

*Poetry of the World Wars*, edited by Michael Foss. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1990. Pp. 192. \$18.95.

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With *Poetry of the World Wars* Michael Foss has assembled a book of little commentary, a collection of poems with enough vigor in verse and imagery to stand on its own. Working as editor rather than explicator, Foss limits his introduction to a two-page preface. His thesis is simple: these "are the poetry of annihilation," the chronicles of the Modern age, the record of how total war vanquished notions of nobility in armed conflict, and in so doing heralded an age of chaos and nihilism.

Each of the book's main chapters, "World War One," "The Years Between," and "World War Two" are divided into smaller units. "World War One" includes six sub-chapters: "Call to Arms," "Combat," "Come death . . .," "Disgust," "Home Front," and "Aftermath." In these shorter sections, our editor fuses events and responses in the flow of time. Collectively, the poems are a chronology of this period, a log with entries in verse. One poem pictures an act of courage; another, the rage of battle; and others echo the screams and groans of both those who fell and those who survived.

Foss submits that the poetry of the Great War, like poetry of earlier wars, began in praise of the warrior. However, a great difference between earlier poets and the poets of the Great War was the latter's insistence "that the cause of heroism did not license the shambles of war. The blood, ordure, and agony of the trenches awakened soldier-poets to both horror and responsibility" (7). The selfless duty characterizing the war's earlier days surfaces in works such as Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Edward Thomas's "This is no Case of Petty Right and Wrong." And while those works resonate with stoic determination, a dissonant chord of ambivalence arises in e.e. cummings' image of the nervous gesture following a proper after-dinner speech:

thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry  
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum  
 why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful  
 than these heroic happy dead  
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter  
 they did not stop to think they died instead  
 then shall the voice of liberty be mute?’

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water (7-14)

cummings’ political pitch, his nervous tempo, his image of unthinking “heroic happy dead” compose but one example of poets wrestling to portray accurately the awful responsibility of war.

As Foss juxtaposes other WWI poems, ambivalence gives way to a new tension, a tension illustrated in poems by Robert Service and Herbert Reed. Service’s “A Pot of Tea” has the suspicious abandon of a bar song:

Hurrah! I’m off to battle, which is ‘ell and ‘eaven too;  
 And if I don’t give some poor bloke a sexton’s job to do,  
 Tonight, by Fritz’s camp fire, won’t I ‘ave a gorgeous  
 brew

(For fightin’ mustn’t interfere with Tea). (21-24)

Denial (as an obvious defense mechanism) as found in Service’s poem is followed by a distinctly different reaction in Herbert Reed’s “My Company.” The contrast is what one might experience by walking among combatants at the close of a battle. Where Service is detached in light-hearted denial, Reed is sober and engaged. In his first and second stanzas Reed shows us the emerging pride of a company commander whose unit bonds “into a body and soul, entire” (3). The transformation is seen in the images of his “men, [his] modern Christs, / whose bloody agony confronts the world” (45-46) as they prepare for and engage in battle. Where poets of earlier wars may have seen this moment as an occasion to praise heroism, Reed’s persona tallies the costs. He spans the aftermath, fixing on each detail:

A man of mine  
    lies on the wire.  
It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.  
And he will rot  
And first his lips  
The worm will eat.  
It is not thus I would have him kiss'd . . . (50-55)

In a moment of realization this persona moves from the dead silence of horror to a mad laughter of hopelessness: Here the reader will thank Foss for so limiting his commentary. Explication would but dull the edge of this verse. One need only read. And when finished, what the reader most desires is not airy interpretation, but quiet pause. Similarly, Wilfred Owen's rage and disgust is representative of the general frustration of the day:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,  
That they should be as stones;  
Wretched are they, and mean  
With paucity that never was simplicity. (50-54)

Such lines clash with others such as those from Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," and in the clash illustrate the hollow heart of a modern warrior:

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love. (1-4)

The verse at the end of the Great War was the last link in a chain of emotional reactions to too many battles and too many deaths. And the change in tone was permanent.

In the book's middle section, "The Years Between," we find Osbert Sitwell's "The Next War" uttering an abject prophesy. At the poem's start, the suggestion is made "to put up tombs / or erect altars / to those brave lads" who died in battle. But a better plan is offered by one of the townspeople:

I think yours is a very good idea  
— A capital idea —  
And not too costly . . .

But seems to me  
That the cause for which we fought  
Is again endangered.  
What more fitting memorial for the fallen  
Than that their children  
Should fall for the same cause? (29-37)

From the beginning to the end of the "war to end all wars," war poetry underwent not only a radical change in tone and structure, but also revealed a radical change in human capacity for hope and belief. Yet as different as it was, the poetry of the Great War offered poets of the next war no point of departure.

"[W]hen fighting began again in 1939," Foss says, "poets were unsure what to say" (8). People had not had time to forget the trauma and fatigue of the Great War, and the verse of the Great War seemed inadequate to express the dread of another war. Moreover, new means of war brought new degrees, even new kinds, of atrocities. The events to which the WWI poets responded called for "rage, disgust, and pity" (8). Amplified further in the works of the WWII poets, those emotions crystallized in expressions of grief, emptiness, despair, and utter devastation. The change is found even in sub-titles such as "Lamentations," "Total War," and "Horror."

Verse such as Stephen Spender's and Barry Amiel's measure the losses of the subsequent war. In caustic, ironic protest, the voice behind Spender's "Ultima Ratio Regum" debits the expense of killing a single soldier:

Consider his life which was valueless  
In terms of employment, hotel ledges, news files.  
Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a man.  
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified  
On the death of one so young, and so silly  
Lying under the olive trees, O world, O death? (19-24)

As candid as Spender's question is, Amiel queries even deeper into the nature of the improved machines of WWII in "Death is a Matter of Mathematics": "Death is a matter of mathematics. / It screeches down at you from dirtywhite nothingness / And your life is a question of velocity and altitude" (1-3). The effectiveness of the new warfare is appraised as dispassionately as its method:

... A lightning, subconscious calculation  
Of trajectory and deflection. With you the focal point,  
The center of the problem. The A and B  
Or Smith and Jones of schoolboy textbooks.

Ten out of ten means you are dead. (18-22)

Amiel's is representative of a verse which declares not only the death of the combatant, but also the demise of heroes and winners.

"Away the horde rode, in a storm of hail," begins "The Uncertain Battle" in which David Gascoyne suggests this war was a series of battles without victors:

[A]nd the storm disappeared  
Soon afterwards, like them, into that pit  
Of Silence which lies waiting to consume  
Even the braggart world itself at last . . .  
The candle in the hermit's cave burned out  
At dawn, as usual. —No-one ever came  
Back down the hill, to say which side had lost. (8-14)

As a whole, *Poetry of the World Wars* asks what we made of ourselves when we made ourselves better weapons. The images offered in a response suggest that in the wake of total war it may be better to be counted among the dead than among those not dead. One of the strongest of these images is found in Howard Nemerov's "Redeployment," a view of existence after the advent of total war. In the first stanza we see nightmare images haunting a survivor's mind:

They say the war is over. But water still  
Comes bloody from the taps, and my pet cat  
In his disorder vomits worms which crawl  
Swiftly away. Maybe they leave the house. (1-4)

In Nemerov's fourth stanza we see the impotent, warped remains of a survivor who strained too hard, too long either to hear or not to hear the enemy:

The end of the war. I took it quietly  
Enough. I tried to wash the dirt out of  
My hair and from under my fingernails,  
I dressed in clean white clothes and went to bed.  
I heard the dust falling between the walls. (16-20)

In choosing his selections and ordering them as he does, Foss seems to conclude that, like a spring stretched beyond its limits, survivors of total war never return to original shape or regain original strength. If impotence, delusion, and psychosis are the spoils of modern war, if, as Keith Douglas writes, "man must spend his life to find / all our successes and failures are similar" (19-20), then what have we won? made of ourselves?

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