

*“she whose eyes are open forever”:
Does Protest Poetry Matter?*

ONE WARM JUNE MORNING IN 1985, I maneuvered my rusty yellow Escort over shin-deep ruts in my trailer park to pick up Adam, a young enlisted aircraft mechanic. Adam had one toddler and one newborn to support. My two children were one and two years old. To save money, we carpooled 11 miles to Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York. We were on a flight path for B-52s hangared at Griffiss, though none were flying that morning. On the long entryway to the security gate, Adam and I passed a group of people protesting nuclear weapons on base. They had drawn chalk figures of humans in our lane along the base access road. Adam and I ran over the drawings without comment. A man. A pregnant woman. Two children—clearly a girl and boy. As I drove toward the security gate, a protestor with long sandy hair waved a sign at us. She was standing in the center of the road, between lanes. Another 15 protestors lined both sides of the roads, but she was alone in the middle, waving her tall, heavy cardboard sign with block hand lettering: WE DON'T WANT YOUR NUKES! A year earlier, I'd graduated from college and joined the Air Force. With my professors' Sixties zeitgeist lingering in my mind, I smiled and waved, gave her the thumbs up. Adam looked away, mumbled, "Don't do that."

After the gate guard checked our IDs, Adam told me why he disliked the protestors. The previous year, Oneida County sheriffs arrested seven people who had come on base and vandalized a maintenance hangar. Adam said the vandals threw toolboxes around, spray-painted everything, and dented spare B-52 aircraft parts with industrial wrenches. "They never got near the nukes," Adam said, and added quickly, "I mean, if we had nukes." Adam was put on 12-hour shifts, six days

a week for three months, to repair the damage and clean up. The protest cost me nothing. It had cost Adam nights and weekends away from his family. It had cost seven people jail time and fines.

We need protestors and we need nukes. But the protestors have always been under-funded and marginalized, have always been *Behind the Lines*. On the title page of Philip Metres' incisive *Behind the Lines* is a photographic collage of perhaps 100 protest buttons. "JUSTICE / Not / JustUS" "Dissent is patriotic." "Who Would Jesus Bomb?" The effect is subtle and clever: words matter. Pith matters. Metres argues that protestors, "aided and prodded by poets," also matter deeply in a free society.

He asks who is qualified to write war-resistance poetry, considering the long columns of soldier-poets from Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in World War I, to Randall Jarrell in World War II, Yusef Komunyakaa in Vietnam, and Brian Turner in America's latest struggle. But after a century that saw more civilian casualties than military ones, Metres concludes that total war gives rise to total poetry. (During World War I, for example, an estimated 8.5 million military personnel and some 12.5 million civilians died.) Who is qualified to write war resistance poetry? Anyone who's watching.

Metres elaborated on the book's exclusively non-combatant focus in a phone interview. He said he wrote the book in part to demonstrate that "civilians have a role in war-resistance poetry. There's this sense in some circles that there's a privilege given to veteran poets." In a longer work, he would have included soldier poets; however, in *Behind the Lines* "my desire was to see how people who do not have direct experience respond to war." He noted that there are "layers of experience" even in participants. World War II poet Randall Jarrell, who served in the Army Air Corps but failed to qualify for flight duty, was a navigator instructor and control-tower operator—"a desk-jockey," Metres said. So his witness is also a secondary experience. He was interested in "broadening the conversation," since historian Paul Fussell and others have written articulately about soldier poets.

The book's subtitle is misleading. Don't read *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941* expecting to find a plethora of war resistance poetry since 1941. For example, the chapter on William Stafford focuses not on the famous poet's poems, but on Stafford's admittedly obscure collection of essays, *Down in My Heart*, about a community of conscientious objectors during World War II. In 20 pages, Metres discusses—insightfully once they arrive—a total of four Stafford poems. But once I move beyond the subtitle's implied promise and get to the business of what Metres is doing, I enjoy the ride. Here is a collection of valuable insights about war resistance, poetry, and how artists respond to war. In one of Stafford's stories, "The Mob Scene at McNeil," one conscientious objector responds to the threat of an impending attack by suspicious locals while working

at a Civilian Public Service camp near McNeil, Arkansas. “‘When the mob comes,’ George would say, ‘I think we should try surprising them with a friendly reaction—take coffee and cookies out to greet them.’” Stafford later realizes the wisdom of being “quiet and respectful” toward the mob: “almost always the tormenter is at a loss,” Metres quotes Stafford, “unless he can provoke a belligerent reaction as an excuse for further pressure or violence.” The group of conscientious objectors was repeatedly warned by the camp superintendent not to call “negroes” Mister and Missus. They ignored him. The notion quickly emerges: these are tough people, facing death as bravely as their Greatest Generation cohorts who captured Mt. Suribachi and landed on the beaches of Anzio.

Behind the Lines is part exploration of present and past peace movements, part solid criticism of protest poetry, and part polemic, intending to inspire action. This book does not add up to a focused and precise argument on using poetry to obtain peace. That’s why I trust Metres, even at the end of the book, when he lists ways poets can engage in the peace movement more effectively. The topic is bigger than the rhetoric of peace—or more accurately, the rhetoric of *The War Against War*. There is even wisdom in his asides. Discussing June Jordan’s essay, “Notes toward a Model of Resistance,” he quotes a fragment of her poem about being raped twice. “She laments that she

had been unable to find within myself
the righteous certainty
that resistance
requires
the righteous certainty that would explode my paralysis
and bring me to an “over my dead
body”
determination
to stop
his violence
stop
his violation of everything that I am.

The righteous certainty that Jordan seeks, writes Metres, might make many American poets, “weaned on an aesthetic of ambiguity and disinterestedness,” uncomfortable. Get back in the fight, he implies. The end of ambiguity is a shrug and an acknowledgement that the topic at hand is difficult and requires further study. While undoubtedly true, the response becomes an easy way to disconnect from the need for action. The end of disinterestedness is . . . disinterestedness. During our interview, Metres quoted poet and law professor Lawrence Joseph, “In

an age of total war, all poetry is war poetry,” from Joseph’s 2005 book of poetry, *Into It*. Metres qualified Joseph’s claim: “Poetry that’s focused on language alone risks a kind of hermeticism. . . . We are living in the most powerful country, militarily, in the world, and probably in the history of the world—not all artists acknowledge that. Think of the Chinese and Greeks, who were genuinely concerned about the effects of their wars.”

If not in ambiguity and disinterestedness, where is the poet’s area of operation? In one camp, it’s taking a hard look at the world without. Former US Poet Laureate Ted Kooser uses a cold-war metaphor, comparing poet to spy, to describe the artist’s job in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. “The spy’s job is (1) to record what he sees, (2) to avoid calling attention to himself, (3) to draw conclusions from his observations, and (4) to pass all this along to the person who hired him. For another camp, the poet’s concern mean taking a hard look at the world within. Robert Bly’s famous essay, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” accuses objectivism and T.S. Eliot’s objective correlative of missing the point. “In this country’s poems the facts are put in because they happened,” Bly wrote, “regardless of how much they lame the poem.” Any “camp” of poetry that prescribes the best territory (internal, external), is necessarily limiting. Metres rises above the argument, implicitly opting for powerful poems from both camps. He quotes June Jordan’s “War Verse,” which imitates Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.”

Something there is that sure must love a plane.
No matter how many you kill with what kind of
bombs or how much blood you manage to spill
you never will hear the cries of pain.

Something there is that sure must love a plane.
The pilots are never crazy or mean
and bombing a hospital’s quick and it’s clean
and how could you call such previous insane?

Something there is that sure must love a plane.

Jordan’s poem has none of Frost’s magic. There is no need to go back for another look. This is poetic placard-writing, like the protestor at Griffiss Air Force Base waving her sign alone in the middle of the road. Sometimes the placards echo with a ferocious profundity. In Jordan’s “Bosnia, Bosnia,” Jordan, writes Metres, “suggests that the lack of oil in Bosnia had something to do with the US government’s

inaction when Muslim women were being raped and brutalized: ‘too bad / there is no oil / between her legs.’” America seems caught in the rhetorical crossfire. Stop the rapists. Stop the military action. Do more. Do less. Beyond the anger, the implication in “Bosnia, Bosnia” seems to be that the United States should have been fair and helped the Muslim women by military action—by dropping more bombs.

I hate war, and I am a member of the US Air Force. I don’t consider those statements contradictory. When the Air Force sent me to graduate school at the University of New Hampshire to earn an MA in literature, I was required to wear the uniform once a week—a reminder that I wasn’t completely free of Uncle Sam’s grasp. Most military-sponsored students chose to “wear” the uniform on days when they didn’t have class, or just ignored the directive altogether. I chose to wear mine, however, in a form of reverse protest. I expected arguments, perhaps physical attack, certainly verbal ones. Sure enough, every other Thursday, my Intro to Literary Criticism instructor would glance at my creased blue sleeves and make a comment. “Looks like we’ll be safe today; we have the Air Force with us.” After a month of hearing his quick taunts I caught him in the stairway after class.

“You make a comment every time I wear the uniform. Do you really think we could do without a military?”

He looked smaller than when he was standing in front of the class. “No, no, of course not.”

“Then you probably want people like me in the military.”

“Why is that?”

“If everyone who didn’t love war got out, who would be left?”

He stopped making comments when I wore my blues. I waited for more comments from students, other professors, and passers-by as I walked to class. And I waited. I lined up arguments and counter-jabs. Mostly the students shrugged or said, “You’ve got a job? Cool.” The times they are a-changing. Perhaps a polemic is in order.

Metres’ writing is dense. “When I started showing it to people, I was horrified to learn that they considered it scholarly writing,” he commented. For the impatient, skip to the section on the Sixties, “Vietnam: The War on the Homefront,” when protest went mainstream. When the poems finally come, they are powerful. Metres has a good eye for hard-hitting poetry. I started marking stand-out poems while I was reading *Behind the Lines* and then stopped after starring half a dozen in a row. Amid a discussion on Denise Levertov’s anti-war poetry, for example, Metres quotes the ending of “Enquiry,” about a Vietnamese woman whose arms and eyelids were burned off by napalm. The poem ostensibly addresses American soldiers in-country.

She is not old,
she whose eyes
know you.
She will outlast you.
She saw
her five young children
writhe and die;
in that hour
she began to watch you,
she whose eyes are open forever.

She whose eyes are open forever could also be the poet, the protestor, creating a response that resists mainstream thought. Who is qualified to write about the war? Anyone whose eyes remain open. Beyond establishing the writers' qualifications, Metres asks the essential question—Does poetry have any practical use?—and quotes Seamus Heaney, “No lyric has ever stopped a tank.” (I envision Robert Bly playing his bazuki and chanting Sufi poetry at the Joint Chiefs of Staff.) Perhaps the question asks too much of a few ink stains across a page. How many books of any nature stopped a war that wasn't already stopped in political or popular opinion? Poetry has always thrived, Metres reminds us, at the local level. Perhaps if it stares, unblinking, at the conflict, that is enough.

War, protest, and our cultural response to both constitute a long-time interest to Metres. “I'm a civilian and I don't plan to be in a war if I can help it, but I have an ethical responsibility to look at it,” he said during our interview. True to his belief in poetry and words as a force for change, Metres hosts a website and blog dedicated to “Poetry, War, and Peacemaking” at behindthelinespoetry.blogspot.com. The featured blog of January 12, 2008, was titled “Political Crisis in Kenya.” After describing his horror at watching the atrocities unfold in that “sun-kissed and gorgeous land,” writer and teacher Mikhail Lossel asks, “What's to be done?” His answer continues and balances Metres' discussion and Heaney's tank-stopping question:

“Hardly anything at all. Nothing of any measure of consequence, to be sure. We realize, with helpless self-directed anger, how vast is the sheer degree of our impotence to help ameliorate the situation, lessen the lurid chaos. Yet still, we are people of letters . . . and after all, even the smallest drop in the ocean is infinitely larger than an infinity of nothings.” As unintentional evidence of the smallness of audience, elsewhere in Metres' website is a video clip of the DC Guerilla Poetry Insurgency. In the clip, a woman half-chants, half-sings “I feel the earth move under my feet.” I want to root for her. I want the clip to be clever and powerful, but it's awful: stolen lyrics stripped of their music. Gathered around the chanter, a

dozen people sit in a circle, banging drums. We are left with the lingering question, does protest matter if almost no one hears?

In light of Heaney's question, what is the use of poetry, then? Jon Stewart and Oliver Stone do more to protest war than any library of poems ever could. Poetry will, perhaps, play a small role to influence the influencers. Poetry, at best, is like the person setting up the sound system before a protest. Committed, sure. Marginally influential, still essential, but always and appropriately *Behind the Lines*.

Metres, an assistant professor of English at John Carroll University, earned his BA in English and peace studies from Holy Cross, and a PhD and MFA from Indiana University. The scholarship in *Behind the Lines* is apparent. Whether he is focusing on writing about literature's first war protestor—Thersites in the *Iliad*—or June Jordan's "righteous certainty," Metres writes with authority, wisdom, and a broad knowledge of protest poetry. But if the poems are powerful, and they are, and if the poems matter, and they do, then to have so high a criticism-to-poetry ratio suggests that the poems alone don't quite "work," that they somehow say too little. I very much look forward to seeing Metres publish a companion anthology of War Resistance Poetry, one that Adam and I can take turns reading on the drive toward the security gate.



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