

# Stefan George, “The War” (1917)

## Abstract

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Many of the poems included in *The New Empire* [*Das neue Reich*] were originally published between 1914 and 1919 in *Blätter für die Kunst*, the literary magazine founded by Stefan George in 1892. Circulated privately as an exclusive forum for poets and like-minded intellectuals who would later come to be known as the George Circle [*George-Kreis*], *Blätter für die Kunst* declared: “The name of this publication says in part what its intention is: to serve art – especially poetry and the written word, and to exclude everything pertaining to the state and society.” The last issue appeared in 1919.

## Source

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### THE WAR

As jungle beasts, which slink away or snarl  
At one another in their greed to rend,  
Seek company and huddle in a flock  
When forests are ablaze, or mountains quake,  
So in our country, split to factions, foes  
United at the cry of war. A breath  
Not felt before, a breath of union floated  
From rank to rank, and a confused divining  
Of what was now to come. The people, seized  
By tremors great as changing worlds, one instant  
Forgot the glut and gauds of coward years  
And saw themselves majestic in their need.

They journeyed to the hermit on the hill:  
“Does this stupendous fate still leave you calm?”  
He said: These shudders were your best response.  
What grips you now—I knew it long ago!  
Long have I sweated blood of anguish while  
They played and played with fire. I exhausted  
My tears before and I have none today.  
The thing was almost done and no one saw,  
The worst is yet to be and no one sees.  
You yield to pressure goading from without ...  
These are the beacons only, not the tidings.  
The struggle, as you wage it, is not mine.

The seer is never thanked, he meets with scorn  
And stones when he foretells disaster, fury  
And stones when it arrives. The crimes unnumbered  
Which all ascribe to force or luck, the hidden  
Descent of man to larva call for penance!  
What are the slaughtered multitudes to him,  
If life itself is slain! He cannot splutter  
Of native virtue and of Latin malice.

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Here whining women, old and sated burghers  
Are more at fault than bayonets and guns  
Of adversaries, for our sons' and grandsons'  
Dismembered bodies, for their glassy eyes!

His charge is praise and blame, amends and prayer.  
He loves and serves upon his way, with blessings  
Dispatched the youngest of those dear to him.  
They do not march for catchwords, but themselves.  
They know what drives, what renders them immune!  
His dread goes deeper, for he feels the powers  
Are more than fable. Who can grasp his plea:  
You, who on reeking corpses swing your scourges,  
May you preserve us from too light an ending  
And from the worst, the blood-betrayal! Races  
Committing this will wholly be uprooted  
Unless their best is used to halt the doom.

You shall not cheer. No rise will mark the end,  
But only downfalls, many and inglorious.  
Monsters of lead and iron, tubes and rods  
Escape their maker's hand and rage unruly.  
Who saw his comrade crushed to pulp and fragments,  
Who lived the life of vermin in the broken  
And desecrated earth, must laugh with hatred  
At speeches once heroic, now deceitful.  
The ancient god of battles is no more.  
And in decay a fevered world is sickening  
Toward death. The only ichors that are sacred  
Are those which, still unstained, are spent in floods.

Where is the man who stands for all? And where is  
The only word that holds on Judgment Day?  
Monarchs with pasteboard crowns and silly gestures,  
Lawyers, and scribes, and traders—froth and chaff!  
Even in firm and charted limits: turmoil!  
Then threat of chaos. From a modest house  
In suburbs of the greyest of our towns,  
Supported by his cane, a plain, forgotten  
Old man appeared and solved the hour's riddle.  
He saved what they—God knows!—with pompous slogans  
Had driven to the chasm's brink: the realm,  
But from the fouler foe he cannot succour.

“Have you no eye for sacrifice unmeasured,  
For strength of unity?” These also flourish  
Across the border. In nefarious eras  
Offerings are useless, duties dim and dull.  
Crowds have their value, but they shape no symbols,  
Are aimless and forgetful. Only sages  
Want reasons. People drool of charity,  
Humaneness—and embark on monstrous slaughter.

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On spittle of the basest wooing follows  
The slime of vile affront, and what's at odds  
Would fawn with fond caresses if the future  
Made manifest its terror to their eyes.

This bloated mask is spirit? Blooms so frail  
Spring from another soil. The withered cant  
Of zenith and a resurrection savours  
Of rotted fruit. The old will not be young  
When they return! Who speaks of truth and errs  
In basic truth is maddest of the mad.  
The wily say: a lesson for the future!  
That will be different, though, and those who face it  
Must learn to change, to grow the inner eye.  
Not one who summons now and thinks he governs,  
Knows that he gropes about in doom, and no one  
Can see the palest flicker of a dawn.

Less strange that millions die than that more millions  
Still dare to live! Whose rhythm is his era's  
Will see the present only as a spook.  
A childish fool finds comfort in: You did it!  
No! All and none—so reads the final verdict.  
A cheating fool pretends: This time the kingdom  
Of peace is near. But when reprieves are over,  
Your ankles and your knees again shall wade  
In must the Master trod. But then a race  
Will spring to life whose gaze does not dissemble,  
Who know their fate and will not turn to stone  
For fear of pitiless Gorgonian law.

In neither camp a single thought, a glimmer  
Of what's at stake. Here, only greed to traffic  
Where others came before, to be converted  
To that which one reviles and not acknowledge  
That when its gods have died a people dies.  
And there they boast of old prestige, and splendor,  
And culture, while they want to sprawl in comfort,  
In gains—and in the lap of clearest judgment  
They do not even guess that those they slighted  
Destroy what has been ripening for destruction.  
And that, perhaps, “a hate and scorn of mankind”  
Will bring salvation in a different form.

But let the song not end in curse! Some ears  
Already grasp my praise of stuff and stem,  
Of seed and fruit. And many hands already  
Are stretched toward me when I proclaim: O land,  
Too beautiful for alien feet to ravage,  
Where groves are harps for winds, where in the osiers  
A flute resounds, and where the dream still weaves,  
Although your children always try to rend it,

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And where the radiant Mother of Caucasians  
Who are embroiled and vicious now, first showed  
Her real unchanging face, O land, still hiding  
So great a promise that it cannot fall!

Now youth calls up the gods, both the eternal  
And the returning when their day is rounded.  
The king of storms gives him of clear horizons  
The scepter and delays the Longest Winter.  
Who hung upon the Tree of Weal cast off  
The pallor of pale souls and vies in frenzy  
With Bacchus. Secretly Apollo leans  
On Baldur: for a while there will be night—  
This time the east will not bring light! The war  
Has been resolved on stars, he is the victor  
Who shelters the palladium in his confines,  
And who can change is lord of worlds to come.

Source: Stefan George, *The Works of Stefan George*, translated by Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz.  
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949, pp. 290–94.

Source of original German text: Stefan George, *Das neue Reich. Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*, Volume  
9. Berlin: Georg Bondi, Endgültige Fassung, 1928, pp. 27–35.

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