

War Without Poetry

by LOUIS UNTERMAYER



This war is bullets without bards, blitz without ballads; no longer do our soldiers pen poems as they slay

POETRY, said Samuel Taylor Coleridge, brings the whole soul into activity. War, being the epitome of action, intensifies all the emotions—and the emotions are the life-blood of poetry.

Why then, it has been asked again and again, is the poetry of this war so thin, so emotionally anemic, so unrepresentative of the fierce struggle in which the world is engaged? Why has no poet, not even a single poem, emerged to stir the heart and burn into the mind? Why are there no names to set against Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and other World War I poets?

At the beginning of the first World War the poets were swept by a deep national fervor. "Now God be thanked who matched us with this hour!" cried Rupert Brooke. The war was a terrible test, a flaming cataclysm, but it was also a kind of cleansing, a release.

Poetry is essentially an act of faith, and the poets of the first World War believed in the dignity of man and the integrity of his purpose. The poets of World War II voice no such affirmation. They

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are confused by the repudiation of the standards for which their fathers had fought. Baffled by disillusion, depressed by a universal bewilderment, they are unable to speak with conviction. They have no faith in the hopes that buoyed up their predecessors. They do not trust the ideas which were once triumphant challenges. "The war to end war" ended not only in a false peace but in a war in which the shape of the peace to come, because it may again be just a "rest period," is only a little less frightening than the continuing conflict.

Faith inspires eloquence—and the young poets of the first World War expressed their fearlessness with happy certainty. Alan Seeger sang of his "rendezvous with death" with unforgettable gusto. Charles Hamilton Sorley, dead at 20, wrote of heroism quietly but with conviction. Isaac Rosenberg, another soldier-poet who died in 1918, sang of dead heroes with compelling force:

*Flame out, you glorious skies,
Welcome our brave;
Kiss their exultant eyes;
Give what they gave.*

*Their blood is England's heart;
By their dead hands
It is their noble part
That England stands.*

*England—Time gave them thee;
They gave back this
To win Eternity
And claim God's kiss.*

In a similarly patriotic key,

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Rupert Brooke composed one of the most famous of war poems, a poem which “gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given, her sights and sounds,” and gives these thoughts a warm universality:

*If I should die, think only this
of me:*

*That there's some corner of a
foreign field*

That is forever England.

There shall be

*In that rich earth a richer
dust concealed . . .*

Such sentiments are suspect today. The very tone is derided as “corny.” It is hard to imagine a poet in this war writing of “all evil shed away, a pulse in the eternal mind.”

Another reason for the poverty of poetry is the changed character and scope of warfare. Poetry is not only an act of faith, but a process of meditation. The first World War was fought from trenches, along a shifting but recognizable front, a series of advances with long periods of digging in and waiting. There was time to think a thought through, to organize and balance the event and the emotion. Today's warfare is not only global but eruptive; instead of being static it is staggering in speed and enormity. Poetry is, first of all, an imaginative process—but the scale of this war overwhelms the imagination.

For proof one might compare the *Treasury of War Poetry* collected in the midst of World War

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I by George Herbert Clarke with its companion volume, *The New Treasury of War Poetry*, recently compiled by the same editor. The first collection sold more than 50,000 copies and is still read; the second is an undistinguished anthology which has made little if any impression upon the public. The volume published more than 25 years ago contained poems as memorable as their authors. No poem produced today can stand comparison with Thomas Hardy's *In Time of "The Breaking of Nations,"* John Masefield's *August, 1914*, Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen*, Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting*, with its:

*Courage was mine, and I had
mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had
mastery.*

There is courage and sometimes a sort of wisdom in the poets of this war, but none of them can be said to have accomplished either mystery or mastery. Edna St. Vincent Millay could not encompass the horror she set herself to portray, and as a result her *Murder of Lidice* is a piece of shrill rhetoric. The one poem of hers included in the new collection is an exercise in uncontrolled nostalgia which begins:

*I am glad, I think, my happy
mother died
Before the German airplanes
over the English countryside*

*Dropped bombs into the
peaceful hamlets that we
used to know . . .*

Joseph Auslander is equally unhappy in *The Unconquerables*, a group of declamatory poems whose pitch is so high that it is hysterical:

*O Jehanne, with the trumpets
in your name,
By all the lilies of the Ori-
flamme,
By all the faggots and the
final shame,
By all the burning voices at
the Tree,
By all the visions that we can-
not see,
By all you were that we can
never be,
By all the little lambs, by
every lark . . .*

Where now is the force and passion of the event, the challenge and intensity which is the voice of poetry?

Perhaps it has changed its medium. Perhaps the poetry of this war is not being written in verse but in prose. For sheer brilliance of transcription, for the vivid image, the epic in action, we turn to the reporters and novelists. Here, written while the war is still in progress, are such moving creations as John Hersey's *Into the Valley* and his *A Bell for Adano*, Howard Hunt's *Limit of Darkness*, Robert St. John's *From the Land of Silent People*, and James Ald-

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ridge's *Signed With Their Honor*, a title, by the way, taken from another poet, Stephen Spender.

Most significant is the case of Harry Brown. Brown began as a poet. With Dunstan Thompson, a fellow-poet, he edited an irresponsible little magazine accurately if punningly called *Vice Versa*; his first three books were books of verse. But after Brown entered the war, helped edit *Yank*, and went abroad, he turned to prose. The spirit that might have gone into another book of poetry went into the graphic and powerfully compact *A Walk in the Sun*.

After the war, poetry will inevitably come into its own again. Such young soldiers as Harry Brown, now in England, Karl Shapiro, now in the South Pacific, and William Meredith, now in Alaska, may well remember their emotions in tranquillity and restore the poet to his function as recorder and communicator. As Wordsworth wrote, "In spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time."

Meanwhile, we wait for the poet as preserver, as "a rock of defense for human nature"—for the return of the poet to poetry.

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