our Father Who art in heaven...

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses.

## FIRE

Wiser than thought, more intimate than breath,  
More ancient than the plated rust of Mars,  
Beyond the light geometry of stars,  
Yet closer than our web of life and death—  
This sergeant of the executing squads  
Calls night from dawn no less than dawn from night;  
This groom that teams the wolf and hare for flight  
Is obstetrician at the birth of gods.  
Around this crimson source of human fears,  
Where rites and myths have built their scaffoldings,  
With smoke of hecatombs upon her wings,  
And chased by shadows of the coming years,  
Our planet-moth tries blindly to survive  
Her spinning vertigo as fugitive.

But stronger than its terror is the deep  
Allurement, primary to our blood, which holds  
Safety and warmth in unimpassioned folds,  
Night and the candle-quietness of sleep;  
With the day's bugles silent, when the will,  
That feeds the tumult of our natures, rests  
Along the broken arteries of its quests.  
So, let the yellowing world revolve until  
Old Demogorgon's last expatriate  
On this exotic hearth leans forth to claim  
Promethean virtue from a dying flame,  
His fingers tapered—less to mitigate  
The chilling accident of his sojourn  
Than to invoke his ultimate return.

## SEEN ON THE ROAD

The pundit lectured that the world was young  
As ever, frisking like a spring-time colt  
Around the sun, his mother. The class hung  
Upon his words. I listened like a dolt.

And muttered that I saw the wastrel drawn  
Along a road with many a pitch and bump  
By spavined mules—this very day at dawn!  
And heading for an ammunition dump.

The savant claimed I heckled him, but—Hell!  
I saw the fellow in a tumbrel there,  
Tattered and planet-eyed and far from well,  
With Winter roosting in his Alpine hair.

### THE PRIZE CAT

Pure blood domestic, guaranteed,  
Soft-mannered, musical in purr,  
The ribbon had declared the breed,  
Gentility was in the fur.

Such feline culture in the gads,  
No anger ever arched her back—  
What distance since those velvet pads  
Departed from the leopard's track!

And when I mused how Time had thinned  
The jungle strains within the cells,  
How human hands had disciplined  
Those prowling optic parallels;

I saw the generations pass  
Along the reflex of a spring,  
A bird had rustled in the grass,  
The tab had caught it on the wing:

Behind the leap so furtive-wild  
Was such ignition in the gleam,  
I thought an Abyssinian child  
Had cried out in the whitethroat's scream.

### UNDER THE LENS

Along the arterial highways,  
Through the cross-roads and trails of the veins  
They are ever on the move—  
Incarnate strife,  
Reflecting in victory, deadlock and defeat,  
The outer campaigns of the world,  
But without tactics, without strategy.

Creatures of primal force,  
With saurian impact  
And virus of the hamadryads,  
The microbes war with the leucocytes.

Physicians watch the conflict—  
Advance, respite, recession and advance—  
They shake their heads and murmur,  
"Body versus organism,"  
"A question of endurance,"  
"Try out transfusion,"  
"Pour in fresh troops."

With flush and pallor alternating,  
Pulses racing, slowing, flickering,  
The body sinks,  
Like a derelict with a mutinous crew,  
Steamless and rudderless,  
Taking its final drubbing from the sea.

Once it was flood and drought, lightning and storm  
and earthquake,  
Those hoary executors of the will of God,  
That planned the monuments for human faith.

Now, rather, it is these silent and invisible  
ministers,  
Teasing the ear of Providence  
And levelling out the hollows of His hands,  
That pose the queries for His moral government.

## THE SEER

Dream on while your prophetic sight  
Is still too keen to probe the day,  
Before the spectrum of your night  
Is recomposed to faded grey—  
Before the riot of your vision  
Is sobered by our prose derision.

Look as you may—horizon-faced!  
The distant palms are waving now.  
But do not touch and do not taste  
The fruit that clusters from the bough.  
For on those sands no healing wings  
Are poised above the water springs.

And when the horses thunder on,  
And dust is on the charioteer,  
Beware the advent of the Dawn,  
Lest that the eye betray the ear;  
Sleep on and let the day eclipse  
The ghosts of your apocalypse.

## (TO ANY ASTRONOMER)

Come, reckon up the eons as you may,  
And measure out the lag of tide and time,  
And circumscribe the pace for night and day  
Within the weave of solar pantomime;  
Then with a casual shrug dismiss the brief  
And latest masquerade which started when  
Blood cells danced red to joy or paled to grief  
In little ticks called three score years and ten.

But chart for me that instant when a pledge  
Of love was mutualized upon the lips  
Within a core of flame beyond whose edge  
All your known planets suffered full eclipse—  
When the hoarse clarions of an atavist  
Called home your Betelgeuze to formless mist.

## THE TEXT OF THE OATH

Upon what Bible will you swear?  
Before whose altar lift your hand  
When kettle-drum and trumpet-blare  
Attest you at the witness-stand?

There was another lad I knew,  
Blue-eyed and trustful and as mild,  
A life-enthusiast like you,  
Who scarcely had outgrown the child.

There was a virus in the air  
That put the toxin in his blood,  
Bugles were blowing everywhere  
Breathing romance on sleet and mud.

He wrote his lesson on a slate,  
Composed of foreign names to spell—  
These to defend and those to hate,  
And at the barracks learned it well.

They pinned a medal on his breast  
Behind the lines one afternoon:  
He had from a machine-gun nest  
Annihilated a platoon.

And there were further honours paid  
One evening when his name was read,  
For after two crossed slabs were laid,  
The LAST POST sounded overhead.

## LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Helen, Deirdre, Héloïse,  
Laura, Cleopatra, Eve!  
The knight-at-arms is on his knees,  
Still at your altars—by your leave.

The magic of your smiles and frowns  
Had made you goddesses by right,  
Divorced the monarchs from their crowns,  
And changed world empires overnight.

You caught the *male* for good or ill,  
And locked him in a golden cage,  
Or let him out at your sweet will—  
A prince or peasant, lord or page.

But do not preen your wings and claim  
That when you passed away, the keys—  
The symbols of your charm and fame—  
Were buried with your effigies.

For, wild and lovely are your broods  
That stole from you the ancient arts;  
In tender or tempestuous moods,  
They storm the barrens of our hearts.

Amy, Hilda, Wilhelmine,  
Golden Marie and slim Suzette,  
Viola, Claire and dark Eileen,  
Brown-eyed Mary, blue-eyed Bett.

Daughters are ye of those days  
When Troy and Rome and Carthage burned:  
Ye cannot mend your mothers' ways  
Or play a trick they hadn't learned.

But whether joy or whether woe—  
Lure of lips or scorn of eyes—  
We bless you either way we go,  
In or out of Paradise.

## THE MIRAGE

Complete from glowing towers to golden base,  
Without the lineage of toil it stood:  
A crystal city fashioned out of space,

So calm and holy in its Sabbath mood,  
It might constrain belief that any time  
The altars would irradiate their fires,  
And any moment now would start the chime  
Of matins from the massed Cathedral spires.  
Then this marmoreal structure of the dawn,  
Built as by fiat of Apocalypse,  
Was with the instancy of vision gone;  
Nor did it die through shadow of eclipse,  
Through clouds and vulgar effigies of night,  
But through the darker irony of light.

### **THE OLD ORGANON (1225 A.D.)**

When Genghis and his captains  
Built their pyramids of skulls  
Outside Bokhara and Herat,  
And sacked Otrar and Samarcand,  
There was no sophistry between the subject and  
    and the verb;  
For what the Khan said, he meant.  
Behind the dust were the hoofs of his cavalry,  
Behind the smoke was his fire.  
And when Mohammed and Jehal-ud-Din,  
In their flight from the Indus to the Caspian,  
Appealed to Allah for protection,  
Even the Great God of Islam  
Could find no escape for the faithful,  
When he knew the flight was regimented  
To the paces of a Mongol syllogism.

### **THE NEW (1937 A.D.)**

Now when the delegates met around the tables  
And lifted up their voices,  
The subjects were their civilizing tasks,  
The fulfilment of historic missions,  
The redemption of the national honour,  
And the emancipation of the slaves.  
But flaws were hidden in the predicates,  
And in the pips of the adverbials,  
And the rhetorical adjectives  
Assumed the protective colouring  
Of the great cats against the jungle grass—  
THEREFORE,  
In all the wealth of their possessive pronouns,

Not a syllable was spared  
For the oil reported in the foreign shales.

### THE MYSTIC

Where do you bank such fires as can transmute  
This granite-fact intransigence of life,  
Such proud irenic faith as can refute  
The upstart logic of this world of strife—  
Its come-and-go of racial dust, its strum  
Of windy discords from the seven seas,  
Its scream of fifes and din of kettle-drum  
That lead the march towards our futurities?  
The proof, that slays the reason, has no power  
To stem your will, corrode your soul—though lime  
Conspire with earth and water to devour  
The finest cultures from the lust of slime;  
Though crumbled Tartar hordes break through their sod  
To blow their grit into the eyes of God.

### THE DROWNING

All patterns of the day were merged in one—  
Clouds, wings and faces, dunes and harbour bars—  
In a swift blur of vision as the sun  
Went down at noon upon a drift of spars.  
In such a lightless hour the sea had cleft  
A heart, fumbling its way as through a strait,  
Then passed, bequeathing to the common weft  
No record but its arid distillate.

Though when night comes with sleep there still remains  
Enough of daylight and of surf to trace  
The artisan outside the storm-swept panes,  
Refashioning the pallor of his face  
To softer lines which thread my nescient mood  
With the illusion of beatitude.

### THE WEATHER GLASS

There is no refuge from this wind tonight,  
Though sound the roof and double-latched the door,

And though I've trimmed the wick, there is no light,  
Nor is there warmth although the tamaracks roar;  
Nor will the battery of those surges keep  
The hammering pulses silent in my sleep.

But one alone might quell this storm tonight,  
And were he now this moment at the door,  
His eyes would clear the shadows from this light,  
His voice put laughter in the billets' roar,  
And he would clasp me in his arms and keep  
The wheeling gulls from screaming through my sleep.

## THE EMPTY ROOM

I know that were my soul tonight  
Strung to the silence of this room,  
I'd hear remembered footfalls light  
As wayward drift of lotus bloom.

Nor would it just be make-believe,  
Were I to find her in this chair,  
Or catch the rustle of her sleeve,  
Or note the glint upon her hair.

Say, would you blame me if I knelt  
To put faith to its enterprise—  
So surely must her touch be felt  
In liquid coolness on my eyes.

Now listen! If the veil should part  
Within this holy ritual,  
You'll hear a voice call to my heart  
More lovely than a madrigal.

\* \* \* \* \*

By E. J. PRATT

*Newfoundland Verse*  
*The Witches' Brew*  
*Titans*  
*The Iron Door*  
*The Roosevelt and the Antinoe*  
*Verses of the Sea*  
*Many Moods*

*The Titanic*

[End of *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems*, by E. J. Pratt]