

POETRY

Ares : A Poem

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Preface

Adolph Hitler's blitzkrieg invaded Poland, only recently allied with the United Kingdom and France, on September 1, 1939. Air and naval forces of the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Those two acts of armed aggression initiated the most devastating war in human history, with up to eighty million deaths. The United Nations Charter was signed in San Francisco, California, on June 26, 1945, with the intent of reducing the probability of such kinds of attacks in the future and, to some optimists, with the hope that wars would end.

But on June 12, 1950, armed forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) invaded the Republic of Korea (South Korea), beginning a conflict in which more than five million more persons lost their lives.

On October 7, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush announced the start of what would become an unprovoked twenty-year war in Afghanistan that would cost eight trillion dollars, kill as many as a million people, and end in defeat for the mightiest military organization on the planet.

On August 1, 2008, Vladimir Putin's Russian army invaded the independent nation of Georgia, starting an eight-day war and ending with the Russian occupation of the Georgian province of South Ossetia. On March 18, 2014, Putin announced that Russia had annexed Crimea, a peninsula of the sovereign and independent nation of Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, Putin's military forces invaded the entirety of the nation of Ukraine in an illegal war in gross violation of international treaties to which Russia is a signatory, including that hope-filled United Nations Charter.

Throughout human history, and even before the invention of writing, there have been wars. War has been an enduring attribute of the human species since before recorded time began, and, for more than 5,000 years, scribes have written about wars in poetry and prose. With all that has been written about wars and warfare, what more can be said? We think more *must* be said.

When we consider the epic struggles of mankind that pit the forces of good against those of evil, we search for archetypal heroes and villains. Achilles, Odysseus, and Beowulf are heroes. Hades, Satan, and Darth Vader represent the forces of evil.

It may be argued that the protagonist of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* is not the god of Abraham, nor is it Adam, the first human of Hebrew mythology, whose fall explains the presence of death and destruction. Milton puts Satan at the core of the story. We see another force: Ares.

If Milton's Satan represents the dark side of humanity in opposition to the light, Ares represents the powers of war against those of peace. The record of history cannot be more clear: Though other gods have come and gone, Ares lives on through the ages. Peace on earth is rare and of short duration. Wars are perennial and universal. That is the central premise of this poem. Other gods are gone; Ares, the God of War, lives.

Why poetry? Perhaps a short anecdote will help. When television was introduced to the public in the middle of the twentieth century, a small boy was asked whether he liked radio or television better. He replied, "I like radio. The pictures are better." Wars are covered in reports and documentaries in fine detail, but perhaps when they are expressed in poetry, the pictures are better.

When Pontius Pilate asks of Jesus, *Quid est veritas?* it is a rhetorical question. He expects no answer, and Matthew gives no answer. Socrates taught that absolute Truth (Sophia) is knowable. Plato wrote that we can discover truth by asking questions. Aristotle wrote that truth is what is consistent with

the external world. In our search for the truth of wars, we may find an answer in the final lines of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In poetry, if the work is true, then there is beauty to be held in awe and to be contemplated at length. And in that studied contemplation, we may come to know ourselves in a way that deepens our understanding of who we are, of *what* we are.

The writer makes a diligent effort to select good words and place them in good order. To paraphrase Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we agree that prose is good words in their best order, but poetry is the *best* words in their best order. Finding good words in English is not difficult, but finding the best words is another matter. That is our quest.

In his 1800 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth wrote, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Powerful feelings arise in the consciousness of anyone who has ever been exposed to war, whether at home or in a foreign land. Perhaps it should be granted to every person who has known warfare, who has seen it up close, heard it, smelled and felt it, some moments of tranquility to reflect on the experiences that can never be adequately shared with those who have not known the horrors of war.

At the technical level, in poetry, every word counts. Indeed, every syllable counts. And in this time of sensitivity to the use of gendered pronouns like "he," "him," and "his," and the masculine terms "man" and "men," I have tried to avoid these aspects of the English language, but it's difficult. For example, "human" and "people" have two syllables, so simple substitution will not scan. I've tried alternative expressions of the intended ideas but have fallen short. I'm therefore left to apologize to anyone who takes offense and to express a willingness to hear suggestions.

This poem is told in twelve books following the style of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which itself follows the model of *The Aeneid* by Virgil. Each book consists of a number of five-line verses in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Book I is narrated anonymously and describes the universe before the birth of Ares. Its thesis is that the seeds of war existed in the Chaos from which the universe was created.

In Book II, the voice becomes that of Ares himself. He describes his origin and how that defines his character, his attitudes, and his actions. He does not admit to the criticisms of other gods or mortals but makes it clear that he is a warrior. Ares continues his narration for the rest of the poem with tales of wars around the world, which he attributes to an innate flaw in mankind, the urge to fight with, even to annihilate, the other.

In Book VII, Ares admits to the dread of any warrior, death in battle, to which he nearly falls at the hands of his half-sister, Athena, for whom it is clear he has no respect. His father, Zeus, admonishes him to change his ways, but he will not change. He is a warrior. He has no other purpose than to fight. In Book VIII, he recovers.

Throughout the poem, Ares recounts some of the many battles he has fought in many of the wars caused by human flaws, especially greed and lust for power. He could go on. A list of all the wars in human history, and before writing was created to make records, would be innumerable. He calls out just a few of the deadliest wars and battles.

By the end of Book XII, Ares has not only ascended, but he remains when other gods have died and receded into the past where only memories persist. He endures. So long as humankind exists, with that



fundamental flaw, the God of War will never die. We get the sense, however, that, unlike Milton's Satan, our Ares has grown tired of all the death and destruction he has seen and in which he has fought. Perhaps he would like to put it behind him, to find another reason for being, but he has no choice.

Why poetry? To paraphrase the American painter, Edward Hopper, if you could say it in prose, there would be no need for poetry. The deeper one dives into the human tragedy that is war, the greater the recognition that prose will simply not do the job. Facts are fundamental, but meaning requires perspective.

Both painting and poetry provide the perspective that prose cannot. In this work, the pen-and-ink line drawings of Salome and Mariam Bekauri complement what one hopes may be the "best words in their best order."

Explanatory Notes are provided for the more obscure references, and a Bibliography is available for those who wish to explore these matters in greater depth.





BOOK I.
Ares Antecedent

Of war I sing and of that god who fights
The battles humankind so cherishes,
No thought of those who languish in the mire
Of fields awash with gore and homes aflame,
No care for mothers now bereft of sons.

Before the earthly humans' time was war.
It lay in wait before the world began,
The ancient passion deep inside us all,
In Chaos then the seeds were formed and sown.
We only mumble in our feckless tongue.

That Chaos was not empty is assured;
The bits, the pieces, and the gas all clashed,
Contesting for celestial dominance,
Establishing the awesome precedent,
The strong will surely overcome the weak.

Erebus, Darkness, spread his gloom abroad.
His sister Nyx then framed the sunless night,
When mischief there will come in darkened times,
When out of sight the drums of war we hear,
The sounds of anger and of avarice.



There were no gods to orchestrate affairs,
For sentient beings had not yet evolved
To populate the new-made universe
And dream of beings they could not explain,
Attributing to them the sway supreme.

Thus gods were born in shrouded mystery
Of cloudy smoke and foggy cosmic dust
Competing for their place in dominance
Of all the hearts and minds of humankind
Responding to their mortal hopes and dreams.

Gaia, she who made the earth and sea,
Who fashioned all from nothingness, and yet
What remnants did she leave behind to rise
From that abyss to claim its due in strife?
Oh, Mother of us all and your neglect!

What did you do or leave undone for us,
The gods descended from your fertile loins
And for the human race as yet to come,
A competition to survive and thrive,
To wrest a dire existence from the rest?



You gave us battlegrounds for wars to come,
For boys with yet unshaven chins to die,
To be received by Tartarus below,
The killing of a billion blameless,
A sacrifice to some uncertain gods.

Gaia, you were lonely, and you made
A mate. Oh, Mother once again, your choice
Would lead the universe to woe, to war,
A war your spawn would fight among themselves.
Did you not know that you were birthing strife?

Then Gaia angrily responds to this:
“Can any mother know what kind of man
Her son will come to be when he is grown?
The fault is mine, I know. Ouranos was
My own creation and my mate, as well.”

“Eighteen was by my count our progeny,
And it was more by far than I could bear.
I sought relief, and Cronus came to me.
I gave to him, my son, a sharpened blade,
And it was done. Ouranos sired no more.”



And then Ouranos said in prophecy,
“Be warned, Cronus, my son, that what you did
To me, the same shall be to you, as well.
You wear the crown today, but it shall rest
Uneasy on your head when war begins.”

Usurpers know that someone waits, prepared
To push them from their place by force of arms,
And Cronus will after a bitter war
Become the first to lose both war and crown.
Then hail the victor Zeus, the risen son.

Ten years the battles raged in Thessaly.
Cronus and Atlas at his side fought on.
The Titans of Othrys could not prevail
Against Olympus and its upstart gods.
Then hail the victor Zeus, the risen son.

Across the sea, another war is told
By sons of Sarah and of Abraham,
Of war before the time of man began
When Chaos had been tamed by their Yahweh,
Alleged creator of the universe.



This Yahweh was in Canaan made by men,
With Asherah, who walks upon the sea,
Consort of El and mother of the gods,
But green-eyed jealous Yahweh went to war,
Destroying temples built to honor her.

Of all the hundred Canaan gods or more,
The greatest was the God of Rain and Dew,
Called Baal, the bull, by those who worshipped him
And by his brother son of El, Yahweh,
Who bore that god eternal enmity.

This Yahweh poses as a god who loves,
With promises of Ecstasy to all
Who bow the knee to him as would a slave,
But threatens lasting horrors to the rest,
Who worship Baal or any other god.

He slaughtered half-a-thousand worshippers
Of Baal, that Yahweh, supremely jealous god,
Commanding genocide to cleanse the land
Of Canaanites who would not bow to him,
This "god who loves" of promised Paradise!



Nearby, in Syria, another god
Compelled obedience lest harm would come
To those recalcitrants who would not kneel,
Who would not recognize the glorious,
The Father of All Gods who's called Dagon

Progenitor of all the gods, he reigned
Throughout Philistia, intolerant
Of lesser deities, as Yahweh was,
And jealous, as all gods appeared to be,
Of sacrifices offered to those gods.

When war broke out, there was no end in sight,
For battles fought were not legitimate,
The war unjust and insignificant.
Those gods would disappear as time moved on,
Existing in the shade of memory.

So many gods, so much imagining,
Of why the morning sun rose in the east,
And why the rains poured down from up above.
Bewildering in childish ignorance.
An answer must be found or go insane.



A fertile land gave rise to fertile minds,
Wherein divinities were born and bred.
By chance or by some mystery, one god,
Like Zeus across the waves, became the king,
A jealous god like all the other gods.

So frightened was this king of his domain,
So jealous of the other thousand gods,
That out of nothingness he made a host,
A horde of angels who would serve his needs,
Controlled by officers of one in ten.

One angel shone so bright above them all,
His name of Lucifer was aptly put,
The one who bears the light's admired by all,
His brilliance spreading happiness and joy,
Admired as much as that great god himself.

An angel close to him who bears the light
Told in the softest voice, "You are the one,
And I am not alone," this angel cried.
"We cannot live in tyranny, my Prince."
The numbers grew; a thousand came to him.

To be continued in our next issue.



“Entreat me not to do what you would ask.
Our god is king, and we must not forget
That he made you and he made me, as well.
All that we are and all we have are his.
Take heed: we owe to him our loyalty.

A thousand voices all as one declared,
“Our king is Lucifer, our Lucifer!
Abolish tyranny,” they cried to him.
“It’s freedom that we want! And Lucifer!”
That thousand and by thousands more they came.

Not all the angels came to Lucifer.
The captains met, with Michael at their head.
“I hear the talk of revolution here,”
The captain said to them. “What can I do?”
“They must be stopped,” one captain said to all.

“Then I shall go to Lucifer and say
Rebellion cannot be allowed by God.
I’ll nip this insurrection in the bud.”
The fervor in the crowd was at its peak.
“Rebel,” one said, then two, then ten, then more.



So Michael went to Lucifer and said,
“You must not try to overthrow our god.
Obedience is the only path to take.”
The bearer of the light in silence stood;
His thoughts were all a blur as Michael spoke.

“God wants no war, Dear Lucifer. Obey!
And this shall pass. We all can live in peace.”
“What kind of peace is this?” the bright one asked.
When angels bide the despotism of one,
A jealous god obsessed with loyalty?”

“I had no plan,” he said, “to do this thing.”
“That’s good,” the happy captains’ captain said.
“But now I see the tyranny first-hand.
You made it clear that freedom’s but a dream.
I want no war, but war is on your head.”

Rebellious Lucifer and all his host
Marched boldly to the throne of Heaven’s king
Demanding termination of the reign,
Cessation of the despotism that pressed
Upon the hundred million seraphim.



When Lucifer took arms against his god,
A war began he had no chance to win.
Insanity it is to start a war
To prove a point but never to prevail,
To win against unbounded strength and will.

The monarch's legions fought their kin,
Advantaged by the power of their god
And deadly weapons only he could give,
While Lucifer's brigades had none of these
To press their cause for liberty.

With Michael at the head of Heaven's troops,
Equipped with weaponry as yet unknown
To mortals or to any other gods,
The forces of the potentate prevailed,
Relentless in suppressing Lucifer.

"We're lost," the leader of the rebels called.
"Have pity, Precious King on all of us.
We erred most grievously and do repent.
We shall obey your will, as you command."
The plea dismissed, the jealous king struck back.



“You dared to challenge me, ungrateful wretch.
Did you forget who gave you life and light,
Who set you in this perfect Paradise?
You and your minions are a thankless lot,
And now you plead for mercy. You’ll have none.”

He knew it all before it came to pass,
This deity whose will must be obeyed.
What every angel knew, and thought, and did,
He knew before the angels did, and yet
Did nothing to prevent the sinful acts.

The fiercest enemies in wars have fought
Across the world and fought with savagery,
But when the battles end, they move along,
And do not tarry for the consequence,
And never would they kill the prisoners.

But here, that king, supremely jealous king
Chained all the rebels to a lake of fire
To languish for eternity in pain,
Absent compassion and no clemency,
No sympathy and no benevolence.



Show mercy to the vanquished, ancients say,
But did the victor god show charity?
And did he chastise those who challenged him?
What kindness or compassion did he show?
What lesson did he leave for humankind?

That lesson's clear: The jealous god rejects
Compassion for opponents in a war,
So take revenge; forgiveness is not due,
No leniency, no clemency, no ruth,
"Retaliation," screams the God of Love!

The lesson's heard and understood by kings
Who brook no interference in their rule,
Disciples of the vicious, jealous god,
As like the bitter son of Henry Third,
Pretender to the Scottish Stone of Scone.

In Scotland, William Wallace rose to claim
That Scots are free from English cruelty,
And when at last he lost on Falkirk's field,
He found no kindness in the frightful king,
But only torture and dismemberment.



Where is the mercy, where the vaunted grace
Of that old god of Moses' puffery,
That so-called God of Love with disregard
For common ordinary decency,
Epitome of base hypocrisy.

Before the mortals' time was wicked war;
In Chaos early evil seedlings grew
And bore the bitter fruit of blood and death,
The perverse spawn of unchecked hate and pride,
Ambition unrestrained by men or gods.

Unlimited desire for more and more
Is doorway back to the abyss of old,
With every gain a little more is lost
Till nothing's left, a hollow self remains,
And pride, the chief of sins, consumes the man.

From Hesiod and Homer come the tales
Of old Greek gods and of their progeny.
Euripides and Sophocles add more
Of ancient heroes and their many gods
Who look like us and act the way we do.



From Heber and his burning bush we're told
How Abram's god defeated all the rest,
One god who formed the universe and gave
His worshipers the license to destroy
The nations who refused to bend the knee.

Oh, Gaia, who did form the universe
From Nothingness, and Shaddai, is it true,
Did both of you prepare the land for war?
Did you instill in every human soul
Eternal need for war, the urge to fight?

With shuttered eyes that cannot see the truth,
With blood-blocked ears that cannot hear the screams,
They wander onto battlegrounds in search
Of what another has to take by force
The things they never made by their own hands.

Their venal pride is inexhaustible,
Their quest corrupted by those human flaws
Pervading hearts and minds with mortal sin
Perpetuating violence without
Recourse to calmer rationality.



If you believe the earth was, at its start,
A kind of paradise, with happiness,
Unbridled joy across the land and sea,
Magnificent, delightful to the eye,
Then you have been deceived and misinformed.

Five billion years have passed since earth was formed
From swirling dust and gas around the sun.
Your earth was nothing more than just a speck
Of jagged rock of little consequence
Among the scraps that shaped the universe.

There was no brilliant splendor to behold,
No stunning radiance to mesmerize,
To glorify the grandeur of the land,
A cosmic accident of little note,
Diminutive, minute among the stars.

No paradise, no happiness or joy
On this new piece of dust, but in the gas
There must have been some fatal element
Surviving from the clashes of the bits
Contending for superiority.



Before the earth began, it was the gods
Whose dormant spirits lay unseen, unknown,
Unknowable, in wait for men to give
Substantial form and character, the fill
That makes a holy god from nothingness.

The gods were made by men to exercise
Control through dread and bogus promises
Of better lives in some state after death,
Deceiving naïve dupes, their easy prey,
To fight their wars for power and for gold.

Once they have gained and hold supremacy,
They clench the sequined stick with tightened grip
Lest then another tyrant come along
Supported by another stronger god
To wrest away by greater force the rod.

Then you're accountable, you gods of old,
For all the woe that war has wreaked on men.
Did you not know what you had done to loose
Nearby the frightful consequence of war,
Or did you care? What kind of gods are you?



In Chaos, then, we find the source of war,
But who, or what unworldly other thing,
Created Chaos from what never was?
That deity or other entity,
Hid war inside that fashioned universe.

Then in that universe, we seek to find
Where its creator hid the seeds of war
And cloaked it with a shroud invisible
That we might never know its whereabouts
To root it out and free us from its curse.

That noxious hidden weed is powerful.
It takes the measure of all humankind,
By sending skyward spores of its own form
To rain upon the earth and there implant
In virgin soil corrupting what was pure.

While men of purpose carry on their quest,
Some hope remains those lethal seeds are found,
The shroud be torn away and that foul source
Be trampled, burnt, and ruined utterly,
But till that time the source of war abides.

To be continued in the next issue.