

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR WAR POEMS
SINCE 1900

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1951

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

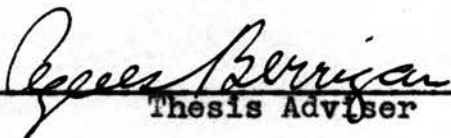
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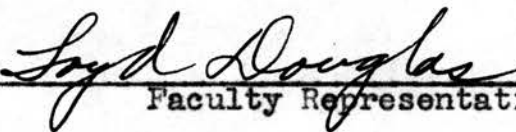
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer wishes to take this opportunity to express his indebtedness to Dr. Agnes Berrigan for her helpful advice and criticisms during the course of this work.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

War does not produce poets, any more than it produces artists or composers. On the contrary it produces conditions infinitely hostile to art. All serious poetry is anti-war poetry.¹

Modern war does not create the proper atmosphere for the production of great poetry. In fact, it creates conditions so perverse to the writers of poetry that it is actually remarkable that anything is ever written during such a time.

Although the opinion expressed above may seem out of place to some, the truth of such a statement is fully justified in light of the unanimous outbursts by the living poets. Wilfred Owen, John Berryman, Siegfried Sassoon, E. E. Cummings, Edwin Muir, Geoffrey Grigson, John Manifold, Richard Eberhart, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Mark Van Doren, Vernon Watkins, and Julian Symons, in one way or another, have expressed their intense disgust for the situations brought about by war.² Other poets still living have similarly expressed themselves. Not one poet, that can rightfully be called a poet, has profited by war. Many of them feel that the subject of war is exhausted, as far as poetry is concerned. As Gaven Ewart says,

¹Oscar Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 22.

²Oscar Williams, ed., A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, pp. 814-821.

War poetry has ceased to be written since the First World War because the subject was by then worn out. Everything written since is more or less repetition. The situations have not changed to any appreciable amount. The destructive efficiency of the World War II weapons is greater no doubt but the poet cannot build great poems around this fact. The modern poet is tired of war; he seeks subjects which are not so large nor loom so near.³

Among the first poems to be written were those which could rightly be considered "war" poems in that they treated some phase of war. Even as far back as the 21st century before Christ cuneiform tablets were discovered which contained the so-called "Gilgamesh Epic," a poem about the heroic deeds of the mythical King Gilgamesh. At this primitive stage the poetry of war was optimistic in the fullest sense. The poet seemed to extol the slaughtered fighters and enjoy the minute details of a dying soldier's actions. This tendency continued on through Homer's epics about Achilles and Odysseus and, to a decreasing extent, until after the immortal Battle of Crecy, when armored knights were replaced on the battlefield by foot soldiers. The poetic shouts of triumph began to change.

While war was conducted more or less by professional fighting men and there was an opportunity for individuality, poetry could be written somewhat successfully as is demonstrated by such poems as "The Battle of Maldon" and "The Battle of Brunnanburg," both written in the 10th century. But as methods in fighting changed, and more and more civilians entered into the conflict, poets found it harder and harder to compose good poetry. In the new scheme of things

³Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 28.

the foot soldier found himself a very small and unimportant target in the battles where the armored knight had been a major unit. The fun, if such it can be called, was taken out of war. Death was much more sudden, and the chances for heroism were limited. Much of the glamor and prestige was removed. "War is hell" was a common phrase during the two world wars. No clearer description of the unattractiveness of modern war can be conceived than the preface to a volume of war poems written by a war poet:

One day I looked out over the countryside from the height of Verdun. As far as eye could see, devastation! Only a few stumps along the river Meuse where was once a forest. Only a sea of mud where once were green fields and fertile farms. Only a few white heaps of powder where once were villages. Barbed wire with barbs as big as penknives, and trenches with lips as scarlet as the poppies that bloomed once in pleasant, peaceful dooryards. And there I made a vow. Another day at Chateau Thierry they said a little boy had been killed. And there I made a vow. Another time I stood in what used to be the city of Soissons, saw the one wall across the fields over which the fury of battle had passed but a few days before, where the blood had not yet dried on the sod, where the holocaust had left behind its shattered chaos. And there I made a vow. I marched with my fellow soldiers many a time behind a funeral drum that told of another comrade to be laid below the ground. And I renewed my vow. One day we stood to honor a young soldier with our regiments drawn up in a great hollow square while the generals pinned upon his breast the reward of war, the cross, symbol of salvation. And then a few hours later I learned the truth; the hero of the day had been badly gassed and the doctors gave him just one month to live. And so again I made my vow. At Montfaucon they told us how our own barrage had fallen short and killed hundreds of our buddies with our own shells. And once more I made a vow. On the Red cross hospital ship, Mercy, I saw more of what war had done to men: men with eyes gone, limbs gone, minds gone. And there my vow renewed itself. And then at last I saw my brother come home, after fourteen months in the trenches, a shell-shocked, shatter-

ed husk of the brave and gay young soldier who had enlisted and marched away. And so my vow was sealed.

And that vow was not to kill Germans.⁴

War poetry could be popular and successful as long as some romance was attached to the business of fighting, but when this romantic aspect was removed, it had little chance. Before the Middle Ages, and to some extent during them, fighting was generally considered a highly honorable and profitable occupation as well as a patriotic one. Since 1900 it is none of these. A poet could, under circumstances such as those existing during the Middle Ages and before, write optimistically of war and perhaps gain a sizable audience. Most poets of this century find only death and destruction to report. Pessimism has been developing in poetry for many years, and it is most marked in war poetry. The modern war poet borders onto cynicism in tone and "neo-classical satire"⁵ in style. But it must be pointed out that no poem, either before or after the Middle Ages, has exalted war and remained extant. Of the few great poems about war in existence, not one glorifies it.

Since the turn of the century, the attitude toward war has changed considerably,⁶ as evidenced by the quality of the poetry that has been turned out. Changes and movements in modern poetry have been brought about by the "growing recognition of the claims of contemporary life upon the artist, a perpetual search for standards of value both in life and

⁴Vincent Godfrey Burns, ed., The Red Harvest, p. xv.

⁵Geoffrey Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry, p. 211.

⁶G. Lowes Dickinson, A Modern Symposium, p. 81.

art,"⁷ and experimentation in poetic form and especially in imagery. This change has been toward the pessimistic and can be traced in poems separated by the relatively short period of time which elapsed between World War I and World War II. A good example of this is Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," written during the First World War, and Gervase Stewart's "I Burn for England with a Living Flame," a product of the Second World War. Brooke was an Englishman, as was Stewart, and both intensely loved England. The passion of these two men for tiny England was so great that they did not hesitate to give their lives when the great crisis came. Most Americans would probably find it difficult to comprehend such deep patriotism due to the vastness of America and the lag in cultural background. Brooke's poem is beautiful and full of true sentiment, as is Stewart's, but there is a difference in the sentiment. Brooke could never have said, "I share with her the fault, who share her name." He could see nothing but complete goodness in his beloved England; the thought that England could have a "fault" probably never occurred to him. These two poems are to be found in Chapter III with a further discussion. For our purpose here it will suffice to say that poetry, especially war poetry, has continued to progress toward extreme pessimism. Other examples could be cited which would show similar advance. When Brooke wrote his poem, there was a common conviction that the War was actually good in that it would end all wars. When Stewart wrote his, that feeling was no longer present. Modern ex-

⁷Bullough, *The Trend of Modern Poetry*, p. 259.

perience has demonstrated that war is not the answer to the world's problems.

As one outstanding living poet put it, "War could be beautiful to Homer and Shakespeare because it could be tragic."⁸ Now, according to the same poet, it is plain catastrophe. Another felt that

...after five years of war, there is so little to write about. War, as I see it here and now, is not the material of poetry. Lasting poetry must go down deeper than the superficial appearances of war machines; it must seek out the spirit of man in pain and glory, and must express that spirit and that pain and that glory in simple terms, in those fundamental statements to which the mechanisms of contemporary warfare are irrelevant.⁹

War, then, has had a considerable influence on modern poetry, most of which was undesirable. Another influence is explained by T. S. Eliot:

Changes in poetic technique are brought about not only by individual genius in contact with a resistant medium, but also to social and intellectual environmental changes.¹⁰

Poetic technique underwent perhaps its greatest changes since Wordsworth with the advent of Imagism, conceived by Ezra Pound and explained by Amy Lowell. A new school of intellectuals, headed by Pound, rebelled against the vocabulary of orthodox poetry and the standard verse forms. "We have witnessed in the years before the war a great deal of revolutionary ingenuity in the writing of poetry..."¹¹ It appears to have been the result of a determination to avoid beaten tracks. The "informal and sketch-like pieces were natural and show

⁹Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry, p. 1.

¹¹Patricia Ledward, ed., Poems of This War, p. xi.

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best the freshness and appeal. No claim is made to their being 'literary.'¹² Beginning just before World War I, Imagism spread rapidly. The most influential tenet laid down by the Imagists was what they called vers libre. As one writer put it, this turned into "the free verse furore."¹³ The language of the common man was adopted and, as new and better poets appeared, poetry began to show signs of a rebirth. Then

On a fateful day in 1914, without a warning flash or tremor, there fell upon the world such a blast of war as human reason could not have foreglimpsed, nor Apocalyptic vision raised, to appall the souls of men. Twenty-seven nations took the shock and were rocked to their foundations. Eleven were caught and knotted in the maddest agony of conflict that ever was known. Through four years the winds of destruction swirled and roared around the monstrous welter, before the evil forces failed and their exhaustion brought a breathing space such as lies at the heart of a typhoon. Around the widening edges of that space they still muttered for a while in gusts of blood and fire, slowly receding, slowly dying.¹⁴

Aside from the experimentation which has been going on in poetic techniques, war poetry has changed in quality another way. Simply stated, it is the constant rising resentment against the mass slaughter of modern war and anything reminiscent of it. Since good poetry of necessity must tell the truth, war poetry became highly unpopular. Little poetry--that is, true war poetry--was accepted during either of the wars. Practically the only verse produced which reached the anthologies was highly patriotic and often sentimental. As one writer says,

¹³Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry and Modern British Poetry, p. 76.

¹⁴W. D. Eaton, ed., Great Poems of the World War, p. 5.

The unpopularity of the true poem, and conversely, the popularity of the false poem, could be much better explained in psychological terms. In the case of war poems, patriotic bombast generally confirms the reader who likes it in a false concept either of himself or of social circumstances, or both. It eases him of responsibility and guilt in the matter acquiescing in sending young men to death to protect himself. This kind of "escape" is also given certain popular poetry which is accepted as "good."¹⁵

Good war poetry would not have a large audience even if the poets produced it.

This resistance to true poetry at the time that it is still contemporary is often blamed upon the technical innovations of creative poets, upon their departure from traditional forms, or upon their "private" language. Actually the important contemporary poetry adheres much more closely to the great English poetic tradition than does sentimental versification....not only in craftsmanship, perception, and subject matter, but in form as well. Technical improvements and experiments have always been characteristic of poetic greatness. Further, the best living poets, far from being more private in language than poetasters, fully use speech-terms and images drawn from daily contemporary life, whereas the poetasters luxuriate in obsolete language (and now pretentious sentiments) copied from the poets of past times, surely much more of a private academic lingo than the normal vocabulary of daily life.¹⁶

This is a situation which must be taken into consideration by editors and publishers and, consequently, must affect the quality of poetry in the long run. Good poetry must suffer this because, as Oscar Williams, noted author and editor, puts it,

The general run of periodical editors fears to print anything but sentimental versification on the premise that good poetry is over the heads of their readers. Book publishers succumb to the same temptations of gross circulation as

¹⁵Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 4.

¹⁶Ibid.

do editors...¹⁷

War creates an atmosphere highly undesirable to the writers of poetry; therefore, the chances for the creation of a really great poem are small. The poet, especially the war poet, is not at home in this modern world with its push-button warfare and chessboard military tactics. As one poet points out,

We are organisms ill-adapted to an alien world, unsure of heaven and of our own natures, yet faced with the problem of survival and growth as intelligent civilized beings in an age when our vast new knowledge is used for purely material and even bestial ends, and when the social order is being transformed by economic pressure and inward desire.¹⁸

Contributing to this feeling is the steady increase of emphasis upon everything mechanical. This is directly opposed to the basic concepts of poetry. Such an increase has been observed in recent years particularly. Modern machinery makes it possible for the laboring man to devote more time to leisure. This has undoubtedly encouraged literacy, but at the same time it has given a great number the opportunity to increase their material belongings, thus tending to lose sight of the religious and aesthetic enjoyments of life. This, along with the "craze for gadgets," is evidence of cultural decay. This answers in part the question, Why so few war poems. The small number is due to the decay of society and the poets' uneasy place in that society. One writer noted this situation as early as 1905:

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry, p. 2.

America has not produced a single lyric of love worth recording because she can't stop long enough to meditate, play, and emotionalize. Intellect, beauty, emotion are things of the past. Acceleration is the modern concept of life's goal.¹⁹

Modern war poetry, generally speaking, is a reflection of the nightmarish world experienced by the soldiers in combatant service. It is an attempt to portray a hell more awful than any previously experienced by man, a hell created and agitated by the greed and madness of a very small number of men. The modern war poet attempts to paint pictures so terrible that his fellow men will take steps to prevent future world wars. In order to paint these gruesome pictures the poet utilizes every available device to shock the reader. The language is bitter and blood-curdling and "only by becoming grotesque could poetry mirror so grotesque a world."²⁰ When asked to define the so-called "war" poet, Geoffrey Grigson, a well-known living poet, replied,

If there is such a thing as a War Poet, it must mean someone whose vestigial heart swells only when vast quantities of suffering mill around him, a poet normally indifferent to the intensity and quality of individual suffering.²¹

It is significant that of all the poems written about war not one great poem condones or glorifies it. The subject has become loathsome to most poets and perhaps most of all to that famous World War I poet, Siegfried Sassoon, who is quoted in Robert Nichols' preface to a volume of Sassoon's

¹⁹G. Lowes Dickinson, A Modern Symposium, p. 103.

²⁰Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry, p. 211.

²¹Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 13.

poetry:

...from henceforth say not one word in any way countenancing war. It is dangerous even to speak of how here and there the individual may gain some hardship of soul by it. For war is hell, and those who institute it are criminals. Were there even anything to say for it, it should not be said; for its spiritual disasters far outweigh any of its advantages...²²

A poet needs a state of tranquility in which to work if he is to create. War does not provide this. The resentment previously mentioned is a death blow to war poetry. The great poems will probably continue to be on other subjects than war.

With what has been said concerning modern material greed, couple the fact that religion continues to play a less important part in the modern world with each generation, and you have the most probable reasons for modern poetry's decline. War poetry must suffer these ills plus the rising resentment of the public toward anything even remotely connected with war. It fared badly in the past; it will undoubtedly fare worse in the future.

²²Siegfried Sassoon, Counter-Attack, p. ii.

Chapter II

The War Poetry of Other Ages

Although war is not a favorable atmosphere for the production of poetry, some war poetry has persisted. It has not remained alive because it is war poetry, however, but because of other elements distinguishable in all great poetry. It might be said that a few war poems have persisted despite the fact that they were on the subject of war.

No war has produced an abundance of good poetry. Even during the battle-torn Anglo-Saxon period the poetic topics were remote from the issues of war. The nineteenth century, which witnessed the mightiest and most encompassing wars prior to 1900, produced no great poems about war. The subjects treated by poets during that period were love, death, life, nature, and the swift passing of beauty. These are the major subjects treated by poets in every age. Few militant poems are ever written, and fewer still reach the anthologies of later ages.

No attempt will be made to critically evaluate the great war poems of the past since a much more impressive evaluation has already been made. One anthologist says,

Poems technically or substantially about war come down from ancient times. It would be difficult to evaluate such actual war poetry through the ages. Rather, the ages have already evaluated them. Likewise, it is a matter always of taste whether one or another modern war poem is considered of the essence of the type, or of the essence of the author, or of the essence of what is thought

a poem ought to be.¹

In other words, those war poems of the past which remain with us today must have the necessary qualities, or they would have been forgotten, and the poems of today must be good or they will be forgotten. The problem of evaluating the newer poems will be taken up in Chapter III.

The fact that so few poems have persisted from any war is astounding when reflection is cast upon the number of battles and wars that have been fought and the importance which has been attached to fighting in the history of man's life. The greatest novel ever written is generally considered to be *War and Peace*, by Leo Tolstoy, a book saturated with the experiences of the Napoleonic Wars. The great journalism has been produced during time of war. But with all this literary activity, there has been surprisingly little poetry written on the subject.

Of the great war poems that have come down to the present generation, the majority are epics which have as their themes battles, wars, and crusades. There are some, as in "The Battle of Maldon" and "The Battle of Brunanburg," which are too short to be called "epics" in the true sense.² Yet they are in the style of Beowulf. The Odyssey, The Iliad, The Aeneid, The Shah Namah, The Nibelungenlied, The Volsunga saga, The Song of Roland, The Cid, and Beowulf are about all that remain after forty centuries of battling, and even these

¹Oscar Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 3.

²Mabel Irene Rich, A Study of the Types of Literature, p. 3.

find their major interests in human values outside war. There are a few poems that could be considered war poetry that fall within other categories, or come as a part of other larger works. An example of this type is found in William Shakespeare's Henry V.

One of the great war poems of all time is "The Battle of Maldon," which has been previously mentioned. It might be called "historic poetry with an epic nature."³ Although the first and last parts are lost, the poem is very revealing in many respects. Many examples of chivalry and daring, which are characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon period, are portrayed in this poem. Perhaps best among these is Byrhtnoth's reaction to a plea from the hated Northmen. During the heat of battle, the Vikings, not having any success in the actual fighting, decided to try another way to beat the Britons. One of the leaders begged Byrhtnoth and his followers to allow them to cross Panta stream unmolested. The plea was granted, despite the terrific loss of military advantage, and the battle ceased long enough for the Northmen to cross the shallows of the stream. The language of the poem is direct, leaving little to the imagination, as far as the actual meaning is concerned:

When the strangers discovered and clearly saw
 What bitter fighters the bridgewards proved,
 They tried a trick, the treacherous robbers,
 Begged they might cross, and bring their crews
 Over the shallows, and up to the shore..
 The earl was ready, in reckless daring,
 To let them land too great a number.
 Byrthelm's son, while the seamen listened,
 Called across, o'er the cold water:
 "Come ye seamen, come and fight us!

³J. Duncan Spaeth, trans., Old English Poetry, p. v.

We give you ground, but God alone knows
Who to-day shall hold the field.⁴

The linking of the adjective to the noun by means of a hyphen ("hearth-band," "battle-play," "war-cry," etc.) gives greater strength to the descriptions. This technique is used much more extensively in the first part of the poem than in the latter. There is a keen sense of patriotism throughout the poem; the poet seems to take for granted the business of fighting for one's country--a contrast to the twentieth century with its mass civilian conscription and conscientious objectors. Although the poem gives a realistic account of the battle, with its "wounded to death," "havoc and Slaughter," and "maddened by battle," it contains throughout an actual joy of conflict. It does not exult in war, however. It is more an acceptance of an undesirable situation with good cheer than exultation, but even at that this poem and "The Battle of Brunanburg" are exceptions to the rule: "All serious poetry is anti-war poetry."⁵

Of the two Anglo-Saxon poems under consideration, "The Battle of Brunnanburg" is by far the shorter and somewhat better known. The fact that it is better known--most anthologies have space for the shorter poem only--does not also mean that it is superior in quality. In short, it is an account of a battle fought between Britons and Northmen in the tenth century. Differing slightly from "The Battle of Maldon" in that it does not take us into the actual fighting, this

⁴"The Battle of Maldon." Spæth, trans., Old English Poetry.

⁵Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 22.

poem boasts of the valor and heroism of the Englishmen. The language is simple, and the meaning is not hard to grasp, but there are some figures of speech and images which cannot be found in "The Battle of Maldon." An example of this skill in imagery may be found in the following passage:

The field was drenched
Ran with the blood of the bravest fighters
From rise of the sun, when the radiant day-star
Bright candle of God, came in the morning-tide
Gliding o'er earth, till the glorious creature
Sank to its setting.⁶

Through the entire poem runs a feeling of sheer joy in fighting. There is much praise in it for valor and heroism. But it is not entirely this. Mixed throughout is a strong realization of the grim penalties of war that balances the bragging and praising. The following is a typical example:

Seven great earls
Of Anlaf were killed, and countless others
Of boatmen and Scotsmen. Barely escaped
The Northern leader. Leaving in haste,
With a handful of men, he made for his ship.
They cleared the craft, the king put out
On the fallow flood; he fled for his life.
Also the cunning Constantinus.
Home again stole to his haunts in the north.
Little ground had the gray old leader
To brag and to boast of the battle-encounter,
Stripped of his clansmen killed in the slaughter.
Alone he returned, his own son dead,
Left on the battle-field, bloody and mangled...⁷

Shakespeare had much to say about war. In Henry V he treated the subject at length, giving a realistic portrayal of the sacrifices and hardships of war. Characteristic of his attitude toward war is a speech by Henry V in the second

⁶"The Battle of Brunnanburg." Spaeth, trans., Old English Poetry, p. 162.

⁷Ibid.

scene of Act I:

For God doth know, how many, in health, now
 Shall drop their blood in approbation
 Of what your reverence shall cite us to
 Therefore take heed now you impawn our person,
 How you awake the sleeping sword of war:
 We charge you in the name of God, take heed:
 For never two such kingdoms did contend,
 Without much fall of blood; whose guiltless drops
 Are everyone a woe, a sore complaint,
 'Gainst him whose wrongs give edge unto the swords
 That make such waste in brief mortality.⁸

The change in attitude toward war commenced long before Shakespeare, but even during his time there was not that chaotic condition which exists today. War was bad, but it was not a catastrophe. The poetry of such men as Shakespeare indicates this slightly more healthy attitude toward war, but at the same time it emphasizes even more the human loss in war. As previously observed, no great poetry has exulted in war, and The Iliad, The Odyssey, and The Aeneid are not exceptions.

Andromache's speech to Hector and Hector's answer in The Iliad is an example of the anti-war poetry of Homer.

The example cited here is Hector's answer:

"Sorrow not thus, beloved one, for me.
 No living man can send me to the shades
 Before my time; no man of woman born,
 Coward or brave, can shun his destiny,
 But go thou home, and Tend thy labors there--
 The web, the distaff--and command thy maids
 To speed the work. The cares of war pertain
 To all men born of Troy, and most to me."⁹

While Hector does not shun war, he is not eager for it. He, like all Trojans, was forced to fight. The thought of run-

⁸Shakespeare, Henry V, Act I, Scene II.

⁹The Iliad of Homer as translated by William Cullen Bryant.

ning away or conscientiously objecting was impossible for Hector.

In Book I of The Odyssey Telemachus says,

"Mother, let the bard sing what he has amind to; bards do not make the ills they sing of; it is Zeus, not they, who makes them, and who sends weal or woe upon mankind according to his own good pleasure. This fellow means no harm by singing the ill-fated return of the Danaans, for people always applaud the latest songs most warmly. Make up your mind to it and bear it; Odysseus is not the only man who never came back from Troy, but many another went down as well as he...¹⁰

This is an example of the sentiment which runs throughout the epic. Nowhere is to be found such disappointments as were encountered by Odysseus and his small group of followers. The terrors of war are recounted again and again in this great war poetry, but the emphasis is not on war but on human valor.

Again, in the immortal poetry of Virgil, is found that bitterness toward war so characteristic of the great war poets. To take one example where dozens exist, we hear Aeneas recounting the circumstances leading to the fall of Troy. He is speaking to Dido, Queen of Carthage:

All silent sat, with locks intent, when thus
Aeneas from his lofty couch began:

O Queen! thou dost command me to renew
A grief unutterable: how the Greeks
O'erturned the power and lamentable realm
Of Troy; the afflicting scenes that I myself
Beheld, and a great part of which I was.
Who of the Myrimidons or Dolopes,
Or of the hard Ulysses' soldiery,
Can, speaking of such things, refrain from
tears?¹¹

¹⁰The Odyssey of Homer as translated by Samuel Butler.

¹¹The Aeneid of Virgil as translated by Christopher Cranch.

While war is the central theme or general atmosphere of the poems considered, the best of them are essentially about man. The fact that war is the principal action interpreted in a poem does not affect the poem's greatness. The greatness of a poem lies in the message communicated, the music, the strength of expression, the form, and the clarity of the actual communication. Many war poems perish because of the narrowness of the theme, but

The best war poetry will transcend war, just as it transcends nationalistic or sectarian boundaries; which is to say that the best war poetry will have to be of the spirit. Like God, it will have to be on both sides, or on none. It will be applicable to different peoples and centuries. The universality of utterance I claim for the best war poetry tends to make it less about war than about man. Therefore, it is about the spirit; judgment upon it cannot be limited to its context, but must run the whole gamut of poetical possibilities. It is the lack of a sufficiency and abundance of these spiritual qualities which condemns most war poetry to the particular.¹²

(Richard Eberhart)

¹²Williams, ed., The War Poets, pp. 192-3.

Chapter III

Analysis of Modern War Poetry

Critics and poets have had much to say about the nature and function of poetry. It is difficult to find identical criteria on the subject in any two books, and never have two men of letters completely agreed on the subject. Wordsworth said that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion,"¹ while his contemporary and collaborator, Coleridge, adopted the principle of Aristotle that poetry "avoids and excludes all accident; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class..."² Long before these statements were made Plato said that only through the direct inspiration or guidance of the Muse could a writer become a poet.³ Housman felt that "poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it."⁴ These are only a few of the hundreds of so-called definitions of poetry. Many are similar, but some are contradictory. Some poets and critics have assumed positions less refutable. Many of them refuse to comment directly on the name or nature of poetry because of its abstractness. Others have dismissed the

¹William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads, p. 2.

²Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chap. XVII.

³B. Jowett, trans., "Ion," The Dialogues of Plato, p. 291.

⁴A. E. Housman, The Name and Nature of Poetry, p. 37.

whole affair by disclaiming the existence of "poetry" and repeating that there is no such thing as poetry, only poems.⁵

Sidney defines the task of the poet thus:

The poet doth not only show the way, but giveth
so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice
any man to enter into it.⁶

Milton felt that poetry should be simple, concrete, and sensuous, while Shelley praised poetry because "it compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know."⁷ Becoming somewhat more academic, one poet explains the modern conception of poetic production:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.⁸

Housman differentiates between verse and poetry:

Verse might be anything that rhymes but poetry is generally restricted to verse which can at least be called literature. Yet it might differ from prose only in its material form...⁹

All the poems selected for this work are considered by the writer to be better-than-average. Some of course are much better than others, and it is the purpose of this chapter to discuss the extent of the good and bad qualities of each poem, keeping in mind three broad principles:

⁶George Herbert Clarke, ed., The New Treasury of War Poetry, p. xxix.

⁷Ibid.

⁸T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 124.

⁹Thomas and Brown, Reading Poems, p. 742.

(1) The clarity of the actual communication, (2) the value of the experience communicated, and (3) the emotional quality of the poem. The last named is perhaps most important. Housman places the evoking of emotion as "the peculiar function of poetry."¹⁰ He goes on to explain that "nothing above perfection can be demanded of anything: yet poetry is capable of more than this...emotion."¹¹

The final judgment of the selected poems in this work will rest with Time. Perhaps none of them will be read a hundred years hence. On the other hand, it is conjectured that most of them will remain for some time because of certain laudable traits common in all great poetry. But, as Oscar Williams puts it,

We are too close to the poets of today to be able to evaluate them with assurance. We cannot predict accurately whether certain poems will last because of this subjective element in criticism.¹²

If only a dozen or so poems, with assured futures, have come out of forty centuries of warfare, and if modern war is less romantic, more cold-blooded, and far less conducive to the production of good poetry, as has been proved by the poets' own declarations, what has been written since the turn of the century on the subject of war? Actually, there has been a great deal more activity among the modern war poets than would be expected under existing conditions. Some of the poems recently written seem destined to remain, and there

¹⁰Thomas and Brown, Reading poems, p. 742.

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry, p. 11.

are many others with good possibilities for long futures. It must be pointed out, however, that this is conjecture only since we are affected to a greater extent by the subject matter of the poems than will be later generations. Also, we feel a kindred relationship toward our contemporaries that will not exist even a hundred years from now. War poetry must be judged, like any other type of poetry, upon its essential excellence.¹³ It cannot be accepted as good merely because it tells a great truth, expresses an emotion, or does any one of the duties required of good poetry. It must meet all the requirements or it is not good poetry.

Some critics feel that good war poetry should stick to the grim and bloody business of war. Anything short of a truthful account of the actual ugliness and suffering at the front is branded as false. Oscar Williams, a strict advocate of this type of criticism, goes so far as to list Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Alan Seeger's "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" as undesirable:

...lines like Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" divert the attention of the reader from any mental image of the soldier's mangled body to the concept of the soldier's placid acceptance of being a bit of soil "for ever England"; Alan Seeger's "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" conjures up a picture of the soldier's easy death in a cloud of noble ecstasies, which effectually prevents the death rattle from being mentally heard.¹⁴

The present writer, however, feels that since war poetry

¹³Richard Eberhart, War and the Poet, p. v.

¹⁴Oscar Williams, ed., The War Poets, p. 5.

is after all poetry, it must be judged as such. It must be measured by an inflexible set of rules, general to the extent of including all types of poetry and not war poetry alone, yet particular enough to distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality, the former being truthful emotion and the latter being false.

The first poem mentioned in Williams' criticism, Brooke's "The Soldier," is perhaps the best known modern war poem. For the reader's convenience it is included here:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed,
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

This beautiful sonnet, appearing in England just before the announcement of its author's death, drew widespread attention. Not only for its prophetic quality was it significant, however; it put into beautiful language that patriotic spirit which is so common among the British, especially during time of crisis. It said the things which every fighting Englishman loved to hear, and it reaffirmed many, who faltered among the chaos of war, in their old faith in the "tight little isle."

In the very first line of the poem a deep seriousness is felt. The implied nearness of death and the tone removes any thought of sham patriotism: "If I should die, think

only this of me." The alliteration and imagery in "a foreign field that is for ever England" develops the serious strain, and in this line, also, the reader may feel, rather than see, all the personal love and devotion of a favorite son for his beloved homeland. By the inclusion of a single word, "forever," Brooke has infused that feeling or sense of infinitude. The repetition of certain words in the same sentence produces an effect similar to alliteration and at the same time emphasizes the desired emotion: "In that rich earth a richer dust concealed," "A body of England's breathing English air," and "Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given." Alliteration occurs throughout the poem: "sights and sounds," and "laughter learnt."

This sonnet, when considered from the standpoint of clarity, experience communicated, and emotional quality, is perhaps the best example of war poetry yet produced. In it is found an emotional comprehension of all that war implies without the grotesque phrasing used by many modern war poets. There is a nobility about it that has been equaled by few poems in any era. It is a personal, intimate message from a young man ready to give his all for the country of his birth.

After peace was declared and order reestablished, "The Soldier" met its first real test; it successfully withstood all attacks and criticisms, such as the one quoted above, and emerged as one of the most read poems in the English language. With the arrival of World War II, it gained many new friends, for its deeply felt patriotism was once more applicable to the

issues of the day.

The objective correlatives explained by Mr. Eliot in an earlier section are present in "The Soldier," as in all great poetry. The experience received is undeniably conscious of the nearness of war, and herein lies that unmistakable emotion. The poet, while proving beyond a doubt his fearlessness and gallantry, passionately delighted in life. This love of life made Brooke's gallantry even greater in that self-sacrifice came at a higher price than in most patriots. The subdued tone of Brooke's "The Soldier" is marked contrast to many modern war poems, especially those by Siegfried Sassoon. In the clarity of communication and in the actual value of the communication, Brooke's poem is all that can be asked of any poem, yet, as Housman said of poems in general, it is something more: It is highly emotional.

Next to be considered is "I Have a Rendezvous with Death." It was written by Alan Seeger, another young poet who gave his life during the Great War. Like Brooke's, it was written shortly before the death of its author and seemed to foretell with prophetic irony the forthcoming disaster. Another resemblance between the two poems is the calm acceptance of war and its penalties. There is no hint of complaint in either poem, thus differing from a vast majority of modern war poems. However, from this point on, the two poems contain very little in common. "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" does hold approximately the same place in America that "The Soldier" does in England in that it is perhaps America's most famous war poem, if not her best. It does not have the depth

and quality which is manifested in Brooke's poem, however, and the patriotic sentiment is not present. This is hardly to be expected from an American living in the twentieth century or from almost any poet other than an Englishman. Our world is perhaps too big to arouse the feeling expressed in "The Soldier" for England.

"I Have a Rendezvous with Death" is here included:

I have a rendezvous with Death
 At some disputed barricade
 When Spring comes back with rustling shade
 And apple blossoms fill the air.
 I have a rendezvous with death
 When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
 And lead me into his dark land
 And close my eyes and quench my breath;
 It may be I shall pass him, still,
 I have a rendezvous with Death
 On some scarred slope of battered hill,
 When Spring comes round again this year
 And the first meadow flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
 Pillowed in silk and scented down,
 Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,
 Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
 Where hushed awakenings are dear.
 But I've a rendezvous with Death
 At midnight in some flaming town,
 When Spring trips north again this year,
 I shall not fail that rendezvous.

This poem, though somewhat inferior to the preceding one, is a masterpiece of imagery, rhythm, and description. There is no definite stanza form or rhyme scheme to it, but this is hardly noticeable with the wealth of imagery and perfect iambic tetrameter rhythm. The seriousness of the poem and its theme is in the first line: "I have a rendezvous with death." And, with slight variation, a refrain occurs frequently to intensify the emotion and to emphasize the ser-

iousness of the situation. Perfect imagery is to be found in almost every line: "disputed barricade," "rustling shade," "blue days and fair," "dark land," "scarred slope of battered hill," "Pillowed in silk and scented down," "love throbs out in blissful sleep,/ Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath," "hushed awakenings," "flaming town," and "When Spring trips north again this year."

Alliteration is also present in this poem: "scarred-slope," and "silk and scented." The descriptions are sharp and clear, and there is an abundance of memorable passages, as follows: "God knows 'twere better to be deep/ Pillowed in silk and scented down." Again, "Where hushed awakenings are dear." Here Seeger, like Brooke, is deeply conscious of life, but he does not complain of his situation. The personification of Death adds an air of dark reality to the poem, but this does not damage the essential seriousness of the poem nor obscure the meaning "in a cloud of noble ecstasies," as Mr. Williams would have us believe. The conception of death as something real and capable of taking the poet's hand is accomplished with little difficulty, and the implied meaning is as clear as the plain sense meaning. The objective correlatives stand out: disputed barricades, scarred slopes, and battered hill. With these the poet has successfully provided that necessary sensory experience, the feeling of Death's nearness, which T. S. Eliot insists is the purpose of the external facts. Here again "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," like "The Soldier," fulfills the three requirements previously discussed.

The next two poems, written twelve years apart, are from the same poet. "The Man He Killed" and "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" are among Thomas Hardy's most successful poems. Since very little resemblance is to be found between the two, they will be considered separately. They are both, however, written in the ballad stanza, and the language is characteristically simple. The earlier poem, "The Man He Killed," was first published in The Dynasts in 1903 as follows:

"Had he and I met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

"But ranged as infantry
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because--
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand-like--just as I--
Was out of work--had sold his traps--
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat, if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

As already observed, this poem is written in ballad stanza. There is at least one outstanding characteristic about this form, however. Besides the first, second, and fourth iambic trimeter lines, there is an iambic tetrameter line, the third, included in each stanza. There is much meaning in this simple tale of war, but figures of speech, alliteration, and other poetic devices are absent, as in most of Hardy's poems. The

language is simple but disarming. The futility and stupidity of war is exemplified here with a humaneness often overlooked by poets of Hardy's time. That the enemy was anything but targets to be blown to bits hardly occurred to them. The thought is still startling and, to a combatant, it is at times terrifying.

The thought in this poem, and the reality, is strikingly produced in the fourth stanza: "He thought he'd 'list, perhaps, / Off-hand-like---just as I--." Sincerity dominates the poem and is a large part of that sensory experience previously explained by Mr. Eliot.

"The Man He Killed" continues to be popular because it can be applied to the modern conception, and in this instance by modern is meant the period since World War II, of war as well as Hardy's time. The growth of the one-world idea is manifested in poems such as this. The brotherly love attitude developed recently toward other nationalities is brought out in the fifth stanza: "You'd shoot a fellow down/ You'd treat, if met where any bar is." It should be remarked that this poem was written eleven years before the outbreak of World War I.

Hardy's other poem to be discussed, "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations,'" was written in the early months of World War I and shows a marked advancement in his attitude toward war.

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk,
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
 From the heaps of couch grass:
 Yet this will go onward the same
 Though dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
 Come whispering by;
 War's annals will fade into night
 Ere their story die.

It is evident from these lines that Hardy was past becoming excited over war. He knew that poetry alone, perhaps nothing, was capable of stopping wars. He had resigned himself to the fact that it was the small and simple things of life that were permanent: "Yet this will go onward the same/ Though dynasties pass," "War's annals will fade into night/ Ere their story die." What can be imagined more simple than "a man harrowing clods"? Yet Hardy felt that this would "go onward the same." The truth is evident in the philosophy. One feels that war is transient while "a man harrowing clods" is permanent. Bright images are produced in "a slow silent walk," "thin smoke without flame," and "War's annals will fade into night."

The poem has what is needed to be rated great--clarity, both in form and subject, and emotion. The simplicity of it does not mar the essential beauty nor diminish the value of the message communicated.

Another outstanding poem to come out of World War I, a beautifully compassionate poem, was "In Flanders' Fields," by Lieut. Col. John McCrae. It consists of three stanzas, generally rhyming in couplets, with iambic tetrameter rhythm. In 1915 this poem appeared as follows:

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
 Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place, and in the sky
 The larks, still bravely singing, fly
 Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead! Short days ago
 We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
 Loved and were loved, and now we lie
 In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe!
 To you from failing hands we throw
 The Torch. Be yours to hold it high!
 If ye break faith with us who die
 We shall not sleep, though poppies grow,
 In Flanders' fields.

In this poem a sharp contrast can be seen between the beautiful, peaceful countryside and the torn, noisy battlefield. The voice that says, "We are the dead," is the voice of the strong, coming back from death. It is not the voice of dejection and hopelessness: "Take up our quarrel with the foe"; rather it is a militant voice insisting on a continuation of the war in the name of Liberty. It commands the lovers of freedom to bear the "Torch" faithfully or the dead will "not sleep, though poppies grow." This poem is full of compassionate emotion; it expresses a strong love for freedom, for the everyday things of life--the glowing sunsets and dawns--yet there is no lamentation. Although the dead have accomplished little--"to you from failing hands we throw/ The Torch"--there is no pessimism. War means Liberty; for that reason it is justified.

The beauty of expression in this poem is exceeded only by the restrained yet passionate emotion. The value of the perfect iambic tetrameter rhythm is increased by alliteration, as in "Flanders' fields," "saw sunset," and the sharp imagery of "poppies blow" and "The larks, bravely singing." Practi-

cally all the virtues of the poem by Brooke but to a less degree. In clarity, as in the emotional qualities, the poem is great. The objective correlatives--poppy fields, crosses, the roar of the guns, the figures of the personification of Death, the metaphor of the Torch--are very successful; sensory experience is strongly present. The quiet tone of the first part of the poem is broken by sudden outbursts, and the final effect is greater for these surprise utterances.

John McCrae was another young soldier poet who lost his life during the First World War. Like Brooke and Seeger, his best poem seemed to predict the forthcoming disaster. "In Flanders' Fields" was written during the spring of 1915 on the Flanders front. Another soldier, an acquaintance of McCrae, describes the beauty of Flanders' fields in spring-time:

On the Flanders front in the early Spring of 1915, when the war had settled down to trench fighting, two of the most noticeable features of the field were, first, the luxuriant growth of red poppies appearing among the graves of the fallen soldiers, and second, that only one species of bird--the larks--remained on the field during the fighting. As soon as the cannonading ceased, they would rise in the air, singing.¹⁵ (Sgt. Charles E. Bisset)

An American not generally considered a war poet but who wrote some great war poems is Vachel Lindsay. His poem, "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," is now considered a modern classic. It is especially a high school classic, as is indicated by the fact that in almost every anthology of American poetry for high schools it is to be found.

¹⁵W. D. Eaton, ed., Great Poems of the World War, p. 100.

It is portentous, and a thing of state
That here at midnight, in our little town
A mourning figure walks, and will not rest,
Near the old court-house pacing up and down,

Or, by his homestead, or in shadowed yards
He lingers where his children used to play,
Or through the market, on the well-worn stones
He stalks until the dawn-stars burn away.

A bronzed, lank man! His suit of ancient black
A famous high top-hat and a plain worn shawl
Make him the quaint great figure that men love,
The prairie-lawyer, master of us all.

He cannot sleep upon his hillside now.
He is among us:--as in times before!
And we who toss and lie awake for long
Breathe deep, and start, to see him pass the door.

His head is bowed. He thinks on men and kings.
Yea, when the sick world cries, how can he sleep?
Too many peasants fight, they know not why,
Too many homesteads in black terror weep.

The sins of all the war lords burn his heart.
He sees the dreadnaughts scouring every main.
He carries on his shawl-wrapped shoulders now
The bitterness, the folly, and the pain.

He cannot rest until a spirit-dawn
Shall come;--the shining hope of Europe free:
A league of sober folk, the Workers' Earth,
Bringing long peace to Cornland, Alp, and Sea.

It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,
That all his hours of travail here for men
Seem yet in vain. And who will bring white peace
That he may sleep upon his hill again?

Perhaps the most laudable trait of this poem is its magnificent imagery. The descriptions, usually in the form of images, are amazingly true; each word seems to fit exactly. Such mental pictures as "A mourning figure walks," "quaint great figure," and "white peace" are almost as sharp as photographs. Also, throughout the poem memorable passages, like the first quoted above, are to be found. Others include "A bronzed, lank man," and "quaint great figure." The

whole poem is saturated with wonderful imagery and noble passages. Such phrases as "a mourning figure" describe Lincoln to the American public almost as well as an entire paragraph on most great men.

There is some alliteration: "well-worn" and "must murder." The stanzas are in the ballad style and the metric system used is iambic pentameter. The poem rates high in clarity and value of communication, but there is not present that immediacy of sensation so characteristic of really great war poetry. Most of this poem is devoted to character sketching and description. Only in the last part do we begin to feel the emotional qualities and sense the bitter truth of the existing world conditions. The language is beautiful, and the facts are true, and the "quaint great figure" demands attention, but beyond this the poem does not attempt to go. The simplicity of the phrasing does not lower the value of the poem; rather it adds to the portraiture of Lincoln, who was noted for his simple words and common sense. There can be little doubt about the continuing popularity of this poem in America. It is simply the best American war poem that has been produced on a national figure. If for no other reason, it will be retained for its patriotic qualities.

Any collection of modern war poems would not be complete without Siegfried Sassoon's "Dreamers." In many ways it is the antithesis of "The Soldier," yet it is unmistakably great. A deep passion runs throughout the poem with gathering momentum near the end. It is truly representative of the modern attitudes toward war. Despite this fact, however, there have been

few poems to approach it in tone or quality. It succeeds where so many of its kind have failed. Unlike Brooke's poem, "The Soldier," it conceals nothing of the ugliness and bitterness of war. Where Brooke instills a feeling of the horror of war with polished compassion and patriotic acceptance, Siegfried Sassoon savagely lashes out against the sacrifices being made. With him it is not so much a matter of patriotism or duty to one's country; it is the individual who suffers and dies. Beyond this Sassoon is not concerned.

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.

Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dugouts, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

Sassoon speaks from bitter experience when he places the soldiers in "death's gray land." This metaphor sets in motion the main feeling of the poem. It is a feeling of hopelessness and utter dejection. There can be no assurance of life after today, "Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows," yet each soldier must meet his maker, with "his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows," in these "ruined trenches." In almost every line is found rich imagery: "flaming, fatal climax," "firelit homes, clean beds," "foul dugouts, gnawed

by rats," "ruined trenches, lashed with rain," and "going to the office in the train." There are several examples of alliteration: "time's tomorrows," "flaming fatal," "balls and bats," and "shows, and spats." Examples of metaphor include "death's gray land," "time's tomorrows," "great hour of destiny," and "fatal climax." Every word seems to have been chosen with the utmost care; there is almost no end to the interpretation which could be given this poem. It is a passionate protest against the stupidity of war. It is significant that the poet should list simple, everyday enjoyments of life, in the latter part of the poem, instead of the more private ones, for in this way he indicates even more completely his negative attitude toward fighting.

Differing somewhat from the other poems selected for this work, Siegfried Sassoon's "Dreamers" secures the effect of rhythm by trochaic pentameter. It is a sonnet of two quatrains and a sestet, rhyming abab cdcd efef.

There has long been a dispute among critics whether a poet could write realistic war poetry without ever having been in combat. Some contend that the poetry of those who have never seen action is not truly "war" poetry. This would seem to limit the scope to a particular type of the poetry of war. For our purpose here, poetry is considered war poetry when its main theme is closely concerned with war, regardless of the past experience of the poet. With this in mind we approach the next poem. It is written by a woman who gained her war experience on the home front; despite this fact the poem, "In Distrust of Merits," has been hailed as the most

eloquent and most compassionate poem of the Second World War.¹⁶

Strengthened to live, strengthened to die for
 medals and positioned victories?
 They're fighting, fighting, fighting the blind
 man who thinks he sees,--
 who cannot see that the enslaver is
 enslaved; the hater, harmed. O shining O
 firm star, O tumultuous
 ocean lashed till small things go
 as they will, the mountainous
 wave makes us who look, know

depth. Lost at sea before they fought! O
 star of David, star of Bethlehem,
 O black imperial lion
 of the Lord--emblem
 of a risen world--bejoined at last, be
 joined. There is hate's crown beneath which all is
 death; there's love's without which none
 is king; the blessed deeds bless
 the halo. As contagion
 of sickness makes sickness,

contagion of trust can make trust. They're
 fighting in deserts and caves, one by
 one, in battalions and squadrons;
 they're fighting that I
 may yet recover from the disease, my
self; some have it lightly, some will die. "Man's
 wolf to man?" And we devour
 ourselves? The enemy could not
 have made a greater breach in our
 defenses. One pilot-

ing a blind man can escape him, but
 Job disheartened by false comfort knew,
 that nothing is so defeating
 as a blind man who
 can see. O alive who are dead, who are
 proud not to see, O small dust of the earth
 that walks so arrogantly,
 trust begets power and faith is
 an affectionate thing. We
 vow, we make this promise

to the fighting--it's a promise--"We'll
 never hate black, white, red, yellow, Jew,
 Gentile, Untouchable." We are
 not competent to
 make our vows. With set jaw they are fighting,

¹⁶ Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry and
 Modern British Poetry, p. 368.

fighting, fighting,--some we love whom we know,
some we love but know not--that
hearts may feel and not be numb.
It cures me; or am I what
I can't believe in? Some

in snow, some on crags, some in quicksands,
little by little, much by much, they
are fighting fighting fighting that where
there was death there may
be life. "When a man is prey to anger,
he is moved by outside things; when he holds
his ground in patience patience
patience, that is action or
beauty," the soldier's defense
and hardest armor for

the fight. The world's an orphan's home. Shall
we never have peace without sorrow?
without pleas of the dying for
help that won't come? O
quiet form upon the dust, I cannot
look and yet I must. If these great patient
dyings--all these agonies
and woundbearings and blood shed--
can teach us how to live, these
dyings were not wasted.

Hate-hardened heart, O heart of iron,
iron is iron till it is rust.
There never was a war that was
not inward; I must
fight till I have conquered in myself what
causes war, but I would not believe it.
I inwardly did nothing.
O Iscariotlike crime!
Beauty is everlasting
and dust is for a time.

In this free verse example of high human sentiment one can almost transfer the feeling of the inward battle that is being waged. The repeated apostrophes ("O shining O firm star, O tumultuous," "O star of David," "O black imperial lion of the Lord," "O alive who are dead," "O small dust of the earth that walks so arrogantly," "O quiet form upon the dust," "O heart of iron," and "O Iscariotlike crime") put force and bitterness in the otherwise compassionate prayer. The references to David, Job, and the Lord give the poem a re-

religious quality that, in this particular instance, increases the value of the message. Underneath the surface of this poem runs an emotion built around the despicable condition of the world and the danger confronting mankind. The persecution of Jew and Gentile, yellow and black, must cease ("We/ vow, we make this promise to the fighting...").

A poem mentioned earlier in connection with Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," and one very similar in sentiment, is Gervase Stewart's "I Burn for England with a Living Flame." It is perhaps World War II's nearest counterpart to "The Soldier."

I burn for England with a living flame
In the uncandled darkness of the night.
I share with her the fault, who share her
name,
And to her light I add my lesser light.
She has my arm--who had my father's arm.

I burn for England, even as she burns
In living flame, that when her peace is come
Flame shall destroy whoever seeks to turn
Her sacrifice to profit--and the homes
Of those who fought--to wreckage,
In a war for freedom--who were never free.

Again, as in "The Soldier," the reader must realize the great extent of patriotic sentiment possible in true lovers of England and other similarly small nations. Imagery, deep felt emotion, and beauty of expression make this one of the best poems of World War II. Stewart's patriotic fervor for England is perfectly summarized in the title line, "I burn for England with a living flame." "Living flame" envisages all that love possible in a young soldier for his country. Although England had her faults, she was still worthy of a patriot's complete love. The poet is willing to do as his

father did before him; he is ready to fight and die for his country, "And to her light I add my lesser light."

This poem was written during the time commonly referred to as "The Battle of Britain," in the early part of World War II. Most of England was being bombed day and night. Stewart refers to the destruction of the bombs and their after affects, fire, when he wrote, "I burn for England even as she burns/ In living Flame..." He was aware of the profiteering and wickedness brought about by war, but he was willing to "burn" in order that those profiteers of war would be destroyed. The poem ends on a note of despair; the war was being fought for freedom, yet those who fought were never free. It is a fitting example of the extent to which modern war poetry has gone toward pessimism since World War I. Brooke and Stewart afford perhaps the best comparison available for this change.

Another World War II poem, this time from an American, is Karl Shapiro's "Nostalgia."

My soul stands at the window of my room,
 And I ten thousand miles away;
 My days are filled with Ocean's sound of doom,
 Salt and cloud and the bitter spray.
 Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

My selfish youth, my books with gilded edge,
 Knowledge and all gaze down the street;
 The potted plants upon the window ledge
 Gaze down with selfish lives and sweet.
 Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

My night is now her day, my day her night,
 So I lie down, and so I rise;
 The sun burns close, the star is losing height,
 The clock is hunted down the skies.
 Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

Truly a pin can make the memory bleed,
 A world explode the inward mind
 And turn the skulls and flowers never freed
 Into the air, no longer blind.
 Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

4

Laughter and grief join hands. Always the heart
Clumps in the breast with heavy stride;
The face grows lined and wrinkled like a chart,
The eyes bloodshot with tears and tide.
Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

The meaning is clear, and there is no mistaking the compassionate feeling. In stanzas of abab rhyme with a dark refrain, the poet remembers joys of youth and early manhood ("My selfish youth, my books with gilded edge," "My night is now her day..."). There is some alliteration: "soul stands," "ten thousand," "many a man," and "tears and tide." Also, with noticeable effect, there is a great deal of highly descriptive imagery: "Ocean's sound of doom," "The potted plants upon the window ledge," "The sun burns close," "The clock is hunted down the skies," "Truly a pin can make the memory bleed," "Laughter and grief join hands," and "The eyes bloodshot with tears and tide." One descriptive simile appears in "The face grows lined and wrinkled like a chart."

It is immediately apparent that this poem does not attempt the depths that are achieved in "I Burn for England with a Living Flame" and "The Soldier." It has great clarity, however, and the message communicated is important.

A war poem much admired today for its variety of form and content is Archibald MacLeish's "Memorial Rain." It was written in 1930, but with all its modern innovations and present-day theme it might have been written last year.

Ambassador Puser the ambassador
Reminds himself in French, felicitous tongue,
What these (young men no longer) lie here for
In rows that once, and somewhere else, were young--

All night in Brussels the wind had tugged at my door:

I had heard the wind at my door and the trees strung
 Taut, and to me who had never been before
 In that country it was a strange wind blowing
 Steadily, stiffening the walls, the floor,
 The roof of my room. I had not slept for knowing
 He too, dead, was a stranger in that land
 And felt beneath the earth in the wind's flowing
 A tightening of roots and would not understand,
 Remembering lake winds in Illinois,
 That strange wind. I had felt his bones in the sand
 Listening.

--Reflects that these enjoy
 Their country's gratitude, that deep repose,
 That peace no pain can break, no hurt destroy,
 That rest, that sleep--

At Ghent the wind rose.
 There was a smell of rain and heavy drag
 Of wind in the hedges but not as the wind blows
 Over fresh water when the waves lag
 Foaming and the willows huddle and it will rain:
 I felt him waiting.

--Indicates the flag
 Which (may he say) enisles in Flanders' plain
 This little field these happy, happy dead
 Have made America--

In the ripe grain
 The wind coiled glistening, darted, fled,
 Dragging its heavy body: at Waereghem
 The wind coiled in the grass above his head:
 Waiting--listening--

--Dedicates to them
 This earth their bones have hallowed, this last gift
 A grateful country--

Under the dry grass stem
 The words are blurred, are thickened, the words sift
 Confused by the rasp of the wind, by the thin grating
 Of ants under the grass, the minute shift
 And tumble of dusty sand separating
 From dusty sand. The roots of the grass strain,
 Tighten, the earth is rigid, waits--he is waiting--

And suddenly, and all at once, the rain!

The people scatter, they run into houses, the wind
 Is trampled under the rain, shakes free, is again
 trampled. The rain gathers, running in thinned
 spurts of water that ravel in the dry sand
 Seeping into the sand under the grass roots, seeping
 Between cracked boards to the bones of a clenched hand:

The earth relaxes, loosens; he is sleeping,
He rests, he is quiet, he sleeps in a strange land.

Here Archibald MacLeish proves to be one of the most resourceful technicians of an experimental age; "he employs all the approved forms and invents several of his own; extends the gamut of rhyme through dissonance and consonance to half-rhyme¹⁷ ("thin-continues," "sun-running," "dish-official," and "star-harbor"). Unmistakably great are the rhyming consonants and unrhyming vowels ("lake-like," "vine-vane," "west-waste"). Another effective technique utilized is internal rhyme. The style is elliptical, but the figures are concrete; without strain or exaggeration MacLeish uses ordinary language to suggest extraordinary sensations and abstractions. The poem is saturated with imagery and memorable sense-impressions ("the trees strung/ Taut," "a wind... stiffening the walls,/ The roof of my room," "There was a smell of rain and heavy drag/...Over fresh water when the waves lag/ Foaming and the willows huddle and it will rain"). Many examples of alliteration may be found ("been before," "Steadily, stiffening," "peace...pain," "sand separating," "rain...running," and "cracked boards...clenched hands").

In Lord Byron's treatment of this subject in his Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III, he portrays a festival in Brussels which was suddenly broken up by the news of the Battle of Waterloo. The contrast between Byron's Belgium and MacLeish's is astonishing. There is a bit of the theatrical in Byron's poem; MacLeish's contains nothing of this. The

¹⁷Ibid., p. 470.

whole atmosphere has changed.

Since the sensory experience is to be gained by suggestion, and this poem is definitely a masterpiece of suggestion, the clarity of communication is considered to be great despite the elliptical style. The message communicated, that long speeches made after one is dead do little good, is very valuable to us in an age of high sounding phrases and voluminous speeches. The telling of this message is brought about in an ingenious manner: An outer story tells of Ambassador Puser's making a very patriotic but empty speech in Flanders' plain on Memorial Day. This is done in two, three, and four line stanzas, and, interspersed, is another story told by one close to a dead soldier buried in the plain. He be- means the fact that this fallen comrade is buried in a strange land. The two stories are linked together artfully by references to the locale and the forthcoming rain. The inner story is a suggested one. It insists upon the futility of speech-making after one is gone.

The last poem to be considered in this discussion is one which drew considerable praise during the years of the First World War. It was a great favorite with the trench soldier and noncombatant alike. According to W. D. Eaton, editor and anthologist, Edgar A. Guest's "Battle of Belleau Wood" was chosen as the Marines' favorite of all the Marine Corps verse composed during the war.¹⁸

It was thick with Prussian troopers, it was foul
 with German guns;
 Every tree that cast a shadow was a sheltering

¹⁸Eaton, Great Poems of the World War, p. 29.

place for Huns.
 Death was guarding every roadway, death was watch-
 ing every field,
 And behind each rise of terrain was a rapid-fire
 concealed;
 But Uncle Sam's Marines had orders: "Drive the
 Boche from where they're hid
 For the honor of Old Glory, take the woods!" and
 so they did.

I fancy none will tell it as the story should be
 told--
 None will ever do full justice to those Yankee
 troopers bold.
 How they crawled upon their stomachs through the
 fields of golden wheat
 With the bullets spitting at them in that awful
 battle heat.
 It's a tale too big for writing; it's beyond the
 voice or pen,
 But it glows among the splendor of the bravest
 deeds of men.

It's recorded as a battle, but I fancy it will live,
 As the brightest gem of courage human struggles
 have to give.
 Inch by inch, they crawled to victory toward the
 flaming mounts of guns;
 Inch by inch, they crawled to grapple with the barri-
 caded Huns;
 On through fields that death was sweeping with a
 murderous fire, they went
 Till the Teuton line was vanquished and the Ger-
 man strength was spent.

Ebbled and flowed the tides of battle as they've
 seldom done before;
 Slowly, surely, moved the Yankees against all
 the odds of war.
 For the honor of the fallen, for the glory of
 the dead,
 The living line of courage kept the faith and
 moved ahead.
 They'd been ordered not to falter, and when night
 came on they stood
 With Old Glory proudly flying o'er the trees
 of Belleau Wood.

While this is undoubtedly a faithful account of the Battle
 of Belleau Wood, it is hardly poetry. It might be classed
 simply as patriotic, propaganda verse. To the soldier it
 was poetry because it rhymed; it was great because it told

a story of a great battle. The language is simple, as Hardy's, but there the comparison ends. Guest simply tells a story. It is a surface story. Hardy tells surface stories incidentally; under that surface he conceals a deeper meaning.

The "Battle of Belleau Wood" is a good example of the many poems which are highly praised by the public but which cannot stand close examination. They are popular because they treat, in very simple language, some incident of wide renown. Once the news value disappears the poems drop from sight. Only those poems which are clearly communicated, tell a worthwhile story or communicate a valuable sensation, and evince a strong emotion will live to be read generation after generation.

Chapter IV

CONCLUSION

Modern war poetry, if it is considered good, exemplifies three basic principles: It has great clarity in form and style; it communicates a worthy message; and it creates an emotional experience. There are not many strictly war poems which measure up to these basic criteria, and all indications seem to negate the chances for the productions of great war poems in the future.

During the course of this study it has become apparent that man's noblest creation, poetry, is not encouraged in an atmosphere of war. War places mankind in a state of frustration, and poetry is best produced in an atmosphere of tranquility. The poets of today are living in an alien world, unhappy and unwilling to continue to write about the chaotic conditions brought about by war. When they produce poetry, it is seldom about war; their wish is to get as far away from the subject of war as possible. This is one of the major reasons for the small number of existing modern war poems.

Of the dozen poems discussed eleven have been rated from good to great. Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" is considered by this writer to be the greatest, with Gervase Stewart's "I Burn for England with a Living Flame" and Archibald MacLeish's "Memorial Rain" following at some distance. Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" is also among the better poems.

The last poem, of course, "Battle of Belleau Wood," is not to be considered among the others in poetic evaluation. It could not be considered great in any list of poems.

It is noteworthy that the best war poetry written during both wars came from combatants, and, coincidentally perhaps, in almost every case the poet was killed in action. Great war poetry has been produced by noncombatants, however; characteristically enough, a woman noncombatant wrote one of America's foremost war poems (Marianne Moore's "In Distrust of Merits"). Vachel Lindsay and Archibald MacLeish were also noncombatants.

In conclusion, it is fitting to note that war poetry is after all just poetry. The best of it will rank among the really great poems of all times; the entire mass of it will range from mere verse to good poetry just as other types of poetry do. Perhaps it is not desirable to distinguish war poetry as a "type"; it might be classed with other poetry which differs only in subject matter, as does nature poetry to ecclesiastical poetry. Correspondingly, it would be difficult to set war poets aside as a type; most of them wrote poetry on subjects other than war.

Finally, it should be pointed out that "war" poetry, as such, is not essentially about war but about human values and the working of the human soul. In this sense, all war poetry might be reclassified as "human" poetry.

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The content and form have been checked and approved by the author and thesis adviser. Changes or corrections in the thesis are not made by the Graduate School office or by any committee. The copies are sent to the bindery just as they are approved by the author and faculty adviser.

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