

An American flag on a wooden pole stands in a field. The flag is waving and is the central focus of the image. In the background, there are trees and a clear sky. In the foreground, there is a pile of grey rocks.

American
Poetry
Division

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American Canto VIII

A book once took monks many months
to painstakingly produce by hand;
now one can be printed in minutes
Communication once needed weeks
to cover the distances between cities;
now words and pictures travel far greater distances
in just seconds,
 or even fractions of seconds
travel to the four corners of the globe once required months;
now anywhere can be reached in a matter of hours
 Many millions
used to perish from eminently preventable diseases;
 now
medicine has eradicated many of those diseases,
 and
can on occasion perform the miracle of raising the dead
with the wonders of resuscitation
 And
since the Creator's patents have apparently lapsed
and the knowledge has entered the public domain,
even life itself can be made from scratch
 But
the fervent worship of the great god Progress
has often obscured,
 if not obliterated outright,
the fact that technology is not neutral,
 not
a disembodied entity that magically appears as needed,
and for the benefit
 of all humanity,
 but
a menu of alternatives available at any given time,
with the triumphant one not often benign,
 but often
the consequence of a quite conscious choice
by a criminal conspiracy commonly called business,

one that had usually begged, borrowed, or stolen its way
into possession of a more profitable technology,
which it always advertised as the most advance,

the latest offering to the great god Progress

(Memo to all brainwashed Americans:

That which best serves the cause of corporate profits
ISN'T NECESSARILY SYNONYMOUS
with the interest of the public at large

Exhibit A:

General Motors,
through a shell game of holding companies,
devoured many electric railway companies,
replaced efficient electric locomotives
with dirty diesel ones,
in order
to create a demand for the bad buses they were building
And to eliminate the alternative they had already cheapened,
and to further increase their profits-
"What's good for General Motors is good for the country, and vice
versa"
they dismantled many miles of trolley tracks.
which were then sold to foreign cities
and remain in use today

A GM executive
was 'penalized' a dollar for his crime)

And when the triumphant technology is taken to task
by a lone dissenter,

that person is smeared,

twice;

first,

as not sufficiently pious in belief in the infallibility of business;
and second,

and more damaging in most eyes,
as a heretic to the great god Progress,
as a Luddite

The Myth of the Luddites.

They are the nattering Neanderthal naysayers
of one of our most persistent, pernicious myths,

those supposedly opposed to technology
Every time a new offering is made to the great god Progress
and some heretic has the temerity to question
why some should be sacrificed so that others may benefit,
their name is invoked as a substitute for thinking,
the trump card that takes the trick

But of course

what everyone knows about them is wrong

They were not opposed to technology,

they used it in their home looms

What they were opposed to,

and strongly,

was having to choose between starvation

and

many years before Marx, wage slavery,

with no possibility of them remaining

the independent artisans they had been

They questioned 'efficiency' as not merely a goal,

but the goal,

to which everything else,

including community,

must be sacrificed

They questioned

who really benefitted from the industrial looms,

and the people who controlled the looms

answered as those in control always have,

by making

the mere questioning and over a hundred other 'crimes'

punishable by death

The questioners have long since passed,

but not the questions;

they're still waiting for a legitimate answer

Well?

American Canto XIX

America's Reign of Terror lasted vastly longer
than its more celebrated counterpart in France,
though it is rarely, if ever,
acknowledged as such in the history books;
and
it resulted,
not from an excess
of revolutionary zeal,
but
from the more powerful forces of reaction,
caste and class in the guise
of the purported protection of purity,
with a fable of rape often created after the fact
to lavish legitimization on the illicit ritual
The committees committing the American atrocities
were not unknown in their day,
nor from it;
their identities were known to all who chose to see
(It is only today that their names
have vanished into myth-mists of history;
an example of
"if it isn't written down, it never happened")
Indeed,
when not comprised directly of components of the alleged best,
the committees were countenance completely
by those same alleged best
The atrocities were even sometimes
advertised in advance of the occurrence
so that spectators could pack a picnic lunch,
surely the most perverse coming attractions promotion
ever practiced by the American press
The victims would again be denied their humanity
in the aftermaths of their deaths;
the reportage of such events
left participants, spectators, and plain old readers
intoxicated by the strange brew

of salacious detail and curious restraint

A lone voice in the wilderness,

(joined by others later)

Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute,
attempted to preserve in the historical record
that which its perpetrators preferred left unrecorded
For more than eighty years,
from 1882 to 1968,

the Institute published an annual report of the atrocities committed,
along with the actual reason given for the deadly assault,
the most comprehensive compilation available,
though surely not complete

The 'reasons' related in the reports
for the extralegal meting out of 'justice'
shock the sensibilities of the sentient:

spitting on the sidewalk

not tipping one's hat to a woman

not giving the due deference demanded by whites
attempting to for a union for economic betterment
having the nerve to have actually succeeded
stealing hogs

'conjuring'

making moonshine,

and numerous others in a similar vein

And

at least **4,742** people perished in the period,
almost three-quarters of them people of color;
not until 1952
was there a year without a reported victim

And

not all the victims were hung,
as is popularly believed;

in fact,

the reports related the most repulsive rituals:

being shot

being burned at the stake

dismemberment

mutilation

castration

a baby cut out of its mother's womb and stomped to death

the various parts sold as souvenirs

photos of the events placed on postcards

And

the reports rescued the victims from anonymity,

reminding the readers that every victim

had a name,

and was a human being

with a family

And

what the reports were too polite to say:

every victim was in fact a human sacrifice,

a ritual rightly rebuked by Americans

when occurring in other cultures;

then

dressed up in pretty words

and enthusiastically employed here

And,

lest the reader congratulate him- or herself

with the American smug self-satisfaction

that such events are safely ensconced in the past,

remember James Byrd Jr.,

lynched in Texas in the late 1990s,

and

remain ever-vigilant

against vigilanteism;

against those who would practice "Judge Lynch's Law"

American Canto XX

Two quotes could bookend the nineteenth century,
and go beyond,

all the way

to today:

“An empire for liberty”

and

“War is an occasional excess,
from which recovery is easy”

Well,

maybe more than occasionally

After all,

you can't cook up an empire
without breaking a few countries along the way

The Monroe Doctrine,

holding that European hegemony

would henceforth be halted in this hemisphere

(“He can't do that to our pledges

Only we can do that to our pledges”)

provided the high-minded rationale

for the conflation of the commercial interest

with the national interest

And

even while America was busy

exterminating the remaining natives

and stealing half of Mexico

and engaging in a bloody civil war,

all well-chronicled in the history books,

she

still found the time and energy to engage

in many more wars that are not so well covered:

shelling the Nicaraguan town of Greytown

in 1854

(We might build a canal there someday);

putting down a Panamanian insurrection

against Columbia in 1885
(We weren't yet ready
to build a canal

in an 'independent' Panama);

militarily ruling,
in the sacred name of democracy,
conquered Cuba after she was stripped from Spain
in 1898
("You may declare a republic on paper
among the mules and monkeys,
but you will never get one");

helping to carve the country of Panama
out of Columbia in 1903
when Columbia asked for just compensation
for the right to build a canal on the isthmus,
pursuant to the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850
("I do not admit the 'dead hand'
of the treaty-making power of the past
A treaty can always be honorably abrogated");

foreclosing on the Dominican Republic in 1905,
running the customs houses,
returning forty-five percent of the revenue collected,
keeping the rest for the repayment of debts
public and private,
and thus forestalling European foreclosure of the same
("It probably might save future trouble
to annex the island outright");

intervening again in Cuba in 1906
to quell a revolution,
and
again staying three years in occupation
("I am so angry
with that infernal little Cuban republic
that I would like to wipe its people
off the face of the earth");

intervening in 1912
when the Nicaraguans rose in revolt
against their government; anticipated acquiescence
in a similar customs houses 'receivership',
putting down the revolt and remaining
until 1925

("I think nearly everybody,
on whatever political side they stand,
was glad to see us");

occupying Honduras at the same time
(though only for seven years there),
(and not 'worthy' of even one sentence
in a specialized history);

landing also in Cuba in 1912,
"a mission since familiar as guarding
'the lives and property of American citizens'",
thus freeing up the Cuban army
to slaughter several thousand blacks
who actually had the brass to demand
the equal rights they had been promised
only a dozen or so years before
("This is not an intervention");

providing National City Bank with a nice Christmas present
when,

on December 17, 1914,

fifty marines

marched into Port-au-Prince

and

carted off the country's gold reserves,
better safeguarded in vaults in New York,
creating Haitian hatred of the current government
that could allow such a thing to happen,

then

refusing to help the government they had plundered
("Only an honest and efficient government deserves support"
except in the United States?),

landing

to impose order in 1915,
and
remaining for nineteen years,
running the country as a colony (without calling it that),

because,

of course,
“we wish for no territory except our own,
for no sovereignty except sovereignty over ourselves”,

‘free elections’ occasionally postponed
until a candidate suitable to the occupiers
could be conjured up
(“It is to be remembered that
there are practically no patriotic people in Haiti”),
several suppression of uprisings against the occupation,
with atrocities committed along the way
(“Neither the Haitians,
the American public,
nor the marines themselves
will feel very badly about it if they never go back”);

some marines sailing from Haiti
to the other side of the island
in 1916,

a “police action”
in support of legitimate constitutional government,
though at first the Americans operated on their own
without even the pretense of a president put in by the people,
staying eight years,

spending
most of that time fighting guerrilla wars
against a populace that wouldn’t be completely pacified,
their stated mission
“to help this Republic and its people”;

making a foray into Mexico
in 1916
in pursuit of Pancho Villa,
who had made a raid against the U.S.A.
in hopes of inviting intervention,

because
Villa believed that just such an occasion
would aid his side in the Revolution,
and
in a strange way it did,
because the Mexican government considered intervention
“an affront to Mexico’s sovereignty and dignity as a nation”,
with troops taken away from chasing Villa
to impede further American incursion,
and the Punitive Expedition ended
without the capture of Villa,
with Wilson remembering temporarily

“ . . . that I am not the servant of those
who wish to enhance the value of their Mexican investments,
that I am the servant of the rank and file
of the people of the United States”;

and Cuba again in 1917,
when
a coup was attempted because of a corrupt election
“ . . . unless all those under arms against the Government of Cuba
return immediately to their allegiance
it may become necessary for the United States
to regard them as enemies
and to deal with them accordingly”,

and
the U.S. was there until 1922,
except for Guantanamo Bay,
where bases remain to this day;

and
Honduras in 1924-1925,
again not mentioned
(Why do the historians hate Honduras?);

and Nicaragua again
from 1927-1933,
the intervention
to forestall a potential British invasion
“Would it not be more worthy

of the greatness of your country
to let the Nicaraguans determine their own affairs
as they have a right to?”,

a question
unanswered then and later;

and spies in the guise of protecting United Fruit
collating a coup in Guatemala in the early fifties;

and intervening in the Dominican Republic
in 1965,

to
prevent the resumption of democracy
“The American nation

cannot,

must not,

and will not

permit the establishment
of another communist government
in the Western Hemisphere”,

with,

of course,

no evidence of that bogeyman;

and using the sale of drugs
to finance a band of thugs
cleverly called Contras to conceal
their true identity as puppets,

as in

Nicaragua and the rest of the region in the Reagan era
honors graduates of our School of the Assassins
wreaked the local brand of havoc

Ronald Reagan:

“I’m a contra, too”;

and Grenada in 1983,
where 7000 ‘combatants’ earned almost 9000 medals
bravely battling Cuban labor battalions
“I can’t say enough in praise of our military”;

American Canto XXI

Another Fourth of July
 Another anniversary
 of the death of Thomas Jefferson
 Another,
 almost annual,
 dissing of the woman
 he spent a large part of his life with

Her name was Sally Hemings,
 and
 she was the half-sister,
 unacknowledged,
 hidden behind the veil of race,
 of Jefferson's late wife
 The relationship started early,
 when Sally was fifteen,
 and
 the coverup started almost immediately
 (That year, 1788, is the only year
 in a *forty-three* year period
 for which there is no correspondence extant)

And there has always been plentiful circumstantial evidence
 for the existence of the relationship,
 but
 the hagiographers posing as biographers
 have willfully ignored it:

first, Sally *never* had a child at any time
 except when Jefferson had been in her presence
 nine months beforehand;

second, she came back from France,
 pregnant,
 even though she would have been free
 had she remained in France;

therefore
there must have been something very powerful

bringing her back to America and slavery;

third, several of their children were 'allowed'
to run away from Monticello with impunity,
and two others were formally freed in Jefferson's will;

and other bits of information deliberately not added up
to avoid the conclusion that would tarnish Jefferson's image,

until

the day came when scientific evidence,
in the form of incontrovertible DNA tests,
proved the truth long known to those with open minds;

and yet,

the 'white' Jefferson descendants still voted
not to accept the 'black' Jefferson descendants

In the name of Sally Hemings,
the rest of us don't have to make that mistake

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