

HUMANITIES AND WAR?

by Donald Anderson, Editor

... –look west at the hill of water: it is half the
planet: this dome, this half-globe, this bulging
Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia,
Australia and white Antarctica: those are the eyelids that
never close; this is the staring unsleeping
Eye of the earth; and what it watches is not our wars.

–from “The Eye,” Robinson Jeffers

From time immemorial, war and art have reflected one another, and it is this intersection of war and art that **WLA** seeks to illuminate. If it seems to fall to the historian to make distinctions among wars, each war’s larger means and ends, the trajectory for the artist, regardless of culture or time, seems to fall towards an individual’s disillusionment, the means and ends of war played out in the personal. For the individual soldier, the sweeping facts of history are accurately written not in the omniscient, third-person plural, but in the singular first. We live in a culture that values the individual. Our works of art about war mirror this welcome bias.

Of course Art and Life are different – if they weren’t we wouldn’t need art. And if Art generally strains towards making sense, most of us have lived long enough to know that Life is under no such obligation. W.H. Auden, who came into his fullness as a poet as fascism was creeping across Europe, wrote about that scourge and then concluded that “poetry makes nothing happen,” that nothing he ever wrote saved one Jew from the gas chambers. Yet, art markets authority, else why would officials at the United Nations have decided to cover the tapestry of Picasso’s searing *Guernica*, as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II? In the long haul of history, a stone ax crushing a skull is no different from a Tomahawk missile except in its efficiency. We have as much to learn from *The Iliad* as we do from *Black Hawk Down*.

At its best, **WLA** is witness to the power of word and image and for the human craving for meaning. And if one of the functions of art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down, then we welcome those disturbances. We would, however, be dismissive of the complexity of the subject **WLA** seeks to explore, if we did not remind ourselves of John Stuart Mill’s notion that war, although an ugly thing, is not the ugliest of things. More spurious, Mill instructs, is the person who is unwilling to fight for anything larger than his or her own personal safety.

In **WLA**, we strive to include voices from many perspectives. We sense that Tim O’Brien hits the mark when he writes in “How to Tell a True War Story”:

War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing

and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

And:

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.

Aristotle's notion that History accretes, but only Poetry unifies is a notion we subscribe to. Art grants access to a larger world, allows us to live other lives, allows us to examine the quality and meaning of our own lives. Whose very earliest recollections do not include the request, Tell me a Story? The human race needs stories. We need all the experience we can get. Before we made fire, before we made tools, before we made weapons, we made images. Art, at its deepest level, is about preserving the world.