

W. B. Yeats and the Poetry of the First World War

(Address given to the Italo-American Association of Trieste on 9th December, 1988, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Armistice.)

The First World War was a peculiarly literate, if not literary, war in that the majority of the soldiers, for the first time in history, were men who could, and did, read and write. Accordingly, the war gave rise to a whole series of literary sub-genres characterised by a common subject matter: the war novel, the war play, the war autobiography, and, of course, the war poem. True, war is no new theme for poetry--look at Homer's *Iliad*--but the Great War made such an impact that when anyone speaks today of "war poetry," it is of the poems of World War One that we automatically think, and of their soldier-authors Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Herbert Read, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, and Ivor Gurney--to say nothing of those countless others who also wrote poems but did not live long enough to produce sufficient material for a printed volume and who survive, therefore, only in anthologies. I have called them soldier-authors since with very few exceptions all wrote out of direct experience of their common subject, namely war as experienced not at home in England, but at the front line. The authentic poetry of World War One, we have come to think, is trench poetry:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us...
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous.
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agony of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey.
But nothing happens.

So opens Wilfred Owen's "Exposure." Are they poetry, these lines with their haunting parahrimes, their grave, drawn-out rhythms, their tactile vocabulary, their conscious exploitation of vowel and consonant, their communication, by the way each short fifth line dispels the tense atmosphere created by the preceding four, of the intolerable strain of endurance? Is the poem itself a quintessential evocation of passive suffering--poetry? We would think it is, yet we have the voice of possibly the greatest English-speaking poet of the century, W. B. Yeats, to tell us that it is not. Why he should so tell us, and why I think he is wrong, are my twin concerns in this paper.

What on earth, as some of you have already asked, has Yeats to do with the war at all, let alone with its poetry? He was nearly fifty

when it broke out. Moreover, he was Irish, and Ireland, though then still officially part of Britain, was not committed to the war in the same way as England was. And finally, we have his own declaration of non-involvement in his brief but characteristically lofty response "On Being Asked for a War Poem," a response whereby in the very process of seeming to deprecate his art he exalts it above the chaos of contemporary concerns:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

What fired Yeats' imagination was not the catastrophe befalling Europe, but what Europe would have considered a mere sideshow, the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin:

I write it out in a verse--
MacDonagh and Macbride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

For Europe a sideshow, for England a stab in the back, for the ordinary citizens of Dublin an act of lunacy--but for Yeats, as these ringing lines proclaim, the Rising was an historic, if not the final, landmark in seven centuries of foreign oppression.

With regard to the Great War, then, Yeats seemed to enjoy a remoteness surpassed only, perhaps, by his compatriot James Joyce in Zurich. At the same time, however, he is also responsible for one of the most concise and damning criticisms of the poetry which the Great War produced, a criticism which nobody who wishes to make a study of that poetry can afford to ignore. True, when Yeats writes to Dorothy Wellesley about Wilfred Owen, dismissing his work as "all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick," we know we are dealing with casual abuse, not criticism. But it is not so easy to ignore the following passage from Yeats' Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, published in 1936. As editor of probably the most idiosyncratic of all the Oxford anthologies, Yeats is concerned in his Introduction to defend not only his inclusions, but also his exclusions. Section XV opens with the following, now famous--or notorious--passage:

I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war; they are in all anthologies, but I have substituted Herbert Read's "End of a War" written long after. The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity, one a man constantly selected for dangerous work, all, I think, had the Military Cross; their letters are vivid and humorous, they were not without joy--for all skill is joyful--but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from

circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced. When man has withdrawn into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror no great event becomes luminous in his mind; it is no longer possible to write "The Persians," "Agincourt," "Chevy Chase:" some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road--that is all.

Few critics share these views, but whatever else can be said about the passage, it is not an idle expression of Yeats' "distaste." On the contrary, it is powerfully if briefly argued in a manner typical of Yeats' prose at its best, that combination of challenging flat statement--"passive suffering is not a theme for poetry"--and startling poetic conceit--"When man has withdrawn into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror"--concluding in lordly quotidian bluntness: "some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road--that is all." In short, it is an argument we can neither lightly ignore nor easily challenge without being sure of what it is we are defending. Yeats himself well understood how the road to truth runs through a dialectic of mutual opposites, so that if war poetry is properly to be appreciated, there is perhaps no better way than to subject it to the acid test of one of the most prestigious attacks upon it.

Yeats' main points are four: that somehow it was a demerit, poetically, in the war poets that they should have felt bound to plead the sufferings of their men; that passive suffering is not a theme for poetry; that the war poets were too close to their experience to write properly about it--they reflected what they underwent, but did not illuminate it; that war poetry should be heroic, if not tragic. I should like to take each of these points--though not necessarily in the order in which Yeats makes them--and see how justly, or otherwise, they are applicable to the work he has in mind.

First, then, the implication that it was somehow a poetic demerit in the war poets that they should have felt bound to plead the suffering of their men. That they did feel so bound few of them would have attempted to deny. Most were appalled at the ignorance of, and insensitivity to, the conditions of the soldiers at the front displayed by the civilians at home. So Owen, at home on leave, disgusted at the swinish complacency of war profiteers, suffering from shellshock and from guilt at being away from his men, writes:

...leaning out last midnight on my sill
I heard the sighs of men, that have no skill
To speak of their distress, no, nor the will!
A voice I know. And I must go.

Thus also Siegfried Sassoon, using what skill he had, which was for short, bitter satire, a hand-grenade, as it were, of savage indignation:

I'd like to see a Tank come down the Stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

And so too Paul Nash, appointed official artist to the war in 1917,

in a letter which transmutes itself into poetry by reason of the depths to which he is stirred by what he has seen:

No glimmer of God's hand is seen anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease....They plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up on it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and cautious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men.

"I am no longer an artist..." or as Owen put it: "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry." Yeats would have smiled grimly at these two statements whereby the two artists seem to convict themselves out of their own mouths that what they were creating was not art, but propaganda.

Now there is a sense in which all art is propaganda. Art is an expression. It is not invisible, inaudible, intangible, but finds forms that can be seen, heard, touched--shared, in fact, by other men. All art is a communication of some sort, even if what it is communicating is, in extremis, the desperate impossibility of communication. That said, however, what Yeats is against is the use of art for purposes more proper to the politician, the social reformer, and the revolutionary than to the artist per se. Ultimately, for Yeats, art is concerned with what is rather than with what should be. So he distinguishes, in this stanza from "Ego Dominus Tuus," between didactic art, practised by those involved in the world, and art proper:

...those that love the world serve it in action,
Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
And should they paint or write, still it is action:
The struggle of the fly in marmalade.
The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.

Yeats' distinctions are always radical, and the distinction here, as Laurence Lerner has pointed out, is clearly between the didactic and the aesthetic theories of art; or, as G. S. Fraser put it, between poetry as moral discourse and poetry as vision. Now such a distinction, legalistically maintained, has mischievous results. Obviously, we expect poetry to have more permanence than last year's political pamphlet, but does it follow that a poetry which shares something of the pamphlet's urgency, argumentativeness, and directness of appeal, thereby forfeits all claim to permanence? When Owen, for example, closes "Dulce et Decorum Est" with the famous

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.

Was it for this the clay grew tall?
--O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Without losing the slightest sense of the present actuality, the local fate of the dead soldier is subsumed into the universal, the accidental into the tragic.

Yeats' second point I shall deal with more briefly, namely the point that war poetry, as implied by his admiration for "Chevy Chase" and "Agincourt," should be heroic. These are deservedly famous ballads, the former in particular for Sydney's praise of it: "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a Trumpet." Undoubtedly the ballad form is highly appropriate to a celebration of military events, and at the outbreak of the war, poets good, bad, and indifferent readily turned to it as a convenient vehicle to express their sense of being launched upon a vigorous adventure. One of the best is Julian Grenfell's "Into Battle," a poem whose rhythmically energetic upbeat intimately connects the call to arms with nature's Spring resurgence. So the poem opens:

The naked earth is warm with spring,
And with green grass and bursting trees
Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,
And quivers in the sunny breeze;
And life is colour and warmth and light,
And a striving evermore for these;
And he is dead who will not fight;
And who dies fighting has increase.

I quote this not solely because it is part of a good poem, but because it is the only contemporary war poem Yeats saw fit to include in his 1936 anthology. Small wonder: it is a worthy successor to "Agincourt" and "Chevy Chase."

Grenfell, however, wrote at the beginning of the war, when poets could still believe that war would follow its traditional pattern whereby human skill and strength and courage could properly be tested by being pitted against the skill and strength and courage of the human enemy. War was still glamorous, and its most glamorous form was the cavalry charge. Yet even if they had forgotten the lessons of the Anglo-Boer War, the generals might have remembered the grim lesson underlying the heroism of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade." Horses were no match for artillery, nor men for machine-guns. The nature of war had changed. By Christmas 1914 it had settled into the trench deadlock which was to last for the duration. Heroism there was, but not in the style of "Chevy Chase," now that the enemy was not man but machinery. Poetry there was, too, but not in the heroic ballad style. The kind of experience Owen wrote about in "Exposure" is simply not tractable to balladic treatment. The altered conditions of war demanded alterations in language, rhythm, prosody.

There is an irony, though, we should take note of: the ballad did survive, in the form of the soldiers' songs, many of which, like their traditional antecedents, were anonymous. One of the most poignant is "Do You Want to Find the General," which works its way steadily down through the ranks until it reaches the private soldier:

Do you want to find your sweetheart?
I know where he is
I know where he is
I know where he is
Do you want to find your sweetheart?
I know where he is
Hanging on the old barbed wire!

It is an irony, I say, for there is nothing heroic in this bitter balladic lament of the common soldier for himself and his comrades. The refinement of the irony, however, is that Yeats himself mastered the ballad form, the popular song and its refrain, in the hope that he could write for his own race, be read by the common people. What the common people have here decided is that their own experience is remote from all heroic interpretation of it.

Yeats' third point about war poetry is contained in his image of man withdrawing into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror. It is a striking image, but perhaps no more than another form of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." "For all good poetry," Wordsworth wrote, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; yet poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply." If Yeats had interpreted war poetry in these terms, he would doubtless have said that the war poets were mostly too young to have thought long and deeply, that they had no tranquillity in which to recollect their emotion, and that if they had powerful feelings, then those feelings were less the product of their own organic sensibilities than of violent, oppressive circumstance. In Yeats' own terms, the war poets became passive reflectors of events, eloquent as a mirror image--or photograph--can always be, but with the eloquence of a psychological document, compelling our sympathy for its distressing detail, but not our admiration for its art. Enjoying no detachment from their experience, the war poets struggled like flies in marmalade, unable to extricate themselves from sensation in order to achieve vision.

This is a point, I think, easily dealt with, partly for the reason that with regard to many war poems it is absolutely true. Here, for example, is part of a short poem by Robert Graves, "Dead Boche:"

...today I found in Mametz wood
A certain cure for lust of blood.
When propped against a shattered trunk
In a great mess of things unclean
Sat a dead Boche: he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green:
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

Here the poet is a fly caught in the marmalade of his own rage and disgust. His overt purpose is to draw violent attention to the inhumanity of war; the effect upon us, however, as we recoil from his lingering over the details of mortality, is to reveal his real purpose which is revenge, to shock those whom he considers complacent because they have been spared experiences he has been compelled to undergo. The dead man exists scarcely at all in his own right; rather he is a thing for Graves to rub our noses well into.

Was it for this the clay grew tall?
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On the other hand, Yeats' point is simply not true. The better poets--and I include Graves among them--were not unaware of Wordsworth's famous dictum, and strove in every way possible to achieve that distance essential to art, if fatal to journalism. They did it through irony, through myth-making, through satire, through prosodic experiment, and also through truth-telling, in the wider sense we defined earlier. Here is an equally horrific incident of war, part of Herbert Read's "Private Kneeshaw Goes to War," describing how the men were suddenly overtaken by bombardment and ordered to "dig in:"

He had to think and couldn't for a while.
Then he seized a pick from the nearest man
And clawed passionately upon the churned earth.
With satisfaction his pick
Cleft the skull of a buried man.
Kneeshaw tugged the clinging pick,
Saw its burden and shrieked.
For a second or two he was impotent
Vainly trying to recover his will, but his senses
prevailing.

The very stuff of sensationalism, it would seem, it is nonetheless artistically controlled through language, tone, and local exactitudes--"With satisfaction his pick..."--to elicit the deeper meaning--in that sense the "burden"--of the incident, namely the difficulty of conducting a Hamletian discourse with death on the modern battlefield. Modest as it is, by comparison with Owen's "Spring Offensive," Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump," or Arthur Graeme West's superbly controlled "Night Patrol," Read's poem is, nevertheless, both an anticipation of Yeats' objection and an answer to it.

Yeats' fourth point is also the most well-known, the flat statement that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry." Now quite apart from the arbitrariness of deciding what poetry can or cannot deal with, the statement itself is not easy to understand. What is passive suffering? In one of his greatest poems, "The Man and the Echo," written in his old age, Yeats writes of his recurring nightmare:

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?

Did words of mind put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

This is suffering, but is it active or passive? It is active, certainly, in the mind's ceaseless, agonized questionings; but passive, too--the suffering has no end, the questions no answers,

both have to be endured. Yeats suffers from remorse, from guilt, feelings by their nature not easily resolvable, and yet we do not think he is wrong to take them and their attendant pain for his theme. And the reason for this is that we respond in Yeats to what is not passive, but highly active, namely the capacity to feel--compassion, both for himself and others: in short, pity. What I am trying to say is that "passive suffering" is a contradiction in terms: there is either suffering--or else insentience. It is the point Shakespeare makes through the words of Emilia as she defies Othello's threats:

Thou hast not half that power to do me harm
As I have to be hurt...

The capacity to be hurt is no passive faculty, but an active power, and it is intimately linked with the poetic process because it too is a vital branch of the imagination. Call it negative capability if you will, but both poetry and human life depend upon the capacity to suffer and to empathize, without which, in Lear's phrase, we are "men of stone." This is the truth which Owen explores in what is possibly his finest poem, "Insensibility." To summarize its argument briefly: in the first four stanzas the officer-poet contemplates the effect of war upon his men, how they are compelled by daily acquaintance with death, by official incompetence and carelessness, by physical pain and exhaustion, and by hideous sights of blood, to seek refuge in insensibility. They become bovine, automatons almost, and in the limited happiness of their forced unconcern scarcely recognizable as human beings, for to be human, the verse makes plain, is to hope, to fear, to suffer, to be compassionate. In the fifth stanza the officer-poet, speaking for those who share his own responsibility and sensibility, rhetorically asks whether it would not be better to cultivate this insensibility, the easier to perform their task of carrying on in a hopeless war. The question remains rhetorical, however, and the reason why is given in the sixth and final stanza, where the speaker turns in a Lear-like rage upon the real villains in this drama of human endurance:

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.
By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores,
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

The capacity to feel and to suffer, so Owen claims, as this final stanza withdraws from the battlefields of World War One and expands to take in the human condition as a whole, is man's only divine attribute, without which we are worse than beasts--"dullards," "stones." To sacrifice this capacity is to sacrifice not only humanity, but all thought of art as well. "Passive suffering" may not be a theme for poetry, but it is the fount from which all poetry springs. So at the back of Eliot's poetry we have

The notion of some infinitely gentle,
Infinitely suffering thing.

And more famously, at the back of Virgil's, whose finest line Owen himself seems to be recalling: "Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mortalia mentem tangunt." And finally, too, perhaps at the back of Yeats' poetry: "The Man and the Echo," that great disquisition on the purpose and end of human existence, is interrupted, and the poet's greater allegiance claimed, by the sound of suffering:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

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