

## Prologue

1. What I have to tell
2. is of my passion
3. for a great story
4. of men throughout the world
5. who play Rugby-
6. a game without parallel
7. played with oval ball
8. and fifteen athletes to a side
9. according to fixed and yet mutable laws
10. which both realize and comply to
11. the becoming of the real;
12. yet, with incessant change,
13. fixity comes to pass
14. as in philosophy
15. where the law of change holds,
16. all thus varies
17. except for the law itself-
18. producing even in its becoming
19. through the different essences
20. being without existence.
21. To fixity belongs
22. the oval shape
23. and so also the prohibition
24. that none should score that magic goal
25. while team-mates
26. stand ahead
27. or pass forward
28. that ball, strange and fantastic
29. as the joy of a child.
30. Fixed, too, the spirit
31. in which it is played:
32. you play with your opponent
33. not against him.
34. For if it were otherwise
35. this noble game,
36. true martial art,
37. might be changed into
38. an offensive weapon
39. just as a river
40. on bursting its banks

41. is death to man  
42. and not occasion  
43. for fishing or peaceful navigation  
44. nor, even, for a joyful swim.  
45. We find in this extraordinary game  
46. verification of the ancient law  
47. written in men' s hearts without use of words:  
48. our inborn strength  
49. is a bit ambiguous;  
50. but when entrusted to a swift-winged  
51. spirit which, in creating,  
52. recreates itself  
53. and modulates into magic,  
54. so, on walking onto the Rugby field,  
55. one becomes a poet, warrior  
56. even a necromancer  
57. taking up the ancient struggle  
58. with every gesture,  
59. recreating and enriching it anew.  
60. A secret music  
61. reaches the heart  
62. of every player when he sees  
63. those infinite posts  
64. at the cross-bar joined  
65. over which the ellipse must fly  
66. to bring points and victory.  
67. But the music becomes speech  
68. when the good ball  
69. emerged "distilled" from the pack  
70. massed in a scrum;  
71. and when you, in the back half,  
72. drink this strong cognac  
73. do not be ungrateful  
74. but remember  
75. how the grape-crusher toiled  
76. to offer the delicate golden  
77. liquor to your lips  
78. craving with thirst for tries.

**First Canto**  
**(The Beauty of Rugby is in kicking and handling)**

1. People still discuss and dispute
2. which is finer:
3. to violate the opposing half
4. with drop or place kick
5. or with a swift swarming movement
6. carrying forward the ball.
7. But they fall silent
8. at the start of play
9. and only the honest athlete
10. knows that a balance exists
11. between the kick and the pass.
12. It is wonderful to score on the run
13. outstretched in a glorious dive
14. across the goal line.
15. But, surely, no less so
16. the smart drop kick
17. perhaps following
18. a scrum won
19. not far from the posts.
20. And we wonder
21. not just at the cold precision
22. of the shrewd kicker
23. but also the titanic strength
24. of the driving scrum
25. heeling back the ball
26. swallowed up by
27. the huge thrusting tortoise
28. made of 16 players,
29. unless the astute brain
30. of a strong captain,
31. guided by a wise coach,
32. should call for intelligent variations
33. and, perhaps, form an array of 7
34. to reinforce the three-quarters.
35. Or draw up
36. in the manner of the Pumas
37. from Patagonia

38. and, five metres from the enemy line,  
39. leave out only  
40. the Platonic demiurge,  
41. the scrum-half  
42. who puts in and flies off  
43. not to gather the ball,  
44. but to plunge into the whirlpool  
45. just as the ball  
46. enters in goal  
47. and they cannot play off-side,  
48. which is referred  
49. to the opposition goal-line;  
50. while a forward pass  
51. is referred to the dead-ball line.  
52. Listen, then, players  
53. to this poem which suffers,  
54. unable as it is to express  
55. what I feel on the field  
56. and also every time  
57. I compare life  
58. with moments in Rugby  
59. and realise that this game  
60. is life at its high points;  
61. an art, creating  
62. ways of being together  
63. in a better and more humane way.  
64. This is the time,  
65. lover of the game of Rugby,  
66. to remember  
67. the value of the written law.  
68. ignore those who pretend  
69. that to win means  
70. to break the rules of the game.  
71. No coach teaches well  
72. if he tells his players  
73. to cheat on the field.  
74. Also, to back this up,  
75. you should know that  
76. Rugby  
77. alone among sports  
78. teaches respect

79. for the rule book  
80. but also to consider,  
81. while in the thick of it,  
82. whether any changes-  
83. keeping always  
84. to what I have called the immutable-  
85. not only to score one try more,  
86. but also to bring out  
87. the power latent  
88. in your XV,  
89. engaged in this magnificent  
90. warlike story,  
91. a modern Homeric war  
92. waged with equal bravery  
93. and losses.  
94. But between them lies an abyss:  
95. for at the end of play  
96. Andromache weeps not for Hector,  
97. Cassandra does not suffer  
98. on the sacred altar at the hands of Ajax,  
99. who cares not that  
100. even in battle  
101. war is not waged against a girl  
102. who laments the loss of her father and brothers.  
103. Rugby is a war fable,  
104. but the great titanic clash  
105. of fair players  
106. is peace itself,  
107. appreciated when  
108. victory by a hair' s breadth  
109. is bestowed inexorably on you  
110. by benign Fate.  
111. Rugby, although a man' s sport,  
112. is subject to cruel human laws,  
113. of which  
114. Fate, Change or Fortune are part,  
115. although we realise  
116. it is our ignorance  
117. of real hidden causes  
118. and not gods at all that act.  
119. But when a ball,

120. flung down in the scramble for victory  
121. for the drop practiced for years  
122. by the splendidly meticulous fly-half  
123. hits the inside of the bar,  
124. slips out,  
125. and with it the 3 fatal points  
126. needed for victory,  
127. it' s natural that you,  
128. player-warrior,  
129. seeing the cruel deflection  
130. hate the three blasts  
131. of the closing whistle  
132. and cry  
133. beseechingly to a non-existent goddess,  
134. just as you do in life.  
135. But it is so strong  
136. as to be more real  
137. than the revealed divinity.  
138. And you, you who win,  
139. realise Rugby is peace,  
140. still able to cheer  
141. the 15 fighting-men  
142. who have played with you  
143. and lost;  
144. so if you taste  
145. the bitterness of defeat,  
146. harder always  
147. the harder you have practiced,  
148. the more you were drilled  
149. in the tactics  
150. of shrewd play  
151. conceived for you  
152. by your wise coach  
153. on leaving the field beaten  
154. (whether at Treviso  
155. or Twickenham),  
156. hearing applause which  
157. brings to mind  
158. Rugby' s great law of love.  
159. But even in the rout  
160. you, even you, are victorious

161. and life alone is beaten-  
162. not life on the field,  
163. but that of the apathetic  
164. who believe, wrongly,  
165. that life  
166. consists in waiting for death;  
167. but in 80 minutes you  
168. have been a poet  
169. of verses  
170. lost from memory,  
171. while for others  
172. lingers a good feeling-  
173. a taste for life,  
174. the beautiful form.  
175. And in a line-out or scrum  
176. the 30 players sculpt- write-  
177. their chess-game  
178. and the sun seems to  
179. stand still to watch over  
180. the match.  
181. So, every decade or so,  
182. sometimes after a year,  
183. for a century and a half  
184. that is, ever since Arnold,  
185. master of Rugby and philosophy  
186. wrote down the 30 rules  
187. which became applied  
188. throughout the world,  
189. thought has always been given  
190. to bettering the game  
191. improving the balance between  
192. kicking and passing,  
193. encouraging scoring  
194. but not making it too easy.  
195. So it was decided by  
196. a wise International Board  
197. to stop the flankers  
198. leaving the scrum  
199. to lay ambush  
200. to the scum-half gathering  
201. the fruit of a titanic shove;

202. and when have you ever seen  
203. on humbler fields  
204. the ellipse soar  
205. above a huge mound of forwards  
206. out towards the open seas  
207. of defence.  
208. This is how the punt  
209. into touch  
210. was reduced to gaining distance  
211. only from defending  
212. behind the 22 line.  
213. If you are new to  
214. this chess-like sport  
215. you should not believe  
216. that kicking  
217. is always a mistake.  
218. Indeed it is not !  
219. To open to the stand-off  
220. when your opponent is bearing down on you  
221. is not a wise move.  
222. To break out from defence is sublime,  
223. similar to  
224. the first flush of love  
225. in a passionate heart.  
226. However, love,  
227. if true,  
228. does not set forth lightly:  
229. understanding is needed,  
230. a sense of timing,  
231. cooperation, harmony  
232. and also passion.  
233. And to entrust the ball  
234. gathered, perhaps, from a pack  
235. losing ground,  
236. to the three-quarters  
237. is like opening the door  
238. to a rival attack.  
239. You should open only with the initiative,  
240. your pack driving forward  
241. and if possible catching  
242. the adversary lagging



243. behind your three-quarters  
244. for an imperceptible  
245. fraction of a second.  
246. At other times,  
247. with the opposition  
248. bearing down  
249. like a crashing wave,  
250. it may be wise  
251. not only to counter-attack  
252. with a powerful movement  
253. by your flankers,  
254. maybe making little ground  
255. but with a flawless ruck and maul  
256. establishing a bridgehead  
257. at which the change of attacking  
258. and, perhaps, breaking through  
259. with quick, airy movement.  
260. Equally profitable is  
261. a highly accurate kick  
262. to a point which  
263. is physically inaccessible  
264. to your foe.  
265. And, novices,  
266. do not forget  
267. that off-side  
268. leaves you 10 metres from  
269. your opponent  
270. and not a centimetre further.  
271. For lads starting  
272. this magnificent sport,  
273. I myself,  
274. trainer-poet,  
275. get them to pass the ball  
276. and if I introduce kicking  
277. only after long preparation  
278. it is precisely because I believe  
279. that only with great precision  
280. will the kick  
281. penetrate the enemy lines.  
282. And bear in mind  
283. that the symmetry

284. of the line-out and scrum  
285. favour recourse to a kick  
286. because of impossibility  
287. of either side  
288. first reaching the advantage line  
289. passing through the ball  
290. in a throw-in, scrum, maul or ruck.  
291. You will also recall,  
292. young player and keen coach,  
293. that any strategic plan,  
294. even one springing from reality,  
295. may always founder  
296. on the creative artistry  
297. of an individual action  
298. and then,  
299. no scheme will work  
300. against a quick pass  
301. by the centre  
302. or if a wing-threequarter,  
303. forced towards touch  
304. by his opposite number  
305. plus a flanker on the blind side,  
306. ties them to the spot,  
307. hypnotising them with a  
308. masterful dummy,  
309. then sets off inside  
310. skimming past vain lunges  
311. and vanishing towards goal  
312. reaching as far as the full-back  
313. through sheer force, perhaps,  
314. or repeating  
315. a dummy scissors on a six pence.  
316. Playing tight,  
317. remember,  
318. is the highest art  
319. in true Rugby  
320. and only a champion  
321. can conjure out of a few centimetres  
322. the fantastic springboard  
323. for a dive towards  
324. the enemy goal line.

325. It is beautiful to see,  
326. sublime to execute,  
327. at a scrum  
328. close to the fatal line,  
329. a wily scrum-half  
330. circles the two packs  
331. and, stretching out his arms,  
332. feigns a pass to the wing  
333. and plunges  
334. effortlessly to a try !

**Second Canto**  
**( Rugby= Chess on the turf ).**

1. If I wished
2. to sing of exploits
3. on the Rugby field
4. I Would have to be a Homer
5. immortal and eternal,
6. employing several thousand years
7. to just sketch out
8. the infinite variations
9. this game produces.
10. It is like talking about chess;
11. and the number of pieces is similar.
12. The 8 forwards are like pawns,
13. the half-backs bishops
14. and the centres like rooks
15. which move straight down
16. to make check-mate;
17. and the divine wing three-quarters
18. are like knights
19. who, alone on the board,
20. can jump,
21. imitating the dummy
22. of someone sliding
23. towards touch.
24. Only the full-back
25. is, rewarded twice,
26. being king and queen combined.
27. But the moves in chess and Rugby
28. are just about the same.
29. No master
30. of the 64 squares
31. has ever advanced
32. without first pushing his pawns forward
33. and no great Rugby player
34. ever emerged
35. in a team
36. lacking a pair of strong half-backs,
37. indispensable as two bishops,
38. in effortlessly cutting across

39. the grassy chess board.  
40. And no XV,  
41. of Pumas or Maoris  
42. ever violated the enemy goal  
43. without two centres,  
44. massive and penetrating  
45. as the deep play of the rook.  
46. So, also,  
47. without wing three-quarters  
48. a team would have to play  
49. like the imprudent chess-player  
50. who has carelessly lost  
51. his cherished knights.  
52. And if the full-back is not strong,  
53. not able to defend  
54. and join in the attack  
55. with rook and knight,  
56. it is as if the team  
57. is involved  
58. in an ethereal game  
59. where, by a stroke of bad luck,  
60. the queen is lost  
61. in the very first snare.  
62. And the check-mate of Rugby  
63. occurs in the 80th minute  
64. just as in chess  
65. where, by the 80th move,  
66. the result is nearly always  
67. cut and dried.  
68. Remember, you coaches  
69. who yearn to master  
70. events on the field,  
71. spend your life there  
72. but do not neglect  
73. your humble, precious blackboard  
74. on which young players  
75. will learn the benefits  
76. of turning a maul into a ruck  
77. to catch the opposing team  
78. entangled ahead of the ball  
79. and trapped inescapably offside,

80. the watchful referee  
81. stopping play  
82. to reward not just  
83. those who won the ball  
84. and pushed harder,  
85. but also the fusion of brain and brawn.  
86. Just as when an artful half-back  
87. like the conductor of an orchestra  
88. cries at the top of his voice  
89. the order to ruck  
90. and seems to be handling  
91. the ball himself  
92. or kicking superbly at goal.  
93. This is why we explain  
94. not only how to play  
95. but how to follow  
96. and even referee the game.  
97. For the alert and discerning eye  
98. inspired with intelligence  
99. is the greatest ally  
100. of players, coach,  
101. referee, technician  
102. spectator  
103. and of every actor  
104. who trod the Rugby field  
105. redolent of chess,  
106. oozing sweat from muscles that shove,  
107. forever vigilant  
108. calculating how to  
109. violate the enemy line.  
110. Now I should like to speak  
111. of the positions in Rugby  
112. fixed and yet mutable,  
113. an in real life,  
114. but always in harmony;  
115. and Rugby,  
116. life' s pupil,  
117. is also its master-  
118. even existence' s sage mentor.  
119. You have on the field  
120. exact designations

121. arising from  
122. what we call  
123. the game' s static phase  
124. which is becoming called  
125. “ dynamic-static”,  
126. with an elucidation  
127. not necessary for devotees of the game;  
128. these are line-outs and scrums,  
129. twins here,  
130. both splendid ways  
131. of restarting the game  
132. after a stoppage.  
133. They are same but different instances  
134. of the sublime objective  
135. of bringing symmetry  
136. to the chess-field  
137. following a build-up  
138. with hand and foot  
139. which foundered on a solid defence  
140. or was caught out  
141. by error, divine and benevolent;  
142. if error, even on the field,  
143. did not exists  
144. life would lose a dimension,  
145. monotony come to paralyse  
146. deeds which are great  
147. and sublime  
148. only in the contest  
149. between men who can spring up  
150. and also fall;  
151. for error, descending  
152. onto the field of play,  
153. begets the divine  
154. violation of the enemy line.  
155. Move prompted counter-move,  
156. but in the end  
157. shrewdness prevailed,  
158. catching unawares  
159. the player for whom  
160. opponents are real enemies.  
161. So, as the fabulous ellipse

162. flashes out of play,  
163. the referee blows for touch,  
164. a line-out,  
165. or for an infringement,  
166. with no hard feelings,  
167. he orders the Olympian  
168. clash of heads in a scrum.  
169. But without the help of error  
170. the match might die.



### Third Canto ( Rugby and Life are alike, but different)

1. Now those of you
2. going through difficult times
3. off the field
4. might at least read these lines,
5. which talk of life.
6. A throw-in is a fable
7. lived on the field
8. but is a true parable
9. about when you, anxious and exhausted,
10. your spirit weighed down by a thousand cares,
11. break every rule and code-
12. indeed even that
13. which should always be observed;
14. then, tired out
15. you break down and succumb
16. and renounce the easy way out,
17. seeking clear direction,
18. a classical way of life.
19. And so, as the airborne ball
20. departs
21. the 30 of you once more
22. form up in classical order
23. and symmetrical array.
24. Yet the scrum
25. is an allegory of life-
26. a human parable.
27. For is you slip up
28. without committing a crime,
29. having just done something wrong,
30. you are given the chance
31. to carry on
32. on the condition
33. you try harder;
34. then, obviously,
35. the ball is put in
36. by the innocent party.
37. The tactician
38. who has studied
39. the Roman army,
40. the Macedonian forces

41. and the innovations  
42. of Nelson and Wellington  
43. would dub them masters  
44. of Rugby and chess  
45. so precise is the formation  
46. of the three interlocking rows  
47. in the scrum,  
48. where only a millimetre  
49. can make possible  
50. the opening out to the wing  
51. or constrain the defence  
52. to batten down the hatches  
53. as the lost ball  
54. flies out to your  
55. rival' s wing.  
56. With the ball attack-  
57. without it defend.  
58. This is the oldest of laws,  
59. unchanging  
60. in the domain of Rugby;  
61. but this is not a dogma,  
62. because even the supreme Maoris,  
63. the sons of Southern Africa,  
64. the masterful British,  
65. those from across the Alps  
66. and now even some teams  
67. from our Latin soil  
68. know well that the side with the ball  
69. is considered on the attack.  
70. But with your shoulders  
71. brushing up against your own goal,  
72. you rightly feel  
73. a shudder of anguish  
74. because, if you drop the ball  
75. metres from their line  
76. a scrum will be ordered  
77. close to their goal,  
78. but a serious mistake  
79. near that frontier which,  
80. like your native soil  
81. and freedom,

82. you wish never to be violated  
83. and you will endure a scrum  
84. with a side profiting  
85. from your mistake  
86. like a gift from heaven,  
87. cashing in and forcing you,  
88. beaten in your own goal area, onto your knees.  
89. But if the points  
90. kiss you and pour out their favours on you  
91. like the woman you love,  
92. and the scoreboard  
93. displays a bag of points  
94. wrung from the goal-line or posts  
95. with accurate kicks and bounces  
96. following fine play,  
97. it is reasonable for a skipper  
98. to tell his players  
99. the game is not yet over  
100. and more suffering is required  
101. before the final rejoicing  
102. at the closing whistle  
103. like a Wagnerian horn blast;  
104. but he can also mean you to take more risks  
105. as he puts his trust  
106. in the team.  
107. Now you see,  
108. not only Maoris  
109. or wholehearted Welsh  
110. loved non only by miners,  
111. break from their 22,  
112. sweeping away  
113. the opposing banks  
114. like a winter' s flood,  
115. inflicting defeat  
116. not only on the field  
117. but into the soul.  
118. During important tournaments  
119. between the 5 glorious Nations  
120. or the World Championships,  
121. so aptly named “ campaigns”  
122. of the Maoris, Lions,

123. Springboks and Pumas  
124. as well as the strong Australians,  
125. how often it is that the finest matches  
126. trace the pattern of life  
127. under these three rubrics:  
128. birth, growth and death.  
129. Then you see  
130. that in the opening minutes  
131. titanic struggles take place  
132. between the two packs  
133. as they tilt  
134. the scales of Rugby  
135. to see  
136. how they will tip;  
137. every game opens like this-  
138. side half attempts to break through,  
139. to gauge opposite numbers  
140. and, in defence, the rival back row,  
141. centres and wings  
142. supported by the full-back  
143. test immediately  
144. if it is right  
145. to pass or kick  
146. or make of either situation  
147. suitable variations  
148. and then stash away  
149. tries and goals  
150. in the vaults  
151. of a longed-for victory.  
152. And this opening phase  
153. is followed by a middle section  
154. in which, as when you are between 20 and 50,  
155. you find success,  
156. your choice of career;  
157. and then there come  
158. your final deeds,  
159. even more difficult,  
160. defending your achievements;  
161. and now the victor,  
162. is similar to a wise old conservative  
163. trying to preserve

164. what is good-  
165. beauty, the sublime-  
166. and to repulse attacks  
167. from disturbers  
168. of the status quo.  
169. He who is losing  
170. is like the uncompromising  
171. revolutionary  
172. who wants change  
173. and with success  
174. straightaway changes  
175. from radical conservative.  
176. recall, in the final moments,  
177. that greater thought is needed  
178. because you are weary  
179. but you also have to run more  
180. to resist the attacks  
181. of the losing XV  
182. right to the end.  
183. Only one who has never been on the field  
184. could fail to relive  
185. the anguish, pain  
186. and blissful yearning  
187. inspired by this.  
188. My heart still now  
189. aches for our XV  
190. who long ago  
191. one Easter in Grenoble  
192. overwhelmed the strongest team  
193. ever fielded by the French  
194. and, in the very last seconds,  
195. slid from exhilarating victory  
196. to bitter defeat,  
197. unassuaged even  
198. by the jubilation of the crowd  
199. for those brave fighters:  
200. Lanfranchi and Fusco,  
201. Ambron and Augeri,  
202. Zani and Troncon,  
203. Avigo and Angioli  
204. and we saw great Crauste

205. warmly shake  
206. our skipper' s hand,  
207. beaten by so harsh a law  
208. yet having won a moral victory;  
209. and let us again hear,  
210. engrossed at Albricci,<sup>2</sup>  
211. stunned by the words of Elio<sup>3</sup> the master  
212. of the anguish of that epic game  
213. learning that rugby  
214. is as beautiful as love  
215. and brings us every joy  
216. but also the bitterest pain.

#### Fourth Canto (RUGBY IS PEACE. A dream about it)

1. Now, young apprentice,
2. beware of those who say
3. wrongly
4. that sport always
5. evades the important issues
6. and in treading the turf
7. of the rugby field
8. you forge t
9. all the suffering of the world.
10. Rugby is a noble art
11. and as a poet
12. withdrawing from the world
13. understands and loves it more
14. so the player,
15. being confined to the pitch
16. is open to
17. higher thoughts
18. because in this chess-like sport
19. the new man is forged
20. who expects victory
21. only after great effort,
22. rejecting outright
23. the easy way
24. and accepting defeat
25. courageously and with poise
26. always retaining
27. his sense of fair play.
28. O that the world,
29. at least half of it,
30. would become a field of rugby and peace
31. Then Americans and Russians
32. could only clash
33. with two packs of giants
34. all nuclear missiles
35. and the awful atom bomb
36. would be dismantled,
37. the world parting
38. only to contemplate~

39. the game of rugby:  
40. passing or kicking  
41. and conceiving new movements.  
42. And how I would love  
43. to see millions of youngsters  
44. sprinting for goal  
45. to vanquish the new violence,  
46. barbarity  
47. and lethal drugs.  
48. This chess-like sport  
49. rugby,  
50. has always united  
51. the hearts of divided peoples  
52. as when mighty England  
53. agreed to play in Dublin  
54. capital of Ireland -  
55. a single nation  
56. divided into two states.  
57. At the end  
58. the cheers are not for  
59. crown or republic  
60. but for the better side.  
61. This is why the Maori,  
62. god-like,  
63. can violate the enemy fine  
64. on the divided African field  
65. and throughout the world  
66. year after year  
67. we see the divided  
68. in a sacred embrace  
69. finding hope  
70. in peace and brotherhood  
71. and casting aside their fear  
72. of the nuclear menace  
73. with a superhuman run  
74. beyond the posts for goal  
75. The rugby coach  
76. is a missionary of peace  
77. and a moral guide,  
78. both a father and brother  
79. to his players.



80. and ho who has trod the pitch  
81. showed in life  
82. that the goal fine  
83. can always be like  
84. a blissful cream;  
85. the hope and certainty  
86. of being, till death,  
87. a fair player  
88. and model citizen.  
89. There are nights when  
90. the bed is a foe,  
91. when sleep, long overdue,  
92. announces  
93. the arrival of dawn.  
94. Then, in those fleeting moments  
95. when reality is a blur  
96. lost in limitlessness,  
97. and life and death  
98. are intertwined,  
99. I am overwhelmed  
100. but remain untroubled  
101. by the dance  
102. of a cream about rugby  
103. where I see  
104. under a resplendent starry light  
105. the posts rise from the ground,  
106. fly heaven wards  
107. and, with a host of strange  
108. oval balls,  
109. embroider the night sky.  
110. And at this moment  
111. two quickened H' s  
112. weaving about  
113. in my night ' s cream  
114. trace the pentagram,  
115. and to the sound of heavenly music  
116. see again  
117. the great contests seen  
118. and played;  
119. and reflect on the game  
120. with slight sadness

121. for a future time  
122. when I shall be no more  
123. and my many rugby-playing  
124. brothers will also be absent.  
125. We all shall come to know  
126. being without existence,  
127. but the boot marks  
128. of players of the past  
129. remain indelible on the pitch  
130. even when  
131. the persistent and cruel rain  
132. foolishly imagined  
133. it had washed them away.  
134. When, before my eyes,  
135. gluttons for action,  
136. never tiring of the game  
137. I see this fleeting dream,  
138. hear sweet music  
139. and remember good times  
140. and realise  
141. in a flash  
142. that only in rugby  
143. is there always room  
144. for the man who lives  
145. and knows how to love.  
146. It is noble to be a player,  
147. but when grey hairs  
148. tell you it is time  
149. to give up  
150. and become a coach,  
151. a cherished physic ,  
152. a judicious manager  
153. or even a knowlegable spectator  
154. cultivating in newcomers  
155. the way to watch  
156. an unfamiliar game  
157. or referee, writer,  
158. sports reporter  
159. even a ticket collector,  
160. you are part of the great chorus  
161. of rugby

162. and you are really still playing.  
163. Nor do you die  
164. even when  
165. your turn comes to leave  
166. life' s shores  
167. on the mysterious journey  
168. to the horizon of the unknown.  
169. Then all that remains  
170. is what we gave rugby,  
171. having received from it  
172. a fresh, strict  
173. initiation into life  
174. which bestowed on us  
175. individuality and humanity.  
176. Do not believe, though,  
177. brother in rugby and years,  
178. that my heart  
179. does not yearn for the far-off days  
180. when the new world  
181. of rugby  
182. first came into view.  
183. will always remember  
184. my rugby-playing youth  
185. and know it is beautiful  
186. to imagine  
187. what it will mean  
188. to a son or friend  
189. but I miss nothing more  
190. than the match  
191. enjoyed among the 30.  
192. So, young player,  
193. jump at this great chance  
194. to live and play  
195. and through it  
196. taste the best in life  
197. making out of the game  
198. a snapshot  
199. of passing youth.  
200. But, with your playing time finished,  
201. it is still wonderful  
202. to contribute to the game:

203. even the person  
204. who pastes up  
205. a small notice  
206. about a school match  
207. play alongside the players  
208. and when the meticulous centre  
209. or wing three-quarter  
210. or strong prop  
211. or battering lock,  
212. crafty half-back, wing  
213. or full-back in attack  
214. steal their way to a try,  
215. he also makes fine passes-  
216. no longer with the ball  
217. but with organisation,  
218. which raises to a peak  
219. the exemplary life in rugby  
220. of Britain,  
221. which then produced the Maoris-  
222. old pupil.  
223. who now outshine their masters  
224. recalling and applying  
225. the adage of the great Leonardo:  
226. it is a bad pupil  
227. who cannot surpass his master.  
228. So the great Maoris  
229. from afar  
230. came to excel,  
231. being recognised by all  
232. as the kings of total rugby;  
233. you can spot  
234. this glorious genie  
235. whenever a sublime  
236. wing three-quarter  
237. turns round  
238. to find his back row,  
239. followed by the second row  
240. then a little further back  
241. his rock-like props  
242. with their kid brother  
243. the audacious hooker;

244. and if the movement  
245. has strayed over to the  
246. right touch-line  
247. then he finds towards the centre  
248. the twins,  
249. his two half-backs  
250. and, folding his centres,  
251. arrives at the third  
252. and fourth stages  
253. of the movement  
254. and the ball in never dropped  
255. and maul and ruck  
256. provide breaks in the symphony  
257. of total rugby  
258. and light interludes along the way  
259. become wonderful opportunities  
260. to open out the bellows  
261. of total rugby 's accordion.  
262. This great play  
263. got them renamed by the papers of the day  
264. "All Backs"  
265. that is to say  
266. "all behind and never offside".  
267. Then, with an agreeable  
268. mistake, due to the  
269. splendid black of their jerseys  
270. cleaved by a sprig of fern,  
271. occasion had it that  
272. "All Blacks" was printed instead  
273. and the 'aca' war-dance -  
274. savage aspect  
275. of a great culture -  
276. crossed the globe  
277. and proclaimed to a stunned world  
278. that the future of rugby  
279. had arrived:  
280. TOTAL RUGBY.

**FIFTH CANTO**  
**(THE VALUE OF ORGANISATION)**

1. Yet even this great game  
2. with its expansion,  
3. needs organisation  
4. and you,  
5. a young player now,  
6. treading the rugby pitch  
7. start already to think about  
8. how you will take part  
9. when no longer able to play;  
10. as a coach, manager,  
11. a fair referee  
12. or in spreading the word  
13. about this poetic sport.  
14. And I understood this lesson  
15. when, on entering the shrine  
16. of English rugby  
17. at Twickenham,  
18. I found the ticket collector  
19. had been an English winger  
20. who, forty years earlier  
21. collected Welsh scalps  
22. and kept a tally  
23. not of tickets  
24. but of his splendid tries.  
25. And that youthful veteran  
26. showed me the spirit  
27. of this hallowed sport,  
28. which hovers above  
29. presiding over the match,  
30. making even  
31. the beer and sandwich vendor  
32. a valued contributor  
33. to this unifying music;  
34. a pyramid not of the pharaohs  
35. where, at its apex, -  
36. a ball touches  
37. the magical goal fine  
38. and at the base

39. lies all the support  
40. needed to bring about,  
41. or think, dream, love  
42. or set the stage for  
43. the casting of a magic spell.  
44. But now I see  
45. that I have maybe  
46. spoken too long  
47. of the theatre  
48. in which the great drama  
49. of rugby takes place;  
50. now is the time  
51. to give some space to the actors,  
52. the roles of the 15  
53. and then entrust these verse  
54. to your passion for rugby  
55. which perhaps may also speak  
56. foreign tongues,  
57. having been written for those  
58. who once in a while,  
59. by day or night,  
60. perhaps at work,  
61. feel their imagination  
62. kindled by the vision  
63. of deeds on the field  
64. or, seated in the cafe,  
65. and pizzeria  
66. create players ~and movements  
67. with pieces of bread  
68. and talk for hours  
69. about rugby  
70. with other fans;  
71. and they can even  
72. draw in young women  
73. and the less young  
74. who do not feel left out  
75. by discussions about  
76. posts and ovals,  
77. understanding them to be  
78. ardent words of love  
79. meant for them.

80. am vexed to speak of roles  
81. feeling  
82. as an impassioned poet  
83. ill-prepared to sing of  
84. the synthesis of the elements  
85. resulting in action  
86. on the rugby fields  
87. of the world  
88. But don' t be deceived by words  
89. young rugby fan:  
90. role in rugby  
91. is not a played-out scheme  
92. paralysing living reality;  
93. it is only a choice of game  
94. which contributes  
95. to the building of a team.  
96. It would be very wrong of me  
97. to draw a parallel,  
98. even well contrived,  
99. between the building  
100. which is a team  
101. and the social structure  
102. all of us experience.  
103. The comparison will not hold water  
104. but if I made it,  
105. the social structure would  
106. be the loser.  
107. In real life  
108. you have many -  
109. men and women - all different  
110. in two basic ways:  
111. Nature and History.  
112. There are the tall and short,  
113. the strong, astute  
114. and the one made rich  
115. by dint of his efforts;  
116. the one affluent  
117. through violence,  
118. and the needy  
119. but clever and able  
120. and those who by choice



121. neither sow nor reap.  
122. And History and Nature,  
123. down through the centuries,  
124. gave many to ponder  
125. the reason  
126. for all this human diversity  
127. and maybe, only now,  
128. have we realised  
129. that the works of Nature  
130. can only with difficulty  
131. and great effort  
132. be slightly altered  
133. but never nullified.  
134. Thus, death  
135. always touches  
136. what exists.  
137. But into the sphere of man,  
138. who is conscious nature,  
139. we can now bring a  
140. slight modification.  
141. which is culture:  
142. we send all our children  
143. to school,  
144. give them bread,  
145. sports,  
146. a house and job  
147. guaranteeing a minimum level  
148. without thwarting  
149. the high-flier,  
150. even though we know  
151. that you amass wealth  
152. by taking from your neighbour  
153. However, the problem  
154. of social roles  
155. has always been difficult  
156. and no-one has ever managed  
157. to really understand  
158. if his proper job  
159. is due to choice  
160. or harsh destiny  
161. or, worse still,

162. paternal and family pressures.  
163. Maybe everyone  
164. in disappointment  
165. towards the end of their life  
166. thinks back to chances missed  
167. or the profession they loved  
168. and yet laid aside.  
169. However, despite empty talk  
170. about the dignity of labour,  
171. he who pontificates  
172. would turn up his nose  
173. if his son decided  
174. to be a farm labourer  
175. or if his daughter took  
176. a miner for a companion  
177. or even a Northerner or Southerner  
178. or one from anywhere  
179. on earth  
180. far from his opulent abode.  
181. And perhaps even in the most just societies  
182. we cannot escape the harsh fact  
183. that love counts for little  
184. and power for much more,  
185. however it was gained;  
186. this is why the pious  
187. sometimes lose heart,  
188. seeing merit go unrecognised  
189. and effort vitiated;  
190. then, perhaps reacting unwisely,  
191. they give birth to utopias  
192. which inflict more suffering,  
193. because man's time  
194. is slow, like nature's -  
195. the alteration from solid mountain  
196. to extensive plain  
197. requiring millions of years  
198. or the separation  
199. of the 5 great continents  
200. which, then, maybe  
201. after a billion years  
202. will reunite as oceans

203. though to us  
204. seeming eternal, disappear  
205. and even our own star  
206. the sun darkens.  
207. But rugby depends on Nature  
208. and sister History;  
209. so use them as a springboard  
210. to soar, with sturdy wings  
211. to the limits of imagination  
212. and radiant poetry,  
213. to realise  
214. true equality on the field:  
215. to be different from one another  
216. without anyone  
217. feeling superior  
218. just because of his role.  
219. Never has a wing three-quarter  
220. thought that his dive for a try  
221. was of greater importance  
222. than the struggle in the scrum  
223. to win a difficult ball  
224. which- mutates via  
225. the half-back' s accurate pass  
226. into a fine try.  
227. We are different  
228. but not pre-eminent,  
229. involved in unequal deeds  
230. but no one tries  
231. fraudulently to make  
232. stupid personal gains from this.  
233. Real and proper equality  
234. does not mortify  
235. but, on the contrary,  
236. rewards effort,  
237. skill on the field  
238. and whoever with courage  
239. regardless of position,  
240. shatters the hopes  
241. with a crushing tackle  
242. of a strong number 8  
243. making for a certain try,

244. having got the ball  
245. from the centre three-quarter  
246. who had cleverly drawn  
247. his opposite number  
248. then passed on the blind side.  
249. In this way,  
250. none of the forwards  
251. feel inferior to the half-back,  
252. that maestro of the scrum,  
253. just because he can  
254. order a maul or ruck,  
255. an airy swirl  
256. in and out  
257. then an "up and under"  
258. or a thousand other wonderful movements  
259. which are sublime  
260. only when that unity  
261. is present on the field,  
262. impossible in everyday life,  
263. of liberty and necessity  
264. reason and creativity  
265. common- sense and intuition on  
266. of individual and collective |  
267. of single and group,  
268. imagination and analysis  
269. and body and spirit.  
270. Even a great champion  
271. recognised as such  
272. by his fellows  
273. appreciates and understands  
274. that being the best  
275. often means  
276. to suffer most  
277. by giving more in energy and stress  
278. because you,  
279. in order to offer more,  
280. must have more to give.  
281. Sometimes, you know,  
282. your lungs burst as,  
283. three times in a row,

284. you dive outstretched for a try,  
285. tackle  
286. and then are tackled yourself  
287. and with the ball out of play  
288. confident of taking a breather  
289. you find yourself again with the ball,  
290. now involved  
291. in yet another gigantic ruck;  
292. not wishing to falter  
293. nor push halfheartedly  
294. knowing that if you stop  
295. your team-mates  
296. who wanted you as captain  
297. might lose heart  
298. after they' d chosen you  
299. for a coach.  
300. Even in the bar  
301. after the game  
302. when youthful high spirits  
303. are set free  
304. by a few drinks  
305. they acknowledge `   
306. not only what you are ;  
307. on the field,  
308. for which you are proud,  
309. but you would rather die  
310. than bear in your heart  
311. the arrogant thought  
312. of a haughty tyrant  
313. and, at those hard times  
314. ma~e harder, probably, by mud  
315. or snow, or impetuous rain,  
316. you manage still to resist  
317. and become Achilles,  
318. Hector,  
319. or Ulysses again -  
320. once more the warrior  
321. sweeping across the enemy line.

**SIXTH CANTO**  
**(THE IMPORTANCE OF AMATEURISM AND TRADITION)**

1. At this point
2. want to stress
3. that rugby should remain
4. a game for men and women
5. who do not make money
6. by appearing on the field.
7. Certainly the Olympic ideal
8. is not being sold short
9. if the club's funds
10. are used to give a helping hand
11. to a young player,
12. perhaps a little lost,
13. to study and find a job;
14. but if you bring
15. prize money into the game -
16. concern for cash
17. and nothing else -
18. then this martial art,
19. tough but never violent,
20. could change from
21. a war-fable
22. into a real battle
23. forgetting Arnold 's vow
24. to play with
25. and not against others,
26. capable of going
27. no longer for the ball
28. but unfairly for the man
29. of the opposing XV.
30. You, young player,
31. never let yourself be tempted
32. by what happens in other sports
33. where professionalism
34. has even destroyed the game.
35. It is marvellous to win
36. on foreign grounds as well
37. and we should find better ways
38. of giving to the younger player

39. the necessary time for  
40. long and difficult transfers;  
41. but the introduction  
42. of a system found wanting  
43. in other sports  
44. could change rugby  
45. from a real contest  
46. into a brawl.  
47. 'The fine separating  
48. strength from its own negation  
49. is always thin  
50. and, for that, more tantalising;  
51. to cross it on purpose  
52. means to stray from  
53. the sublime lesson  
54. of the great Maoris, |  
55. who leave their land  
56. far even from the heavens  
57. and come over to Europe  
58. to write  
59. poems in rugby -  
60. but earn nothing -  
61. always playing  
62. for the profound satisfaction  
63. of playing and beating  
64. French at and Scots,  
65. the strong Welsh,  
66. the hearty Irish  
67. and many more  
68. epic XV' s.  
69. We know, though,  
70. that in the clubs and associations  
71. all those who love rugby  
72. and have the means  
73. should contribute  
74. to opening up new horizons  
75. for youngsters  
76. and new grounds.  
77. It certainly is not  
78. against Arnold' s teachings  
79. if a player does not

80. lose out financially;  
81. and simple, honest  
82. organisations created -  
83. rugby schools where players  
84. perhaps even full-time  
85. can work to promulgate  
86. the spirit of the game  
87. and its great values,  
88. taking time off normal work  
89. for a certain period.  
90. However, the serious-minded  
91. organiser should never forget  
92. that it is better to have  
93. a thousand good youngsters  
94. on the field  
95. playing mini-rugby  
96. than score dubious victories  
97. of little value  
98. with a squad  
99. of only twenty good elements.  
100. Remember also -  
101. having many youngsters -  
102. you will shortly possess  
103. a strong team too,  
104. which will remain so  
105. only if it draws continually  
106. from a base of youth  
107. playing fair rugby;  
108. and you, being a real leader,  
109. draw them away  
110. from the streets  
111. and, perhaps, from deadly drugs.  
112. When you get down to basics  
113. with boys and youths  
114. and, in time,  
115. they win the highest prizes  
116. as great players,  
117. then you can only  
118. stumble momentarily,  
119. losing by a small margin,  
120. but win in the end;



121. you have already won  
122. because the only great triumph  
123. is to make rugby,  
124. sport of life,  
125. widely enjoyed by young people  
126. and also dearly loved  
127. by thousands of kids  
128. who are set,  
129. if they start early,  
130. not only to cross  
131. the goal fine  
132. of strong and powerful teams  
133. but, what really counts,  
134. is to be rugby players  
135. on the field and off.  
136. They will score tries  
137. at crowded grounds  
138. but also among the concrete  
139. in grey suburbs  
140. which could live again  
141. if the dusty spaces  
142. were changed into to rugby fields -  
143. all strips of green and light  
144. and hope for the future.  
145. At this point I would tell  
146. the leaders of our nations  
147. to take positive steps  
148. to providing facilities for kids  
149. without parks to play in.  
150. You can see  
151. from beautiful Treviso,  
152. understand from strong Rovigo  
153. from l' Aquila, Benevento  
154. and so many towns  
155. throughout the world  
156. what it means to play  
157. the greatest sport on earth.  
158. But now my heart feels remote  
159. as I remember  
160. that in Naples,  
161. in the past,

162. rugby was played  
163. by many more youngsters than now;  
164. but I nourish the great hope  
165. of seeing rugby take root  
166. among the young athletes of the South.  
167. And remember  
168. that behind the great champions  
169. of glorious Partenope I  
170. stood the solid young  
171. ranks of a thousand other clubs;  
172. and when, for lack of leadership  
173. the bedrock crumbled,  
174. rugby' s wonderful edifice fell.  
175. Now, it is a fine thing  
176. to start again from scratch,  
177. very humbly,  
178. among the younger generation  
179. always recognising  
180. that real success,  
181. just as valuable  
182. as the World Championship,  
183. means to have on the fields:  
184. youth, youth, youth.  
185. And you,  
186. who now find grey  
187. in your thinning hair  
188. and were invincible champion,  
189. bear in mind  
190. that you have yet to score  
191. the most difficult of all tries:  
192. to pass on the great tradition  
193. with real passion,  
194. as they have always done  
195. on the pitches of New Zealand)  
196. in the Wales of the miners,  
197. indomitable Ireland,  
198. tenacious Scotland,  
199. great England  
200. gracious France  
201. where rugby is a bloom  
202. constantly tended

203. in exquisite conservatories -  
204. so that by now  
205. it even springs up  
206. in borders along paths.  
207. In those countries  
208. rugby is a civil education  
209. based on the friendly club,  
210. the cohesion of associations  
211. created by rugby-lovers;  
212. in those glorious changing rooms  
213. lives, with photos fading,  
214. the story of great captains  
215. and heroic struggles.

## SEVENTH CANTO (THE PROPS)

1. Now, from the background
2. I turn my attention
3. back to the players
4. with hope and more confidence
5. that reality will contradict me
6. and assert
7. that I have spoken too little
8. and am not a poet
9. equal to this sublime game.
10. Starting with numbering:
11. I like to follow the
12. Anglo-Saxon system
13. which places single figures
14. on the shirts of the eight forwards
15. and two half-backs,
16. numbers 8 and 9,
17. as it is nicer to see
18. the double-figured backs
19. filling out
20. the inevitable voids
21. not found in the tightly-knit
22. forward unit.
23. Now, you the number **1**
24. are loose-head prop
25. and as the rules say
26. you are always peripheral
27. taking less thrust -
28. almost half -
29. that of your comrade
30. to your right, number **3**.
31. In between is your hooker, number **2**
32. not second to you
33. in that roaring clash:
34. going down to a scrum
35. in direct contact
36. with the opposing front row.
37. And you, with your left foot,
38. help your brother strike
39. on no account collapsing the scrum-

40. for which you will be penalised -  
41. even before the whistle sounds,  
42. by your sense of fair-play  
43. which requires you to win cleanly.  
44. You are tough with your tough opponent  
45. the tight-head prop,  
46. because in a scrum there is  
47. a lop-sided order  
48. between the two rows,  
49. whereas the defence,  
50. centres, half-backs and full-back  
51. face each other  
52. as in Alice 's looking-glass  
53. and number 12 faces 12  
54. as does 13 face 13;  
55. ( exceptionally  
56. numbers 12 and 13  
57. may be opposed -  
58. distinguished as "left and right"  
59. from that which  
60. lines up the same warriors  
61. as first and second),  
62. number 15 fights along the same  
63. perpendicular as the other,  
64. so too the 9 and 10  
65. twin halves always face  
66. and mirror each other.  
67. But the number 11 left wing  
68. opposes 14, the right wing  
69. and number 14  
70. clashes with the left wing.  
71. And you, indomitable prop,  
72. strong-hearted  
73. and broad-shouldered as you are,  
74. if you are a serious player  
75. and are thoughtful  
76. you will always feel a shudder  
77. in the first scrum  
78. of a game  
79. and ask yourself  
80. if this first confrontation

81. will auger well  
82. for the next eighty minutes,  
83. or mean you face a stronger man  
84. you will certainly surrender to;  
85. but suffer  
86. as you feel  
87. his head dig into your arms  
88. trying to break the link  
89. between you and your brother.  
90. If you are taller  
91. you should try and take the thrust  
92. a little further, away;  
93. shorter, and you  
94. aim to close in  
95. and, from underneath,  
96. use the force of motion  
97. to bend archlike  
98. the copiously muscled tree,  
99. which hangs mockingly over you.  
100. And you, on the tight-head,  
101. carrying number 3  
102. have the greater burden  
103. and you are to your opponent  
104. what his comrade on the right  
105. is to your number 1.  
106. Then you, edging forward  
107. from the right  
108. should roll the mighty scrum  
109. and, with perfect timing,  
110. suck in the ball  
111. entering along the centre line  
112. on which is stamped  
113. a harsh penalty  
114. for the raising of a leg  
115. before the ball touches the grass.  
116. Usually, in winning the line-out,  
117. each stubborn prop  
118. helps a second row  
119. and they are often trump cards,  
120. winning the maul and ruck  
121. formed on the spot, whenever possible,

122. because as long as the foot  
123. of the last man  
124. in the turbulent pack  
125. stays behind the offside line,  
126. their defence is rooted  
127. metres from ours.  
128. And if the ball is won  
129. and passing begins  
130. you must follow  
131. always on the blind side  
132. and slightly behind  
133. your flankers and three-quarters  
134. and, now and then,  
135. you see a swift prop  
136. even reach the Wing  
137. and make it to goal,  
138. beat the full-back  
139. who vainly attempts to tackle  
140. our fleeing giant  
141. who can break through  
142. given a chance -  
143. but also stop suddenly,  
144. firmly planting  
145. is sturdy frame  
146. and stopping the entire  
147. opposition in its tracks  
148. with a fast-moving ruck.  
149. Just think, it needs only two,  
150. one per side  
151. standing around the ball on the ground  
152. to bring the rule of the ruck  
153. into play.  
154. Were I a mathematician  
155. would use the formula  
156.  $(a + b)^n$   
157. where "n" means ball  
158. and "a" and "b" are players.  
159. The law of the maul is  
160.  $(a + b) + a^1$  or  $(a + b) + b^1$   
161. where "1" stands for ball.  
162. So in today's game

163. the prop is a jet of energy,  
164. a natural geyser  
165. capable of demolishing  
166. with sheer power  
167. the opposite front row;  
168. but also of finding in his lungs  
169. and fast strong legs  
170. the oxygen needed to give  
171. twice as much as his comrades.  
172. And here, young coach  
173. bear in mind that  
174. your finest schemes  
175. will come to nothing - be nullified -  
176. if you fail to teach your forwards  
177. to play very tight  
178. and all your players to pass  
179. the ball in line  
180. and not forward,  
181. but never too far back  
182. if you want to gain ground  
183. and quickly take the advantage:  
184. this is the real game  
185. which always produces  
186. with least effort  
187. that sixteenth extra man  
188. who breaks through  
189. the sacred advantage fine  
190. even before the goal-  
191. a sure foundation  
192. for the rest of the game.  
193. Only if you respect  
194. this simple rule,  
195. as clear as spring water:  
196. pass and back up in line,  
197. play very tight;  
198. only then is the time ripe  
199. to tell the lads  
200. of the "Culisse"  
201. on the right or left  
202. and that you can jump over a centre  
203. make a scissors



204. and clever moves  
205. which escape punishment  
206. even though, in this case,  
207. you try not to forget  
208. that if you have a kicker,  
209. better try for goal  
210. or, if too far away,  
211. play for touch  
212. with an accurate kick.  
213. In this case,  
214. the rule giving distance  
215. only to the kick  
216. from inside the 22  
217. is not enforced.  
218. Today's props are like three-quarters  
219. who are expected, moreover,  
220. to work in the scrum  
221. line-out and nearly 100%  
222. of rucks and mauls;  
223. but in the third,  
224. if not second  
225. stage of the actual attack  
226. it is wonderful to see a prop  
227. reaching the touch-line  
228. opposite to where the move started  
229. and, either score against  
230. a stragglng defence,  
231. or engage it  
232. in a titanic ruck.  
233. It is beautiful to see  
234. how in following up  
235. the order', even numerical  
236. of the eight forwards in concert  
237. can be reversed  
238. and first to follow  
239. the swift three-quarters  
240. are 7, 8 and 6  
241. then 4 and 5  
242. who always keep to the middle;  
243. then 3, 2 and even 1  
244. and, if all this occurs quickly,

245. (and the opposing pack collapses)  
246. the dream of every  
247. player and coach comes true  
248. when your own pack  
249. in reverse order  
250. snaps in two  
251. the opposite three-quarter line  
252. which vainly tried to resist;  
253. and you can read  
254. in the defending centre' s eyes,  
255. as he tackles a giant number 8  
256. with his breathing in distress  
257. and no need to glance back  
258. that his back row  
259. is missing in defence  
260. and hopeless to wonder 7  
261. if 8, 7 and 6 are lagging behind  
262. or, at least, the second row  
263. which has never given way  
264. even in the worst scrums  
265. might arrive in support  
266. to spasmodically slam shut the door.  
267. And this great  
268. but simple advice  
269. is offered to us  
270. on the field today  
271. by the great Maoris  
272. or by charming teams  
273. of fleet-footed boys  
274. who live total rugby  
275. in the way we have described  
276. and know how to play it -  
277. today with only the aid of imagination -  
278. tomorrow with a clear mind as well.  
279. Though it would be unjust  
280. to remain silent that,  
281. from a tough scrum,  
282. it is truly superhuman  
283. just at the end of the thrust  
284. to reach your three-quarters.  
285. It is clear that this tactic

286. of backing up on the field  
287. is totally impossible  
288. if the defence is imprudently  
289. lying too deep  
290. so that, having won the ball,  
291. With great effort  
292. yes, it arrives on the wing,  
293. but maybe 40 metres behind  
294. and your opponents  
295. are already occupying the field  
296. able to make the most  
297. of the extra time  
298. you have given them  
299. passing backwards while they ran forward  
300. and screwed down the game  
301. in every department.  
302. Often, you see an inexperienced coach  
303. not realising why,  
304. a ball well won  
305. is followed in the rear half  
306. by a losing ruck  
307. and the enemy bursts through  
308. and, like a flood,  
309. even though they had originally lost  
310. the throw-in, scrum,  
311. ruck or maul.  
312. The hard work of the prop  
313. is always appreciated  
314. by a rugby-lover  
315. and you realise why  
316. that great player  
317. now turned T.V. commentator, Paolo Rosi,  
318. tells this story:  
319. complete absolution  
320. is already granted to props  
321. and if God really exists  
322. he knows that on the rugby pitch  
323. those two living rocks  
324. have expiated their sins.  
325. So, the divine light  
326. spoke to them

327. convinced that entry  
328. of the blessed into eternity  
329. was a reward to those  
330. who had bravely borne their cross  
331. on the rugby field.  
332. And Rosi, deeply moved,  
333. tells of a superb Maori prop  
334. on their first European tour,  
335. a father of total rugby,  
336. in his handsome black strip,  
337. who kissed the goal-line  
338. with the ball to score  
339. but the referee said: “ no”  
340. to this fair equaliser;  
341. the prop silently accepted the decision,  
342. stunned.  
343. Yet some decades later  
344. as they surrounded the dying man  
345. his weeping family  
346. were amazed to hear the old prop  
347. with his feeble voice  
348. confess that the only regret  
349. he bore in his parting soul  
350. was for the disallowal  
351. of that try against mighty England.  
352. “ I swear to the last”  
353. were his dying words  
354. “ that I scored that time  
355. and still bear a deep pain  
356. in my heart.”  
357. This is why props  
358. are the battering ram  
359. of the modern Macedonian phalanx  
360. and, without them,  
361. it would be vain  
362. to even think of tries.

## EIGHTH CANTO (THE HOOKER)

1. In a double lock
2. between the props
3. fits a tough and agile player:
4. the hooker.
5. It's he who uses
6. the inside of his right foot
7. at a put-in
8. to channel the ball
9. into the hands of his crafty half-back
10. in a powerful stroke.
11. Linking arms
12. in the great clash he seems
13. an image of the crucifixion;
14. he relies entirely
15. on his great comrades the props,
16. supported by the two back rows
17. who must hold fast.
18. Given a scrum, we prefer
19. to use the right foot
20. because you must keep
21. one foot on the ground.
22. Then it is easy to see
23. that, given human anatomy
24. the right is stronger
25. not only for the forward drive
26. but also the knife-like movement -
27. a human machete
28. slashing through a thick
29. jungle of enemy legs.
30. Then, at the first chance,
31. using a quick closure
32. of your loose-head prop
33. with his left leg
34. like a steel pincer
35. to grasp the fleeing ball
36. and, for Pumas or Maoris
37. send it fast
38. upwards at forty five degrees
39. into your swift half-back's hands

40. who opens or tricks the scrum  
41. with a well-aimed slap  
42. two hand-breadths from the ground,  
43. and resumes dreaming  
44. how best to violate  
45. the opposing goal.  
46. Often number 2 makes touch:  
47. it is quite a fine art  
48. like clay-pigeon shooting,  
49. but if the hooker  
50. strikes accurately,  
51. touch is won  
52. ten times over  
53. and the whole pack benefits  
54. from the increased chance  
55. of reaching the enemy horizon.  
56. But the greatest quality  
57. of the hooker in defence  
58. at a throw-in against  
59. is his ability to tackle  
60. their half-back  
61. in an acrobatic plunge  
62. and, perhaps, just  
63. miss colliding with his flanker  
64. who is moving in fast  
65. for a tackle.  
66. To break the linchpin,  
67. a good scrum-half,  
68. is the principal objective  
69. if the match is to be won.  
70. And at a short line-out  
71. with slow, inaccurate passing  
72. by the opposing forwards  
73. to their scrum-half,  
74. to swoop eagle-like  
75. in a hard tackle  
76. can often be the seal  
77. number 2 sets on the game.  
78. If the ball is passed then,  
79. his quick bolt  
80. is like sailing on a bowline

81. towards your line  
82. and may mean  
83. dealing with a whole series  
84. of opponents going for a try;  
85. it' s not unusual to see,  
86. with a flanker lagging  
87. hooker overlap  
88. and beat the centre  
89. as the sharp axe falling  
90. with great might cuts down  
91. an ancient sequoia.  
92. A true hooker in defence  
93. should if necessary  
94. be found behind his full-back;  
95. if they were gods,  
96. not men on the field,  
97. and everything happened  
98. without a hint of an error,  
99. he should find  
100. his opposite number with the ball,  
101. received from a wing three-quarter  
102. or swift number 15  
103. moving into attack;  
104. his last and decisive tackle  
105. should force both ball  
106. and opponent into touch.  
107. or forlornly follow him,  
108. triumphant, over the fatal line.  
109. But believe me  
110. you see such graceful play,  
111. pure total rugby,  
112. by great champions and youngsters alike  
113. and so, during their lives  
114. only young and old  
115. accomplish such things -  
116. while those in the prime of life  
117. hardly ever do.  
118. With the two props bound to him,  
119. the hooker is like  
120. the sacred Indian Trimurti:  
121. Brahma, Siva and Vishnu

122. are the front row  
123. and, if there are  
124. fast and strong players here  
125. a ruck rarely has to open  
126. to the defence; and in the narrowest of spaces,  
127. in that critical passageway  
128. the three divinities  
129. of the front row with the 2nd row like Dioscuri behind  
130. overwhelm all and,  
131. figuring how to defend the ball  
132. place it in goal  
133. and then you see the enemy  
134. posts curved back by a gust of wind  
135. produced in a scythe  
136. by the five deities  
137. and their hundred steel clasps  
138. seem to many as the coupling  
139. of enormous wagons  
140. shunted from behind  
141. by screeching Locomotives;  
142. you, seated and watching,  
143. would relish a quicker brain,  
144. an unhurried eye  
145. to capture this eruption of vigour  
146. in your soul.  
147. The first five,  
148. at line-outs and scrums, mauls and rucks-  
149. at the game's every instant-  
150. spring up and are  
151. starry rays and seem  
152. fabulous sunflowers  
153. in a field immense with life.



## NINTH CANTO (THE LOCK FORWARDS: RUGBY'S DIOSCURI)

1. But in every pack,
2. behind divine Trimurti,
3. exists the huge back-bone
4. of numbers 4 and 5, the Dioscuri -
5. Siamese twins of the scrum
6. bound well on the flank
7. and driving the whole pack forward
8. like mighty bison.
9. And just as the great bison
10. is venerated as a god
11. and beloved of the Red Indian,
12. so the locks are like
13. two lofty peaks
14. to whom you must entrust,
15. skilled coach,
16. the task of winning the ball in the air
17. and thrusting with loins of steel
18. in the set scrum
19. reshaping a loose group
20. into a powerful force
21. to upset
22. the balanced horizontal antagonism
23. of the opposing line
24. to then break through
25. or reach it at least
26. and then reopen wide
27. when the concentration
28. sees around the peaks
29. a vain enemy advance
30. as when slender ivy
31. assails the foot of the knotty oak.
32. But often these two peaks, ..
33. in the space of eighty minutes,
34. are in constant conflict
35. against their similars;
36. often the struggle
37. is so titanic
38. they seem to mirror themselves.
39. At the line-outs

40. they have a thankless but sublime task,  
41. to leap high above the turf  
42. and win the ball  
43. which may only be fed surely  
44. with two hands  
45. clean to the waiting half-back.  
46. However, the giants under pressure  
47. stand out like the Himalayas  
48. and, like angels,  
49. fly on the hot air  
50. to that fatal line  
51. which seems a prologue  
52. to the glorious goal-line  
53. often denied,  
54. like a woman who puts off  
55. giving herself to a man;  
56. but when eventually  
57. union is complete  
58. on that fine of love,  
59. all the fatigue  
60. of the thrusting forward  
61. and tackling wing  
62. dissolves in orgasm.  
63. Now, in the end  
64. as the line is crossed,  
65. the marks left on the body  
66. by all-consuming fatigue  
67. seem joyful kisses.  
68. Often a second row,  
69. straight from a throw-in,  
70. feinting a pass  
71. to the waiting half-back  
72. breaks through the unwary  
73. enemy pack who,  
74. being taken in,  
75. have relaxed their grip;  
76. but like a child who  
77. after waiting expectantly  
78. to have a turn  
79. on the roundabout  
80. and then, disappointed,

81. is left behind because he wasn' t ready  
82. to get on,  
83. the opposing pack  
84. pass their way back  
85. after the determined pair  
86. who break the air  
87. overwhelming, without even offering  
88. the opposing half a glance.  
89. He, surprised  
90. and without the ball,  
91. is taken, sucked in  
92. by that enormous vortex  
93. then thrown backwards  
94. in a vain tackle;  
95. and if those whose entrance  
96. is the goal-line and  
97. are close to the realm of hope  
98. tried frantically to defend  
99. or withdraw quickly  
100. from a superb opening,  
101. followed by two shaky centres -  
102. the entire field  
103. by now in turmoil  
104. and you witness a try by the sacred twins,  
105. Castor and Pollux.  
106. But, on the other hand,  
107. if a shrewd, brave tackle,  
108. perhaps by the half-back himself,  
109. swiftly aided by a wing  
110. on the blind side  
111. topples the giant  
112. and no time remains  
113. for a deft pass  
114. to the tide advancing in support,  
115. the ruck ensuing  
116. at the point of impact  
117. dazzles us;  
118. defending centres  
119. overwhelmed by eight forwards  
120. emerge breathless  
121. from the twisted, tidy clump

122. to take up position  
123. then, realising with a sigh of relief  
124. that the pack, deceived and ensnared  
125. by a dummy to the fly-half  
126. had promptly retreated  
127. to repair the damage.  
128. If the scrum is won  
129. on the advance,  
130. as should always happen,  
131. for good ball  
132. they also overlap  
133. and in the temples of rugby  
134. throughout the world  
135. they will always be found  
136. reforming in the centre  
137. to receive a perfect ball,  
138. maybe from a centre,  
139. a flanker or outside-half  
140. then go for the upright posts and cut through  
141. a dilatory back row  
142. or, in a ruck,  
143. pin down their straight  
144. defence and swelling into a bunch  
145. take off again, handling  
146. loosely in reverse  
147. or on a tight bow-line.  
148. To have a second row  
149. able to defend,  
150. means to possess a couple of tanks  
151. which cut across the pitch  
152. mowing down everything  
153. in their path;  
154. in the shade  
155. if the sun is behind  
156. their fatal line -  
157. in the light  
158. if the sun shines  
159. its eternal warmth  
160. on the enemy line .  
161. The job of the scrum ' s  
162. Siamese twins

163. is truly titanic  
164. and I would have to  
165. write a modern treatise  
166. on philosophy  
167. to explain that this poetic sport  
168. is, in fact, Stoicism  
169. lived on the field and in life,  
170. because the player  
171. who wishes to be serious  
172. but stay amateur  
173. and also be a great champion  
174. like the Maoris  
175. has to behave  
176. in a particular way  
177. in everyday life,  
178. getting up early to do  
179. weight-training and loosen up,  
180. the repeat in the evening.  
181. At table he should sometimes  
182. be able to deny himself things  
183. except for the beer  
184. supped with his team-mates  
185. and fond coach  
186. in the pub or cellar;  
187. always accompanied  
188. at these colossal booze-ups  
189. by the firm manager,  
190. the old champion,  
191. indomitable physic,  
192. team physician  
193. and the good counsellor  
194. who never says,  
195. when things have already happened,  
196. that he had fore seen them.  
197. Anyway, there is nothing better  
198. than to see the second rows,  
199. adversaries during the match,  
200. exchanging jerseys:  
201. with 5,  
202. with 4,  
203. in a chiastic gifting -

204. and even nicer to see  
205. a strong Siamese second row  
206. play like a hero,  
207. despite being much shorter  
208. than his opposite number!

**TENTH CANTO**  
**(THE BACK ROW AND NUMBER 8)**

1. And now, reader,
2. I hope you are not too bored
3. but are roused by the poem
4. to take to the field
5. in your shorts
6. for epic matches.
7. No longer a youngster,
8. my voice quavers
9. as I sing the epic
10. of the back row -
11. a second Trimurti
12. which enters the scrum from behind;
13. and number 8,
14. helmsman of the scrum,
15. sailing often in heavy seas
16. and taking a fearful pounding
17. from the raging ocean.
18. No celebrated team
19. can remain so
20. if it rounds off its pack
21. with a weak back row.
22. And you, number 6
23. are the left flanker,
24. supernal chameleon
25. of a hundred essences,
26. whatever the form of a scrum;
27. but certainly we can today
28. do without the 3-2-3
29. which makes a speedy
30. return to defence
31. more difficult
32. for our flankers.
33. Also, every inch
34. you get nearer
35. the opposing goal
36. is to your advantage;
37. rugby unfolds
38. in much the same way

39. as does life:  
40. and the first moments  
41. are the most critical  
42. and determine whether life  
43.  
44.  
45.  
46.  
47.  
48.  
49.  
50.  
51.  
52.  
53.  
54.  
55.  
56.  
57.  
58.  
59.  
60.  
61. of the game.  
62. Remember then, astute captain,  
63.  
64.  
65.  
66.  
67.  
68.  
69.  
70.  
71.  
72.  
73.  
74.  
75.  
76.  
77.  
78.  
79.

will flourish strong  
or be overcome  
before it has a change.  
But sonnetises  
it is good to use 3-4 -  
only, though,  
if your pack is much stronger,  
that is, if your seven  
can overwhelm their eight  
with certainty;  
above all, when the enemy  
is invading your sensitive 22,  
and you have less time  
to draw closed your defensive bolt  
against the attacking wave  
which pounds and floods,  
raging, perhaps, against  
a deficit in the closing minutes

not to take your tiredest  
player from the pack  
but one still able to tackle  
right up to the last whistle;  
and there are few  
quick flankers  
who can attack and tackle  
till the end,  
as implacable as Fate  
and with the certainty  
of the rising sun.  
Supernal chamaeleons,  
the back row  
must always be like wingers -  
swift, strong  
as a penetrative forward,  
artful as a half-back,



80. as gifted in positioning  
 81. as a full-back  
 82. who plays as if with  
 83. a hidden telephone  
 84. in direct contact with the ball  
 85. and its fantastic  
 86. bizarre movements which  
 87. from a kick  
 88. require precise compass-work  
 89. on the ellipse descending  
 90. like an angel of vengeance.  
 91. But if it is fast-moving  
 92. from hand to hand  
 93. then you must take the man,  
 94. but in either case  
 95. defence may change to attack.  
 96. And so, the left flank  
 97. in a scrum played  
 98. on the same side as the line-out  
 99. and on an enemy break-through  
 100. has the task of blocking  
 101. the corridor  
 102. dangerous and fatal  
 103. if their scrum-half  
 104. manages to produce  
 105. a blazing switch  
 106. in the first three metres  
 107. and seizes the advantage  
 108. like an Argentinian Puma  
 109. who devours his prey  
 110. before it is aware  
 111. of the awful deed.  
 112. And now for the new rules,  
 113. which prohibit the scrum-half  
 114. controlling the ball  
 115. from the side opposite  
 116. the quick put-in,  
 117. number 6, in a scrum against the head  
 118. must feel the hard passage  
 119. like Leonidas' narrow and fatal pass  
 120. at Thermopylae;

121. and the brother to his right,  
122. number 7, takes more care  
123. in the scrum  
124. which takes place  
125. from the right  
126. but more at our put-in,  
127. unfortunately lost,  
128. than at the enemy's.  
129. The thinking player will  
130. understand the reason for this.  
131. If the ball were put in  
132. on that disquieting side  
133. by their scrum-half  
134. it would be truly amazing  
135. if he, intoxicated even  
136. by an astronomical lead,  
137. heeled from our scrum-half,  
138. his opposite number,  
139. should set upon him at Thermopylae;  
140. on the contrary a ball  
141. put in by us  
142. and won by their eight  
143. superb Persians  
144. gives him a perfect  
145. opportunity to circle the scrum  
146. close in and move out wide,  
147. but vainly pursued  
148. by our maestro  
149. who must be able  
150. to skip over  
151. legs deftly outstretched  
152. by their crafty enemy flankers;  
153. but when our scrum-half  
154. circles, starting from  
155. where his opponent is,  
156. he is always late  
157. and has to tackle from behind:  
158. a nice one to see,  
159. and it doesn't rule out a try  
160. if the distance the body  
161. travels in falling

162. equals the gap  
163. between you and the line.  
164. Then there is a tough rule  
165. which stops you  
166. circling the scrum  
167. without the ball.  
168. However, remember coach  
169. that at the fatal five metre  
170. corridor  
171. I have seen many a  
172. flanker break down,  
173. tricked and frustrated  
174. by a crafty scrum-half;  
175. and so, on the open side  
176. the open flanker,  
177. on the right if the scrum is from the left,  
178. on the left if the scrum is from the right,  
179. must,  
180. at the speed of light,  
181. take off like a shot  
182. at their opponents' opening.  
183. But as he pounces  
184. he must see  
185. in his mind's eye  
186. exactly what will occur.  
187. The tackle must be  
188. as solid as a rock, side-on,  
189. if the opening moves  
190. towards the outside,  
191. but head-on  
192. if it enters directly  
193. resting on the side  
194. near its forwards  
195. what want to execute a scissors  
196. and take the ball back  
197. to its roots in the scrum,  
198. where it was quickly hatched;  
199. and with the ardour  
200. of a man who,  
201. after a long absence  
202. far from home

203. returns to the land of his birth  
204. and finds that he loves it.  
205. The great battle of Troy  
206. sung of by Homer,  
207. is little in comparison  
208. to the clash of the two flankers  
209. and the half-backs,  
210. Platonic demi-urges.  
211. Nearly always,  
212. this continual clash  
213. lays the foundations  
214. for an entire match,  
215. but, above all,  
216. determines the final result,  
217. for good or ill.  
218. An intelligent coach  
219. should always explain  
220. to his lads in the back row  
221. how their fifteen  
222. is like a doorway;  
223. first, there is the back row:  
224. this is the door  
225. which opens and closes,  
226. but then come the hinges:  
227. and these are the half-backs!  
228. To break these,  
229. either by snapping them  
230. early on  
231. or patiently unscrewing them  
232. while you have the time  
233. is the solemn task of any team  
234. seeking victory;  
235. but this sublime mission  
236. is undertaken in a pact of steel,  
237. not between our half-backs  
238. and anyone else  
239. amongst us, but above all  
240. the flankers, buttressed  
241. by our prudent number 8  
242. who in set scrums  
243. gives the flankers support.

244. If either slips up,  
245. he makes up for it and if he is a good runner  
246. even manages to back-up  
247. his full-back  
248. in the case of a quick ball  
249. from the opposing fly or scrum-half.  
250. But if the scrum clutches  
251. the taunting ellipse  
252. and advances carefully,  
253. allowing a swift movement  
254. out to the centre three-quarter,  
255. it is truly wonderful  
256. to see these jaguars  
257. in an ingenious peel  
258. and the brilliant festoons  
259. traced on the ground;  
260. without the re-introduction  
261. of this natural and quick  
262. line of attack  
263. by the new, strong three-quarters,  
264. it is difficult to imagine  
265. how to score effortlessly  
266. against a strong opponent.  
267. Their inexorable blocking  
268. becomes faster and faster  
269. and the flankers stronger and stronger  
270. in obstructing, in defence.  
271. So, you could say  
272. that in the modern game  
273. more and more attention  
274. is being paid to stopping  
275. these attacks by human thunderbolts.  
276. And do not forget,  
277. demanding coach,  
278. that everything violating  
279. the goal is legitimate,  
280. but equally  
281. to stand up straight  
282. against a strong opponent,  
283. if you are equal to it,  
284. is the best way

285. to take the initiative;  
286. and some maintain,  
287. but saying it is not enough,  
288. that you have first  
289. to beat  
290. their back row  
291. directly with your flankers  
292. or, at least, smother them  
293. like a landslide  
294. then pass cleanly to the half-back  
295. or another fast ally.  
296. And the flankers  
297. with their strange system  
298. of curving runs should often  
299. as they almost brush the turf  
300. pick up the loose ball  
301. as precisely as an Indian tracker  
302. observes a receding track  
303. and with the loving trust  
304. of a gardener tending  
305. the almost precious roses  
306. in his lovely garden.  
307. Capturing a loose ball,  
308. picking it up as it rolls  
309. and slithers in the mud  
310. is like making a fortune  
311. on the seas:  
312. you need great courage  
313. but the prize is great  
314. and a mariner,  
315. a Marco Polo of rugby,  
316. who wrings from oriental markets  
317. such rare and precious goods  
318. that they seen like bounty.  
319. ind to find the ball  
320. not long emerged  
321. from a melée  
322. is the finest baggage  
323. for an astute flanker  
324. and his elder brother,  
325. the glorious number 8.

326. But if the run of the game  
327. does not produce  
328. good ball for you  
329. or, meanly, offers it  
330. always with the tide  
331. runner against you,  
332. the flanker it is  
333. who plunges in  
334. and roughs out  
335. the beginnings of a maul or ruck;  
336. and with this human dough  
337. he and he alone  
338. the refined and speedy leaven  
339. dictates whether  
340. the oven of the field  
341. will bring forth  
342. a delightful, crisp bread  
343. or just a messy lump-  
344. a waste of time and effort.  
345. In this noble art  
346. of running together  
347. the flankers must exercise great care  
348. and never be hurried or rash,  
349. because it is difficult  
350. to run behind just enough  
351. not to be left out,  
352. a technique acquired with time  
353. and, perhaps,  
354. natural ingenuity.  
355. But experience sharpens  
356. the wit disposed  
357. to being sharpened.  
358. And when the ball is lost,  
359. from a scrum or throw-in,  
360. the locks of the back-row  
361. are as safe  
362. as an impregnable fortress;  
363. and one has the job  
364. of trying to overcome their fly-half -  
365. but number 8 has also the honour  
366. of clearing the terrain

367. with his comrade,  
368. tackling and blocking everything  
369. they wash over,  
370. like a wave -  
371. as unconfined  
372. in their course  
373. as the great "Azzurra" yachtsmen  
374. on the sail;  
375. and you sail before the win  
376. only when trailing badly,  
377. often using the slack  
378. or a neat little garden,  
379. sometimes abeam  
380. and, if the opposition stops  
381. or makes a mistake  
382. and delays,  
383. letting the advantage slip  
384. more and more,  
385. then you can attack  
386. from defence  
387. on a tight bowline  
388. or, as the Azzurri are prevented from doing,  
389. confront the great wind  
390. head-on  
391. and break it at the outset.  
392. it is when playing without ball  
393. in scrums and line-outs,  
394. that you assess  
395. the worth of a flanker  
396. and if, with his comrades,  
397. he manages to hold the field  
398. and even kick  
399. or, in any case, marshall  
400. the whole pack  
401. and keep them together  
402. profiting  
403. with consummate skill,  
404. from every second of struggle.  
405. In attack or defence  
406. a good number 8  
407. and solid flankers



408. are like three horrific nightmares  
409. for the opposition  
410. arid three dreams  
411. for their comrades,  
412. who are proud to have  
413. in their fifteen  
414. the three sons of Proteus,  
415. bred of the sea,  
416. God of a hundred shapes;  
417. so the flankers  
418. and number 8  
419. should embody an ocean  
420. of rugby wisdom,  
421. which enriches itself  
422. with great passion  
423. and comprehension  
424. from events on the field  
425. always and at every instant.  
426. And you, spectator,  
427. as you read  
428. do not be fooled  
429. and totally bewitched  
430. by the game  
431. which flows easily,  
432. but learn to appreciate that  
433. above all for the flankers  
434. and number 8,  
435. the cleverest thing  
436. is to play without the ball;  
437. and you should always applaud  
438. a number 7 who,  
439. in a scrum from the left,  
440. shoots off wide  
441. and fools their outside-half  
442. who innocently believes  
443. he has cleared  
444. a straight path to goal,  
445. but meets a hard tackle from number 8  
446. and a neat finish by number 6  
447. in collusion with  
448. crafty number 7,

449. making the coach  
450. seated on the bench  
451. full of joy to see  
452. his shrewdness  
453. put into practice on the field,  
454. thanks to a fine captain  
455. and harmonious team.  
456. But, if there is discord  
457. among the fifteen,  
458. he should face up to the fact  
459. that love of the game  
460. is lacking somewhere;  
461. and whoever does not wish  
462. to make a sonorous composition  
463. of the team  
464. does not dream of beauty  
465. in this poetic sport.  
466. For their job,  
467. the three fellows  
468. in the back row,  
469. the three battens in defence,  
470. the three performers in attack  
471. will only be appreciated  
472. by the expert eye,  
473. which recognises  
474. the titanic power  
475. of the sons of Proteus  
476. in eternal rugby.

**ELEVENTH CANTO**  
**(THE SCRUM-HALF AND THE OUTSIDE-HALF: HEAVENLY TWINS)**

1. And now perhaps you,  
2. sports journalist  
3. or T. V. commentator,  
4. will follow my poem  
5. which opens with  
6. Patroclus and Achilles,  
7. Euryalus and Nisus:  
8. the two bishops of the field  
9. we have depicted as hinges,  
10. as without them  
11. the team would fly apart  
12. and forwards and three-quarters  
13. would seem to be playing  
14. on separate pitches.  
15. As in-tune as heart and aorta,  
16. harmonious as a duet,  
17. they always play  
18. in an imaginary ring  
19. at either end of an  
20. incandescent diameter  
21. set afire  
22. by the promise of a break-through;  
23. and the distance  
24. dividing them  
25. is never decided  
26. once and for all,  
27. but re-calculated  
28. on the basis  
29. of the effective strength  
30. of the scrum-half's pass.  
31. And when you,  
32. apprentice coach,  
33. are fortunate enough  
34. to have a true half-back  
35. in your cordial team  
36. with a strong and accurate pass,  
37. which you will make  
38. even stronger

39. and more accurate  
40. using a sand ball  
41. and the iron ring  
42. for him to practice his deep passing,  
43. then you have gone a long way  
44. to escaping from the vice  
45. of the enemy flankers.  
46. The long pass,  
47. precise and smart,  
48. is the real secret  
49. in linking brain with brawn  
50. in the pack  
51. with the three-quarters'  
52. urge to run;  
53. and without a good half-back  
54. the backs really only seem  
55. a herd of colts  
56. in the paddock,  
57. whose every attempt  
58. to gallop ends  
59. on the cruel timbers.  
60. But prior tho this  
61. a good brain is needed  
62. which can understand  
63. in a flash  
64. whether to entrust the ball  
65. to his brother  
66. outside-half  
67. or fly close by tile scrum  
68. and call around  
69. tile sons of Proteus  
70. to call an enormous ruck  
71. or a bubbling maul,  
72. or with a graceful  
73. and clever little kick  
74. send a fine ball  
75. out to a wing three-quarter  
76. who, gaining ground,  
77. captures the oval  
78. in an instant,  
79. beats off an opponent

80. with a hard hand-off  
81. then plunges into the area  
82. like a child,  
83. hot from the summer sun  
84. throws himself playfully  
85. towards the advancing waves.  
86. You will recall then,  
87. young coach,  
88. to whom the young are entrusted:  
89. for, to make  
90. a great half-back  
91. you must offer him a taste of everything:  
92. and nothing  
93. is more tedious to see  
94. than the first twin  
95. monotonously repeating  
96. the same moves  
97. in attack and defence.  
98. Your scrum-half  
99. should always be  
100. weighing up events  
101. and he will often be  
102. the ninth forward  
103. breaking through  
104. the enemy pack  
105. from a throw-in or scrum;  
106. but he must be supported  
107. by eight thunderbolts  
108. which make absolutely sure  
109. the enemy swarm  
110. doesn't suck back in,  
111. overpower him  
112. and rob him of the ball.  
113. The intelligence of a great scientist  
114. and chirpiness  
115. of an impudent street-urchin  
116. should be combined  
117. in the ideal figure  
118. of a great scrum-half.  
119. And it is good to teach him  
120. to drop-kick

121. to good effect,  
122. either on our put-in  
123. at a scrum with the head  
124. or, when won  
125. by the fine hooker,  
126. against the head.  
127. And, in the first instance,  
128. you kick with your right foot  
129. and, in the second,  
130. you need to be ambidextrous  
131. and use your artful left foot  
132. In a line-out  
133. he really has to have  
134. reckless courage  
135. to tackle their forwards  
136. like towering oaks  
137. which smash through  
138. and go for him,  
139. because they know that,  
140. since time immemorial,  
141. to overwhelm the scrum-half  
142. is to start the match  
143. with extra players.  
144. The leader of the pack  
145. should never command  
146. his tight forwards  
147. like a tedious bureaucrat,  
148. and is all the more skillful  
149. if his clear orders  
150. coincide with their wishes,  
151. playing as they do with  
152. and not under hills.  
153. Then you see  
154. the shrewd scrum-half  
155. gather up  
156. the spark of genius  
157. in his eight forwards  
158. as they advance,  
159. soon to violate  
160. the longed-for goal line;  
161. then you, maestro,

162. must follow them close,  
163. ready to receive the ball  
164. if a maul arises  
165. from a tackle;  
166. failing that,  
167. they could even break through  
168. the opposition goal-line.  
169. But if, in the ruck,  
170. they have won the ball  
171. but are now out of breath  
172. you cannot use them.  
173. So you must always know  
174. if the wing on the blind side  
175. has any gas in reserve  
176. to spring on the oval  
177. from a precise kick  
178. into the corridor of Thermopylae.  
179. The best scrum-half  
180. can dream up simple things  
181. using simple things  
182. with genuine simplicity;  
183. there is, perhaps, no finer thing than  
184. with a ball won  
185. by our eight brothers up front,  
186. an opening long pass  
187. by the maestro 9-  
188. across and not backwards-  
189. then a double-back  
190. to appear again,  
191. meeting the first centre  
192. from behind the action,  
193. seize the ball  
194. and, out of the corner of his eye,  
195. catch the flankers  
196. just arriving in support  
197. and reads whether to go  
198. or whether it's up to him  
199. to draw the opposition  
200. and open to the second centre  
201. who, with a scissors,  
202. gets the ball and goes off again

203. playing with the pack;  
204. or this centre,  
205. on seeing the opposition lagging  
206. behind a movement  
207. started on the left,  
208. darts in deep  
209. and still has backing up  
210. on the right  
211. his crafty scrum-half  
212. and his wing still free.  
213. So you reach your target,  
214. perhaps without effort,  
215. with further passing  
216. to your fire comrades in the pack  
217. who have learned well  
218. the great secret  
219. that you must run together  
220. always ready to slip away  
221. and grab the fleeting chance,  
222. giving further proof  
223. of how, in the realm of the oval,  
224. individual actions  
225. and a neat,orderly chorus  
226. work together.  
227. The great soloists  
228. in the pack's chorus,  
229. when led by  
230. outstanding conductor,  
231. are even better than usual  
232. and if each one  
233. is well managed  
234. he will produce a purer note  
235. and the harmonious song will end in victory.  
236. Now, reader,  
237. we shall speak of Nisus,  
238. the outside-half  
239. who carries number 10;  
240. this, according to Pythagoras,  
241. represented perfection itself.  
242. And the opening  
243. should be perfect -



244. every error being  
245. multiplied by 10;  
246. but everything he does  
247. with a sparkling attack  
248. which makes a mess of their defence  
249. is multiplied by 1000.  
250. Remember that in rugby  
251. things happen fast.  
252. Yet, by slowing down,  
253. you can make good your errors  
254. by a side-step  
255. or a nice scissors,  
256. a maul or ruck;  
257. or you can lob the enemy  
258. with a long, accurate kick;  
259. if by chance  
260. the pace slackens, then suddenly quickens,  
261. even the wing-  
262. sprite of the three-quarters -  
263. outwits his opponent.  
264. But when number 10 slows,  
265. then time stops  
266. to see how one man  
267. may play against the rest.  
268. And to the fly-half  
269. who must then decide  
270. whether to lob into  
271. a deserted defence  
272. with a high  
273. precise kick,  
274. or suddenly open  
275. using a clever scissors  
276. or, pulling out flankers  
277. like battering-rams  
278. against the wings  
279. and, working close in,  
280. besot their defence  
281. and swill them down  
282. as a thirsty runner  
283. drains his tankard.  
284. He makes big decisions

285. and when his brother  
286. scrum-half  
287. opens to him,  
288. he can feel in the ball  
289. the intelligent strength  
290. of his nine forwards  
291. but in the thick of it  
292. he cannot stop and ponder  
293. the vital task  
294. assigned him-  
295. which he could either shirk  
296. or make use of.  
297. And, like a banker  
298. whose treasures are not  
299. cheques or precious coin,  
300. but the dedication  
301. of his team who  
302. often rely on his drop-kick  
303. in a classic scrum  
304. won near the opposing 22.  
305. A first-class  
306. outside-half  
307. also loves to challenge the posts  
308. from ever wider and more  
309. delicate positions;  
310. violating the uprights  
311. with a sure drop  
312. is often like  
313. the walk of a graceful young lady  
314. who, with quickening gait,  
315. is not distracted  
316. by the compliments  
317. of the first admirer she meets,  
318. but marches on  
319. towards an unknown  
320. future love;  
321. his exact drop-kick  
322. raises the spirit  
323. of his tired  
324. or strife-torn fifteen,  
325. battling against a cleverer opponent.

326. In rugby the opening  
327. is always like an exotic plant  
328. which must be carefully tended  
329. for it to bloom;  
330. behind the stealth  
331. of a black panther  
332. lies hard work  
333. in training and everyday life  
334. because exact drops  
335. and good fast reflexes  
336. are born  
337. not only of talent  
338. but of minute sacrifices.  
339. To sum up, players,  
340. goals are even scored  
341. by an unremitting "no"  
342. to the slightest laxity  
343. and pleasing dodge  
344. too often repeated.  
345. And whether you play  
346. with the Maoris  
347. or in a high school team,  
348. the opening is always  
349. closely watched  
350. and often it is blamed  
351. without reason:  
352. it is easily forgotten  
353. that the beauty of rugby  
354. which is, after all, a game  
355. lies in the respect for error,  
356. especially when committed  
357. by a fair player  
358. who never complains  
359. about an inaccurate  
360. or weak pass,  
361. or about not finding  
362. a flanker beside him  
363. in support.  
364. The outside-half  
365. is a great player  
366. if he cherishes silence

367. and prefers to show  
368. with a swift gesture  
369. his two centres and wing  
370. whether to defend in a straight line  
371. or move diagonally,  
372. ready for a sharp attack.  
373. Using his eyes only  
374. he tells the backs  
375. he will run across more slowly,  
376. then kick over  
377. the opposition lines.  
378. Yet he the player  
379. who often has to go  
380. into attack  
381. trailing a pair  
382. of rather inexperienced centres  
383. who often see in him  
384. the sage player  
385. who does not make a lot  
386. of his own achievements,  
387. even in his sharpest rebukes.  
388. The fly-half  
389. is really a second demiurge  
390. of Platonic philosophy  
391. and, as scrum-half's twin,  
392. from halfway across the ford  
393. of the pitch,  
394. he takes part  
395. in the life on either bank  
396. of the two different units.  
397. Also, our outside-half  
398. is always exposed to the guile  
399. and direct attacks  
400. of their back row;  
401. often he, like a Tarzan,  
402. who can tell  
403. if the hole he is approaching  
404. is a snare,  
405. or the horrible tunnel  
406. in which lies waiting number 8  
407. lurking with his comrade.

408. But to this interminable  
409. devilish cunning,  
410. the great outside-half  
411. reacts with class  
412. playing a varied game  
413. and, if he is unpredictable,  
414. he will have his opposite number  
415. groping about  
416. and can then try,  
417. the scrum won,  
418. to run leftwards into open space  
419. and pull a centre  
420. and someone else  
421. into a beautiful attacking movement  
422. with that "extra" man:  
423. the culisse!  
424. Otherwise  
425. he can try playing  
426. the same on the other wing  
427. and fool the opposing three-quarters  
428. as they vaily defend  
429. their sacred territory  
430. from miles in the rear.  
431. But to end  
432. on our great number 10,  
433. during training  
434. you should make them play fast  
435. and tight.  
436. Once in a while, though  
437. try and give  
438. the outside-half's  
439. role to the other players;  
440. they will all then realise  
441. how hard it is,  
442. and what it means  
443. to be the director,  
444. with number 9  
445. at one end of that critical diameter  
446. in the circle of fire.

**TWELTH CANTO  
THE CENTRE THREE-QUARTERS)**

1. And now, once the greasy ball
2. leaves the hands of number 10,
3. two actors in the magical game
4. now come forward,
5. tenaciously clutching
6. the real protagonist:
7. the oval set on a try.
8. And the two centres,
9. running straight
10. in a perfect line,
11. to avoid colliding
12. with the opposing three-quarters
13. and their epic clashes
14. go beyond the field
15. into a vast
16. psychological arena.
17. And you, number 12,
18. once with the ball,
19. remember how wonderful
20. it is to pass,
21. but always in good time
22. and to a comrade you have
23. protected from danger
24. by selling a dummy
25. in which the ball
26. really does seem to fly
27. toward the other centre,
28. but did not.
29. Mark that this is not
30. a simple feint,
31. but an intimate
32. way of overcoming
33. your adversary.
34. Anyway,
35. your strongest asset,
36. when in attack,
37. is your transformation into Mercury
38. thus avoiding

39. disclosure of your intentions.  
40. And all this should, then,  
41. take place  
42. with precise  
43. and fluent  
44. speed of mind and foot.  
45. And, if you are physically strong,  
46. it is great to see you  
47. dive towards their number 12  
48. and elude him  
49. as he tries to tackle  
50. and remains glued to the spot;  
51. then you pass  
52. to your expectant colleague,  
53. who may either  
54. spring forward,  
55. perhaps going wide  
56. on the wing  
57. or play the same trick  
58. on his mirror image  
59. to then sprint away  
60. or pass to the full-back  
61. who, intelligently,  
62. has immediately caught on  
63. and once into the attack  
64. flies past everyone -  
65. for he is the 16th man:  
66. a clear objective  
67. of those who envisioned rugby  
68. as a rational activity  
69. realised with the body  
70. to beat your opponent  
71. intelligently and fairly.  
72. You are a noble artist  
73. who tries to castle  
74. long or short,  
75. jumping a square  
76. on the straight line  
77. with a slight tack.  
78. However, patient coach.  
79. learn to teach

80. with forbearance  
81. that the main task  
82. of the first and second threequarters  
83. is to keep in line  
84. when defending.  
85. Otherwise,  
86. the extra space  
87. gives the opposition  
88. more chance  
89. of swerving past you,  
90. running straight for the gap  
91. or, wonderful sight,  
92. a scissors  
93. which could, if necessary,  
94. become a sublime dummy  
95. and give birth to  
96. a long pass  
97. leaving the opposition  
98. rooted to the spot,  
99. because a centre is obliged to tackle  
100. his direct opposite first.  
101. But you,  
102. centre three-quarter,  
103. should realise  
104. that nothing can happen  
105. without your unerring tackle;  
106. head-on if there's time,  
107. side-on if he is past on either side,  
108. or from behind  
109. diving spectacularly,  
110. when you suffer the indignity  
111. of being passed  
112. maybe with a dummy  
113. a side-step  
114. a scissors  
115. or the beautiful dummy scissors;  
116. and sometimes it is a  
117. quick change of direction  
118. by the opposition  
119. that beats the defending centre.  
120. And if they manage



121. to rush past one of you,  
122. it is tragic  
123. if your flankers  
124. lag behind  
125. or your half-backs  
126. and their brothers in the pack  
127. fail to link up.  
128. There are coaches  
129. who like to talk  
130. not of first and second castles  
131. but of the right and left centres;  
132. then, in scrums, throw-in,  
133. mauls or rucks,  
134. springing up on the left  
135. the right becomes second  
136. while by the same token  
137. springing from the right,  
138. the left centre  
139. becomes second.  
140. But this beautiful movement,  
141. remember, is only possible  
142. if you are fortunate enough  
143. to have players placed  
144. in the same way  
145. on each side  
146. and exploit  
147. this magnificent mimicry  
148. to sow confusion among the enemy  
149. and let the two of them  
150. try a change of roles.  
151. But in other situations  
152. it is better  
153. to put safely on the outside  
154. at first rook-threequarter position  
155. the faster  
156. and better kicker,  
157. because in today's game  
158. you try and make  
159. a second outside half  
160. who can scotch their flankers'  
161. attempts to break

162. quickly through the hinges.  
163. Fine also  
164. when near the goal-line,  
165. is the kick and rush -  
166. better still  
167. but a rare sight,  
168. is the kick to the wing.  
169. But the simple game  
170. is the one  
171. which brings you tries.  
172. So, above all,  
173. learn to pass  
174. and catch the ball safely  
175. if it is wet and muddy  
176. and hug it to your chest  
177. like a goalkeeper  
178. when he leaves his goal  
179. for a high ball.  
180. Anyway, centre three quarter,  
181. whatever your number  
182. learn to go straight,  
183. learn to figure out  
184. what is happening  
185. or what might occur-  
186. but, mainly, remember  
187. all the harmonious rules  
188. you must respect  
189. with the divine outside half  
190. and even  
191. the magical, strong pack  
192. protecting you  
193. behind  
194. whenever you break through  
195. on the narrower side  
196. to then join  
197. them all there,  
198. in support,  
199. behind your splendid1 entry  
200. certainly in need  
201. of a strong, buttres  
202. to pound all

203. remaining strength  
204. out of their defence.  
205. Learn, once you reach maturity,  
206. to play "culisse";  
207. learn  
208. that this divine test  
209. is inspired,  
210. but realise  
211. with modesty  
212. that the second storey  
213. rests on the first,  
214. the third upon that  
215. and the fourth on the third,  
216. making for the beauty  
217. of each new game;  
218. that the standard rises  
219. and with passing carefully  
220. down the line  
221. interweaves the nice kick  
222. and the armonious band  
223. becomes  
224. not the sum  
225. of 15 players,  
226. but a synthesis,  
227. just as Arnold  
228. the great philosopher  
229. may repeat  
230. that one times fifteen  
231. is fifteen  
232. and fifteen times one  
233. is the same,  
234. going from numbers  
235. to the world of men  
236. into the game of rugby  
237. you no longer have  
238. a mechanical sum,  
239. but the ability to play  
240. at new rhythms,  
241. in greater unison;  
242. then, one plus one  
243. makes infinity

244. and we have  
245. a synthesis:  
246. the fatal try .  
247. Remember, then  
248. perennial coach,  
249. always to be dynamic  
250. while maintaining balance  
251. and allow a small space  
252. for players to tackle hard  
253. and score more lightning tries  
254. decorated by variety  
255. and fine play.  
256. However  
257. the two centre-rooks  
258. are the strong and wise ones  
259. of our green chess-board  
260. only if  
261. they make a greater contribution  
262. when the forwards clash.  
263. Also, to waste a ball  
264. is an offence  
265. to the great objective  
266. of taking  
267. and placing it on that white line  
268. which, virgin,  
269. awaits love's climax.

**THIRTEENTH CANTO**  
**THE WING THREEQUARTERS**

1. And now
2. the lyre and cithern,
3. harp and drum
4. celebrate the two wingers
5. that we called "knights"
6. of this chess-like sport.
7. Normally
8. they are the fastest
9. players in the team,
10. but now
11. it its becoming difficult
12. to assail
13. the enemy ramparts
14. with the ball
15. to the wing;
16. then it falls to
17. the winger,
18. positioning himself
19. slightly behind
20. the second centre
21. while on the right
22. half of the pitch
23. to learn to appreciate
24. whether it is better
25. not to go on the blind side
26. or even dare
27. to rob his centre
28. who is tied up
29. by their centre
30. and give everything he has:
31. and not only
32. the swoop of an eagle,
33. but. also a return
34. to his full-back
35. masterfully placed,
36. or to a flanker
37. or forward

38. generously backing him up.  
39. His great foe  
40. on the blind and open side  
41. is always the touch-line  
42. which tackles hard  
43. and without pity;  
44. better, indeed,  
45. than any adversary.  
46. Against her,  
47. a real goddess  
48. who marks out the pitch,  
49. a side-step is no good  
50. and, if touched,  
51. she decrees the ball  
52. out of play  
53. and everything stops.  
54. But the wing threequarters -  
55. the left being number 11  
56. and the right number 14,  
57. (always better to be  
58. ambidextrous  
59. and limit yourself  
60. by choice  
61. to one half of the field)  
62. well know their proverbial enemy:  
63. the white touch-line.  
64. However,  
65. a side-step and dummy scissors,  
66. and above all  
67. rapid changes of direction;  
68. the pause  
69. followed by a gallop-  
70. dives for goal -  
71. tackles in defence  
72. short kicks  
73. skimming the turf,  
74. hoodwinking the enemy -  
75. or a huge, parabolic kick  
76. for goal  
77. from the centre of the field.  
78. These are the wing's

79. duties:  
80. when hemmed into  
81. Thermopylae,  
82. he must be able to  
83. gather the ball  
84. punted by the scrum-half  
85. and at other times  
86. be able to kick  
87. to himself  
88. on the blind side  
89. if it is blind  
90. and never to the open  
91. because this would  
92. present t the ball  
93. to the opposing second centre,  
94. if not his twin:  
95. the other wing  
96. who, playing along  
97. an asymmetrical axis  
98. works in the open spaces  
99. when his partner  
100. as little room -  
101. only the 5 metre corridor  
102. which is often  
103. the cherished path  
104. to their goal-line  
105. And he must gather up  
106. a kicked ball  
107. like an accomplished full-back  
108. and the wing  
109. should always be able  
110. to back up sensibly ,  
111. following the ball  
112. at the proper distance;  
113. otherwise, if they take possession,  
114. he presents  
115. an empty half  
116. to the enemy  
117. on a silver salver.  
118. Sometimes,  
119. in a beautiful movementt,

120. starting from a scrlllll  
121. or a line-out  
122. close by touch  
123. he gathers a loose ball  
124. and with great determination  
125. flies off for a try  
126. or, beating his opposite number,  
127. he offers  
128. a giant from the second row  
129. the great pleasure  
130. of togheter smothering  
131. the splendid oval,  
132. and also with it  
133. the full-back's  
134. hope of protecting his goal;  
135. A wing threequarter  
136. is a cat  
137. who needs nine lives  
138. per match.  
139. But he should use his stealth  
140. because a bungled  
141. up-and-under  
142. could turn out to be  
143. a polite act of surrender.  
144. If the wing threequarter  
145. can really follow  
146. the harsh realities  
147. of play,  
148. he will manage the score  
149. a hundred and one tries;  
150. but he should always consider  
151. the needs of his team  
152. and not seek  
153. the easy applause  
154. of the ignorant.  
155. Often, when the full back  
156. has been beaten,  
157. the last link in the chain  
158. of defence  
159. is a wing threequarter  
160. who has a fair hope



161. of breaking  
162. the arrogant enemy attack  
163. at the Piave.<sup>1</sup>  
164. The two superb rooks  
165. of the chess-rugby board  
166. are essential allies  
167. in the check-try  
168. and are like children  
169. who can fly a kite  
170. and enjoy holding tight  
171. and tugging at the string  
172. guiding the hovering  
173. brightly-coloured paper  
174. overhead.  
175. But the real kite,  
176. for the threequarters,  
177. is only a ball  
178. and their bodies and brains  
179. the string,  
180. tied only to the ellipse  
181. with which they  
182. like poets  
183. crown the goal line.

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<sup>1</sup> Turning-point for the Italians during Ist World war; at this river their outnumbered forces began the counter-attack against Austrians.

**FOURTEENTH CANTO  
(THE FULL-BACK)**

1. Now,
2. the poet can speak
3. of the piece
4. which is both king and queen,
5. united and embodied
6. in number 15 - the full-back:
7. the player who
8. gathers the ball
9. from yhe sky
10. with an obstinate certainty
11. which scotches a kicker's
12. hopes of gaining ground
13. and scoring off
14. a lucky bounce.
15. And often his run
16. towards a ball falling
17. like an angel of vengeance
18. is a direct challenge
19. to the forwards
20. bearing down on him
21. after a punishing
22. up-and-under.
23. But this icy coolness
24. is equalled
25. by his courage
26. in taking on alone
27. both player and ball.
28. In defence
29. he is the last hope
30. of a team under siege.
31. In attack
32. he joins the threequarters
33. to make the extra man;
34. he is the coup de grace,
35. he is the master
36. of the 15
37. who records
38. victory as it is plucked.

39. If his comrades  
40. do not support him,  
41. he is frequently  
42. left on his own.  
43. But,  
44. when he clutches the ball,  
45. his plan springs  
46. into action.  
47. At the line-out  
48. the ball dropping like a stone  
49. palmed and shielded  
50. by magnetised hands,  
51. if a comrade  
52. is on his flank,  
53. preferably on the run,  
54. it falls to him  
55. to set the counter-attack  
56. in motion;  
57. if he sets off alone,  
58. it is difficult  
59. to fool a determined team  
60. which, with a kick,  
61. starts amovement  
62. it does not succeed  
63. in being undecided about.  
64. His long kicks into touch  
65. which bounce into touch  
66. while their full-back  
67. is outside his 22  
68. are body-blows  
69. which, in the end,  
70. ensure victory.  
71. It is on him  
72. that his opposite number  
73. concentrates his kicks;  
74. on him  
75. the rook that took rock  
76. on him  
77. precipitates  
78. the fleeing forward  
79. and on him

80. tha ball that,  
81. moving so as to defy  
82. the laws of refraction,  
83. slips from his grasp  
84. like a street urchin  
85. in a crowd.  
86. It would take  
87. a sorcerer to foretell  
88. its bounce.  
89. If it is not taken  
90. on the full,  
91. or at the latest,  
92. on the first bounce,  
93. the enemy threequarter  
94. takes advantage  
95. and, following it  
96. like a dog after a boar  
97. gets and carries it  
98. over the goal line  
99. like a trophy.  
100. His own talents  
101. are those  
102. of any back.  
103. But, sometimes,  
104. he is also the leading  
105. forward to break  
106. their first challenge  
107. and as comrades fall  
108. sets up a ruck  
109. from which  
110. he quickly steals,  
111. rushing away  
112. into this thick  
113. of the action.  
114. And it is usually  
115. the wing's job  
116. to hold the position  
117. left vacant by him,  
118. swept away by the wave,  
119. who manages to save the day.  
120. Place kicks are often his

121. and when they  
122. violate the posts  
123. they are essential to victory;  
124. there is little glory  
125. for a team  
126. which is unable to field  
127. a good place kicker  
128. who can bring  
129. an extra half try  
130. for every one scored.  
131. Sometimes,  
132. when brought into the attack  
133. he finds the twins  
134. to his left  
135. or, right,  
136. Proteus's sons,  
137. or further away  
138. the poets of the pack.  
139. But there is  
140. a bond between them all  
141. to break up the swarming  
142. adversary.  
143. And comrades follow,  
144. feeling protected  
145. by him-  
146. for with him they can  
147. play like threequarters  
148. even after an infernal scrum.  
149. When he has been  
150. tricked by a winger  
151. after a sketchy tackle  
152. the wholehearted embrace  
153. of his outside-half  
154. or number 8  
155. consoles the player  
156. they have always known  
157. play with intelligence and grift  
158. and intrepidly seize  
159. the fast or tricky ball.  
160. The full-back,  
161. watching from behind,

162. is always alert  
163. eagerly awaiting  
164. the outcome of a scrum  
165. or line-out  
166. with a prayer on his lips  
167. for the ball  
168. that decides both game and competition.  
169. With the ball set upright  
170. always at varying ranges  
171. determined by the other side's kicking  
172. and by the changing wind:  
173. and, if Aeolus is contrary,  
174. he sets it further back,  
175. but, if pneuma  
176. blows from the stern  
177. which at sea tends you to spin,  
178. he pushes it forward  
179. and bends to the force  
180. of the sea wind  
181. blowing on the playing field.  
182. How often,  
183. with his friends in training,  
184. must he try a nice drop  
185. clever and accurate  
186. and then blissfully wager  
187. that the ball  
188. will bisect the posts.  
189. When he sells a dummy  
190. to a winger,  
191. then flies off  
192. to create an attacking move,  
193. he does so with great respect:  
194. his opponent  
195. who tackles and misses him  
196. wishes to favour  
197. a wholehearted, warm embrace  
198. at the end of the match  
199. of a player  
200. who has known suffering.  
201. He should recall that  
202. in times long past

203. a full-back  
204. who sold a dummy  
205. was sent off the pitch  
206. for unfair play.  
207. And Villepreux,  
208. the great French full-back,  
209. in his glorious days  
210. beguiled a Maori wing:  
211. he feinted  
212. then kicked into touch  
213. with great precision.  
214. But even great Pierre  
215. was later punished  
216. by a pack closing ranks  
217. with their brilliant wingers,  
218. humiliated and demeaned  
219. by the insult received;  
220. and to the ball,  
221. plummeting from  
222. an up-and-under  
223. sent up from the all black pack,  
224. arrived Pierre,  
225. but the encounter  
226. with the cruel ball  
227. was a collision  
228. with their eight forwards  
229. who,  
230. fair but tough  
231. like a landslide  
232. grabbed the ball from him  
233. and wreaked  
234. a famous revenge  
235. for an affront  
236. more grave  
237. than Achilles suffered  
238. at Atrides's proud hands,  
239. who humiliated  
240. the immortal son of Thetis  
241. in the eyes of his troops.  
242. King and Queen in one,  
243. the full-back is,

244. perhaps, the loniest player  
245. in this most human of sports;  
246. but the champion  
247. who drop-kicks  
248. to make ground  
249. and wins the ball  
250. to repel an attack  
251. in a flash  
252. is clasped to the bosom  
253. of a team  
254. and his warmly applauding fans.  
255. Sometimes  
256. his shout of “Mark!”  
257. gives the red light  
258. to a determined enemy incursion.  
259. A full back  
260. finds himself  
261. in the same position  
262. as each new generation  
263. does as history unfolds;  
264. he should know the past  
265. in order to make his  
266. contribution to it;  
267. and understand  
268. where that action started,  
269. which, now so airy,  
270. but not so shortly before,  
271. is to be seriously analysed.  
272. Such responsible play  
273. never wastes  
274. the titanic effort  
275. that the early scrums  
276. or line-outs,  
277. mauls or rucks  
278. past generations built  
279. with self-sacrifice;  
280. The best full-back  
281. is, however,  
282. the number 15  
283. who raises his head  
284. and watches the sunset,



285. conscious  
286. that rugby is a light  
287. which warms life  
288. and illumines the eye  
289. of players  
290. and even many spectators  
291. who appreciate  
292. his positioning,  
293. courageous tackles,  
294. precise kicking  
295. and great flair  
296. for making the extra man.  
297. In his heart  
298. there is not the coldness  
299. of a cynic  
300. who thinks only of himself,  
301. but the coolness of a great surgeon  
302. whose hand keeps steady  
303. as he tries to save  
304. a human life;  
305. but at the end of the game  
306. his heart  
307. frees itself from the vice  
308. and, sometimes, tears  
309. moisten the warrior's eyes  
310. as he thinks of the contest fought,  
311. of the toughest moments  
312. lived on the pitch  
313. and of place kicks,  
314. taken with a fear of erring  
315. and losing the day.  
316. in the fairest game on earth,  
317. the full-back is King  
318. and Queen  
319. in the chess of the greensward,  
320. but his subjects  
321. are Kings like he  
322. who, undefeated,  
323. defends to the last  
324. the goal line  
325. or violates it

326. for check-mate.

**FIFTEENTH CANTO**  
**(GRAND FINALE FOR THE COACH AND ALL THOSE WHO WORK FOR**  
**RUGBY)**

1. And now
2. a truer pen
3. should record the epic
4. of the physio,
5. the physician
6. and the organizer of fixtures
7. and the king of the whistle,
8. a true referee
9. only if he takes to the field
10. to act as a clear guide
11. to the 30,
12. to really help them play
13. intelligently
14. interpreting the rules
15. offering the advantage.
16. Anyway,
17. this finale is for you, coach
18. who guide the players,
19. keep up with
20. developments in the game
21. and share in the creation
22. of better and more serious players.
23. Remember that,
24. if by chance
25. you must do without all this
26. and put everything in a nutshell
27. “EVERYTHING YOU DO
28. SHOULD BE TAILORED
29. TO YOUR PLAYERS’S INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES”.
30. Never invent
31. what doesn’t exist,
32. and know how to turn
33. the inevitable errors
34. and natural limitations
35. of your players
36. to your advantage.

37. if the pack is lightweight,  
38. work for greater  
39. speed and timing,  
40. and, if the second row  
41. are short  
42. and can never win the ball,  
43. work to develop  
44. a strongly linked defence;  
45. and if your scrum-half  
46. is still inaccurate,  
47. then arrange openings  
48. further back and close  
49. to his twin half-back;  
50. and, if one of the wingers  
51. is weaker than the other,  
52. you can only  
53. and always use him  
54. on the blind side.  
55. However,  
56. all your astuteness  
57. should be held in reserve  
58. in readiness  
59. to recognise,  
60. at the end of a game,  
61. that the opposition was stronger  
62. and applied the law of rugby.  
63. remember, though,  
64. that the first victory  
65. is to take youth  
66. off the streets  
67. hostile to life  
68. and onto the rugby field.  
69. Your humanity  
70. does not consist  
71. in giving away medals,  
72. but in seeing your  
73. rugby-playing pupils  
74. appreciate the destiny of the game  
75. which teaches right and duty  
76. with great restraint and passion.  
77. These are times when

78. the rugby player's  
79. life is hard.  
80. But in life  
81. there is not greater satisfaction  
82. than to walk along the street  
83. and be pointed out  
84. by someone saying to his friend  
85. "He was my captain",  
86. "my team-mate",  
87. "an intelligent manager",  
88. or, at least,  
89. "he is a real rugby-lover".  
90. The rugby life is a hard  
91. path to follow,  
92. but as you climb up  
93. you see the sun from up high  
94. showering its life-giving rays  
95. on the earth,  
96. grass,  
97. on men and women  
98. but, alone before those posts  
99. stretching up to the infinite heavens,  
100. Apollo kneels  
101. of those who make rugby  
102. their life;  
103. the hearts  
104. relax upon the turf  
105. and talk of love  
106. at every momentt of the game.  
107. The floodlights  
108. on my athlete's song  
109. go out;  
110. but now  
111. it is you  
112. the player's turn  
113. to write the actual poem:  
114. play,  
115. play again  
116. and score  
117. the first  
118. and the last

119. TRY OF LIFE.

**THE END-TO BE CONTINUED ON THE PLAYING FIELD.**

I should like to thank all those who have played on all the world's pitches, great and small, for giving the poet the inspiration to undertake this all-consuming task and tempered him to write about Rugby, the poetic sport. *Luigi Nespola*