

Guest Editorial

The Poetry of War

It sounds like an oxymoron to us. How can there be anything like poetry in organized slaughter? And yet war has given us great poetry. One only has to go back to Homer to see this in our ancient roots, both directly in *The Iliad* and indirectly in *The Odyssey*. The deaths of Patroclus (*Iliad*, XVI) and Hector (*Iliad*, XXII) offer moments of supreme grief and pathos, as combat itself elsewhere allows the poet graphic portrayals of courage and heroism. That war brings other dislocations is brought out in that aftermath to *The Iliad*, namely *The Odyssey*, where the hero has to use other skills – supremely, his ingenuity – to overcome hostility and violence in guises other than war. These two great works face each other like bookends, opposites yet whose very boundaries contain all the varied aspects of war, from beginnings to aftermath, and embody the same arguments we still debate today: what are the criteria for a just war? And if we win a war, just or unjust, will we be able to win the peace?

Today we are less moved by military heroism, possibly because we cannot see the personnel engaged in any morally justified way. But this should not deny the gratitude we owe to soldiers who are prepared to face death for our security. Nevertheless, our idea of a hero is likely to be more along the lines of the Pakistani aid workers who risk death at the hands of the Taliban for vaccinating children against polio; the British nurse who returns to Sierra Leone to help fight the Ebola virus; the photo journalist

who brings back evidence of atrocities, pain and suffering and provokes our consciousness and perhaps allows an informed decision to be made about aid or military intervention and often paradoxically, both.

And we are also as likely to be moved by the bravery shown by those who oppose what they see as an unjust war. Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps very fortunate in being an officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers in World War I. The authorities quickly and diplomatically silenced his protest against the continuing war in 1917 and his refusal to fight. Had he been a Tommy in actual combat, he would most probably have faced a firing squad, if not immediate execution in the field. And yet Sassoon had shown exceptional bravery in military terms as well, as did his fellow soldier poets. We still deliberate over what is a just war and, very sad to say, will never do so. Or should I say, even more sadly, be *forced* to do so?

Unfortunately, unlike Homer, writers today cannot have it both ways. Starting with World War I, they have tried to show the cost of war; that is, the human cost. One of Wilfred Owen's most moving poems is 'Strange Meeting', a dream vision where the poem's persona meets the German he killed the day before. This unexpected fraternal meeting says everything about the humanity the two combatants might have shared – and should have shared – in a more just world. The poetry is indeed in the pity that, for them, this was never to be the case.

The point is eloquently made here by the Czech poet and playwright Fráňa Šrámek in a similar dream vision published well before the First World War. The speaker is taken to Hell and sees the death throes of his officer's mount, shot in the stomach

like himself, the pathos of the suffering innocent horse underlining the unspoken suffering of the soldier. What is strangely modern about this poem is that it is spoken in terms of a military report.

Over the last thirty years we have become used to reports from the front line as journalists get ever closer to the action, often 'embedded' with the troops. If Šrámek's poem is a fulsome, if indirect, protest against unnecessary slaughter, then Dan O'Brien's three poems speak more directly to war and the way it is reported (or not) in its aftermath. The 'dancing boys' are certainly an unreported feature of Afghan life both during and after the Taliban, followed by the scathing satiric view of deliberations around a potential film script of the conflict and, lastly, another view of aftermath in the portrayal of the Afghan surgeon injured in a hand grenade attack and his reaction on seeing the film *Argo* (2012). These poems cleverly and effectively use the report and/or reporter to deliver these bitter truths, a method which also allows the poet to voice the experience of war through the eyes of a non-combatant.

Italy's entry on the Triple Entente side in the First World War was delayed as ministers sought an assurance that Italy would be granted sovereignty over what they deemed to be Italian territory governed at the time by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When this was secretly granted at the Treaty of London, they declared war against the Central Powers in May, 1915 and – as in Britain – many men joined up in a flood of patriot fervour at the prospect of fighting for such a just cause. Loud as the Futurists (Marinetti and his camp) extolled the glories of war, much of it in the experimental *parole in libertà* ('words in freedom', similar to

what Charles Olson later proposed in his 'open field' poetry), the high cost of life on the Italian front and indifference of officers that it soon brought about a more sober view of war. The minimalistic poems Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote while in the trenches are as full of compassion for his fellow combatants as those of Wilfred Owen, while the apparent cynicism of Clemente Rebora's 'La Rite' shocks us into a true sympathetic understanding of the situation. Similarly, the personal view expressed in Giuseppe Bottai's 'Bandage' gives a vivid picture of life on the front. It was a particular pleasure to come across Giulio Camberlani's wonderfully dry report of a proposed attack, mercifully delayed by inclement weather. Elsewhere he expresses a more exuberant satiric voice, somewhat akin to Sassoon's, adopting popular song from the trenches.

In his review of Owen Lowery's debut collection *Otherwise Unchanged*, Martin Malone rightly ponders on the dangers of non-combatants writing war poetry when they obviously have no choice but to use secondary material. As he says 'Working in such a manner, there is always the risk of producing poetry which has a vague hint of worthiness or, worse, a sad-shirred form of exploitation.' But artistry can overcome this to create moving poetry, as indeed many non-combatants in World War I showed from the great figures of Hardy and Kipling to the more modest ventures of a Wilfred Gibson and the different perspective of women poets such as Margaret Postgate Cole and Ma Wedderburn Cannan. In Lowery's case, the tragic aftermath of spinal injury has left him a tetraplegic with added complications and his personal fight to have a life of the mind, let alone simply to exist, must give him a special voice of sympathy with other

kinds of combatant, beyond his doctorate on poetry written ‘in the face of war and imminent death’.

We might question the attraction of war for poets (not to mention other figures), both historical and contemporary, but cannot deny that its tragic theatre is often the occasion for reminding us in full about our human fragility and – even less happily – our insanity. We cannot put a stop to the first, but we can hope that poetry may sometimes help to put a curb on the second, as the examples here will attest and agree.

N S Thompson

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