

The Five Books of Youth

Robert Hillyer

Table of Contents

<u>The Five Books of Youth</u>	1
<u>Robert Hillyer</u>	2
<u>BOOK I. A MISCELLANY</u>	5
<u>I—LA MARE DES FEES</u>	6
<u>II—PROTHALAMION</u>	8
<u>III—MONTMARTRE</u>	9
<u>IV—A LETTER</u>	10
<u>V—ESTHER DANCING</u>	11
<u>VI—HUNTERS</u>	12
<u>VII—A WRECK</u>	14
<u>VIII—GRAVE STONES IN A FRONT YARD</u>	15
<u>IX—VIGIL</u>	16
<u>X—WHEN THE DOOR WAS OPEN</u>	17
<u>XI—THE MAKER RESTS</u>	19
<u>XII—THE PILGRIMAGE</u>	21
<u>XIII—EPILOGUE</u>	25
<u>XIV—THERMOPYLAE</u>	26
<u>BOOK II. DAYS AND SEASONS</u>	27
<u>I</u>	28
<u>II</u>	29
<u>III</u>	30
<u>IV</u>	31
<u>V</u>	32
<u>VI</u>	33
<u>VII</u>	34
<u>VIII</u>	35
<u>IX</u>	37
<u>X</u>	38
<u>XI</u>	39
<u>XII</u>	40
<u>XIII</u>	41
<u>XIV</u>	43
<u>XV</u>	44
<u>XVI</u>	45
<u>XVII</u>	46
<u>XVIII</u>	47
<u>XIX</u>	48
<u>XX</u>	49
<u>BOOK III. EROS</u>	50
<u>I</u>	51
<u>II</u>	53
<u>III</u>	54
<u>IV</u>	56
<u>V</u>	57
<u>VI</u>	58
<u>VII</u>	59
<u>VIII</u>	60
<u>IX</u>	61

Table of Contents

The Five Books of Youth

<u>X</u>	62
<u>XI</u>	63
<u>XII</u>	64
<u>BOOK IV. THE GARDEN OF EPICURUS</u>	65
<u>I</u>	66
<u>II</u>	67
<u>III</u>	68
<u>IV</u>	69
<u>V</u>	70
<u>VI</u>	71
<u>VII</u>	72
<u>VIII</u>	73
<u>IX</u>	74
<u>X</u>	75
<u>XI</u>	76
<u>XII</u>	77
<u>XIII</u>	78
<u>XIV</u>	79
<u>XV</u>	80
<u>XVI</u>	81
<u>XVII</u>	82
<u>BOOK V. SONNETS</u>	83
<u>I</u>	84
<u>II</u>	85
<u>III</u>	86
<u>IV</u>	87
<u>V</u>	88
<u>VI</u>	89
<u>VII</u>	90
<u>VIII</u>	91
<u>IX</u>	92
<u>X</u>	93
<u>XI</u>	94
<u>XII</u>	95
<u>XIII</u>	96
<u>XIV</u>	97
<u>XV</u>	98
<u>XVI</u>	99
<u>XVII</u>	100
<u>XVIII</u>	101

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• BOOK I. A MISCELLANY

- I—LA MARE DES FEES
- II—PROTHALAMION
- III—MONTMARTRE
- IV—A LETTER
- V—ESTHER DANCING
- VI—HUNTERS
- VII—A WRECK
- VIII—GRAVE STONES IN A FRONT YARD
- IX—VIGIL
- X—WHEN THE DOOR WAS OPEN
- XI—THE MAKER RESTS
- XII—THE PILGRIMAGE
- XIII—EPILOGUE
- XIV—THERMOPYLAE

• BOOK II. DAYS AND SEASONS

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V
- VI
- VII
- VIII
- IX
- X
- XI
- XII
- XIII
- XIV
- XV
- XVI
- XVII
- XVIII
- XIX
- XX

• BOOK III. EROS

- I
- II

The Five Books of Youth

- III
- IV
- V
- VI
- VII
- VIII
- IX
- X
- XI
- XII

• BOOK IV. THE GARDEN OF EPICURUS

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V
- VI
- VII
- VIII
- IX
- X
- XI
- XII
- XIII
- XIV
- XV
- XVI
- XVII

• BOOK V. SONNETS

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V
- VI
- VII
- VIII
- IX
- X
- XI
- XII
- XIII
- XIV
- XV
- XVI
- XVII
- XVIII

The Five Books of Youth

Juliet Sutherland, Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

The Five Books of Youth

BOOK I. A MISCELLANY

I—LA MARE DES FEES

The leaves rain down upon the forest pond,
An elfin tarn green-shadowed in the fern;
Nine yews ensomber the wet bank, beyond
The autumn branches of the beeches burn
With yellow flame and red amid the green,
And patches of the darkening sky between.

This is an ancient country; in this wood
The Druids raised their sacrificial stones;
Here the vast timeless silences still brood
Though the cold wind's October monotones
Fan the enchanted senses with the dread
Of holiness long-past and beauty dead.

How far beyond this glade the day-world turns
Upon its pivot of reward and chance;
Farther than the first star that palely burns
Over the forest's meditative trance.
First star of evening, last star of day,
The one grows clear, the other dies away.

Will they come back who once beneath these trees
Invoked their long-forgotten gods with tears,
Who heard the sob of the same twilight breeze
Blow down the vistas of remembered years,
Beside the tarn's black waters where they stood
Close to their god, far from the multitude?

I watch, but they are long ago departed,
Far as the world of day, or as the star;
The forest loved her priests, and tranquil-hearted
They stole away in dim procession, far
Down the unechoing aisles, beyond recalling;
The moss grows on the stones, the leaves are falling.

In vain I listen for their hissing speech,
And seek white holy hands upon the air,
They told their worship to the yew and beech,
And left them with the secret, trembling there,
Nor shall they come at midnight nor at dawn;
The gods are dead; the votaries are gone.

A form floats toward me down the corridor
Of mighty trees, half-visions through the haze,
And stands beside me on that empty shore;
So rest we there, and wonderingly gaze.

The Five Books of Youth

By the dead water, under the deep boughs,
My Love and I renew our ancient vows.

MORET-SUR-LOING, 1918

II—PROTHALAMION

The faded turquoise of the sky
Darkens into ocean green
Flecked palely where the stars will rise.
A single bough between
The spacious colour and your half-closed eyes
Hangs out its hazy trceries.
Still, like a drowsy god you lie,
My fair unbidden guest,
Your white hands crossed beneath your head,
Your lips curved strangely mute with peace,
Your hair moved lightly by the breeze.
A glow is shed
Warm on your face from the last rays that push
From the dying sun into the green vault of the west.

This is your bridal night; the golden bush
Is heavy with the fruits that you will taste,
Full ripened in desire.
You who have hoarded youth, this is your hour of waste,
Your hour of squandering and drunkenness,
Of wine-dashed lips and generous caress,
Of brows thorn-crowned and bodies crucified,—
O bid me to the feast.

Tomorrow when the hills are washed with fire,
Your door ajar against the flashing East,—
O fling it wide.

PARIS, 1919

III—MONTMARTRE

A rocky hill above the town,
Grey as the soul of silence,
Except where two white strutting domes
Stand aloof and frown
On the huddled homes
Of world—wept love and pain,—
They do not heed that tall disdain,
But sleep, grey, under the stars and the rain.

A woman, young, but old in love,
Carried her child across the square;
Her face was a dim drifting flame
To which her pyre of hair
Was a column of golden smoke.

Her eyes half told the secrets of
Gay sins that no regret defiled;
There her heart broke
In the little question between her eyes.
Hearing the trees in the square she smiled,
And sang to the child.

So passed by in the narrow street
That climbs the steep rock over the town,
Love and the west wind in the stars;
The wind and the sound of those lagging feet

Died like forgotten tears.
I waited till the stars went down,
And I wrote these lines on a cloud to greet
The dawn on the crystal stairs.

PARIS, 1919

IV—A LETTER

Dear boy, what can this stranger mean to you,
Blown to your country by unbridled chance?
That he should drink the morn's first cup of dew
Fresh from the spring, and quicken that grave glance
Wherein as rising tides on hazy shores
Rise the new flames and colours of romance?

Ah, wise and young, the world shall use your youth
And fling you shorn of beauty to despair,
The sum of all that fascinating truth
That you have gleaned, hands tangled in brown hair,
Eyes straining into contemplative fires,—
This truth shall not seem truth when trees are bare.

The hunger of the soul, the watcher left
To brood the nearness of his own decay,
Dully remarking the slow shameless theft
Of the old holiness from day to day,
How youth grows tarnished, wisdom changes false,—
Till one bends near to steal your life away.

Yet who am I to turn aside the hand
Outstretched so friendly and so humbly proud,
Heaped up with beauty from the sunrise land
Of hearts adventurous and heads unbowed?
Only, look not at me with changing eyes
When we must separate amid the crowd.

TOURS, 1918

V—ESTHER DANCING

Speak not nor stir. Here music is alive,
Woven from those swift fingers, strong and light,
Marching across those singing hands, or shed
Slowly, like echoes down the muffled night,
Or beautifully translated, note by note,
Some fainter voice, rhapsodic and remote,
Or shaken out in melodies that dive
Clear into fathoms of profounder things,
Then suddenly again on rising wings,
Burst into sun and hover overhead.

Incarnate music flashing into form
Fled from the vineyards of melodious Greece,
Feet that have flown before the gathering storm
Or glanced in gardens of the Golden Fleece,
Face atune to all the songs that mass
Their gusts of passion on the sunlit grass,
Image of lyric hope and veiled despair,
Like them, thou shalt unutterably pass
Into the silence and the shadowed air.

POMFRET, 1919

VI—HUNTERS

A vase red-wrought in Athens long ago....
The hunter and his gay companion ride
Through the young fields of life; on every side
Frail and fantastic the tall lilies grow.
Her head thrown back, her eyes afraid and wide,
Flies like a phantom the grey spectral doe,
Her light feet scarcely bend the grass below,
Gloriously flying into eventide.

Ahead there lies the shadow, then the dark,
And safety in the thick forestial night,
But nearer still she hears the bloodhounds bark,
And horses panting in impetuous flight,
And hunters without pity for the slain,
Halloing shrilly over the windy plain.

Sombre become the skies, the winds of fall
Sing dangerously through the hissing grass;
Sunlight and clouds in slow procession pass
Over the tress, then comes an interval
Of utter calm, the air is a morass
Of humid breathlessness. A dreadful call
Rings suddenly from the onrushing squall,
And the storm closes in a whirling mass.

And still the doe eludes the raging hounds,
And still the youths press onward toward the woods,
Though the world shudders with diluvian sounds
And the rain streams in undulating floods.
Sharp lightning splits the sky; the doe is gone.
O follow! follow! if it be till dawn.

The hunted flees, the boyish hunters follow
Into the forest's dripping everglades,
The wind goes wailing through the swaying shades,
And violent rain gushes in every hollow.
The doe runs free, triumphantly evades
Those straining eyes; the ghastly shadows swallow
Her flying form; the frightened horses wallow
Deep in the mire. Then the last daylight fades.

O Youths, turn back! the year is getting late,
And autumn has no pity for the slain.
Twining like serpents, the lean arms of fate
Grope toward you through the blackness and the rain,
Then Death, and the obliterating snow....

The Five Books of Youth

A vase, red-wrought in Athens long ago.

Tours, 1918

VII—A WRECK

Survivor of an unknown past,
On this wild shore cast
By the sad desolate tides;
In a warm harbour long ago
They waited you, and waited long,
And guessed and feared at last,
But could not know.

Now in a language strange the waves make song,
And the flood surges round your broken sides,
And the ebb leaves you to the burning sun.

But when the voyage of my life is done,
And my soul puts forth no more,
Then may I sleep
Beneath the fathoms of the tideless deep,
And not be cast deserted on some dark alien shore.

Cape Cod, 1916

VIII—GRAVE STONES IN A FRONT YARD

Lest the swift world forget their names and pass
Unthinking, they have set this cold dead slate
Above their slumbers in the living grass
To warn all comers of impending fate;

Where friends made merry once at their behest,
Where young feet strolled about the shady lawn,
They welcome none but one unfailing guest,
And all the revellers but Death are gone.

Edgartown, 1916

IX—VIGIL

This is the hour when all substantial foes
Are exorcised and taunt the soul no more;
Now thinner grows the veil between the shore
Of vaster worlds and our calm garden close.
Through the small exit of the open door
We pass, and seem to feel the eyes of those
We knew upon us; almost we suppose
The advent of the face we tremble for.

O that through this profound serenity
Might sound the answer to the heart's deep cry;
If all those gracious presences might see
That, though we hurt them once, they shall not die
Until we also wither, we who keep
Vigil on these sweet meadows where they sleep.

Pomfret, 1919

X—WHEN THE DOOR WAS OPEN

Lonely as music from afar,
Hung the new moon and one white star,
Above the poplars black and tall
That sentineled the garden wall;
Four black poplars beyond the wall,
Two on each side of the garden gate,
In silhouette against the wide
Pale sky of the late eventide.
Close was the garden and serene.
The leaning reeds in quiet state
About the pool, merged in the green
Of misty leaves and hanging vines.
The fireflies spun their silver lines
Across the deeper atmosphere,
And through the silence came the clear
Persistent tuning of the frogs
From dank recesses of the bogs.

Beyond the garden I could see
The glimmer of uncertain meadows,
Framed by the open doorway, wreathing
Sarabands of ghostly shadows,
Slowly turning, slowly breathing,
Largely and unhastily,—
But the garden held its breath.

Peace as profound as death, if death
Be visited by stealthy dreams;
A vagrant note from soundless themes
That ring the comet—paths of space,
Seemed vibrant in the windless air
That trembled with its presence there.
Out beyond the nameless place
Where neither fields nor clouds exist,
Grey from the background of the mist,
I saw three vague forms drawing near.
My sense recoiled acute with fear;
I could not stir. As from a cage
I watched that spectral dim cortege
Moving inexorable and slow
Against the ashen afterglow.
Now caught the moon their robes in white,
Now strode they sable through the night,
Across the grass they came and grew
Whiter, statelier, as they drew
Beneath the shadow of the wall;

The Five Books of Youth

Then one by one the three stepped through
The garden door, and stood a while
Beside the pool, their image spread
Sombre, and menacing, and tall.
Sombre as Priam's dreadful daughter,
Menacing as a murderer's smile,
Tall as the fingers of the dead,
Stood they beside the quiet water.

The moon went out in a golden blur,
And the small stars followed after her,
But when the fireflies cleft the air
I saw those three forms standing there,
Until the night cooled, and the trees
Shook in the strong hands of the breeze,
And then I heard their footsteps press
The muffled grass beyond the door,
And so went forth for ever more,
My three Fates to the wilderness.

Pomfret, 1919

XI—THE MAKER RESTS

I have worked too long and my hands are tired,
Said the maker;
From the earliest dawn unto deepest nightfall
Have I laboured.

From the earliest dawn before any spirit
Stirred from sleeping,
When no single note from the frozen forest
Wakened music,

Unto nightfall and the new moon rising
When the silence
From the valleys rose in a faint blue spiral,
Have I laboured.

I created dawn and the new moon rising
Out of silence;
I have worked too long and my hands are tired,
Said the maker.

I shall fold my hands; I shall rest till sunrise,
Said the maker;
In the shade of hills and the calm of starlight
Shall I slumber.

O my night is sweet with a distant music!
I shall hear
The responding waves and the wind's slight murmur
While I slumber.

O my night is fair with amazing colour!
I shall dream
Of the blue–white stars and the glimmering forest
While I slumber.

O my night is rich with unfolding flowers!
I shall breathe
All the scattered smells of the field and garden
While I slumber...

I will rise, O Night, I will make new beauty,
Said the maker,
I will make more songs, more stars, more flowers,
Said the Lord.

Cambridge, 1920

The Five Books of Youth

XII—THE PILGRIMAGE

Beside a deep and mossy well
In the dark starless night I lay;
And dropping water like a bell,
Like a bell ringing far away,
Struck liquid notes in monotone,—
An echo of a distant bell
Tolling the knell of yesterday.
Deep down beneath the mossy ground
The liquid notes in monotone
Kept dropping, dropping endlessly,
And as I listened, over me
Crept like a mist a filmy spell;
My spirit's waving wings were bound,
And dreams came that were not my own.
Half-sleeping, half-awake, I heard
The drowsy chirp of a forest bird,
And the wind came up and the grasses stirred
And the curtaining woods that cluster round
That resonantly-echoing well
Shook all their leaves with silver sound
Like voices murmuring in a shell.
Was it the past that lived again
In that nocturnal murmuring,
Waking a hidden voice to sing
Deep in my heart of other times
Whose memory long entombed had lain
Covered with all the dust of the years?...
Falling in splashing tears
The wet notes drop in liquid chimes,
And the white fingers of the breeze
Gather a song from the melodious trees....

There is a hand whiter than pearl
That plucks a lute's monotonous strings;
O starlight phantom of a girl
What lyric soul around thee sings,
And what divine companionship
Taught that entwining music to thy fingers,
And that unearthly music to thy lips?
She pauses, and the echo lingers
Hovering like wings upon the air.
I see more clearly now, her hair
Ripples like a black water-fall
About the pallor of her face.
She sits beside a mossy well
Amid some dim marmoreal place,

The Five Books of Youth

Some fragrant Moorish hall
Set all about with arabesques of stone
And intricate mosaics of gem and shell.
She sings again, she plays a monotone,
Perpetual rhythm like a far-off bell,
And someone dances, in a dancing river
The white ecstatic limbs flutter and quiver
Against the shadow. In the odorous flowers
That grow about the well, still forms are lying,
A group of statues, an eternal throng,
Watching the dance and listening to the song;
So shall they lie, innumerable hours,
Silent and motionless for ever.
The wind comes up, the flowers shiver,
The dancer vanishes, the songs are dying;
Night sickens into day.
The wind comes up and blows the dust away....

Between two clouds a sullen flame
Expands, and lo, the crescent moon
Rides like a warrior through the sky.
Thus long ago the warning came
When midnight towns lay all in swoon,
That the great gods were coming nigh
To crush the rebellious earth.
Now beneath the crescent moon
No spirits stir, no wind makes mirth,
Only a rhythmic monotone
Of waters dropping in a well....

But who is this so broken with distress
That steals like mist into my loneliness?
Why art thou weeping there, disconsolate child?
Thy tears fall like the waters of a well,
And drip in silver notes upon the sands.
What is thy sorrow? Ah, what man can tell
The shapeless fancies that unwelcome dwell
Within thy brain, the spectres, dark and wild
That haunt the spirit of a child?
Mayhap thou weepest for the embattled lands,
The bloody ruin of decaying realms
That a war overwhelms
And buries deep in the dust of history?
He raises his wet eyes and looks at me,
His boyish face full of a yearning,
An ancient pain,
As of a ghost long dead who yearns to live again,
And answers, "In myself, thy thoughts returning
To other times shall slumber in the past,
And be a child again, and die at last
In the protecting arms of our great Mother

The Five Books of Youth

Who bore us both, O well-beloved brother.
Thou in thy sorry dreams, I in my childish grief,
Thy heart in tears, mine eyes amazed with tears,
Thy sorrow rich with the repining years,
My sorrow frail as childhood, and as brief."
Who art thou, haunting boy, nocturnal elf?
"I am the Dead; the Dead that was thyself."
Then falls a darkness on that starless shore.
Afar I hear the closing of a door....

I see on a sharp hill above the Styx,
The bruised Christ upon his crucifix,
And racked in anguish on his either side
Hang Buddha and Mohammed crucified.
Their heavy blood falls in a monotone
Like deep well-water dropping on a stone.
None moves, none breaks the silence; on those roods
Eternal suffering triumphant broods.
Prometheus from his cliff of wild unrest
Mocks them and draws the vulture to his breast.
Each year upon a darker Calvary
Are hung the pallid victims of the tree,
And none will watch with them, for none can see
As I once saw, unending agony,
Save where Prometheus from his dizzy place
Regards those sufferers with scornful face,
And his loud laughter rings through empty Space....

I can see nothing now, and only hear
Through the thick atmosphere
A deep perpetual well, that sad and slow,
Intones the knell of ages long ago,
And ages that no man can tell or know,
Whose shadows roll before them on the sky,
Black with forebodings of futurity.

Sweet sounds through midnight, liquid interlude,
Voice of the lonely souls that yearn and brood,
Voice of the unseen Life, the unsubdued,
What wonder that He draweth nigh to taste
Of your cool waters. Hail thou nameless One,
Fair stranger from a realm beyond the Sun,
Knowing that thou art God I do not fear,—
Speak to me, raise me from my life's long dream.

"The whole night through thou liest here
Beside the well that waters Lethe's stream,
And still thou dost not drink; O Man make haste;
Ere long the dawn will pour adown the waste,
And show thee, reft from the embrace of night,
The barren world, barren of revelry.
Happy art thou, O Man, happily free,

The Five Books of Youth

Who wilt never see
A thousand ages shed their life and light
As petals fall at eventide.
Thou shalt not see the radiant stars subside
Into the frozen ocean of the Vast,
Nor see thy world absorbed at last
Into a nothingness, an airless void,
Nor see the thoughts that Man has glorified
Swept from the world, and with the world destroyed.
This have I seen a thousand times repeated,
Unhappy as I am, unhappy God!
As many times as thou hast greeted
The rising sun against the broad
And tranquil clouds, so many times have I
Greeted the dawn of a new Universe,
And seen the molten stars rehearse
The lives and passions of the stars gone by.
When worlds are growing old, and there draw nigh
The shadows that shall cover them for ever,
(Shadows like these which doom your ancient sky)
Then to the well that feeds the sacred river
I come, and as the liquid music drips
Far in the ground, I plunge my lips
Deep in forgetfulness, and wash away
All the stains of the old griefs and joys,
That with His lips as smiling as a boy's,
God may rejoice in His created day."
He stoops and drinks; a moment the cool bell
Pauses its ringing in the well:
A mist flies up against the dawn; the young winds weep;
Is it too late? I too would drink, drink deep,
But weariness is on me and I sleep.

Cambridge, 1915

XIII—EPILOGUE

Dawn has come.
Faint hazes quiver with the faltering light;
Some airy skein draws in the shadows from
The broken forest where the war has passed,
The Forest Terrible, the grey despair,
The forest broken in the withering blight
Of the lean years,—the blight, the years, have passed,
Leaving a solitary watcher there,
Silence at last.

She watches by the dead,
Her deep white shadow overspreads their faces.
Here in the outland places,
She watches by the dead.

How many dawns have driven her afar
With the loosed thunder of tempestuous wrong!
Today she will remain.

Silence familiar to the morning star,
Standing, her finger to her lips,
Hushing the battle-cry, the victor's song,
Standing inviolate above the slain.

The fugitive sunlight slips
Over the fragment of a cloud,
And the sky opens wide,
Behold the dawn!

Where is the nightmare now? the angry-browed?
The lowering imminence—the bloody eyed?
Fled, as the threat of midnight, fled away,
Gone, after four dark timeless ages, gone.
Hail the day!

Silence, robed in the morning's golden fleece,
Folding the world's torn wings to stillness, giving
Peace to the dead, and to the living,
Peace.

Tours, 1918

XIV—THERMOPYLAE

Men lied to them and so they went to die.
Some fell, unknowing that they were deceived,
And some escaped, and bitterly bereaved,
Beheld the truth they loved shrink to a lie.
And those there were that never had believed,
But from afar had read the gathering sky,
And darkly wrapt in that dread prophecy,
Died trusting that their truth might be retrieved.

It matters not. For life deals thus with Man;
To die alone deceived or with the mass,
Or disillusioned to complete his span.
Thermopylae or Golgotha, all one,
The young dead legions in the narrow pass;
The stark black cross against the setting sun.

Pomfret, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

BOOK II. DAYS AND SEASONS

The Five Books of Youth

I

Winds blowing over the white-capped bay,
Winds wet with the eager breath of spray,
Warm and sweet from the oceans we have dreamed of;
 From gardens of Cathay.

The empty factory windows, row on row,
Warm sullenly beneath the afterglow,
Burn topaz out of dust and dim the flare
 Of the street-lamps below.

In the smoky park the dingy plane-trees stir,
Green branches in the twilight fade and blur;
A lonely girl walks slowly through the square
 And the wind speaks to her.

Speaks of the sunset scattered on the sea,
And the spring blowing northward radiantly;
Flaming in lightning from cyclonic dark,
 Dreams of delights to be.

Tomorrow there will be orchards filled with fruit,
And song of meadow lark and song of flute;
Far from the city there are lover's fields,
 Lips eloquent and mute.

Warm are the winds out of the ebbing day,
Blowing the ships and the spring into the bay,
I smell the cherry blossoms falling gaily
 In gardens of Cathay.

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

II

Like children on a sunny shore
The rhododendrons thrive
Which never any spring before
Have been so much alive.

Each metal bough benignly lit
With yellow candle flames;
The tree is holy, hallow it
With sacramental names.

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth



Against my wall the summer weaves
Profundities of dusky leaves,
And many-petaled stars full-blown
In constellated whiteness sown;
I contemplate with lazy eyes
My small estate in Paradise,
And very comforting to me
Is this familiarity.

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

IV

Into the trembling air,
Calm on the sunset mist,
Sweetness of gardens where
The yellow slave boy kissed
The Sultan's daughter....

Shadow of tumbled hair
Shadow of hanging vine
Fountains of gold that twine
In singing water.

A secret I have heard
From the scarlet beak of the bird
That sings at the close of day,
Fills me with cold unrest
Under the open doors of the fiery west.

"O heart of clay,
O lips of dust,
O blue-shadowed wisteria vine;
Youth falls away
As petals must
Beneath the drooping leaves in the day's decline."

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

V

In gardens when the sun is set,
The air is heavy with the wet
Faint smell of leaves, and dark incense
Of peach-blossom and violet.

There is no lurking foe to fear,
Only the friendly ghosts are here
Of lazy youth and dozing age,
Who sat and mellowed year by year,

Until they merged with all the rest
Beneath the overhanging west,
And took their sleep with tranquil hearts
Safe in our Mother's mighty breast.

If there be any sound, 'tis sweet,
The hidden rush of eager feet
Where robins flutter in the dust,
Or perch upon the garden-seat,

And little voices that are known
To those who contemplate alone
The busy universe that moves
In gardens rank and overgrown.

Here in the garden we are one,
The golden dust, the setting sun,
The languid leaves, the birds and I,—
Small bubbles on oblivion.

Tours, 1918

VI

Now the white dove has found her mate,
And the rainbow breaks into stars;
And the cattle lunge through the mossy gate
As the old man lowers the bars.

Westerly wind with a rainy smell,
Eaves that drip in the mud;
And the pain of the tender miracle
Stabbing the languid blood.

Over the long, wet meadow-land,
Beyond the deep sunset,
There is a hand that pressed your hand,
And eyes that shall not forget.

Now the West is the door of wrath,
Now 'tis a burnt-out coal;
Petals fall on the orchard path;
Darkness falls on the soul.

Washington, 1918

VII

When voices sink in twilight silences,
Like swimmers in a sea of quietude,
And faint farewells re-echo from the hill;
When the last thrush his sleepy vesper says,
And the lost threnody of the whip-poor-will
Gropes through the gathering shadows in the wood;

Then in the paths where dusk fades into grey,
And sighing shapes stir that I never see,
I follow still a quest of old despair
To find at last,—ah, but I cannot say,
Except that I have known a face somewhere,
And loved in times beyond all memory.

O soulless face! white flash in solitude,
Forgotten phantom of a moonless night,
Shall I kiss thy sad mouth once again, or wait
Drowned beneath fathoms of a tideless mood
Until the stars flee through the western gate
Driven in shivering fear before the light?

Cambridge, 1916

VIII

When noon is blazing on the town,
The fields are loud with droning flies,
The people pull their curtains down,
And all the houses shut their eyes.

The palm leaf drops from your mother's hand
And she dozes there in a darkened room,
Outside there is silence on the land,
And only poppies dare to bloom.

Open the door and steal away
Through grain and briar shoulder high,
There are secrets hid in the heart of day,
In the hush and slumber of July.

Your face will burn a fiery red,
Your feet will drag through dusty flame,
Your brain turn molten in your head,
And you will wish you never came.

O never mind, go on, go on,—
There is a brook where willows lean;
To weave deep caverns from the sun,

And there the grass grows cool and green.
And there is one as cool as grass,
Lying beneath the willow tree,
Counting the dragon flies that pass,
And talking to the humble bee.

She has not stirred since morning came,
She does not know how in the town
The earth shakes dizzily with flame,
And all the curtains are drawn down.

Sit down beside her; she can tell
The strangest secrets you would hear,
And cool as water in a well,
Her words flow down upon your ear....

She speaks no more, but in your hair
Her fingers soft as lullabies
Fold up your senses unaware,
Into a poppy paradise.

And when you wake, the evening mist

The Five Books of Youth

Is rising up to float the hill,
And you will say, "The mouth I kissed,
The voice I heard...a dream...but still

"The grass is matted where she lay,
I feel her fingers in my hair"...
But your lamp is bright across the way,
And your mother knits in the rocking chair.

Paris, 1919

IX

The trees have never seemed so green
Since I remember,
As in these groves and gardens of September,
And yet already comes the chill
That bodes the world's last garden ill,
And in the shadow I have seen
A spectre,—even thine,
O Vandal, O November.

The wind leaps up with sudden screams
In gusts of chaff.
Two boys with blowing hair listen and laugh.
We hear the same wind, they and I,
Under the dark autumnal sky;
It blows strange music through their dreams.
Keenly it blows through mine,
Singing their epitaph.

Tours, 1918

X

The green canal is mottled with falling leaves,
Yellow leaves, fluttering silently;
A whirling gust ripples the woods, and heaves
The stricken branches with a sigh,
Then all is still again.
Unmoving, the green waterway receives
Ghosts of the dying forest to its breast;
Loneliness...quiet...not a wing has stirred
In the cold glades; no fish has leaped away
From the heavy waters; not a drop of rain
Distils from the pervading mist.
Sluggishly out of the west
A grey canal-boat glides, half-seen, unheard;
The sweating horses on the towpath sway
Backward and forward in a rhythmic strain;
It passes by, a dream within a dream,
Down the dark corridor of leaning boughs,
Down the long waterways of endless fall.
A shiver stirs the woods; a fitful gleam
Of sun gilds the sky's overhanging brows;
Then shadowy silence, and the yellow stream
Of dead leaves dropping to the green canal.

Moret-sur-Loing, 1918

XI

They who have gone down the hill are far away;
From the still valleys I can hear them call;
Their distant laughter faintly floats
Through the unmoving air and back to me.
I am alone with the declining day
And the declining forest where the notes
Of all the happy minstrelsy,
Birds and leaf-music and the rest,
Sink separately in the hush of fall.
The sun and clouds conflicting in the west
Swirl into smoky light together and fade
Under the unbroken shadow;
Under the shadowed peace that is the night;
Under the night's great quietude of shade.
The sheep below me in the meadow
Seem drifting on the haze, serene and white,
Pale pastured dreams, unearthly herds that roam
Where the dead reign and phantoms make their home.
They also pass, even as the clear ring
Of the sad Angelus through the vales echoing.

Montigny, 1918

XII

Where two roads meet amid the wood,
There stands a white sepulchral rood,
Beneath whose shadow, wayfarers
Would pause to offer up their prayers.
There is no house for miles around,
No sound of beast, no human sound,
Only the trees like sombre dreams
From whose bare boughs the water drips;
And the pale memory of death.
The haze hangs heavy without breath,
It hangs so heavy that it seems
To hold a silent finger to its lips.

In after years the spectral cross
Will be quite overgrown with moss,
And wayfarers will go their way
Nor stop to meditate and pray.
The spring will nest in all the trees
Unblighted by the memories
Of autumn and the god of pain.
The leaves will whisper in the sun,
Life will crown death with snowy flowers,
Long hence...but now the autumn lowers,
The sky breaks into gusts of rain,
Turn thee to sleep, the day is nearly done.

Forest of Fontainebleau, 1918

XIII

The boy is late tonight binding his sheaves,
The twilight of these autumn eyes
Falls early now and chill.
The murky sun has set
An hour ago behind the overhanging hill.
Great piles of fallen leaves
Smoulder in every street
And through the columned smoke a scarlet jet
Of flame darts out and disappears.

The boy leans motionless upon his staff,
With all the sorrows of his fifteen years
Gazing out of his eyes into the fall,
A memory ineffable and sweet
Half tinged with voiceless passion, half
Plaintive with sad imaginings that drift
Like echoes of far-off autumnal bells.
He starts up with a laugh,
Binds up the last gaunt sheaf and turns away;
Out of the dusk an inarticulate call
Rings keen across the solemn Berkshire woods,
And then the answer. Impotent farewells
That eager voices lift
Into the hush of the receding day;
Full soon the silence surges in again,
Peaceful, inevitable, deep as death.

The boy has lingered late in the grey fields,
Knowing the first strange happiness of pain,
And the low voices of October moods.
Now comes the night, the meadow yields
Unto the sky a damp and pungent breath;
The quiet air of the New England town
Seems confident that everyone is home
Safe by his fire.
The frosty stars look down
Near, near above the kind familiar trees
In whose dry branches roam
The gentle spirits of the darkling breeze.
Deep in its caverned heart the forest sings
Of mysteries unknown and vanished lore;
Old wisdom; dead desire;
Dreams of the past, of immemorial springs....
The wind is rising cold from the river: close the door.

Tours, 1918

The Five Books of Youth

XIV

O lovely shepherd Corydon, how far
Thou wanderest from thine Ionian hills;
Now the first star
Rains pallid tears where the lost lands are,
And the red sunset fills
The cleft horizon with a flaming wine.

The grave significance of falling leaves
Soon shall make desolate thy singing heart,
When the cold wind grieves,
And the cold dews rot the standing sheaves,—
Return, O Thou that art
The hope of spring in these lost lands of mine.

Chalons-sur-Marne, 1917

XV

O little shepherd boy, what sobs are those
That shake your slender shoulders, what despair
Has run her fingers through your ruffled hair,
And laid you prone beneath a weight of woes?
The trees upon the hill will soon be bare,
A yellow blight is on the garden close,
But you, you need not mourn the vanished rose,
For many springs will find you just as fair.

Weep not for summer, she is past all weeping,
Fear not the winter, she in turn will pass,
And with the spring love waits for you, perchance,
When, with the morn, faint wings stir from their sleeping,
And the first petals scatter on the grass,
Under the orchards and the vines of France.

Recicourt, 1917

XVI

The dull-eyed girl in bronze implores Apollo
To warm these dying satyrs and to raise
Their withered wreaths that rot in every hollow
Or smoulder redly in the pungent haze.
The shining reapers, gone these many days,
Have left their fields disconsolate and sear,
Like bony sand uncovered to the gaze,
In this, the ebb-tide of the year.

My wisest comrade turns into a swallow
And flashes southward as the thickets blaze
In awful splendour; I, who cannot follow,
Confront the skies' unmitigated greys.
The cynic faun whom I have known betrays
A dangerous mood at night, and seems austere
Beneath the autumn noon's distempered rays,
In this, the ebb-tide of the year.

Ice quenches all reflection in the shallow
Lagoon whose trampled margin still displays
Upheaval where the centaurs used to wallow;
And where my favourite unicorns would graze,
A few wild ducks scream lamentable lays
Of shrill derision desperate with fear,
Bleak note on note, phrase on discordant phrase,
In this, the ebb-tide of the year.

Poor girl, how soon our garden world decays,
Our metals tarnish, our loves disappear;
Dull-eyed we haunt these unfrequented ways,
In this, the ebb-tide of the year.

Cambridge, 1920

XVII

The winter night is hard as glass;
The frozen stars hang stilly down;
I sit inside while people pass
From the dead-hearted town.

The tavern hearth is deep and wide,
The flames caress my glowing skin;
The icicles hang cold outside,
But I sit warm within.

The faces pass in blurring white
Outside the frosted window, lifting
Eyes against my cheerful night,
From their night of dreadful drifting.

Sharp breaths blow fast in a smoky gale,
Rags wander through the dull lamp light;
O my veins run gold with Christmas ale,
And the tavern fire is bright.

The midnight sky is clear as glass,
The stars hang frozen on the town,
I watch the dying people pass,
And I wrap me warm in my gown.

Brussels, 1919

XVIII

Chords, tremendous chords,
Over the stricken plain,
The night is calling her ancient lords
Back to their own again.

Vast, unhappy song,
From incalculable space,
Calling the heavy-browed, the strong,
Out of their resting-place.

Far from the lighted town,
Over the snow and ice,
Their dreadful feet go up and down
Seeking a sacrifice.

And can you find a way
Where They will not come after?
The vast chords hesitate and sway
Into a sudden laughter.

Sheffield, 1917

XIX

I have known the lure of cities and the bright gleam
of golden things,
Spires, towers, bridges, rivers, and the crowd that
flows as a river,
Lights in the midnight streets under the rain,
and the stings
Of joys that make the spirit reel and shiver.

But I see bleak moors and marshes and sparse grasses,
And frozen stalks against the snow;
Dead forests, ragged pines and dark morasses
Under the shadows of the mountains where no men go.
The crags untenanted and spacious cry aloud as clear
As the drear cry of a lost eagle over uncharted lands,
No thought that man has ever framed in words is spoken here,
And the language of the wind, no man understands.

Only the sifting wind through the grasses, and the hissing sleet,
And the shadow of the changeless rocks over the frozen wold,
Only the cold,
And the fierce night striding down with silent feet.

Chambery, 1918

XX

We wove a fillet for thy head,
And from a flaming lyre
Struck a song that shall not die
Until the echoing stars be dead,
Until the world's last word be said,
Until on tattered wings we fly
Upward and expire.

And calm with night thou watchest till
Long after we are gone,
Not knowing how we worshipped thee;
Serene, unfathomably still,
Gazing to the western hill
Where pales the moon's hushed mystery,
White in the white dawn.

Cambridge, 1915

The Five Books of Youth

BOOK III. EROS

Now the sick earth revives, and in the sun
The wet soil gives a fragrance to the air;
The days of many colours are begun,
And early promises of meadows fair
With starry petals, and of trees now bare
Soon to be lyric with the trilling choir,
And lovely with new leaves, spread everywhere
A subtle flame that sets the heart on fire
With thoughts of other springs and dreams of new desire.

The mind will never dwell within the present,
It weeps for vanished years or hopes for new;
This morn of wakened warmth, so calm, so pleasant,
So gaily gemmed with diadems of dew,
When buds swell on the bough, and robins woo
Their loves with notes bell-like and crystal-clear,
The spirit stirs from sleep, yet wonders, too,
Whence comes the hint of sorrow or of fear
Making it move rebellious within its narrow sphere.

This flash of sun, this flight of wings in riot,
This festival of sound, of sight, of smell,
Wakes in the spirit a profound disquiet,
And greeting seems the foreword of farewell.
Budding like all the world, the soul would swell
Out of its withering mortality;
Flower immortal, burst from its heavy shell,
Fly far with love beyond the world and sea,
Out of the grasp of change, from time and twilight free.

Could the unknowing gods, waked in compassion,
Eternalize the splendour of this hour,
And from the world's frail garlands strongly fashion
An ageless Paradise, celestial bower,
Where our long-sundered souls could rise in power
To the complete fulfilment of their dream,
And never know again that years devour
Petals and light, bird-note and woodland theme,
And floods of young desire, bright as a silver stream,

Should we be happy, thou and I together,
Lying in love eternally in spring,
Watching the buds unfold that shall not wither,
Hearing the birds calling and answering,

When the leaves stir and all the meadows ring?

The Five Books of Youth

Smelling the rich earth steaming in the sun,
Feeling between caresses the light wing
Of the wind whose gracious flight is never done,—
Should we be happy then? happy, elusive One?

But no, here in this fragile flesh abides
The secret of a measureless delight,
Hidden in dying beauty there resides
Something undying, something that takes its flight
When the dust turns to dust, and day to night,
And spring to fall, whose joys in love redeem
Eternally, life's changes and death's blight,
Even as these pale, tender petals seem
A glimpse of infinite beauty, flashed in a passing dream.

Cambridge, 1916

II

The heavy bee burdened the golden clover
Droning away the afternoon of summer,
Deep in the rippling grass I called to you
Under the sky's blue flame.
Then when the day was over,
When petals fell fresh with the falling dew,
Stepped from the dusk a radiant newcomer,
Fled by the waters of the sleeping river,
Swift to the arms of your impatient lover,
Gladly you came.
And the long wind in the cedars will sing of this for ever.

Thin rain of the saddest of Septembers
Bent the tall grasses of the sloping meadows,
But spring was with me in your slender form,
And the frail joy of spring.
Although the chilly embers
Of summer vanished into the gathering storm
And the wind clung to the overhanging shadows,
Fair seemed the spirit's desperate endeavour,
(And even fair to the spirit that remembers)
Joy on the wing!
And the long wind in the cedars will sing of this for ever.

Years, and in slow lugubrious succession
Drop from the trees the leaves' first yellowed leaders,
Autumn is in the air and in the past,
Desolate, utterly.
Sunlight and clouds in hesitant procession,
Laughter and tears, and winter at the last.
There is a battle—music in the cedars,
High on the hills of life the grasses shiver.
Hail, dead reality and living vision,
Thrice hail in memory.
And the long wind in the cedars will sing of this for ever.

Tours, 1918



Of days and nights under the living vine,
Memory singing from a tree has given
The plan of my buried heaven,
That I may dig therein as in a mine.

Did I call you, little Vigilant One, under the waning sun?
Did you come barefooted through the dew,
Through the fine dew-drenched grass when the colours faded
Out of the sky?
Who is that shadow holding over you a veil of tempest woven,
Shaded with streaks of cloud and lightning on the edges?
Lean nearer, I fear him, and the sigh
Of the rising wind worries the sedges,
And the cry
Of a white, long-legged bird from the marsh
Cuts through the twilight with a threat of night.
The receding voice is harsh
And echoes in my spirit.
Hark, do you hear it wailing against the hollow rocks of the hill,
As it takes its lonely outgoing towards the sea?
Lean nearer still.
Your silence is an ecstasy of speech,
You are the only white
Unconquered by the overwhelming frown.
Who stands behind you so impassively?
Bid him begone, or let me reach
And tear away his veil. But he is gone.
Who was he? surely no comrade of the dawn,
No lover from an earthly town,
Was he then Love? or Death? . . . but he is gone.

Come, I will take your hand,—this little glade
Of stunted trees,—do you remember that?
You dropped the Persian vase here on this stone,
And the white grape was spilled;
And then you cried, half angry, half afraid;
Yonder we sat
And carefully took the pieces one by one,
And tried to make them fit.
I brought another vessel filled
With a deeper wine, and there on that dark bank,
When the first star stepped from immensity,
We lay and drank....
Do you remember it?

White flame you burned against the star grey grass.

The Five Books of Youth

Drink deep and pass
The insufficient cup to me.

Paris, 1919

IV

You seek to hurt me, foolish child, and why?
How cunningly you try
The keen edge of your words against me, yea,
The death you would not dare inflict on me,
Yet would you welcome if it tore the day
In which I pleasure from my sight.
You would be happy if that sombre night
Ravished me into darkness where there are
No flowers and no colours and no light,
Nor any joy, nor you, O morning star.

What have I done to hurt you? You have given
What I have given, and both of us have taken
Bravely and beautifully without regret.
When have I sinned against you? or forsaken
Our secret vow? Think you that I forget
One syllable of all your loveliness?
What is this crime that shall not be forgiven?

Spring passes, the pale buds upon the pond
Shrink under water from my lonely oars,
The fern is squandering its final frond,
And gypsy smoke drifts grey from distant shores.

O soon enough the end of love and song,
And soon enough the ultimate farewell;
Blazon our lives with one last miracle,—
We have not long.

Genoa, 1918

The Five Books of Youth

V

By these shall you remember
The syllables of me;
The grass in cushioned clumps around
The root of cedar tree.

The blue and green design
Of sky and budding leaves,
The joyous song that in the sun
A golden ladder weaves.

When soil is wet and warm
And smells of the new rain,
When frogs accost the evening
With their recurrent strain,

Then damn me if you dare.
I know how you will call,
But this time I will laugh and run,
Nor look at you at all.

Or, if you will, go walking
With immortality,
But never shall you once forget
The syllables of me.

Paris, 1919

VI

Two black deer uprise
In ghostly silhouette
Against the frozen skies,
Against the snowy meadow;
The moonlight weaves a net
Of silver and of shadow.
The sky is cold above me,
The icy road below
Leads me from you who love me,
To unknown destinies.
Was that your whistle?—No,
The wind among the trees.

Sheffield, 1917

VII

When in the ultimate embrace
Our blown dust mingles in the wind,
And others wander in the place
Where we made merry;
When in the dance of spring we spend
Our ashen powers with the gale,
What will these tears and joys avail,
The winged kiss, the laughing face,
Where we make merry?
Save that with everlasting grace
Thy soul shall linger in this place,
And haunt with music, or else be
A lyric in the memory.

Boston, 1915

VIII

Tonight it seems to be the same
As when we two would sit
With struggling breath beside the river.
How slowly the moon came
Above the hill; how wet
With shaking silver she arose
Above the hill.
Now in the sultry garden close
I hear the katydid
Strumming his foolish mandolin.
The wind is lying still,
And suddenly amid
The trembling boughs the moon expands into a scarlet flame.

What charm can bid the mind forget,
And sleep in peace forever,
Beyond the ghosts of ancient sin,
Lost laughter, barren tears.

And you, my dear, have slept four thousand years,
Beneath the Pyramid.

Brussels, 1918

IX

If you should come tonight
And say, "I could not go, and leave
You here alone in pain,"
How should I take delight
In that or dare believe,
Lest I deceive myself with dreams again?...
If you should come tonight.

Cambridge, 1916

The Five Books of Youth

X

You are very far to-night;
So far that my beseeching hands
Clasp on the bright
Metallic lock of some forbidden portal,
Where you alone may enter in;
And my long gaze
Blurs in a memory of other lands,
And other times.
You stand immortal.
You have fought clear beyond these nights and days
Whose rusty chimes
Shake the frail, faded tapestries of sin.
You stand immortal,
Intense with peace, immaculate as stone,
Raising white arms of praise,
Far from this night, triumphantly alone.

Cambridge, 1917

XI

O lonely star moving in still abodes
Where fear and strife lie indolently furled,
You cannot hear the rushing autumn hurled
Against these wanderers bent with futile loads.
Our broken dreams like withered leaves are swirled
Where wind-dashed lanterns fail upon the roads,
And all our tragic gestured episodes
End in forgotten graveyards of the world.

But in those twilights where you spread your fires,
Tempest and clarion are heard no more;
Autumn no sorrow, spring no hope inspires,
Nor can the distant closing of a door
Affright the soul to dark imagining
Beneath deflowered boughs where no birds sing.

Pomfret, 1919

XII

A chalice singing deep with wine,
Set high among the starry groves,
Welcomes every man to dine
With his old familiar loves.

Sheffield, 1917

The Five Books of Youth

BOOK IV. THE GARDEN OF EPICURUS

The Five Books of Youth

I

As dreamers through their dreams surmise
The stealthy passage of the night,
We half-remember smoky skies
And city streets and hurrying flight,
Another world from this clear height
Whereon our starry altars rise.

Beneath our towering waste of stone
The fragile ships creep to and fro,
By tempest riven and overthrown,
The toys of these same tides that flow
Against our pillars far below
With faint, insistent monotone.

The snarling winds against our rocks
Hurl breakers in a fleecy mass,
Like wolves that chase stampeding flocks
Over the brink of a crevasse,
While thunders down the Alpine pass
The deluge of the equinox.

Lost in that stormy atmosphere,
Men chart their seas and trudge their roads;
Inviolable, we scorn to hear
Their shouted warning that forebodes

An end to these fair episodes
Of life beneath our tranquil sky;
Having sought only peace, then why
Should we go down to death with fear?

Pomfret, 1920

The Five Books of Youth

II

The thinkers light their lamps in rows
From street to street, and then
The night creeps up behind, and blows
Them quickly out again.

While Age limps groping toward his home,
Hearing the feet of youth
From dark to dark that sadly roam
The suburbs of the Truth.

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

III

I pass my days in ghostly presences,
And when the wind at night is mute,
Far down the valley I can hear a flute
And a strange voice, not knowing what it says.

And sometimes in the interim of days,
I hear a fountain in obscure abodes,
Singing with none but me to hear, the lays
That would do pleasure to the ears of gods.

And faces pass, but haply they are dreams,
Dreams of a mind set free that gilds
The solitude with awful light and builds
Temples and lovers, goblins and triremes.

Give me a chair and liberate the sun,
And glancing motes to twinkle down its bars,
That I may sit above oblivion,
And weave myself a universe of stars.

Rome, 1918

IV

Each mote that staggers down the sun
Repeats an ancient monotone
That minds me of the time when I
Put out the candles one by one,

And left no splendour on the face
Of Him who found His resting-place
Upon the Cross; and then I went
Out on the desert's empty space,

And heard the wind in monotone
Blow grains of sand against a stone,
Until I sang aloud, to break
The fear of wandering alone.

There is no fear left in my soul,
But when, to-day, an aureole
Of sunlight gathered on your hair,
And winking motes fled here and there,
Like notes of music in the air,
Suddenly I felt the wind
Wake on the desert as I stole
Out of that desecrated shrine,
And then I wondered if you sinned
As part of me, or if the whole
Dark sacrilege were mine.

Cambridge, 1917

The Five Books of Youth

V

He is a priest;
He feeds the dead;
He sings the feast;
He veils his head;
The words are dread
In morning mist,
But the wine is red
In the Eucharist.

Red as the east
With sunlight spread
Like a bleeding beast
On a purple bed.
O Someone fled
From an April tryst,
Were your lips fed
In the Eucharist?

I, at least,
When the voice of lead
Sank down and ceased,
Knew the things he said.
That the god who bled,
And the god we kissed,
Shall never wed
In the Eucharist.

Spring, give the bread
We sought and missed,
And wine unshed
In the Eucharist.

Paris, 1919

VI

Through hissing snow, through rain, through many hundred Mays,
Contorted in Promethean jest, the gargoyles sit,
And watch the crowds pursue the charted ways,
Whose source is birth, whose end they only know.
Charms borrowed from the loveliest of hells,
And from the earth, a rhapsody of wit,
They hear the sacramental bells
Chime through the towers, and they smile.
Smile on the insects in the square below,
Smile on the stars that kiss the infinite,
And, when the clouds hang low, they gaily spout
Grey water on the heads of the devout
That gather, whispering, in the sabbath street.
O gargoyles! was the vinegar and bile
So bitter? Was the eucharist so sweet?

Paris, 1919

The Five Books of Youth

VII

Gods dine on prayer and sacred song,
And go to sleep between;
The gods have slumbered long;
The gods are getting lean.

Sheffield, 1917

VIII

A smile will turn away green eyes
That laughter could not touch,
The dangers of those subtleties,
The stealthy, clever hand,
Should not affright you overmuch
If you but understand
How Judas, clad in Oxford grey,—
Could walk abroad on Easter Day.

Paris, 1919

IX

Two Kings there were, one Good, one Bad;
The first was mournfulness itself,
The second, happy as a lad,—
And both are dust upon a shelf.

Sheffield, 1917

The Five Books of Youth

X

I see that Hermes unawares,
Has left his footprints on the path;
See here, he fell, and in his wrath
He pulled out several golden hairs
Against the brambles. Guard them well,
The hairs of gods are valuable.

Paris, 1919

XI

Semiramis, the whore of Babylon,
Bade me go walking with her. I obeyed.
Philosophy, I thought, is not afraid
Of any woman underneath the sun.
Far up the hills she led me, where one ledge
Thrust out a slender finger to the sky,
Dizzy and swaying as an eagle's cry;
Semiramis stepped to the farthest edge.

And there she danced, whirling upon her toes,
The triumph of a flame was in her face,
Faster and faster as the mad wind blows,
She whirled, and slipped, and dashed down into space....
Next day I saw her smiling in the sun,
Semiramis, the Queen of Babylon.

Paris, 1919

XII

Bring hemlock, black as Cretan cheese,
And mix a sacramental brew;
A worthy drink for Socrates,
Why not for you?

Sheffield, 1917

XIII

Walking through the town last night,
I learned the lore of second sight,
And saw through all those solid walls,
Imbecile and troglodyte.

The vicious apes of either sex
Grinned and mouthed and stretched their necks,
Their little lusts skipped back and forth,
Not very pretty or complex.

Each has five senses; every sense
Is like a false gate in a fence,
They think the gates are bona fide,
Such is their only innocence.

And think themselves extremely wise
When any sense records its lies,
They mumble what they feel or hear,
Unmindful still of Paradise.

When I walked through the town last night
In vain they drew their curtains tight,
Through walls of brick I plainly saw
The imbecile, the troglodyte.

Paris, 1919

XIV

The change of many tides has swung the flow
Of those green weeds that cling like filthy fur
Upon the timbers of this voyager
That sank in the clear water long ago.
Whence did she sail? the sands of ages blur
The answer to the secret, and as though
They mocked and knew, sleek fishes, to and fro,
Trail their grey carrion shadows over her.
Coffer of all life gives and hides away,
It matters not if London or if Tyre
Sped you to sea on some remoter day;
Beneath your decks immutable desire
And hope and hate and envy still conspire,
While all the gaping faces nod and sway.

Brussels, 1919

XV

Piero di Cosimo,
Your unicorns and afterglow,
Your black leaves cut against the sky,
Black crosses where the young gods die,
Black horizons where the sea
And clouds contend perpetually,
And hanging low,
The menace of the night:—

They called you madman. Were they right,
Piero di Cosimo?

Pomfret, 1919

XVI

I would know what can not be known;
I would reach beyond my sphere,
And question the stars in their courses,
And the dead of many a year.
I would tame the infinite forces
That bend me down like the grain,
Peace would I give to the fields where the young men died,
Peace to the sea where the ships of battle ride,
And light again to the eyes of the beautiful slain.

This would I do, but today against the sky,
They who were building a cross grinned as I passed them by.

Pomfret, 1919

XVII

The yellow bird is singing by the pond,
And all about him stars have burst in bloom,
A colonnade stands pallidly beyond,
And beneath that a solitary tomb.
Who lies within that tomb I do not know,
The yellow bird intones his threnody
In notes as colourless as driven snow,
Clashing with the green hush and out of key.

O cease, your endless song is out of tune,
Where all these old forgotten things are sleeping,—
Give back to silence's eternal keeping
The windless pond, the hanging colonnade,
Lest in the wane of the long afternoon,
The Dead awake, unhappy and afraid.

Bordeaux, 1917

The Five Books of Youth

BOOK V. SONNETS

The Five Books of Youth

I

Love dwelled with me with music on her lips;
Beauty has quickened me to passion; prayer
Has cried from me before I was aware
When grief was scourging me with scarlet whips.
The gods gave me to follies false and fair;
Made me the object of immortal quips,
But I am recompensed with comradeships
That gods themselves would be content to share.

The time of play has been, of wisdom, is;
Yet who can say which is the truly wise?
Enough that I have stayed Love with a kiss,
That Beauty has found welcome in my eyes;
Though the long poplar path leads dark before,
Up to the white inevitable door.



Invoking not the worship of the crowd
As Hadrian divulged Antinous
Would I denote Thy sanctity, not thus
Should Love's deep litany be cried aloud.
There is a mountain set apart for us
Where I have hid Thy soul as in a cloud,
And there I dedicate as I have vowed
My secret voice,—all else were impious.

Remote and undiscovered, rest secure
Where I have set Thee up, that I may keep
My faith of God—in—Thee unblent and pure;
That I may be at one with Thee in sleep;
That waking as a mortal, I may leap
Into immortal dreams where love is sure.



And yet think not that I desire to seal
Your earthly beauty from the eyes of praise,
The Soul I worship hath its holy-days,
But being God is manifestly real.
The flesh resplendent in a lover's gaze
Hath too its triumph; the divine ideal
Is dual and can wonderfully reveal
Itself in dust enriched by subtle ways.

You are no shadow, for in you combine
Earth-music and a spirit's sanctity,
And both are exquisite, and both are mine...
For holier men a Beatrice, for me
The joyous sense of your reality,
Not half so saintly,—but far more divine.

IV

With the young god who out of death creates
The flame of life made manifest in spring,
Let us go forth at day's awakening,
The first to open wide the garden gates.
And resting where the blowing seasons sing,
Await the voice of god who consecrates
The pallid hands of the autumnal fates
That beckon from the dusk, dream-harvesting.

When comes the grey god, eager to destroy
Our garnered hoard of wisdom and of joy,
Fear not that phantom, desolate and stark,
For the young god, the all-creating boy,
Will come and find us sleeping in the dark,
And from two deaths, bring forth life's single spark.

The Five Books of Youth

V

O it was gay! the wilderness was floral,
The sea a bath of wine to the laughing swimmer;
Dawn was a flaming fan; dusk was a glimmer
Like undersea where sly dreams haunt the coral.
The garden sang of fame when the golden shimmer
Of sun glowed on the proud leaves of the laurel,—
But time and love fought out their ancient quarrel;
The songs are fainter now; the lights are dimmer.

For it is over, over, and the spring
Is not quite spring to you who sit alone;
A paradise entire has taken wing;
Love and her merry company are gone
The way of all delight and lyric measures,
And the lone miser mourns his vanished treasures.

VI

The snow is thawing on the hanging eaves,
The buds unroll upon the basking limb,
And hidden birds are practising a hymn
To sing when petals fall among the leaves.
And yet in life there is an interim
So dull that stagnant loneliness bereaves
Beauty of tenderness, and hope deceives
Until the eyes grow sceptical and dim.

I know I have no right to solitude
When every friendly grove is loud with calls
From bird to mating bird, and all the wood
Is throbbing with the voice of waterfalls,
But merry song and liquid interlude
Ring in my heart like mirth in empty halls.

VII

So ends the day with beauty in the west,
Bending in holy peace above the land;
It is not needful that we understand;
Oblivion is ours, and that is best.
Oblivion of battles that command
Our wan reluctance, and a starless rest
Borne on in tideless twilight, where all quest
Ends in the pressure of a quiet hand.

There is no morrow to this final dream
That paints the past so wonderfully fair;
No rising sun shall desecrate that gleam
Of fragile colour hanging on the air.
Enshrined in sunset are all things that seem
Happy and beautiful; and Thou art there.

VIII

Across the evening calm I faintly hear
The melody you loved; a violin
Sings through the listening air, far-off and thin,
The infinite music of our happy year.
The soul's dim gates are broken to let in
That gush of memories, and you are near,
Poised on the shadowy threshold whence appear
The prospects of the dreams we strove to win.

Rise wistfully, and fall away, and pass,
Frail music of impossible delight,
Steal into silence over the dark grass,
Dreams of the inner caverns of the night.
Strange that in those few hesitating bars
Are life and death, the orbits of the stars.

IX

Calmer than mirrored waters after rain,
Calmer than all the swaying tides of sleep,
Profounder than the stony eyes that keep
Afternoon vigil on the ruined plain;
So drift they by, the cloudy forms that creep
In stealthy whiteness through the windless grain;
The twilight ebbs, and washed in the long rain,
I am their shepherd, pasturing my sheep.

They can not change; they can but wander here;
That is their destiny and also mine;
The fuel that I was, the flames they were,
Are vanished down the lost horizon line.
Likewise the stars have died; the silence hears
Only the footfall of the pastured years.

X

I stood like some worn image carved of stone
Amid the thoughtful sands of eventide;
When rolling back the grey, there opened wide
The unsuspected gates of the Unknown.
Long hours I stood, amazed and deified,
Beside that singing shore; that shining zone,
Myself like God, triumphantly alone,
"And is this then the shore of death?" I cried.

A wind blew down from the tremendous sky,
Fraught with a whisper fainter than a breath,
Fanning my spirit with exalted wonder;
But the great doors swung to with rumbling thunder;
One more the winged faith had passed me by,
Like unto melody, like unto death.

XI

Through the deep night the leaves speak, tree to tree.
Where are the stars? the frantic clouds ride high,
The swelling gusts of wind blow down the sky,
Shaking the thoughts from the leaves, garrulously.
Through the deep night, articulate to me,
They question your untimely passing-by;
Your spring is still in flower, must you fly
Windswept so soon down lanes of memory?

Through the deep night the trees recount the past,
The lovers that have long ago gone hence,
And whom you joined ere love had reached her prime.
Chill with an early autumn's immanence,
Through the dark night plunges the sudden blast,
Sweeping the young leaves down before their time.

XII

I walked the hollow pavements of the town,
Lost in the vast entirety of night,
The moon was cankered with a greyish blight,
And half her face was gathered in a frown.
A hooded watchman passed me, and his gown
Was dyed so black it made the darkness white,
He turned upon my face his curious light,
And whispered as he wandered up and down.

Then there were curling lanes and then a hill,
And sentry stars that guard the Absolute,
And spectral feet that followed me, until
The vapours rose, and somewhere in the mute
And hesitating dawn, a single flute
Piped once again the grey, and then was still.

XIII

In tireless march I move from sphere to sphere.
I turn not back nor pause; my feet are drawn
By shining power. Master soul or pawn,
I know not which I am; I only hear
The faint insistent world voice murmuring on
Its pivot in another atmosphere;
All else is silence, the pervading year
Blows wanly through my senses and is gone.

O You who met me on the sunny lawn
Of yesteryear, to be my true companion,
And bade me lead you with me from the dawn
Into the shades of my predestined canon,
How is it that I find myself alone
Here in this desolate and starry zone?

XIV

A while you shared my path and solitude,
A while you ate the bread of loneliness,
And satisfied yourself with a caress
Or with a careless overflow of mood.
And then you left me suddenly, to press
Into the world again, and seek your food
Among the mortals whom you understood,
Instead of learning in the wilderness.

Now you return to where you fled from me,
And find me gone. You call me from afar,
And call in vain; I can not turn to see
You loveliness, beloved as you are.
Inexorably I move from sphere to sphere,
Nor wait for any soul, however dear.

XV

There is a void that reason can not face,
Nor wisdom comprehend, nor sweating will
Diminish, nor the rain of April fill,
And I am weary of this wan grimace.
Behold I touch the garments of all ill
And do not wash my hands; a dusty place
Unprobed by light becomes a loud mill race
That swirls together straw and daffodil.

It is untrue that vigil can not trace
The orbits which upon our births distil
The filtered dew of fate; I saw the hill
That I must climb, and gauged the upward pace;
And now upon the night's worn window sill,
I wait and smile. Hail, Judas, full of grace.

XVI

The mirrors of all ages are the eyes
Of some remembering god, wherein are sealed
The beauties of the world, the April field,
Young faces, blowing hair, and autumn skies.
The mirrors of the world shall break, and yield
To life again what never really dies;
The forms and colours of earth's pageantries,
Unwithered and undimmed, shall be revealed.

And in that moment silence shall unfold
Forgotten songs that she has held interred,
The ocean rising on the shores of gold,
Flecked with white laughter and love's lyric word;
All happy music that the world has heard;
All beauty that eternal eyes behold.

XVII

We sat in silence till the twilight fell,
And then beyond the vague and purple arc
Where sky and ocean merge, a summons. "Hark!
Clear notes like water falling in a well,
Can you not hear?" "No, but a sudden dark
Seems to enfold me, lonely and terrible."
Out of the sunset, a black caravel
Drew near, and then I knew I should embark.

I saw it tack against the fading skies,
I heard its keel slide crunching up the sand,
Then turned, and read, deep in the other's eyes,
The pain of one who can not understand.
Dusk deepened over the insurging seas,
And loose sails crackled in the rising breeze.

XVIII

He clung to me, his young face dark with woe,
And as the mournful music of the tide
Monotonously sang, he stood and cried,
A silhouette against the afterglow.
I said, "The boat has spread her pinions wide;
The stars and wind come forth together. Go
Back to our ivy-haunted portico,
And place my seat as always at your side."

And so I stepped aboard and left him there.
Farewell; the rhythmic somnolence of oars;
Star-misty vastness; swiftly moving air;
Then distant lights on undiscovered shores.
This I remember, standing by the sea,
But where was that dark land, and who were we?