

‘The salty taste of glory’: Some American Poetry of World War I

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I

In a review of three anthologies of American war poems in 1918, Harriet Monroe, editor of the Chicago-based literary journal *Poetry*, commented on one of them:

Fifes and Drums represents last year’s American reaction to the call to arms. The poems were ‘written under the immediate stress of great events by those who have banded themselves together under the name of The Vigilantes’. The book is interesting as impassioned rhymed eloquence, but none of the poems rises to lyric beauty.¹

Another collection claimed the dubious title of *Doughboy Doggerel*, and there were several more such collections including *Sock Songs*, a volume focused on poems about knitting socks and sweaters for the American troops in France.² When *Poetry* ran a contest for war poems, which were published in the November 1914 issue, poets sent in 738 entries. James A. Hart has reported 704 volumes of poems published between 1914 and 1920 with at least one war poem.³ Thousands of other war poems were published in the leading periodicals, for example *Poetry*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*, and in newspapers across the country – the *New York Times* alone published over 1,000 during the war years; and uncounted thousands more appeared in church bulletins, newsletters, private publications, and circulars of organisations. Despite the number of poems published, Harriet Monroe in July 1917 discussed the weakness of the American poetic response to the war, and then concluded:

Some critics try to comfort us with the assurance that the

best war poem will be written after the war. But history is not convincing on this point – the chance of it then may be more improbable than now. The poet who waits to mature his thought may prove as impotent as the laggard in battle'.⁴

The issue has never been that American poets did not respond to World War I, but that the poetry did not 'rise to lyric beauty' and thereby find a place in the canons of modern literature. In *Poetry*, the journal that championed Imagism and the beginnings of Modernism more than any other journal in the country, it was obvious to the editor that most of the verse about the war was caught in the traditional structures and rhetoric of the late nineteenth century. Monroe was frustrated by the conventional verse of the immediate response to the war, and despite her belief that 'the best war poem' would not be written after the war, that is precisely what happened. Conventional verse and the poetics of High Modernism appeared simultaneously, at times in the same literary journals; and while there was a huge production of conventional verse during the war years, it was Modernism's assertion in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1924) that transformed the comprehension of the influence of the war into new literary forms. The issue, then, becomes one of literary history, which redirects the discussion away from literary taste and literary merit to the facts and circumstances of publication, what the American poet Charles Olson called 'what lies under'. Both known and unknown poets responded to the impulses of the war, so a discussion of the conventional responses will lay the foundation for a discussion of the cultural and political factors at the time of the war, which, in turn will lead into a discussion of the achievements of High Modernism.

II

From the beginning of the discussion, the British poets Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon defined the war poet

and the genre of the modern war poem. The poem focuses on the direct and personal experience of the poet in war, and the descriptions of battles, the wounded, every variety of human misery, gained intensity because the person doing the writing had actually experienced the events of the poem. These were not fictive statements, literary accounts made up for the sake of the poem itself, but reports from the front, testimonies to patriotism, suffering, and bravery. Just as in America, thousands of other war poems appeared in British newspapers, journals, weekly publications and the like during the war years, all infected with Edwardian styles, and these, like their counterparts in America, have moved off to the shelves of 'seldom read'. Later anthologies like Jon Silkin's *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* confirmed the earlier definitions of war poetry and the modern war poem. More recently, Tim Cross corroborated these definitions in his collection entitled *The Lost Voices of World War I*,⁵ which included only poets who were killed in action, so Allen Seeger's 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death' is the only American poem included. Paul Fussell, Bernard Bergonzi and Vincent Sherry, all of whom have written major critical studies of the literature of the war years, confirm this judgement of what constitutes war poetry.⁶ They also insist that disaffection with the war introduced a rejection of war itself, and the persistent irony, a dissipated disaffection with modern man and modern life, which is also pervasively influential in the voices of High Modernism – the dirty war of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. With only a few exceptions, the definitions of the war poet and the war poem excluded nearly all American poetry about World War I.⁷

III

In the movements of literary history, new departures in literary style are not adopted universally. When Ezra Pound published his first announcements of Imagism in 1912 (which were the unofficial announcements of Modernism), even William Carlos Williams and his colleagues at the magazine *Others* paid little

attention, and certainly the majority of poets writing before 1920 paid slight notice. The American poet H.D. declared Imagism over in 1917 before most poets knew it had existed, and before the war had ended. While the violent influence of the war appeared in fractured forms and new literary structures in the 1920s, the public face of poetry was not radically altered by the experience of the war. When *Poetry* ran its contest for war poems in 1914, most poems reverted to the models of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. Modernism formed itself concurrently with the continuation of the accepted terms of conventional verse. Rhymed stanzas and fixed stanza forms were the rule, as in Longfellow's 'Killed at the Ford':

He is dead, the beautiful youth,
The heart of honor, the tongue of truth,
He, the life and light of us all,
Whose voice was blithe as a bugle-call [...].

Or Whittier's 'The Battle Autumn of 1862':

The flags of war like storm-birds fly,
The charging trumpets blow;
Yet rolls no thunder in the sky,
No earthquake strives below.

Herman Melville's poems of the Civil War in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*, such as 'The Surrender at Appomattox', are some of his most accomplished:

As billows upon billows roll,
On victory victory breaks;
Ere yet seven days from Richmond's fall
And crowning triumph wakes

The loud joy-gun, whose thunders run
By sea-shore, streams, and lakes.
The hope and great event agree
In the sword that Grant received from Lee.

The warring eagles fold the wing,
But not in Caesar's sway;
Not Rome o'ercome by Roman arms we sing,
As on Pharsalia's day,
But Treason thrown, though a giant grown,
And Freedom's larger play.
All human tribes glad token see
In the close of the wars of Grant and Lee.

Walt Whitman served as a nurse in the hospitals around Washington, DC during the Civil War and his poems under the title 'Drum Taps', written in long lines with intricate internal rhythms, were well known to the American reading public; 'An Army Corps on the March', is an example:

With its cloud of skirmishers in advance,
With now the sound of a single shot, snapping like a whip,
and now an irregular volley,
The swarming ranks press on and on, the dense brigades
press on;
Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun – the dust-cover'd
men,
In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground,
With artillery interspers'd – the wheels rumble, the horses
sweat,
As the army corps advances.

This kind of formalist poetry is certainly matched by Isabel Howe Fiske's poem 'Somewhere in France', published in 1918:

Somewhere in France my heart is kept

In a soldier's heart, out there.
Last night I know not where it slept,
My heart, in his heart's care.

Or by Louise Ayres Garnett's 'The Lilies of France':

France's lilies are tall and white,
Brave as the dawn, calm as the night;
And fragrantly they sway above
The quiet head of one I love.⁸

These poems appeared in *Poetry* during the same period that periodical was publishing T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', and Ezra Pound's 'Three Cantos'. Some major poems of High Modernism appeared in the same journal with conventional lyrics.

Well-known poets wrote war poems, and though their poems move away from the formal writing, they do not propose new literary structures. Robert Frost, who spent time in England before the war and kept up a correspondence with the British war poet Edward Thomas, wrote the poem 'Not to Keep', which tells of a wounded soldier returning home to heal before going back to war.

She dared no more than ask him with her eyes
How was it with him for a second trial.
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.
They had given him back to her, but not to keep.⁹

Amy Lowell's poem 'Patterns', discussed as an Imagist poem, begins in a very traditional manner.

I walk down the garden paths,
And all the daffodils
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.
I walk down the patterned garden paths
In my stiff, brocaded gown.

With my powered hair and jeweled fan,
I too am a rare
Pattern. As I wander down
The garden paths.¹⁰

Carl Sandburg refers to the model of Whitman's open structures in many poems, like 'Killers':

I wake in the night and smell the trenches,
and hear the low stir of sleepers in lines –
Sixteen million sleepers and pickets in the dark:
Some of them long sleepers for always,

Some of them tumbling to sleep tomorrow for always,
Fixed in the drag of the world's heartbreak,
Eating and drinking, toiling . . . on a long job of killing.
Sixteen million men.¹¹

Ezra Pound's war poem of note is the fifth poem in the sequence 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' (1915):

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,

For two gross of broken statues,
For a few thousand battered books.¹²

Wallace Stevens submitted four poems from the sequence of eleven poems 'Phases' to *Poetry's* contest for war poetry, and the poems appeared there in November 1914. The poems have topical references to Paris and Belgium, but are distanced from actual

events in old literary references, as in the second poem of the four:

This was the salty taste of glory,
That it was not
Like Agamemnon's story.
Only, an eyeball in the mud,
And Hopkins,
Flat and pale and gory!

Admittedly, war generates emotions which fight with other emotions, but the poems do move to eliminate a sentimental response to war with direct, careful meditation, as in the final poem in the complete sequence, 'XI':

War has no haunt except the heart,
Which envy haunts, and hate, and fear,
And malice, and ambition, near
The haunt of love. [. . .]

Close tight the prophets' coffin-clamp.
Peer inward, with the spirit's lamp,
Look deep, and let the truth be known.¹³

That the literary heritage is destroyed by war came up again in another sequence published in *Poetry* in 1918, nine of the thirteen poems of the sequence 'Lettres d'un Soldat'. The first poem in the complete sequence, 'Common Solder', sets the tone of determined meditation:

No introspective chaos . . . I accept:
War, too, although I do not understand.
And that, then, is my final aphorism.¹⁴

The ninth poem in *Poetry* came over into the 1931 edition of Stevens's first book *Harmonium* (1923) as 'The Death of a Soldier'. The fallen soldier does not become 'a three-days'

personage?:

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in the season of autumn,
When the wind stops [. . .].¹⁵

The stern message supports the announcement in ‘Sunday Morning’ that ‘Death is the mother of beauty’.¹⁶

By 1918 Stevens was taking over the events and thoughts of the war into his own poetics; the war gives examples for his own poetic thinking. At the end of ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, written during World War II, he makes a similar claim:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky [. . .].
It is a war that never ends (p. 407).¹⁷

Stevens is unique among the poets of Modernism in his direct response to the war, but like Eliot and Pound he also produced major poems during and after World War II, indicating the persistent influence of war on modern poetry.

IV

Memories of the Civil War also persist in the American consciousness. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln directed his call for volunteers to form an army against the South to save the Union. Throughout the war he relentlessly maintained that he was president of one nation, and that the Confederacy was an illegal government threatening the whole. The fight against slavery came into his public thinking only in January 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. But as David W. Blight has shown in a study entitled *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*,¹⁸ various memories of the causes and the results of the Civil War persist in modern culture, including the issue of race. Blight shows how pervasive the unsolved questions

of race remain in contemporary society. The Civil War haunts the American consciousness because there is no final answer to the questions the war raised and the uncertainties its conclusion created. A recent article in the *Sewanee Review* pointed out that since 1865 one book a day about the Civil War has been published, for a total in excess of 55,000.¹⁹ In thousands of city squares and town parks North and South monuments remain to the dead and the heroic. Battlefields are popular places for Americans to visit, and re-enactments of battles draw big crowds. For the generation of poets who came to maturity before World War I, their common understanding of war came from the Civil War. The poets would have known veterans, many with missing limbs, as they grew up, and would have known stories of battles and the horrors of fighting a modern war. The war was both a memory and a present fact, and there was constant commentary and discussion about it. As late as 1910, people were still discussing in public forums whether General Longstreet supported or betrayed General Lee at Gettysburg. The Great Reunion of 1913 brought 50,000 veterans, both North and South, to the Gettysburg battlefield to relive the battle of fifty years earlier, and to celebrate reunifications. President Woodrow Wilson, speaking at the Reunion, said that the fifty years had brought ‘peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation’, but despite the restoration of the Union – echoing again Abraham Lincoln’s ‘Gettysburg Address’ – ‘The days of sacrifice and cleansing are not closed. We have harder things to do than were done in the heroic days of war, because harder to see clearly, requiring more vision, more calm balance of judgement, a more candid searching of the very spring of right’.²⁰ In both the Civil War and World War I, the concept of ‘total war’ involved citizens with danger and violence. The country was in the habit of discussing war as a commentary about the war, and even though men who had experienced it directly were still alive, their memories also became commentaries on experiences long over.

In introducing a volume of poems about the allied victory, Theodore Roosevelt observed:

We are humbly and profoundly grateful that now, as in the great crisis of the Civil War, America should have imposed peace with hand close gripping the sword hilt and with the flush in her face that shows her to be Victory's daughter. The nation has not been put to any such terrible trial as in the years that intervened between Sumter and Appomattox, and our service and our sacrifice have been small compared with the service and the sacrifice of France and of England.²¹

In his 'Foreword' to *A Book of Verse of the Great War* (1917), Charlton M. Lewis wrote:

The fundamental national and patriotic impulse is half smothered by impulses toward universal humanity and righteousness. As in our Civil War, so to-day the struggle for self-preservation is also a struggle for the establishment of a great idea, upon which rests the hope of the world; and these years of ruinous militancy have also been years of unique intellectual and spiritual fermentation. The poetry of this war is not merely war poetry, not merely patriotic poetry; it is the poetry of an irresistible movement of human thought, reinvigorated by the very crime that was designed to arrest it.²²

Edgar Lee Masters understood this position. In his poem of 1915, 'Silence', a boy asks an old veteran without a leg about his wound, and the veteran 'cannot concentrate [his mind] on Gettysburg' though he lost the leg in that battle and turns the question into a joke. 'There is the silence of the dead', and of the veteran who does not want to review again the terror of the battlefield, though it is well known as a generalisation to the public.²³

When Vachel Lindsay published his seven-part sequence against the war in *The Congo and Other Poems* (1914), he began with the

poem 'Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight'. Lincoln emerged in the American memory as the martyred President who led the nation out of the Civil War, and restored the Union; he stood for every kind of humanitarianism, peace and kindness to all peoples, and above all he stood for democracy.

The sins of all the war-lords burn his heart.
He sees the dreadnaughts scouring every main.
He carries on his shawl-wrapped shoulders now
The bitterness, the folly and the pain.

He cannot rest until a spirit-dawn
Shall come; – the shining hope of Europe free:
The league of sober folk, the Workers' Earth,
Bringing long peace to Cornland, Alp and Sea.

In his disdain for imperial European nations – the second poem in the sequence begins 'A curse upon each king who leads his state' – Lindsay invokes the spirit of democratic America in his supplication to Lincoln, and accuses the European nations at war in the fifth poem with 'The Unpardonable Sin'. He comes back in the seventh poem 'Epilogue' to the woman he loves, 'Hiding beneath your giant Psyche-wings'.²⁴ The memory of Lincoln was part of the American memory. When Woodrow Wilson honored Lincoln 1916 he was speaking for the nation:

The commands of democracy are as imperative as its privileges and opportunities are wide and generous. Its compulsion is upon us. It will be great and lift a great light for the guidance of the nations only if we are great and carry that light high for the guidance of our own feet. We are not worthy to stand here unless we ourselves be in deed and in truth real democrats and servants of mankind, ready to give our very lives for the freedom and justice and spiritual exaltation of the great nation which shelters and nurtures

us.²⁵

Lindsay's sequence is a commentary on his ideas about Lincoln, which the nation shared, and America; he invokes the presences of Lincoln and the Civil War to comprehend the events of World War I. Lindsay, like Wallace Stevens, was distanced from the daily action of the war; however, both poets helped to establish the nature of American poetry about the war as a poetry of reflection and commentary, in some cases involved with commentary on other cultural and political events of the time.

V

The war in Europe was a long way from American towns and cities, and some actions of the government in Washington tried hard to keep it distant and non-specific. President Wilson was elected for a second time in 1916 on a platform of keeping America out of the war, a position he reversed in 1917 when he asked Congress to declare war on the Central Powers. At the start, he wanted tight censorship of the press on all matters of the war and the government's handling of the war issues. Congress denied his requests, but passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and its amendment, the Sedition Act of 1918. It also passed the Trading with the Enemy Act in October 1917, which required a foreign language publication to submit translations of all articles about the war, and the Immigration Act of 1918, aimed mainly at silencing communists and anarchists. These Acts made it possible for the Post Office, under the unchecked authority of Postmaster General Albert Burleson, to deny mailing privileges to publications which expressed views in favour of Germany or against the American government; the act also authorised fines of up to \$10,000 and imprisonment for up to twenty years for resisting the raising of troops or supplying information to Germany. Anti-German sentiments ran high, as did the fear of German espionage of vital elements of the war effort.²⁶ *The Masses* was shut down, for example, as well as the *Der Shturm*, the publication of the

Frayhayt Group in New York City. The members of the group were arrested, tried in October 1918, and sentenced to long jail terms. Some like Mollie Steimer and Alexander Beckman were deported. Eugene V. Debs, Bill Hayward, Victor Berger, John Reed, Max Eastman and Emma Goldman were all arrested for protesting the government's war activities, tried, and given prison terms under the leadership of Attorney Thomas Gregory, and later by Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer and his assistant J. Edgar Hoover.²⁷

After Congress denied President Wilson's requests for censorship of mainline newspapers, he created the Committee for Public Information (CPI), headed by George Creel. An experienced journalist, Creel was in charge of shaping public opinion about the war so that the population would support the war effort to 'save the world for democracy'. Volunteer suppression of news and articles against the war or against the government became a regular policy of major newspapers. So, the war was to be fought in France with armies and at home with propaganda.

The Committee on Public Information was called into existence to make this fight for the 'verdict of mankind', the voice created to plead the justice of America's cause before the jury of Public Opinion. [. . .] In all things, from first to last, without halt or change, it was a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising.²⁸

The CPI produced motion pictures, and pamphlets about the war effort, published posters and put up billboards, sponsored radio programs, and speeches by a variety of academic and community leaders.²⁹ Boy Scouts delivered annotated copies of President Wilson's speeches.³⁰ Its most successful programme was the 'Four Minute Men', volunteers who gave four minute speeches at movie houses (between the features, for example), community centers, farm meetings, church activities, picnics, wherever the message of

the nationalistic support for the war, war bonds, and various volunteer activities could be heard. Creel summarised the activities of the group this way: ‘When the armistice brought activities to a conclusion, the Four Minute Men numbered 75,000 speakers, more than 7,555,190 speeches had been made, and a fair estimate of audiences makes it certain that a total of 134,454,514 people had been addressed’.³¹

Citizens worked under censorship and propaganda at home, and war correspondents worked under censorship on the western front. Major Frederick Palmer became the Chief Press Officer of the American Expeditionary Force; he created the Press Section known as G-2-D, which required all reporters to register, and ruled that all dispatches for publication be approved before sending. The news of the terrible casualties at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 was not as well known as the Civil War casualties at Antietam and Fredericksburg; news of the difficulties in training and supplying troops in France during 1917 was severely censored. After July 1918, when American forces fought in the battle of Soissons with success, the censorship was less restrictive; however what hometown America read and heard about the war was modified by the censorship. Emmet Crozier concludes: Under censorship, ‘[t]he news, instead of reflecting the honest discoveries of the reporter, was becoming a semi-official, semi-military agency serving the purposes of the bureaucracy which controlled it’.³²

News of actual battles coming to the public, then, went through the filter of the Army censors (G-2-D) and then the regulations and enforcement of the CPI before it got into print or into radio reports. On top of that situation, Americans were flooded with nationalistic propaganda from multiple sources. The horror of the human and material destruction did not arrive on the front pages, but stories about successes and volunteer activities at home did. What Americans could know about the war had all the terror and hard edges removed, so it is little wonder that poets had a distanced view of the trenches and commented on the issues of the war more than they presented direct experiences of the fighting.³³

VI

American poetry had its roots deeply attached to the nineteenth century traditions of formalism and commentary, and though Modernism had been launched, its strengths had not been established. Lincoln Colcord's *Vision of War* (1915) and John Curtis Underwood's *War Flames* (1917) were based in a Whitmanesque view and informed by liberal political and social views, especially a disdain for imperialism and a love of democracy. Likewise, Louise Ayres Garnett's sequence 'Flowers of War' (1918) and Cloyd Head's 'War Sequence' (1918) were informed by democratic views which held that 'preserving the union' and 'saving the world for democracy' were sustaining American beliefs. Beliefs and various social and political views combined with views about the war to change the poetry into a national debate about the traditions and the role of modern America in international events. Nationalism was a common theme even as President Wilson changed the nation's policy of neutrality by declaring war in 1917. A selection of poems about the war which reflects the contemporary political, national, and social issues will make the definition of the genre clearer; and a discussion of the poetics, sustained by the conventional stanzas, rhymed structures, and fixed modes of expression, will add further clarification.

Louise Driscoll won the first prize for the best war poems in *Poetry's* 1914 contest. Her dramatic poem 'The Metal Checks' gives exchanges between 'The Counter' and 'The Bearer' of the metal plaques that stand for dead soldiers.

Fathers, sisters, little sons,
Count the cost
Of the lost;
And we count the unlive lives,
The forever unborn ones

Who might have been your sons.

This poem was not collected by Driscoll for her collection *The Garden of the West* (1922), a book which contains poems of regular stanzas and rhymes, and certainly no mention of the war.³⁴ The poems are similar to those of McLandburgh Wilson, in her book *The Little Flag on Main Street*. The conclusion of the poem 'France' is a fitting example.

But now henceforth when we look on France
Another sky shall our eyes entrance,
For out of her stars and out of her storm
The rainbow spanning the earth shall form.

As is the conclusion to the poem 'The Patriots':

The earth was thirsty – it craved a flood,
A patriot watered it well with blood,
The blood of valorous clear-eyed youth
Who died for honour and Flag and truth,
And laurel sprang from crimsoned sod
And lilies of peace grew up to God.³⁵

Angela Morgan was born in Mississippi, ten years after the end of the Civil War, and so grew up in the atmosphere of the facts and legends of that war. She was a prolific writer who produced books before World War I and after World War II. She wrote about twenty poems against the First World War, but her poem 'Battle Cry of the Mothers' was widely read; it was published in 1915, and it was reprinted many times. It contains the plea:

We who have given the soldiers birth,
Let us fling our cry to the ends of earth,
To the end of Time let our voice be hurled
Till it waken the sleeping world.
Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone,

Toil of the centuries come to speech –
As far as the human voice can reach
We will shout, we will plead for our own!

Another poem, ‘The Hour Has Struck’ (1914), reads in part:

What are we waiting for? And can we wait
While at our gate
This red colossal Shape of armored Strife
Fastens its fangs upon the throat of Life?
Whose dragon wings, unfurled,
Drip blood . . . and blood . . . and blood upon the world?

It concludes:

A Monster sprawls upon the breast of Time –
To question or to hesitate were crime,
While o’er those awful battlefields of hate
The mothers gaze, too late!
It is the world-command, God’s judgment call,
Greater than all.
*The hour is here for the immortal deed;
For huge, majestic action we have need –
Now let the people stand – and take great heed!*³⁶

Morgan’s anti-war views were part of a larger social consciousness which included oppression of women, economic exploitation of workers, and world peace; at one point she advocated the transformation of the armies of World War I to fight for the public good, in poems like ‘Forward March’ where the ‘sun-bright armies’ will fight the ‘foe within’. ‘I Will Rise’ concludes:

I will rise to-day as the militant workers must,
For I know their cause is just.

I who suffer and I who bleed,
 My tongue shall plead as theirs shall plead.
 Mine their courage and mine their good,
 Mine their union in brotherhood.
 Oh ye who sleep in your soft white bed,
 Rise up, rise up when the sun is red.
 Go bravely forth as the workers go,
 For knowledge cometh only so!³⁷

Angela Morgan stayed outside the experiments of Modernism, and though her commentary poems on World War I were praised and reprinted many times, she remains on the list of seldom read but widely published poets.

Margaret Widdemer is another woman poet who held strong anti-war sentiments, along with strong views in favour of women's suffrage. In 'The Old Suffragist' she longs for freedom in place of the platitudes of nationalism:

She strove for an unvisioned, far-off good,
 For one far hope she knew she should not see:
 These – not *her* daughters – crowned with motherhood
 And love and beauty – free.

She also despised the exploitation of factory workers. The speaker in 'The Factories' begins, 'I have shut my little sister in from life and light / (For a rose, for a ribbon, for a wreath across my hair)'. In 'A Mother to the War-Makers' her view are explicit:

*This was my son, that you have taken,
 Guard lest your gold-vault walls be shaken –
 This – that shall never speak or waken!*

And again in the poem 'War-March' the stern anti-war views are combined with an informed social conscience:

('Were we made for this?' asked the Folk

Lifting their eyes from the sod
 A little way to peer
 From the crushing-weighted yoke
 Of toil and of slaughtering
 Of the King and his battle-lust,
 The King and his battle-God:
 And the sullen murmur broke
 Like waves when the storm is near. . . .
 ‘The Kings,’ they said, ‘are but dust –
 Who hath made our world for Kings?’³⁸

Percy MacKaye was widely published and well-known poet and playwright of the war period who has passed over into the class of the unread. His two-volume collected *Poems and Plays* (1916) contains sonnets that suit very well the genre of commentary about the war. ‘American Neutrality’ ends with the lines:

Peace! do we cry? Peace is the godlike plan
 We love and dedicate our children to;
 Yet England’s case is ours: The rights of man,
 Which little Belgium battles for anew,
 Shall we recant? No! – Being American
 Our souls cannot keep neutral and keep true.

The formal structure of the lines and rhymes contains the argument, but doesn’t instruct a passionate engagement with the issues. ‘The Lads of Liege’ removes the discussion into old references of other battles:

The lads of Liege, on glory’s field
 They clasp the hands of Roland’s men,
 Who lonely faced the Saracen
 Meeting the dark invasion. [...]

O lads of Liege, brave lads of Liege,
 Your souls through glad Elysium

Go chanting: *horum omnium*
Fortissimi sunt Belgae!

‘Antwerp’ bemoans the towers of intellect and aspiration ‘torn and wrecked’, and then concludes:

Reason shall ask, and answer shall be given;
Justice shall ask, and deal to those insane
Their dark asylums, but to those – the vain
Of lustful power, how shall their souls be shriven? –
They shall be raised on infamy’s renown
And from their towers of tyranny hurled down.³⁹

Some American poets did see combat. Joyce Kilmer and Allan Seeger are the best known, but others, like William Alexander Percy and Robert A. Donaldson, wrote poems published in books soon after the war. Their poetry shares the distanced perspective of other poets who were not in combat.

William Alexander Percy served with the Commission for Relief in Belgium during 1916, and as a Captain in the U.S. Army, 1917–1919. He served at the front, as he writes in a letter home in 1918:

That night the two of us and some twenty more passed in a dugout listening to the shells and awaiting the counter-attack, which did not develop. That dugout I shall never forget. It was about ten feet wide and forty feet long. The two sides were of mud, dripping and shiny, likewise the floor. The roof was a few logs and a layer of elephant iron which, far from furnishing protection from shell bursts, did not even keep out the rain which all night long trickled through onto our faces and hands and down our backs. We sat shoulder to shoulder on the floor in two rows, our backs against the mud of the walls, our feet against the feet of the man opposite. One candle made visible our weariness and discomfort. I’ve never seen such tired men. We’d all been a

bit gassed and during the night four mustard shells fell at the door and forced us to climb into our masks (all but me, who was in charge and answering the telephone all night). The features of the men had sagged and run together with fatigue; it was cold and they had no blankets; our only food for two days had been bread and corned beef. The horror of the impending destruction tortured them while it could not hold them from sleep. They slept prone in the mud or propped up against each other; clothes, helmets, hands, faces, and hair all one color – mud. There was no complaining, little talking, and no thinking. Fatigue, cold, and hunger quickly made of us mere animals.⁴⁰

Percy's book of poems from 1920, *In April Once*, contains an eight-part sequence entitled 'Night off Gallipoli', and also the poem 'The Soldier Generation':

We are the sons of disaster,
Deserted by gods that are named,
Thrust in a world with no master,
Our altars prepared but unclaimed;
Wreathed with the blood-purple aster,
Victims, foredoomed, but untamed.

Percy knew the horrors of the battles and life in the trenches, but the details in the letters do not show up in the poems. Instead he tries to make some sense out of the soldier's experience, to explain what the slaughter of war means in human terms inside a commentary about the war. In 'After Any Battle', for another example, the Voice of Earth describes soldiers, but refuses to turn the butchery into a mythic or religious rite:

Their days are short at best, and they return
With shuddering to my bosom's dark, yet now
They rob each other of the little years their due,
And choke the houses of the whimpering dead!

And why? O why?
 Another's folly wrought this holocaust,
 Calling it falsely by a sacred name,
 Turning the shambles to an altar stone,
 And butchery to sacrifice!⁴¹

Robert A. Donaldson served in the American Field Service in France, but when America joined the war in 1917 he was commissioned in the US Army. He wrote a book with another ambulance driver named Lansing Warren and in the introduction they attempted a rationale for their poetry of the war. Their comments, perhaps in a very ironic sense, agree with Harriet Monroe's ideas that Americans have not produced great war poetry:

We should like to state that these verses were written in the midst of heavy fighting, shell-fire, and destruction. We should like to tell stories of verses scribbled in the star-shell light, and by the lightning flashes of the guns. But the soul which is supposed to evidence its emotions during moments of stress by soaring into verse, more commonly evidences them by soaring into the nearest 'abri,' where it remains in nervous discomfort until the bombardment is over. There is and will be but little literature from the actual trenches.⁴²

In his poems, Donaldson relies on the conventional forms from nineteenth century models to talk about the unconventional experiences of war. The poem, 'On the Oise', concludes:

The spring again, so sweet and gay,
 The spring recurrent! . . . yet the guns
 Roar and rumble, night and day,
 Up where the battle's lifeblood runs.

The lilacs bloom by the castle wall,

And still will their blossoms scent the dawn
When the cannon's roar, and the bugle's call,
And we ourselves are dead and gone.

Though he was familiar with combat, Donaldson removes the poems from 'the nervous discomfort' and shelling to adopt a meditative mode which, as in 'For France To-day', still reflects the nationalistic fervor of America's war effort.

Why do we fight, we from a distant shore,
Removed, contained, scarce touched by all the strife,
Far from the thunders of a foreign war,
Who might in peace have followed with our life?
Our debt to France? – incurred in times of old,
Graced by the workings of a despot king? –
For Rochambeau and Lafayette, we're told;
Our bell of freedom which they helped to ring.
No, none of these; forget the ancient score:
For greater things – for France to-day we fight!
Our living debt to France is even more,
Her hard-fought battle is our cause of right:
For fine-souled France, a star too bright to go,
We come to help defeat the brutal foe!⁴³

Joyce Kilmer was killed in action on the Western Front after he had written his 'Poems from France', which includes *Rouge Bouquet*:

In a wood they call the Rouge Bouquet
There is a new-made grave to-day,
Built by never a spade nor pick
Yet covered with earth ten meters thick.
There lie many fighting men,
Dead in their youthful prime,
Never to laugh nor love again

Nor taste the Summertime.⁴⁴

His poems do not stray from the conventional, and he shares with other war poets a deep sense of patriotism and purpose in fighting.⁴⁵

Although Alan Seeger is remembered for one poem, 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death', he wrote more poems about his experiences as an American volunteer in the French Foreign Legion. 'The Aisne (1914–15)' affirms:

There where, firm links in the unyielding chain,
Where fell the long-planned blow and fell in vain –
Hearts worthy of the honor and the trial,
We helped to hold the lines along the Aisne.

Seeger, certainly a romantic idealist, longed to participate in the war to end all wars, as he says in 'Champagne, 1914–15':

I love to think that if my blood should be
So privileged to sink where his has sunk,
I shall not pass from Earth entirely,
But when the banquet rings, when healths are drunk,

And faces that the joys of living fill
Glow radiant with laughter and good cheer,
In beaming cups some spark of me shall still
Brim toward the lips that once I held so dear.

Yet this can be tempered by other perceptions of war, as in 'Maktoob':

A shell surprised our post one day
And killed a comrade at my side.
My heart was sick to see the way
He suffered as he died.

Or 'On Returning to the Front After Leave':

Now turn we joyful to the great attacks,
Not only that we face in a fair field
Our valiant foe and all his deadly tools,
But also that we turn disdainful backs
On that poor world we scorn yet die to shield –
That world of cowards, hypocrites, and fools.

In these and other poems, Seeger seeks engagement with movements and ideas larger than himself which will fulfill his longings, just as in his rendezvous with death he will join the cycle of the seasons and so have some immortality.

When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

Seeger loved France, and in the poem 'A Message to America' thought his country should 'Be true to its proud inheritance, / Oh look over here and learn from FRANCE!'⁴⁶

VII

The conclusions that World War I broke up the political, social and intellectual structures of Europe are now part of a common understanding of the war. The Hapsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire were dismantled, the Middle East was divided into new countries, and America emerged as a giant military industrial complex with an international banking system. Poets and philosophers announced the fracture of literary and intellectual traditions. The 'post Christian' era emerged. T. S. Eliot, for one, tried to resubstantiate the Anglo-Catholic religious tradition based on the spirituality of Dante. In the 1920s, High Modernism emerged with radically new literary forms, a persistent sense of

irony, and an acute sense of fragmentation in literary matters and personal matters of identity and definition. The war brought radical changes to culture as well as to poetry. Such conclusions appear in the myriad discussions of the war and its significance to twentieth century culture.

Despite the massive disruptions of World War I and the emergence of High Modernism, some American poets did not immediately alter the orderly patterns of rhymes and stanzas of most of the poetry written about the war and then the new culture. The poems of commentary and social movements form a chapter of literary history, but they do not engage the intellectual comprehension of the influence of the war; and because of their distanced participation, they offer little understanding of the direct influence of the war on daily events. For poets like Louise Driscoll and Angela Morgan, the war was one more event in a long and eventful life. It was not life-altering as it was for Robert Graves. Robert Donaldson and William Alexander Percy were directly influenced by the war, but they did not alter their literary styles when they tried to articulate the meaning of the war. For many, the precedent of the Civil War and the established habits of literary commentary and reflection were not transformed by the war. Archibald MacLeish and John Peale Bishop, who were both soldier-poets, turned to elegy and reflective memory respectively for their poems about the war.⁴⁷

The dominant war poem by an American is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which mentions the war only indirectly ('I had not thought death had undone so many') but takes as one of its themes the spiritual dysfunction brought on by the breaking up of the social, political and artistic traditions and the institutions of Europe. Unity and wholeness left artistic expression. *The Waste Land*, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), builds a literary structure based on old models (The Grail legends, vegetation myths, and Homer's *Odyssey*) to talk about contemporary life because it was impossible to sustain a contemporary narrative in such a fragmented/broken culture – or so the argument went. *Spring and All* (1924), William Carlos Williams's response to *The Waste*

Land, proposes a fractured narrative structure, no sustaining themes, units unrelated by causal relationships, and a constant experiment with language and the means of expression. Williams did not publish any war poems, but after he published ‘The Descent of Winter’ (1927), with its series of poems in a broken narrative, it was clear enough that the fractures caused by the war introduced more into American poetry than the viability of the fragment. He rejected Eliot’s and Pound’s claims for a European source for a new poetics in favor of American roots, the geography and people who established the nation, as he demonstrated in *In the American Grain* (1925). While there were examples of other sorts of experiments in verse – like Wyndham Lewis’s *Blast* and Pound’s *The Cantos* – it was Williams who introduced the non-linear sequence of individual fragments as a literary structure into modern literary history. *Spring and All* might be called the first *post-modern* poem, but it is precisely the first serial poem, with lyric beauty. It is a sequence of poems, and in that regard not unlike *The Cantos*, and later Louis Zukofsky’s *A*. The American painter Stuart Davis painted the *Egg Beater* Series in 1927–1928, which is a sequence or a series of four paintings, each a version of the actual, physical construction, but nonetheless an individual version.⁴⁸ He proposed seriality in painting in the same year that Williams published ‘The Descent of Winter’. Versions, or the willingness to accept multiple views or ideas of the same object, and serial form, a sequence of poems or paintings, became the most important results of the influence of World War I on American poetry. The serial poem in the works of such poets as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan is the major contribution of American poetry to literary history in the later twentieth century.⁴⁹

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Irby. He retired as Charles D. Abbott Scholar of Poetry and the Arts, Emeritus, to Austin, Texas.

NOTES

¹ Harriet Monroe, 'War Poetry Again', *Poetry*, 12, 5 (1918), 286.

² *Doughboy Doggerel: Verses of the American Expeditionary Force 1918–1919*, ed. by Alfred E. Corneise (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985); *Sock Songs* (Boston: Cornhill, 1919); *A Book of Verse on the Great War*, ed. by W. Reginald Wheeler (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1917); *The Muse in Arms: A Collection of War Poems*, ed. by E. B. Osborn (New York: Stokes, 1917); J. W. Cunliffe, *Poems of the Great War* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

³ James A. Hart, 'American Poetry of the First World War (1914–1920): A Survey and Checklist' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Duke University, 1964).

⁴ Harriet Monroe, 'Will Art Happen?', *Poetry*, 10, 4 (1917), 204.

⁵ *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Jon Silkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); *The Lost Voices of World War I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets and Playwrights*, ed. by Tom Cross (London: Bloomsbury, 1988). See also *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets, 1914–1918: An Anthology*, ed. by Brian Gardner, foreword by Edmund Blunden (London: Methuen, 1964).

⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Constable, 1965); Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (London: Constable, 1965).

⁷ The best recent account of American poetry of World War I, based on primary research sources like *The New York Times* and other public newspapers and magazines, is *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War*, ed. by Mark W. Van Wienen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). See also his earlier study, *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁸ *Civil War Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. by Paul Negri (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), pp. 58–59, 18, 47, 88; Isabel Howe Fiske, 'Somewhere in

France', *Poetry*, 13, 2 (1918), 75; Louise Ayres Garnett, 'The Lilies of France', *Poetry* 13, 1 (1918), 14.

⁹ *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Conney Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 230–31.

¹⁰ Amy Lowell, *The Complete Poetical Works*, introduced by Louis Untermeyer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), pp. 75–76.

¹¹ Carl Sandburg, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950), p. 36.

¹² *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 191.

¹³ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. by Milton J. Bates, rev. edn (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 9, 13.

¹⁴ *Opus Posthumous*, p. 29.

¹⁵ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 97.

¹⁶ *Collected Poems*, p. 69.

¹⁷ *Collected Poems*, p. 407.

¹⁸ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ George Garrett, 'Such Scenes I Never Dreamed of: Recent Books about the Civil War', *Sewanee Review*, 108, 2 (2000), 259–269 (260). In another article, Adam Gopnik, 'The Big One: Historians Rethink the War to End All Wars', *New Yorker*, 23 August 2004, 78–85, reviews recent books about World War I: David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Knopf, 2004), David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), Eric Dorn Brose, *The Kaiser's Army: The Politics of Military Technology in Germany During the Machine Age, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking Press, 2004), John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1999), Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1998). Gopnik could have included John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War I* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), which is a carefully researched examination of the American contribution to the war. Like the American Civil War, the First World War invites continued commentary because the issues it raises are essentially unsolvable.

²⁰ Woodrow Wilson, *Papers*, ed. by Arthur S. Link, 69 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 23–28.

²¹ Theodore Roosevelt, ‘Introduction’, *Victory! Celebrated by Thirty-eight American Poets*, ed. by William Stanley Braithwaite (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1919), p. vii.

²² Charlton M. Lewis, ‘Foreword’, *A Book of Verse of the Great War*, ed. by W. Reginald Wheeler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), p. xvii.

²³ Edgar Lee Masters, *Songs and Satires* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 1–3.

²⁴ John Curtis Underwood shared Lindsay’s views. Underwood wrote poems about the war including ‘At Bethlehem’, about the thousands of men building ‘Armor plates’ – ‘For the war is a job and a tool, that must be beaten out and battled with to / the bitter end of the stint; and finally finished’ – and ‘The Red Coffins’, which celebrates those who died for freedom in Russia: ‘And some saw red fagots of freedom rising and kindling a fire that would / warm all the world. / But no man there could tell the truth of it’. John Curtis Underwood, *Poetry*, 51, 3 (1918), 119–21.

²⁵ *Papers*, vol. 38, p. 145.

²⁶ German-American publications in the states of Wisconsin and Michigan were under heavy surveillance by agents of the Committee for Public Information (CPI). The Oregon poet Anthony Euwer expressed sentiments commonly held in the second stanza of his poem ‘Are You Americans?’

We’re fighting Germans gun for gun
And blood for blood and son for son!
The Hell-hounds there across the seas
And here amongst us – if you please,
Those skulking Jackals in disguise –
Those Hun Hyenas – German Spies!
Those prowling Skunks – forever keen
To fling their venom – vent their spleen
By arson, bomb or any scheme
To bring about their Kaiser’s dream.
Thank God we’ve got men who can play
The prowling game as well as they

And so hats off – hats off, I say
To the Secret Service, U. S. A.

Anthony Euwer, *Wings and Other War Rhymes* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1918), p. 11.

²⁷ See August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Scribners, 1991), pp. 433–93, and Jeffrey A. Smith, *War and Press Freedom: The Problem of Prerogative Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 128–42.

²⁸ George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (New York: Harper, 1920), p. 4.

²⁹ George T. Blakey discusses the ways academic people participated in the war effort in *Historians on the Home Front: American Propagandists for the Great War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1970).

³⁰ There are many examples of poems supporting the war causes. Edwin Markham's 'The Fate of France' is representative:

And in the evening hush of home, I hear
Beyond the Marne the marching heroes cheer:
I see brave lines that waver and gain breath
To hurl their valours into the front of death.
Their glad cry thrills me like a lifted lance:
The whole world's future is the fate of France!

Edwin Markham, *Gates of Paradise and Other Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1920), p. 78.

³¹ *How We Advertised America* (1920), p. 85. See also James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words That Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917–1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

³² Emmet Crozier, *American Reporters on the Western Front: 1914–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 182. See also Phillip Knightly, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt, 1975).

³³ For a concise and useful summary of the governmental attempts at censorship see Margaret A. Blanchard, *Revolutionary Sparks: Freedom*

of *Expression in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 71–109. See also David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 45–92 for an account of the government's propaganda; and Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

³⁴ Louise Driscoll, *The Garden of the West* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

'The Metal Checks' is quoted from *Poetry*, 5, 11 (1914), 33.

³⁵ McLandburgh Wilson, *The Little Flag on Main Street* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 48, 70–71.

³⁶ Angela Morgan, *Selected Poems* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1927), p. 211, 232–33.

³⁷ Angela Morgan, *Forward, March* (New York: Lane, 1918), p. 21.

³⁸ Margaret Widdemer, *The Factories with Other Lyrics* (Philadelphia: Winston, 1915), pp. 42, 34, 38.

³⁹ Percy MacKaye, *Poems and Plays*, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1916), I, pp. 30, 35, 37, 46.

⁴⁰ William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee* (New York: Knopf, 1941), pp. 206–07.

⁴¹ William Alexander Percy, *In April Once* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), pp. 122, 124.

⁴² Lansing Warren and Robert A. Donaldson, 'Introduction', in *En Repos and Elsewhere Over There: Verses Written in France 1917–1918*, preface by Major A. Piatt Andrew (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. xvi–xvii.

⁴³ Robert A. Donaldson, *Turmoil: Verses Written in France 1917–1919* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), pp. 24, 28.

⁴⁴ Joyce Kilmer, *Poems, Essays, and Letters*, ed. by Robert Cortes Holliday, 2 vols. (New York: Doran, 1918), I, p. 105.

⁴⁵ Amos Niven Wilder served in an artillery unit, and published a book of poems, *Battle-Retrospect and Other Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923). Years later his journal of his war experiences appeared as *Armageddon Revisited: A World War I Journal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Alan Seeger, *Poems*, intro. by William Archer (New York: Scribners, 1916), p. 133, 135, 141, 155, 144, 166.

⁴⁷ Archibald MacLeish, 'Memorial Rain, for Kenneth MacLeish, 1894–1918', *Collected Poems 1917–1952* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), pp. 36–37; John Peale Bishop, 'In the Dordogne', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Scribners, 1948), pp. 12–14. Bishop's poem was written in 1933.

⁴⁸ *Stuart Davis: American Painter*, ed. by Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 184–90.

⁴⁹ Obviously, this discussion could be expanded into a book-length study. The issues here are complex, but with a careful historical analysis, the relationships between the war, William Carlos Williams, and some poets active in the later art of the century could be established. I make this brief statement here to illustrate how the conflict between convention and experiment turned into a new poetics under the direct and indirect influence of World War 1.