Philip Appleman

"I Sing of Arms and the Man"

It's easy to forget (and it's always sad to reflect) that male poets have traditionally been shills for the warriors: Homer marveling at Achilles' butchery; Vergil celebrating Aeneas (*Arma virumque cano . . .*); Chaucer admiring his "verray parfit gentil knight"; Shakespeare's Henry V come to glory in an aggressive foreign war; Lovelace going off to battle singing "I could not love thee, dear, so much, / Loved I not honour more"; Milton's heavenly heroes blasting the serried ranks of fallen angels with thunder, lightning, and sulphurous hail . . .

And so on, right down to A. E. Housman's penning—far too late in history to be credible:

> I did not lose my heart in summer's even,
> When roses to the moonlight burst apart.
> When plumes were underfoot and steel was flying,
> In blood and smoke and flame I lost my heart.
> I lost it to a soldier and a foeman,
> A chap who did not kill me—but he tried,
> Who took the sabre straight and took it striking,
> And laughed, and kissed his hand to me, and died.

Too late to be credible because Housman (1859-1936) lived to cross the line between those older poets, who could still pretend to believe in the noble and heroic swordsman, and the younger poets for whom the weapons of mass destruction had long since made *mano a mano*

heroism all but irrelevant, replacing it with more and more impersonal and wholesale long-distance killing machines: the cannon, the bomber, the guided missile, the nuke.

Not to mention the poison gas, still in surreptitious stockpiles today, even though "outlawed." When the British poet and soldier, Wilfred Owen, just before he was killed in action, looked about him at the trenches of World War I and wrote a poem about a gassed comrade, he incorporated a remark by the Roman poet, Horace: "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" ("It is sweet and becoming to die for your country"). The poem concluded:

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.

That's a far cry from Housman's gallant hand-kisser, because—as warfare became ever less personal and ever more devastating; as the consciously targeted victims became the civilian populations as well as the armies; as the rationale for going to war became more arcane and disputable (shifting, say, from specific border disputes to slippery notions of "national honor")—the focus of poets' attention had long since switched from the swaggering warriors to their hapless victims.

Too late then to cheer the noble swordsman on the white horse: the democratic and humanistic notion that ordinary citizens should not be arbitrarily or whimsically dragooned as cannon fodder for the benefit of political, religious, or ethnic disputes gradually became one of our

accepted truths, and so most wars became harder and harder to justify to "civilized" people. After the vast horror of World War I, only an overwhelmingly persuasive sanction could bring a whole nation together to support a major war.

Which is where I came in. In the fall of 1941, after two years of devastating war in Europe (and years more in Asia), Americans were seriously divided over our potential role in the conflict. Some were for armed intervention against Hitler, but many others were for neutrality and against any "foreign entanglements." On December 7, the Japanese effectively put an end to that argument. We may have known little or nothing about Hitler's death camps, and we may have been willing to deplore discreetly the distant Rape of Nanking, but we understood backstabbing well enough, and bombs sinking our battleships, and Americans killed in action—all in "peacetime."

So began our four years of the last "Good War." We were all in it together, no dissent allowed, and rarely even considered. We did our best in that war: there was a lot of painful losing at first, and then, by the time I turned 17 and eagerly enlisted in the Aviation Cadet program in the US Army Air Corps in 1943, some painful winning. By the time I was activated in 1944, our troops were already in France. Later, at an Army Air Base in Boca Raton, Florida, in August, 1945, my buddies and I heard for the first time about the atomic bomb—and the PX sold great quantities of 3.2 beer.

The good guys had won, the bad guys lost. Who wanted to argue then about the morality of using bigger bombs, or instantly wiping out whole cities? All that mattered at the moment was that we were suddenly, quite unexpectedly, free, at peace, able to get on with our lives. After all, we had seen our army's "motivational" films on the tyranny of the Nazis, the viciousness of the

Japs: they deserved what they got. It had been a "Good War."

And what did our poets have to say about all that? Not much. Big guys fighting other big guys, honorable cause, final crowning success clearly made in heaven: the stuff of B movies, not of good poetry. Look through the anthologies of that time: the best poems came not in grand sweeping periods, à la Homer or Milton, but in poets looking at small, specific, personal things, as in Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" or Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"—fine poems, but few of them. The war had been *too* good for the poets; it caused physical pain in massive doses, but did not twist the national psyche into knots, did not relentlessly bludgeon us with the anguish of moral choice. We were in it together, one hundred percent, no questions asked.

Twenty years after my army discharge, my wife and I were on sabbatical in Mexico, writing. By then we had traveled and studied in a lot of places, including Southeast Asia, where we had become fond of the people we met there. And we had lived in France while their armies were being endlessly defeated in Vietnam, French second lieutenants being killed faster than St. Cyr could produce them. Our little Mexican radio brought in wavering stations from Texas, and one day in 1965, it crackled out the shattering news that President Johnson had ordered the escalation of our small war in Vietnam by half a million American troops. I was incredulous and devastated; the future was as clear to me at that moment as on a billboard: we were going to bleed profusely, and commit terrible atrocities—and then, for the first time in our history, lose a war.

For what? "The National Interest," "The Domino Theory," "National Honor"—for eight more excruciating years, we were flimflammed and hoodwinked and ha-

rangued and preachified—but nobody could ever explain with any credibility why we were fighting a war in Vietnam.

Of course this was not a new thing in history. Stephen Crane, brooding about the Civil War, had written, in 1895:

> There was crimson clash of war.
> Lands turned black and bare;
> Women wept;
> Babes ran, wondering.
> There came on who understood not these things.
> He said: "Why is this?"
> Whereupon a million strove to answer him.
> There was such intricate clamor of tongues,
> That still the reason was not.

But its being commonplace, even traditional, was no consolation.

Meanwhile the dying escalated. The shock of My Lai stripped away our mask of innocence. New phrases entered our vocabulary: Body Count, Body Bags, Pacification, Peace with Honor. And the dying went on and on: by the end, 58,000 Americans. Nobody knows how many Vietnamese, but certainly millions; we prided ourselves on our military body counts, but dead civilian gooks didn't count at all.

For what? If the senior citizens and the veteran diplomats and the elder statesmen couldn't figure it out and articulate it, how could a high school senior? Go, said some patriotic parents: do your duty. Get into college on a draft deferment, said others: let somebody else do the dirty work. Try for conscientious objector, a few were advised. Head for Canada, many said: save your skin.

In the '60's, I was in my 40's, teaching at Indiana University and trying to help my students sort it all out. But how? What if I said sure, go to Canada—would they still think I'd done them a favor, ten years later? And what if some eighteen-year-old was academically hopeless, and I failed him, and he lost his college deferment? He could be dead in six months. Education had become a hostage of the military.

One thing I knew: killing peasants somewhere on the other side of the world was not patriotic, not moral, not (if there is any sense in even talking about such a concept) even legal. The wrong war, the wrong justifications, the wrong strategy, the wrong tactics. The French in Vietnam had taught us how to go down to ignominious defeat, as senselessly and brutally as possible; we followed their script.

Sterile politics, sterile world-view, sterile killing-fields—but oh, what a fertile field for poets. The moral anguish that had been bypassed in World War II was an inescapable by-product of this gratuitous adventuring, this nouveau colonialism, this aggression. By the late '60's, it seemed that all the poets in the country were speaking and acting their outrage, individually and collectively. We wrote with furious pens, published in the newspapers, read to roaring audiences, marched in the streets in protest. Later, when Bill Ehrhart was organizing an anthology of Vietnam literature, he found over five thousand antiwar poems.

In the end, did it make any difference? Cynics said no, but we knew better. What our country needed was not more politicians and their hired guns telling us the war was good for us. What we needed was passionate voices to speak out and remind ourselves of what we already knew: that war should always be a last resort, not just "politics by other means"; that our hearts could tell us truths that colonialist politicians would not; that a

bully is a shameful thing, whether a person or a nation. To defend our true national honor against the lies of the politicians, we needed to make those truths traumatic, painful: to bring the war home. We needed to realize ourselves, and to declare to others that (as Pogo sagely advised us at the time) the enemy was *us*, that every pitiful victim of this devastation was *our* victim. "The poetry," Wilfred Owen wrote just before he was killed, "is in the pity."

Poets, rarely in the public eye, quickly fade from attention; but they leave their traces behind. Some of mine are reprinted here. Others, by many outraged voices, can be found in anthologies of or about the period, such as W.D. Ehrhart's *Carrying the Darkness*, or Ehrhart and Jan Barry's *Demilitarized Zones*, or Vince Gotera's *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*. Surveying this scene, the historian H. Bruce Franklin wrote:

> When the men in the White House and the Pentagon made the decision to send Americans to fight in Vietnam, they probably never gave a thought to the literature that might be produced by the US veterans of what we now call the Vietnam War. How would these men have responded if someone had whispered in their ears that this literature would constitute one of the few great American achievements of that war?

So forget Homer and Milton for a while, and read those anthologies—and weep: they are the black wall of the Vietnam Memorial, dripping blood. Better than any other history, they tell us what it's really like to endure—and to be responsible for—a Bad War. ❑

Philip Appleman

Five Poems

On a Morning Full of Sun

One of our gulls
is keening in the flat
blue light: *something*
is gone, is gone, is gone—a hundred
teen-age boys picked out
of mud, zipped into
plastic bags, and air-mailed
home to Mom.

White wings sweep over our beach
in formation: straw huts leap
into flame—*something*
is gone, is gone—
I stagger up the sand,
press my M-16
to the skull of a peasant girl,
and watch the bone
go chipping off and dancing
through the flat blue keening
air.

Winding Down the War

and this is it: the pause,
right hand to the sun,
the glare of crazed mirrors
in the sea, hopelessly
beautiful;

this is the end of it:
a long gray glare on stumps
moldy yet from some
old, inadequate flood;
G.I.'s slicing the ears
off muddy corpses;
upstream, a thousand
hulls in mothballs, waiting
the howl, the call again
to fear on the glittering water;
the flicker of orange flames
on Main Street;
sad-mouthed harlequins
manning the pumps and hoses; and

this is it: the pause,
band over eyes, the glare,
the desert sea

The Persistence of Memory

We have been through them now, the silver
anniversaries: VE-Day,
the Bomb, the wreck
of Japan, all
misted in quaintness—and still
they keep coming,
brown women swirling past,
the armies somewhere behind them, burning
the villages: always the same,
the same weary women each year,
muddy skeletons lugging
the brass pots, tugging the delicate children,
camping in culverts, eating grass—
and the rich bombers run
on their shabby targets; kids
in helmets inch
through torn jungles; somewhere at sea,
ships lob shells
at the horizon—it is all a memory
of old men:
the brave planes limping home,
balding heroes sending
their sons to glory, the bleeding
always the same, like father
like son, breastplate
and buckler rusting
in a dream of blood we
move through, open-eyed,
sons of our dreaming fathers,
waiting for all the memories
to fade.

Peace with Honor

Solitudinem faciunt,
pacem appellant.

I

The outer provinces are never secure:
our Legions hold the camps, their orders
do not embrace the minds
and hearts of barbarians. So, when the late-
late news reported the outlandish
screams in that distant temple,
the great bronze Victory toppled,
red stains in the sea, corpses
stranded by the ebb tide—all of that,
and only four hundred
armed men at the garrison—why,
of course it had to come, the massacre,
the plundering.

II

It was the decade's scandal at home,
the humiliation, the Eagles gone.
Senators put on grim faces
and gossiped over Bloody
Marys—what laureled head would roll for this?
Reports from the field
were cabled not to the Emperor but
to the Joint Chiefs, to filter
through at last, edited
and heavy with conclusions: the traitor,
they revealed, was not in uniform,
the treason was our own permissiveness;
in sterner times our Fathers would not

have suffered such dishonor.
We nodded: yes, they knew,
the Chiefs, what ancient virtue was.
The twilight shudders of matrons
seasoned our resolution. Somber, we took
a fourth martini, wandered to the couches,
the tables rich with peacocks' tongues,
and nodded,
nodded, waiting.

III

They sent our toughest
veterans, the Ninth Legion, the Fourteenth,
the Hundred-and-First, their orders un-
ambiguous: teach the barbarians respect.
Our marshals chose the spot: a steep defile
covering the rear, our regular troops drawn close,
light-armed auxiliaries at their flanks,
cavalry massed on the wings.
The enemy seethed everywhere, like a field
of wind-blown grasses.
There were the usual
harangues, the native leaders boasting
their vast numbers, screaming
freedom or death;
our generals, with that subtle sneer
they learn at the Academy,
pointing only to the Eagles on their tall shafts—
and every man remembered
the shame of Eagles fallen, comrades' bones
unburied: there was that curious thing,
men in bronze and steel, weeping.
And then the charge, the clash of arms,
cavalry with lances fixed, the glorious
victory: a hundred thousand tons of TNT
vaporized their villages, their forests were

defoliated, farmland poisoned forever,
the ditches full of screaming children,
target-practice for our infantry.
The land, once green and graceful,
running with pleasant streams in the rich brown earth,
was charred and gutted—not even a bird
would sing there again.

IV

A glorious victory, of course,
but in a larger sense, a mandatory act
of justice: the general peace
was kept, the larger order held; peasants
for a thousand leagues around
are working their mules again.
Our prisoners and Eagles all returned,
we dine at the rich tables,
thinking of the Sunday games,
thinking of anything but rebellion—thinking
the honor of Empire
is saved.

Waiting for the Fire

Not just the temples, lifting
lotuses out of the tangled trees,
not the moon on cool canals,
the profound smell of the paddies,
evening fires in open doorways,
fish and rice the perfect end of wisdom;
but the small bones, the grace, the voices like
clay bells in the wind, all wasted.
If we ever thought of the wreckage
of our unnatural acts,
we would never sleep again
without dreaming a rain of fire:
somewhere God is bargaining for Sodom,
a few good men could save the city; but
in that dirty corner of the mind
we call the soul
the only wash that purifies is tears,
and after all our body counts,
our rape, our mutilations,
nobody here is crying; people who would weep
at the death of a dog
stroll these unburned streets dry-eyed.
But forgetfulness will never walk
with innocence; we save our faces
at the risk of our lives, needing
the wisdom of losses, the gift of despair,
or we could kill again.
Somewhere God is haggling over Sodom:
for the sake of ten good people
I will spare the land.
Where are those volunteers

to hold back the fire? Look:
when the moon rises over the sea,
no matter where you stand
the path of the light comes to you.

Editor's Note: These poems first appeared in book form in *Open Doorways* (Norton, 1976) and have since been reprinted in *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996). They appear here by permission of the author.