

Classic Poetry Series

Archibald MacLeish
- poems -

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Archibald MacLeish(7 May 1892 – 20 April 1982)

Archibald MacLeish was an American poet, writer, and the Librarian of Congress. He is associated with the Modernist school of poetry. He received three Pulitzer Prizes for his work.

 Early Years

MacLeish was born in Glencoe, Illinois. His father, Scottish-born Andrew MacLeish, worked as a dry goods merchant. His mother, Martha (née Hillard), was a college professor and had served as president of Rockford College. He grew up on an estate bordering Lake Michigan. He attended the Hotchkiss School from 1907 to 1911 before entering Yale University, where he majored in English, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and was selected for the Skull and Bones society. He then enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he served as an editor of the Harvard Law Review. In 1916, he married Ada Hitchcock. His studies were interrupted by World War I, in which he served first as an ambulance driver and later as a captain of artillery. He graduated from law school in 1919, taught law for a semester for the government department at Harvard, then worked briefly as an editor for The New Republic. He next spent three years practicing law.

Expatriatism

In 1923 MacLeish left his law firm and moved with his wife to Paris, France, where they joined the community of literary expatriates that included such members as Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway. They also became part of the famed coterie of Riviera hosts Gerald and Sarah Murphy, which included Hemingway, Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos Fernand Léger, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, John O'Hara, Cole Porter, Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley. He returned to America in 1928. From 1930 to 1938 he worked as a writer and editor for Fortune Magazine, during which he also became increasingly politically active, especially with anti-fascist causes.

While in Paris, Harry Crosby, publisher of the Black Sun Press, offered to published MacLeish's poetry. Both MacLeish and Crosby had overturned the normal expectations of society, rejecting conventional careers in the legal and banking fields. Harry published MacLeish's long poem Einstein in a deluxe edition

of a 150 copies that sold quickly. MacLeish was paid US\$200 for his work.

Librarian of Congress

American Libraries has called MacLeish "one of the hundred most influential figures in librarianship during the 20th century" in the United States. MacLeish's career in libraries and public service began, not with a burning desire from within, but from a combination of the urging of a close friend Felix Frankfurter, and as MacLeish put it, "The President decided I wanted to be Librarian of Congress." Franklin Roosevelt's nomination of MacLeish was a controversial and highly political maneuver fraught with several challenges. First, the current Librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, who had served at the post for 40 years, needed to be persuaded to retire from the position. In order to be persuaded, Putnam was made Librarian Emeritus. Secondly, Franklin D. Roosevelt desired someone with similar political sensibilities to fill the post and to help convince the American public that the New Deal was working and that he had the right to run for an unprecedented third term in office. MacLeish's occupation as a poet and his history as an expatriate in Paris rankled many Republicans. Lastly, MacLeish's lack of a degree in library sciences or any training whatsoever aggravated the librarian community, especially the American Library Association which was campaigning for one of its members to be nominated. Despite these challenges, President Roosevelt and Justice Frankfurter felt that the mixture of MacLeish's love for literature and his abilities to organize and motivate people, exemplified by his days in law school, would be just what the Library of Congress needed.

MacLeish sought support from expected places such as the president of Harvard, MacLeish's current place of work, but found none. It was support from unexpected places, such as M. Llewellyn Raney of the University of Chicago libraries, which alleviated the ALA letter writing campaign against MacLeish's nomination. Raney pointed out to the detractors that, "MacLeish was a lawyer like Putnam...he was equally at home in the arts as one of the four leading American poets now alive...and while it was true that he had not attended a professional school of library science, neither had thirty-four of thirty-seven persons presently occupying executive positions at the Library of Congress." The main Republican arguments against MacLeish's nomination from within Congress was: that he was a poet and was a "fellow traveler" or sympathetic to communist causes. Calling to mind differences with the party he had over the years, MacLeish avowed that, "no one would be more shocked to learn I am a Communist than the Communists themselves." In Congress MacLeish's main advocate was Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley, Democrat from Kentucky. With President Roosevelt's support and Senator Barkley's skillful defense in the United States Senate, victory in a roll call vote with sixty-three Senators voting

in favor of MacLeish's appointment was achieved.

MacLeish became privy to Roosevelt's views on the library during a private meeting with the president. According to Roosevelt, the pay levels were too low and many people would need to be removed. Soon afterward, MacLeish joined Putnam for a luncheon in New York. At the meeting, Putnam relayed his desire to come to the Library for work and that his office would be down the hall from MacLeish's. This meeting further crystallized for MacLeish that as Librarian of Congress, he would be "an unpopular newcomer, disturbing the status quo."

It was a question from MacLeish's daughter, Mimi, which led him to realize that, "Nothing is more difficult for the beginning librarian than to discover what profession he was engaged." Mimi, his daughter, had inquired about what her daddy was to do all day, "...hand out books?" MacLeish created his own job description and set out to learn about how the library was currently organized. In October 1944, MacLeish described that he did not set out to reorganize the library, rather "...one problem or another demanded action, and each problem solved led on to another that needed attention."

MacLeish's chief accomplishments had their start in instituting daily staff meetings with division chiefs, the chief assistant librarian, and other administrators. He then set about setting up various committees on various projects including: acquisitions policy, fiscal operations, cataloging, and outreach. The committees alerted MacLeish to various problems throughout the library.

First and foremost, under Putnam, the library was acquiring more books than it could catalog. A report in December 1939, found that over one-quarter of the library's collection had not yet been cataloged. MacLeish solved the problem of acquisitions and cataloging through establishing another committee instructed to seek advice from specialists outside of the Library of Congress. The committee found many subject areas of the library to be adequate and many other areas to be, surprisingly, inadequately provided for. A set of general principles on acquisitions was then developed to ensure that, though it was impossible to collect everything, the Library of Congress would acquire the bare minimum of canons to meet its mission. These principles included acquiring all materials necessary to members of Congress and government officers, all materials expressing and recording the life and achievements of the people of the United States, and materials of other societies past and present which are of the most immediate concern to the peoples of the United States.

Secondly, MacLeish set about reorganizing the operational structure. Leading scholars in library science were assigned a committee to analyze the library's

managerial structure. The committee issued a report a mere two months after it was formed, in April 1940 stating that a major restructuring was necessary. This was no surprise to MacLeish who had thirty-five divisions under him. He divided the library's functions into three departments: administration, processing, and reference. All existing divisions were then assigned as appropriate. By including library scientists from inside and outside the Library of Congress, MacLeish was able to gain faith from the library community that he was on the right track. Within a year MacLeish had completely restructured the Library of Congress making it work more efficiently, bringing the library to the center to "report on the mystery of things."

Last, but not least, MacLeish promoted the Library of Congress through various forms of public advocacy. Perhaps his greatest display of public advocacy was requesting a budget increase of over a million dollars in his March 1940 budget proposal to the United States Congress. While the library did not receive the full increase, it did receive an increase of \$367, 591, the largest one-year increase to of the increase went toward improved pay levels, increased acquisitions in under served subject areas, and new positions.

World War II

During World War II MacLeish also served as director of the War Department's Office of Facts and Figures and as the assistant director of the Office of War Information. These jobs were heavily involved with propaganda, which was well-suited to MacLeish's talents; he had written quite a bit of politically motivated work in the previous decade. He spent a year as the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and a further year representing the U.S. at the creation of UNESCO. After this, he retired from public service and returned to academia.

Return to writing

Despite a long history of criticizing Marxism, MacLeish came under fire from conservative politicians of the 1940s and 1950s, including J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy. Much of this was due to his involvement with left-wing organizations like the League of American Writers, and to his friendships with prominent left-wing writers. In 1949 MacLeish became the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. He held this position until his retirement in 1962. In 1959 his play J.B. won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. From 1963 to 1967 he was the John Woodruff Simpson Lecturer at Amherst College. Around 1969/70 he met Bob Dylan, who describes this encounter in the third chapter of *Chronicles*, Vol. 1.

MacLeish greatly admired [T.S. Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/t-s-eliot/) and [Ezra Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/), and his work shows quite a bit of their influence. He was the literary figure that played the most important role in freeing Ezra Pound from St. Elisabeths Hospital in Washington DC where he was incarcerated for high treason between 1946 and 1958. MacLeish's early work was very traditionally modernist and accepted the contemporary modernist position holding that a poet was isolated from society. His most well-known poem, "Ars Poetica," contains a classic statement of the modernist aesthetic: "A poem should not mean / But be." He later broke with modernism's pure aesthetic. MacLeish himself was greatly involved in public life and came to believe that this was not only an appropriate but an inevitable role for a poet.

Legacy

MacLeish worked to promote the arts, culture, and libraries. Among other impacts, MacLeish was the first Librarian of Congress to begin the process of naming what would become the United States Poet Laureate. The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress came from a donation in 1937 from Archer M. Huntington, a wealthy ship builder. Like many donations it came with strings attached. In this case Huntington wanted the poet Joseph Auslander to be named to the position. MacLeish found little value in Auslander's writing. However, MacLeish was happy that having Auslander in the post attracted many other poets, such as [Robinson Jeffers](http://www.poemhunter.com/robinson-jeffers/) and [Robert Frost](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-frost/), to hold readings at the library. He set about establishing the consultancy as a revolving post rather than a lifetime position. In 1943, MacLeish displayed his love of poetry and the Library of Congress by naming [Louise Bogan](http://www.poemhunter.com/louise-bogan/) to the position. Bogan, who had long been a hostile critic of MacLeish's own writing, asked MacLeish why he appointed her to the position; MacLeish replied that she was the best person for the job. For MacLeish promoting the Library of Congress and the arts was vitally more important than petty personal conflicts.

In the June 5, 1972 issue of *The American Scholar*, MacLeish laid out in an essay his philosophy on libraries and librarianship, further shaping modern thought on the subject. MacLeish remarked in the essay that libraries are more than a mere collection of books. "If books are reports on the mysteries of the world and our existence in it, libraries remain reporting on the human mind, that particular mystery, still remains as countries lose their grandeur and universities are not certain what they are." For MacLeish, libraries are a massive report on the

mysteries of human kind.

Two collections of MacLeish's papers are held at the Yale Library Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. These are the Archibald MacLeish Collection and Archibald MacLeish Collection Addition.

MacLeish had three children: Kenneth, Mary Hillard, and Peter. He is also a great-uncle of film actress Laura Dern.

Awards

1933: Pulitzer Prize for poetry (Conquistador)

1953: Pulitzer Prize for poetry (Collected Poems 1917–1952)

1953: National Book Award (Collected Poems, 1917–1952)

1953: Bollingen Prize in Poetry

1959: Pulitzer Prize for Drama (J.B.)

1959: Tony Award for Best Play (J.B.)

1965: Academy Award for Documentary Feature (The Eleanor Roosevelt Story)

1977: Presidential Medal of Freedom

A Poet Speaks from the Visitors' Gallery

Have Gentlemen perhaps forgotten this?-
We write the histories.

Do Gentlemen who snigger at the poets,
Who speak the word professor with guffaws-
Do Gentlemen expect their fame to flourish
When we, not they, distribute the applause?

Or do they trust their hope of long remembrance
To those they name with such respectful care-
To those who write the tittle in the papers,
To those who tell the tattle on the air?

Do Gentlemen expect the generation
That counts the losers out when tolls the bell
To take some gossip-caster's estimation,
Some junior voice of fame with fish to sell?

Do Gentlement believe time's hard-boiled jury,
Judging the sober truth, will trust again
The words some copperhead who owned a paper
Ordered one Friday from the hired men?

Have Gentlemen forgotten Mr. Lincoln?

A poet wrote that story, not a newspaper,
Not the New Yorker of the nameless name
Who spat with hatred like some others later
And left, as they, in his hate his shame.

History's not written in the kind of ink
The richest man of most ambitious mind
Who hates a president enough to print
A daily paper can afford or find.

Gentlemen have power now and know it,
But even the great and most famous kings
Feared and with reason to offend the poets
Who songs are marble

And who marble sings.

Archibald MacLeish

An Eternity

There is no dusk to be,
There is no dawn that was,
Only there's now, and now,
And the wind in the grass.

Days I remember of
Now in my heart, are now;
Days that I dream will bloom
White the peach bough.

Dying shall never be
Now in the windy grass;
Now under shaken leaves
Death never was.

Archibald MacLeish

Ancestral

The star dissolved in evening—the one star
The silently
and night O soon now, soon
And still the light now
and still now the large
Relinquishing
and through the pools of blue
Still, still the swallows
and a wind now
and the tree
Gathering darkness:
I was small. I lay
Beside my mother on the grass, and sleep
Came—

slow hooves and dripping with the dark
The velvet muzzles, the white feet that move
In a dream water
and O soon now soon
Sleep and the night.

And I was not afraid.
Her hand lay over mine. Her fingers knew
Darkness,—and sleep—the silent lands, the far
Far off of morning where I should awake.

Archibald MacLeish

Ars Poetica

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown -

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind -

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs

A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea -

A poem should not mean
But be

Archibald MacLeish

Autumn

Sun smudge on
the smoky water

Archibald MacLeish

Baccalaureate

A year or two, and grey Euripides,
And Horace and a Lydia or so,
And Euclid and the brush of Angelo,
Darwin on man, Vergilius on bees,
The nose and Dialogues of Socrates,
Don Quixote, Hudibras and Trinculo,
How worlds are spawned and where the dead gods go,--
All shall be shard of broken memories.

And there shall linger other, magic things,--
The fog that creeps in wanly from the sea,
The rotten harbor smell, the mystery
Of moonlit elms, the flash of pigeon wings,
The sunny Green, the old-world peace that clings
About the college yard, where endlessly
The dead go up and down. These things shall be
Enchantment of our heart's remembering.

And these are more than memories of youth
Which earth's four winds of pain shall blow away;
These are earth's symbols of eternal truth,
Symbols of dream and imagery and flame,
Symbols of those same verities that play
Bright through the crumbling gold of a great name.

Archibald MacLeish

Before March

THE gull's image and the gull
Meet upon the water
All day I have thought of her
There is nothing left of that year
(There is sere-grass
Salt colored)
We have annulled it with
Salt
We have galled it clean to the clay with that one autumn
The hedge-rows keep the rubbish and the leaves
There is nothing left of that year in our lives but the leaves of it
As though it had not been at all
As though the love the love and the life altered
Even ourselves are as strangers in these thoughts
Why should I weep for this?
What have I brought her?
Of sorrow of sorrow of sorrow her heart full
The gull
Meets with his image on the winter water.

Archibald MacLeish

Broken Promise

THAT was by the door
Leafy evening in the apple trees
And you would not forget this anymore
And even if you died there would be these
Touchings remembered
and you would return
From any bourne from any shore
To find the evening in these leaves
To find my arms beside this door...
I think O my not now Ophelia
There are not always (like a moon)
Rememberings afterward
(I think there are
Sometimes a few strange stars upon the sky.)

Archibald MacLeish

De Votre Bonheur Il Ne Reste Que Vos Photos Sipsce...

And the rain since
And I have not heard
Leaf at the pane all winter
Nor a bird's wing beating as that was
I have not seen
All year your leaning face again
Since I have never wakened but that smell
Of wet pine bark was in the room.

Archibald MacLeish

Definition Of The Frontiers

First there is the wind but not like the familiar wind but long and without lapses or falling away or surges of air as is usual but rather like the persistent pressure of a river or a running tide.

This wind is from the other side and has an odor unlike the odor of the winds with us but like time if time had odor and were cold and carried a bitter and sharp taste like rust on the taste of snow or the fragrance of thunder.

When the air has this taste of time the frontiers are not far from us.

Then too there are the animals. There are always animals under the small trees. They belong neither to our side nor to theirs but are wild and because they are animals of such kind that wildness is unfamiliar in them as the horse for example or the goat and often sheep and dogs and like creatures their wandering there is strange and even terrifying signaling as it does the violation of custom and the subversion of order.

There are also the unnatural lovers the distortion of images the penetration of mirrors and the inarticulate meanings of the dreams. The dreams are in turmoil like a squall of birds.

Finally there is the evasion of those with whom we have come. It is at the frontiers that the companions desert us—that the girl returns to the old country

that we are alone.

Archibald MacLeish

Dr. Sigmund Freud Discovers The Sea Shell

Science, that simple saint, cannot be bothered
Figuring what anything is for:
Enough for her devotions that things are
And can be contemplated soon as gathered.

She knows how every living thing was fathered,
She calculates the climate of each star,
She counts the fish at sea, but cannot care
Why any one of them exists, fish, fire or feathered.

Why should she? Her religion is to tell
By rote her rosary of perfect answers.
Metaphysics she can leave to man:
She never wakes at night in heaven or hell

Staring at darkness. In her holy cell
There is no darkness ever: the pure candle
Burns, the beads drop briskly from her hand.

Who dares to offer Her the curled sea shell!
She will not touch it!--knows the world she sees
Is all the world there is! Her faith is perfect!

And still he offers the sea shell . . .

What surf
Of what far sea upon what unknown ground
Troubles forever with that asking sound?
What surge is this whose question never ceases?

Archibald MacLeish

Hurricane

Sleep at noon. Window blind
rattle and bang. Pay no mind.
Door go jump like somebody coming:
let him come. Tin roof drumming:
drum away — she's drummed before.
Blinds blow loose: unlatch the door.
Look up sky through the manchineel:
black show through like a hole in your heel.
Look down shore at the old canoe:
rag-a-tag sea turn white, turn blue,
kick up dust in the lee of the reef,
wallop around like a loblolly leaf.
Let her wallop — who's afraid?
Gale from the north-east: just the Trade . . .

And that's when you hear it: far and high —
sea-birds screaming down the sky
high and far like screaming leaves;
tree-branch slams across the eaves;
rain like pebbles on the ground . . .

and the sea turns white and the wind goes round.

Archibald MacLeish

Hypocrite Auteur

mon semblable, mon frère

(1)

Our epoch takes a voluptuous satisfaction
In that perspective of the action
Which pictures us inhabiting the end
Of everything with death for only friend.

Not that we love death,
Not truly, not the fluttering breath,
The obscene shudder of the finished act—
What the doe feels when the ultimate fact
Tears at her bowels with its jaws.

Our taste is for the opulent pause
Before the end comes. If the end is certain
All of us are players at the final curtain:
All of us, silence for a time deferred,
Find time before us for one sad last word.
Victim, rebel, convert, stoic—
Every role but the heroic—
We turn our tragic faces to the stalls
To wince our moment till the curtain falls.

(2)

A world ends when its metaphor has died.

An age becomes an age, all else beside,
When sensuous poets in their pride invent
Emblems for the soul's consent
That speak the meanings men will never know
But man-imagined images can show:
It perishes when those images, though seen,
No longer mean.

(3)

A world was ended when the womb
Where girl held God became the tomb

Where God lies buried in a man:
Botticelli's image neither speaks nor can
To our kind. His star-guided stranger
Teaches no longer, by the child, the manger,
The meaning of the beckoning skies.

Sophocles, when his reverent actors rise
To play the king with bleeding eyes,
No longer shows us on the stage advance
God's purpose in the terrible fatality of chance.

No woman living, when the girl and swan
Embrace in verses, feels upon
Her breast the awful thunder of that breast
Where God, made beast, is by the blood confessed.

Empty as conch shell by the waters cast
The metaphor still sounds but cannot tell,
And we, like parasite crabs, put on the shell
And drag it at the sea's edge up and down.

This is the destiny we say we own.

(4)
But are we sure
The age that dies upon its metaphor
Among these Roman heads, these mediaeval towers,
Is ours?—
Or ours the ending of that story?
The meanings in a man that quarry
Images from blinded eyes
And white birds and the turning skies
To make a world of were not spent with these
Abandoned presences.

The journey of our history has not ceased:
Earth turns us still toward the rising east,

The metaphor still struggles in the stone,
The allegory of the flesh and bone
Still stares into the summer grass
That is its glass,
The ignorant blood
Still knocks at silence to be understood.

Poets, deserted by the world before,
Turn round into the actual air:
Invent the age! Invent the metaphor!

Archibald MacLeish

Imagery

The tremulously mirrored clouds lie deep,
Enchanted towers bosomed in the stream,
And blossomed coronals of white-thorn gleam
Within the water where the willows sleep—
Still-imaged willow-leaves whose shadows steep
The far-reflected sky in dark of dream;
And glimpsed therein the sun-winged swallows seem
As fleeting memories to those who weep.

So mirrored in thy heart are all desires,
Eternal longings, Youth's inheritance,
All hopes that token immortality,
All griefs whereto immortal grief aspires.
Aweary of the world's reality,
I dream above the imaged pool, Romance.

Archibald MacLeish

Immortal Autumn

I speak this poem now with grave and level voice
In praise of autumn, of the far-horn-winding fall.

I praise the flower-barren fields, the clouds, the tall
Unanswering branches where the wind makes sullen noise.

I praise the fall: it is the human season.

Now

No more the foreign sun does meddle at our earth,
Enforce the green and bring the fallow land to birth,
Nor winter yet weigh all with silence the pine bough,

But now in autumn with the black and outcast crows
Share we the spacious world: the whispering year is gone:
There is more room to live now: the once secret dawn
Comes late by daylight and the dark unguarded goes.

Between the mutinous brave burning of the leaves
And winter's covering of our hearts with his deep snow
We are alone: there are no evening birds: we know
The naked moon: the tame stars circle at our eaves.

It is the human season. On this sterile air
Do words outcarry breath: the sound goes on and on.
I hear a dead man's cry from autumn long since gone.
I cry to you beyond upon this bitter air.

Archibald MacLeish

Invocation To The Social Muse

Señora, it is true the Greeks are dead.

It is true also that we here are Americans:
That we use the machines: that a sight of the god is unusual:
That more people have more thoughts: that there are

Progress and science and tractors and revolutions and
Marx and the wars more antiseptic and murderous
And music in every home: there is also Hoover.

Does the lady suggest we should write it out in The Word?
Does Madame recall our responsibilities? We are
Whores, Fräulein: poets, Fräulein, are persons of

Known vocation following troops: they must sleep with
Stragglers from either prince and of both views.
The rules permit them to further the business of neither.

It is also strictly forbidden to mix in maneuvers.
Those that infringe are inflated with praise on the plazas—
Their bones are resultantly afterwards found under newspapers.

Preferring life with the sons to death with the fathers,
We also doubt on the record whether the sons
Will still be shouting around with the same huzzas—

For we hope Lady to live to lie with the youngest.
There are only a handful of things a man likes,
Generation to generation, hungry or

Well fed: the earth's one: life's
One: Mister Morgan is not one.

There is nothing worse for our trade than to be in style.

He that goes naked goes further at last than another.
Wrap the bard in a flag or a school and they'll jimmy his
Door down and be thick in his bed—for a month:

(Who recalls the address now of the Imagists?)
But the naked man has always his own nakedness.
People remember forever his live limbs.

They may drive him out of the camps but one will take him.
They may stop his tongue on his teeth with a rope's argument—
He will lie in a house and be warm when they are shaking.

Besides, Tovarishch, how to embrace an army?
How to take to one's chamber a million souls?
How to conceive in the name of a column of marchers?

The things of the poet are done to a man alone
As the things of love are done—or of death when he hears the
Step withdraw on the stair and the clock tick only.

Neither his class nor his kind nor his trade may come near him
There where he lies on his left arm and will die,
Nor his class nor his kind nor his trade when the blood is jeering

And his knee's in the soft of the bed where his love lies.

I remind you, Barinya, the life of the poet is hard—
A hardy life with a boot as quick as a fiver:

Is it just to demand of us also to bear arms?

Archibald MacLeish

L'An Trentiesme De Mon Eage

And I have come upon this place
By lost ways, by a nod, by words,
By faces, by an old man's face
At Morlaix lifted to the birds,

By hands upon the tablecloth
At Aldebori's, by the thin
Child's hands that opened to the moth
And let the flutter of the moonlight in,

By hands, by voices, by the voice
Of Mrs. Whitman on the stair,
By Margaret's 'If we had the choice
To choose or not - 'through her thick hair,

By voices, by the creak and fall
Of footsteps on the upper floor,
By silence waiting in the hall
Between the doorbell and the door,

By words, by voices, a lost way - ,
And here above the chimney stack
The unknown constellations sway -
And by what way shall I go back?

Archibald MacLeish

Liberty

When liberty is headlong girl
And runs her roads and wends her ways
Liberty will shriek and whirl
Her showery torch to see it blaze.

When liberty is wedded wife
And keeps the barn and counts the byre
Liberty amends her life.
She drowns her torch for fear of fire.

Archibald MacLeish

Lines For A Prologue

These alternate nights and days, these seasons
Somehow fail to convince me. It seems
I have the sense of infinity!

(In your dreams, O crew of Columbus,
O listeners over the sea
For the surf that breaks upon Nothing—)

Once I was waked by the nightingales in the garden.
I thought, What time is it? I thought,
Time—Is it Time still?—Now is it Time?

(Tell me your dreams, O sailors:
Tell me, in sleep did you climb
The tall masts, and before you—)

At night the stillness of old trees
Is a leaning over and the inertness
Of hills is a kind of waiting.

(In sleep, in a dream, did you see
The world's end? Did the water
Break—and no shore—Did you see?)

Strange faces come through the streets to me
Like messengers: and I have been warned
By the moving slowly of hands at a window.

Oh, I have the sense of infinity—
But the world, sailors, is round.
They say there is no end to it.

Nocturne

The earth, still heavy and warm with afternoon,
Dazed by the moon:

The earth, tormented with the moon's light,
Wandering in the night:

La, La, The moon is a lovely thing to see—
The moon is an agony.

Full moon, moon rise, the old old pain
Of brightness in dilated eyes,

The ache of still
Elbows leaning on the narrow sill,

Of motionless cold hands upon the wet
Marble of the parapet,

Of open eyelids of a child behind
The crooked glimmer of the window blind,

Of sliding faint remindful squares
Across the lamplight on the rocking-chairs:

Why do we stand so late
Stiff fingers on the moonlit gate?

Why do we stand
To watch so long the fall of moonlight on the sand?

What is it we cannot recall?

Tormented by the moon's light
The earth turns maundering through the night.

Archibald MacLeish

Not Marble Nor The Gilded Monuments

THE praisers of women in their proud and beautiful poems
Naming the grave mouth and the hair and the eyes
Boasted those they loved should be forever remembered
These were lies
The words sound but the face in the Istrian sun is forgotten
The poet speaks but to her dead ears no more
The sleek throat is gone -and the breast that was troubled to listen
Shadow from door
Therefore I will not praise your knees nor your fine walking
Telling you men shall remember your name as long
As lips move or breath is spent or the iron of English
Rings from a tongue
I shall say you were young and your arms straight and you!
mouth scarlet
I shall say you will die and none will remember you
Your arms change and none remember the swish of your garments
Nor the click of your shoe
Not with my hand's strength not with difficult labor
Springing the obstinate words to the bones of your breast
And the stubborn line to your young stride and the breath to your breathing
And the beat to your haste
Shall I prevail on the hearts of unborn men to remember
(What is a dead girl but a shadowy ghost
Or a dead man's voice but a distant and vain affirmation
Like dream words most)
Therefore I will not speak of the undying glory of women
I will say you were young and straight and your skin fair
And you stood in the door and the sun was a shadow of leaves on your shoulders
And a leaf on your hair
I will not speak of the famous beauty of dead women
I will say the shape of a leaf lay once on your hair
Till the world ends and the eyes are out and the mouths broken
Look! It is there!

Archibald MacLeish

Poem In Prose

This poem is for my wife.
I have made it plainly and honestly:
The mark is on it
Like the burl on the knife.

I have not made it for praise.
She has no more need for praise
Than summer has
Or the bright days.

In all that becomes a woman
Her words and her ways are beautiful:
Love's lovely duty,
the well-swept room.

Wherever she is there is sun
And time and a sweet air:
Peace is there,
Work done.

There are always curtains and flowers
And candles and baked bread
And a cloth spread
And a clean house.

Her voice when she sings is a voice
At dawn by a freshening spring
Where the wave leaps in the wind
And rejoices.

Wherever she is it is now.
It is here where the apples are:
Here in the stars,
In the quick hour.

The greatest and richest good,
My own life to live in,
This she has given me --

If giver could.

Archibald MacLeish

Seafarer

And learn O voyager to walk
The roll of earth, the pitch and fall
That swings across these trees those stars:
That swings the sunlight up the wall.

And learn upon these narrow beds
To sleep in spite of sea, in spite
Of sound the rushing planet makes:
And learn to sleep against this ground.

Archibald MacLeish

The End Of The World

Quite unexpectedly, as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe,
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb
Quite unexpectedly to top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing -- nothing at all.

Archibald MacLeish

The Night Dream

To R. L.

NEITHER her voice, her name,
Eyes, quietness neither,
That moved through the light, that came
Cold stalk in her teeth
Bitten of some blue flower
Knew I before nor saw.
This was a dream. Ah,
This was a dream. There was sun
Laid on the cloths of a table
We drank together. Her mouth
Was a lion's mouth out of jade
Cold with a fable of water.
Faces I could not see
Watched me with gentleness. Grace
Folded my body with wings.
I cannot love you she said.
My head she laid on her breast.
As stillness with ringing of bees
I was filled with a singing of praise.
Knowledge filled me and peace.
We were silent and not ashamed.
Ah we were glad that day.
They asked me but it was one
Dead they meant and not I.
She was beside me she said.
We rode in a desert place.
We were always happy. Her sleeves
Jangled with earrings of gold.
They told me the wind from the south
Was the cold wind to be feared.
We were galloping under the leaves
This was a dream, Ah
This was a dream.
And her mouth
Was not your mouth nor her eyes,
But the rivers were four and I knew
As a secret between us, the way

Hands touch, it was you.

Archibald MacLeish

The Old Men In The Leaf Smoke

The old men rake the yards for winter
Burning the autumn-fallen leaves.
They have no lives, the one or the other.
The leaves are dead, the old men live
Only a little, light as a leaf,
Left to themselves of all their loves:
Light in the head most often too.
Raking the leaves, raking the lives,
Raking life and leaf together,
The old men smell of burning leaves
But which is which they wonder &mdash whether
Anyone tells the leaves and loves &mdash
Anyone left, that is, who lives.

Archibald MacLeish

The Rock In The Sea

Think of our blindness where the water burned!
Are we so certain that those wings, returned
And turning, we had half discerned
Before our dazzled eyes had surely seen
The bird aloft there, did not mean?—
Our hearts so seized upon the sign!

Think how we sailed up-wind, the brine
Tasting of daphne, the enormous wave
Thundering in the water cave—
Thunder in stone. And how we beached the skiff
And climbed the coral of that iron cliff
And found what only in our hearts we'd heard—
The silver screaming of that one, white bird:
The fabulous wings, the crimson beak
That opened, red as blood, to shriek
And clamor in that world of stone,
No voice to answer but its own.

What certainty, hidden in our hearts before,
Found in the bird its metaphor?

Archibald MacLeish

The Sheep In The Ruins

for Learned and Augustus Hand

You, my friends, and you strangers, all of you,
Stand with me a little by the walls
Or where the walls once were.
The bridge was here, the city further:
Now there is neither bridge nor town—
A doorway where the roof is down
Opens on a foot-worn stair
That climbs by three steps into empty air.
(What foot went there?)
Nothing in this town that had a thousand steeples
Lives now but these flocks of sheep
Grazing the yellow grasses where the bricks lie dead beneath:
Dogs drive them with their brutal teeth.

Can none but sheep live where the walls go under?
Is man's day over and the sheep's begun?
And shall we sit here like the mourners on a dunghill
Shrilling with melodious tongue—
Disfiguring our faces with the nails of our despair?
(What dust is this we sift upon our hair?)
Because a world is taken from us as the camels from the man of Uz
Shall we sit weeping for the world that was
And curse God and so perish?
Shall monuments be grass and sheep inherit them?
Shall dogs rule in the rubble of the arches?

Consider, Oh consider what we are!
Consider what it is to be a man—
He who makes his journey by the glimmer of a candle;
Who discovers in his mouth, between his teeth, a word;
Whose heart can bear the silence of the stars— that burden;
Who comes upon his meaning in the blindness of a stone—
A girl's shoulder, perfectly harmonious!

Even the talk of it would take us days together.
Marvels men have made, Oh marvels!—and our breath
Brief as it is: our death waiting—
Marvels upon marvels! Works of state—
The imagination of the shape of order!
Works of beauty—the cedar door
Perfectly fitted to the sill of basalt!
Works of grace—
The ceremony at the entering of houses,
At the entering of lives: the bride among the torches in the shrill carouse!

Works of soul—
Pilgrimages through the desert to the sacred boulder:
Through the mid night to the stroke of one!
Works of grace! Works of wonder!
All this have we done and more—
And seen—what have we not seen?—

A man beneath the sunlight in his meaning:
A man, one man, a man alone.

In the sinks of the earth that wanderer has gone down.
The shadow of his mind is on the mountains.
The word he has said is kept in the place beyond
As the seed is kept and the earth ponders it.
Stones—even the stones remember him:
Even the leaves—his image is in them.
And now because the city is a ruin in the waste of air
We sit here and despair!
Because the sheep graze in the dying grove
Our day is over!
We must end
Because the talk around the table in the dusk has ended,
Because the fingers of the goddesses are found
Like marble pebbles in the gravelly ground
And nothing answers but the jackal in the desert,—
Because the cloud proposes, the wind says!

Because the sheep are pastured where the staring statues lie
We sit upon the sand in silence
Watching the sun go and the shadows change!

Listen, my friends, and you, all of you, strangers,
Listen, the work of man, the work of splendor
Never has been ended or will end.
Even where the sheep defile the ruined stair
And dogs are masters—even there
One man's finger in the dust shall trace the circle.

Even among the ruins shall begin the work,
Large in the level morning of the light
And beautiful with cisterns where the water whitens,
Rippling upon the lip of stone, and spills
By cedar sluices into pools, and the young builders
String their plumb lines, and the well-laid course
Blanches its mortar in the sun, and all the morning
Smells of wood-smoke, rope-tar, horse-sweat, pitch-pine,
Men and the trampled mint leaves in the ditch.

One man in the sun alone
Walks between the silence and the stone:
The city rises from his flesh, his bone.

Archibald MacLeish

The Silent Slain

We too, we too, descending once again
The hills of our own land, we too have heard
Far off -- Ah, que ce cor a longue haleine --
The horn of Roland in the passages of Spain,
the first, the second blast, the failing third,
And with the third turned back and climbed once more
The steep road southward, and heard faint the sound
Of swords, of horses, the disastrous war,
And crossed the dark defile at last, and found
At Roncevaux upon the darkening plain
The dead against the dead and on the silent ground
The silent slain --

Archibald MacLeish

The Snowflake Which Is Now And Hence Forever

Will it last? he says.
Is it a masterpiece?
Will generation after generation
Turn with reverence to the page?

Birdseye scholar of the frozen fish,
What would he make of the sole, clean, clear
Leap of the salmon that has disappeared?

To be, yes!--whether they like it or not!
But not to last when leap and water are forgotten,
A plank of standard pinkness in the dish.

They also live
Who swerve and vanish in the river.

Archibald MacLeish

The Too-Late Born

We too, we too, descending once again
The hills of our own land, we too have heard
Far off --- Ah, que ce cor a longue haleine ---
The horn of Roland in the passages of Spain,
The first, the second blast, the failing third,
And with the third turned back and climbed once more
The steep road southward, and heard faint the sound
Of swords, of horses, the disastrous war,
And crossed the dark defile at last, and found
At Roncevaux upon the darkening plain
The dead against the dead and on the silent ground
The silent slain---

Archibald MacLeish

The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:
who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night
and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died.
Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could
but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished
no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,
they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,
it is you who must say this.

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.

Archibald MacLeish

Two Poems From The War

Oh, not the loss of the accomplished thing!
Not dumb farewells, nor long relinquishment
Of beauty had, and golden summer spent,
And savage glory of the fluttering
Torn banners of the rain, and frosty ring
Of moon-white winters, and the imminent
Long-lunging seas, and glowing students bent
To race on some smooth beach the gull's wing:

Not these, nor all we've been, nor all we've loved,
The pitiful familiar names, had moved
Our hearts to weep for them; but oh, the star
The future is! Eternity's too wan
To give again that undefeated, far,
All-possible irradiance of dawn.

Like moon-dark, like brown water you escape,
O laughing mouth, O sweet uplifted lips.
Within the peering brain old ghosts take shape;
You flame and wither as the white foam slips
Back from the broken wave: sometimes a start,
A gesture of the hands, a way you own
Of bending that smooth head above your heart,--
Then these are varied, then the dream is gone.

Oh, you are too much mine and flesh of me
To seal upon the brain, who in the blood
Are so intense a pulse, so swift a flood
Of beauty, such unceasing instancy.
Dear unimagined brow, unvisioned face,
All beauty has become your dwelling place.

Archibald MacLeish

Unfinished History

WE HAVE loved each other in this time twenty years
And with such love as few men have in them even for
One or for the marriage month or the hearing of
Three nights' carts in the street but it will leave them:
We have been lovers the twentieth year now:
Our bed has been made in many houses and evenings:
The apple-tree moves at the window in this house:
There were palms rattled the night through in one:
In one there were red tiles and the sea's hours:
We have made our bed in the changes of many months and the
Light of the day is still overlong in the windows
Till night shall bring us the lamp and one another:
Those that have seen her have no thought what she is:
Her face is clear in the sun as a palmful of water:
Only by night and in love are the dark winds on it....
I wrote this poem that day when I thought
Since we have loved we two so long together
Shall we have done together all love gone?
Or how then will it change with us when the breath
Is no more able for such joy and the blood is
Thin in the throat and the time not come for death?

Archibald MacLeish

Voyage

for Ernest Hemingway

HEAP we these coppered hulls
With headed poppies
And garlic longed-for by the eager dead
Keep we with sun-caught sails
The westward ocean
Raise we that island on the sea at last
Steep to the gull-less shore
Across the sea rush
Trade we our cargoes with the dead for sleep.

Archibald MacLeish

Way-Station

The incoherent rushing of the train
Dulls like a drugged pain

Numbs
To an ether throbbing of inaudible drums

Unfolds
Hush within hush until the night withholds

Only its darkness.
From the deep
Dark a voice calls like a voice in sleep

Slowly a strange name in a strange tongue.

Among

The sleeping listeners a sound
As leaves stir faintly on the ground

When snow falls from a windless sky—
A stir A sigh

Archibald MacLeish

You, Andrew Marvell

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night:

To feel creep up the curving east
The earthy chill of dusk and slow
Upon those under lands the vast
And ever climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange
The flooding dark about their knees
The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kermanshah the gate
Dark empty and the withered grass
And through the twilight now the late
Few travelers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge
Across the silent river gone
And through Arabia the edge
Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street
The wheel rut in the ruined stone
And Lebanon fade out and Crete
high through the clouds and overblown

And over Sicily the air
Still flashing with the landward gulls
And loom and slowly disappear
The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore
Of Africa the gilded sand
And evening vanish and no more
The low pale light across that land

Nor now the long light on the sea:

And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on...

Archibald MacLeish