

British War Poetry from France

At last, the British poets who fought and fell at Ypres, Paschendale, and the Somme have returned to France. A discriminating selection of their poems, translated by Roger Asselineau, has been issued as *Poetes anglais de la Grande Guerre* (Barre & Dayez, 150 avenue Daumesnil, 75012 Paris). This 77-page bilingual collection has been in preparation for several years. M. Asselineau, Emeritus Professor of American literature at the Sorbonne, is best known for his authoritative studies of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. He is the author also of three estimable volumes of poems: *Traduit de moi-meme*, published under the pseudonym of Roger Maurice in 1949; *Poésies incomplètes* (Debresse, 1959), and *Poésies incomplètes II* (Le Meridien, 1989). A selection from the latter has appeared in English, translated by Kenneth Christensen (*Incomplete Poems*, Bryan, TX 77803: Cedarhouse Press, 1984).

As his own titles and the subject of his scholarship suggest, Roger Asselineau's sensibility is attuned to Whitman's. The present anthology has its affinities with Whitman's *Drum-Taps*. As M. Asselineau writes in his preface, "Dans la guerre *modern* il n'y a plus des heros, il n'y a que des victimes." Himself a veteran of the Resistance in World War II, Asselineau shares the emotions of the soldier-poets he translates—their revulsion, their irony, their searches for redemptive meanings in their fear and sufferings. Although his own *vers libre* seems more akin to much contemporary French poetry than to the often formal verses of the British poets of 75 years ago, he is a skillful translator and has sensitively replicated the shapes as well as the sentiments of their anguished responses to modern war. For example, Sassoon's last stanza of "Suicide in the Trenches" reads:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

In French, the quatrain reads like this:

Badauds aux yeux brillants, au visage béat,
Qui acclament quand passent de jeunes soldats,
Filez et priez de ne jamais voir l'horreur
De l'enfer où leur jeunesse et leur rire meurent.

This improves the original, for where Sassoon's rhymes are throw-away words, Asselineau pairs *smug* with *soldiers*, and horror with die, his rhymes giving emphasis to Sassoon's theme.

The anthology opens with poems filled with patriotic jargon—an anonymous ode to “The Cricketers of Flanders” and verses by Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell, who, as Asselineau remarks in his preface, had no time to change their opinions of war since both were killed in 1915. The poets who follow are Robert Nichols, W.W. Gibson, Robert Graves (one poem apiece), and the chief contributors: Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen. Edmund Blunden is not included.

The Graves poem chosen is “The Leveller,” from *Country Sentiment*, a poem which after 1927 became a casualty of Graves's constant extirpation of his earlier work. Most of the verses dealing with the war in Graves's first three books attempt at once to recall and to hold at a distance violent emotions of fear, shock, revulsion. Graves treats his war subjects in various disguises: regression to nursery rhymes or in mythological, Biblical, or historical parallels. These evasions are evident in “It's a Queer Time” and the poems headed “Nursery Memories” (*Over the Brazier*): “An Old Twenty-Third Man” (set in the Roman Legion) and “Goliath and David” (*Fairies and Fusiliers*). In the latter book one poem, “A Dead Boche,” does dramatically bring war's horror before us in an image suggestive of the dead soldier seen in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. I conclude that M. Asselineau is about right in limiting Graves to the one poem chosen; Graves's mature poetic responses to the war appear not in his poems from the trenches—but in such poems as “Alice,” “The Cool Web,” and “Warning to Children,” which evoke the world gone mad. But poems expressing post-traumatic stress syndrome a decade after the war would have to be in a different anthology indeed.

This would seem the first gathering in French of the British war poets. Why is this so? Have publishers in France assumed that anyone interested in the subject would have read them in English? Or was it thought that readers of Apollinaire's *Caligrammes* had no need of further responses in verse to trench warfare? The differences between Apollinaire and the English poets are in fact as great as the similarities of their experiences and themes. Apollinaire continually contrasts love with death and romance with suffering in poems whose suppression of punctuation elicits the irrational movements of the unconscious mind under extreme pressure. The sentence, that grammatical unit of completed thought, vanishes in a flow of images. And the shapes of some of the poems on the page mimic the exploding shells—clumps of broken lines, type blasted apart. Thus in method and in manner the French poet participates in the modernist breakup of received conventions which enters Anglo-American verse with the *Cantos* and the postwar *Waste Land*. The Britons, on the other hand, do not abandon syntax; it is in their national character to cling to common sense, to the hope that experience, however terrible, is still intelligible. Among British war poets only David Jones was an experimental modernist, and he, a Roman Catholic and a Welshman, writes from a background different from that of the poets in the

present collection, and two decades later.

In his preface M. Asselineau makes a good case for his resurrecting these poets who express almost immediate responses to the shocks of unprecedented violence. Their poems, he says, are fragments of the universal poem of human suffering here raised by war to utmost power, and therefore no one can be deaf to the emotion that breathes in them.

As Paul Fussell has shown in *The Great War and Modern Memory* and stated again in the preface to his recent collection, *The Norton Book of Modern War*, in wartime poets tell the truths their governments try to suppress: their poems deny the patriotic jingoism that celebrates heroism, God, duty, honor, etc., by showing modern war for what it is, a field of suffering, pity, fear, pain, shock, and death, where the soldier is a victim of impersonal forces beyond human control. Fortunately, Roger Asselineau has had more courage and success in translating these poems than had the romantic soldier in Apollinaire's poem, "L'inscription anglaise"—

Et le soldat n'ose point achever
Le jeu de mots bilingues que ne manque point de
Cette calligraphie...

French readers will be rewarded by M. Asselineau's versions of *inter alia*, Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" and "Dead Man's Dump," Sassoon's "Does It Matter?" and Owen's "Strange Meeting":

Je suis l'ennemi que tu as tué, ami.
Je t'ai bien reconnu malgré la nuit, car c'est ainsi
Qu'hier tu te crispais lorsque tu m'as tué.
J'ai paré, mais mes mains étaient froides et lasses.
Il ne nous reste plus qu'à dormir maintenant...

These poems retain their strength, their plangency, their ironies and their strivings to comprehend the enormity in which the authors have been immersed. *Poètes anglais de la Grande Guerre* should be added to any collection of the literature of the First World War.

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