
THE POETRY OF

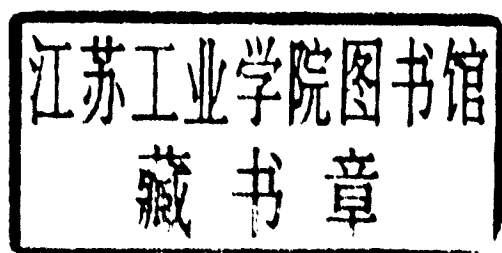
WAR

JAMES ANDERSON WINN



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In memory of Maynard Mack

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Boston, February 2007

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
Introduction: Terrible beauty	i
1 Honor and memory	12
2 Shame and slaughter	38
3 The cost of empire	66
4 The myth of chivalry	101
5 Comrades in arms	145
6 The cause of liberty	182
<i>Notes</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	234

Illustrations

1	Robert Graves in Oxford (1920). By kind permission of Mr. William Graves.	<i>page 4</i>
2	Rupert Brooke in Ottawa (1913). King's College Library, Cambridge RCB/Ph198. By permission of King's College Library, Cambridge.	14
3	Siegfried Sassoon (1916). Photograph by George C. Beresford. By permission of the Hulton Archive 3351190 (RM).	17
4	Wilfred Owen. By permission of the English Faculty Library, University of Oxford.	19
5	Frontispiece to <i>Posthume Poems of Richard Lovelace, Esq.</i> (London, 1659). 14454.42.35*. Reproduced courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.	28
6	George Henry Boker. By kind permission of the Abraham Lincoln Foundation of the Union League of Philadelphia.	57
7	William Blake Richmond, <i>Sleep and Death Carrying the Body of Sarpedon into Lycia</i> (1875–1876). By permission of the Vancouver Museum.	64
8	Pierre Mignard, <i>Louise Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth</i> (1682). By permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.	85
9	Augustus St. Gaudens, Monument for Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth on the Boston Common. Photograph by Caleb Taylor Williams.	102
10	"Britain needs you at once." London: Parliamentary Recruiting Committee [1915], printed by Spottiswoode & Co. Ltd. London E.C. Library of Congress Photograph Collection LC-USZC4-11248.	122

- 11 "Buy National War Bonds." By permission of the Imperial War Museum, London. 123
- 12 Pope Urban II. Corbis Image Library CS010439. 127
- 13 Kenyon Cox, "The sword is drawn, the Navy upholds it!" N[ew] Y[ork]: The H. C. Miner Litho. Co. [1917]. Library of Congress Photograph Collection POS – WWI – US, no. 390. 128
- 14 Aristotile da Sangallo (1481–1551), *The Battle of Cascina, or The Bathers* after Michelangelo (1475–1564), 1542 (oil on panel). © Collection of the Earl of Leicester, Holkham Hall, Norfolk/The Bridgeman Art Library. 149
- 15 Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Ten Naked Men* (1465). By permission of the Metropolitan Museum, New York. 150
- 16 Walt Whitman (between 1855 and 1865). Library of Congress Photograph Collection LC-BH82- 137. 152
- 17 J. C. Leyendecker, "Weapons for Liberty." American Lithographic Co. N. Y. Library of Congress Photograph Collection POS – US.L494, no. 12 185
- 18 Denarius of Brutus (circa 43–42 B. C.) By permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum Library, University of Cambridge. 189
- 19 Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), *Le 28 juillet 1830: La Liberté guidant le peuple* (detail). Paris: Louvre. ©Photo RMN – Hervé Lewandowski. 190

Introduction: Terrible beauty

War rages in our world, as it has for all of human history. Each morning news stories from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, Chechnya, and Darfur report the violent deaths of combatants and civilians. Even Americans, long accustomed to the notion that such events could only happen overseas, are still reeling from the attack on the World Trade Center, which has forced us to confront our fear of death and our grief at the deaths of others. Recent history raises with new urgency the question of how to respond – politically, morally, and artistically – to the intensity and horror of war.

Soldiers in combat employ a stripped-down language of curses, screams, and commands – a language far removed from the reflective and formal idiom of poets. Yet in order to come to grips with the full range of their thoughts and feelings about war, soldiers, mourners, victims, and prophets have often turned to poetry. Even before poems were written down, soldiers trusted poets to make their deeds immortal, and poets embraced warfare as a grand and challenging subject.

Despite these ancient connections, war and poetry are fundamentally different activities. War dismembers bodies, scattering limb from limb. Poetry re-members those bodies and the people who lived in them, making whole in verse what was destroyed on the battlefield. The technology of warfare tears people, armies, and cities apart; it divides in order to conquer. The technology of poetry binds together all the ways that words can move us; it combines in order to enrich. In the history of warfare, the great technological changes have been innovations designed to make existing weapons and skills useless: the stirrup, the cannon, the tank, the guided missile. In the history of poetry, even the most original poems depend on past

practice, building older forms and ideas into their texture. War obliterates the past; poetry feeds upon the past.

Professional soldiers, however, are often backward-looking, conservative, tribal. Their “values and skills,” as the military historian John Keegan has argued, “are those of a world apart, a very ancient world, which exists in parallel with the everyday world but does not belong to it. Both worlds change over time, and the warrior world adapts in step to the civilian. It follows it, however, at a distance.”¹ This formula also applies to poets, whose values and skills are those of an ancient world, and whose modes of expression have often followed those of the prosaic world at a distance. A shared sense of preserving older skills and values has sometimes drawn warriors and poets together, despite the stark differences between their crafts. The Japanese Samurai, an extreme example, managed to suppress guns and gunpowder for 250 years. They knew about the new technology, but they feared it would make their skill with swords obsolete, so they rigorously controlled the making of guns and retained a power based on the art of swordsmanship. It should not surprise us that the other art on which the Samurai prided themselves was the making of poems.²

Critics eager to dismiss poetry have typically used the imagery of gender to separate the brutal, sweeping violence of warfare from the subtle, delicate energy of poetry, treating violence as manly, poetry as feminine. Resisting that crude formula, poets have often found beauty in violence. Homer, describing the blood flowing down a hero's wounded thigh, thinks of a woman using red dye to color a piece of ivory, an ornate work of art.³ Bertran de Born, a medieval troubadour, links the pleasure he feels when hearing the birds sing in springtime with the pleasure he feels when seeing dead knights in ditches, with splintered lances stuck through their sides.⁴ Some brave poets have even acknowledged the dark connection between violence and the erotic. They have seen the links between sexual desire and military aggression, but they have also described the sacrifices made in war as acts of love that lead to the birth of beauty.

In his great poem on the Easter Rising of 1916, William Butler Yeats develops this idea in haunting and memorable terms. Although their attempted revolution failed, Yeats credits the Irish patriots who briefly occupied the Dublin Post Office with changing the emotional

landscape of Ireland. From their “excess of love” came a hope for freedom that the poet could picture as beauty:

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
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.⁵

As the patriots showed their love for Ireland by mounting a doomed revolt that led to their deaths, Yeats shows his love for them by fitting their names into his meter and rhyme-scheme, using the power of verse to keep their memory alive.

Two years later, Robert Graves addressed an affectionate poem to his fellow-soldier and fellow-poet Siegfried Sassoon, who had served with him in the same regiment throughout the First World War. Expressing amazement at their survival, Graves admits that he and Sassoon found beauty in death, and argues that they drew life and breath from the numerous dead:

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the wet bond of blood,
By friendship blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men, breath.⁶

By calling the force that binds the two men “the wet bond of blood,” Graves bravely acknowledges the softer aspects of his feelings for Sassoon. A friendship blossoming from mud suggests the conventional motif of the flower that springs from a grave, but it also allows the two males a metaphorical fertility. Together, they have given birth to a blossoming friendship. All of this rich imagery, however, is a prelude to the revelation of the true bonding force: Death. By staring Death in the face, Graves claims, the two men found beauty. From the dead men all around them, they drew breath.



Figure 1. Robert Graves in Oxford (1920).

We need poems like these to counter the mindless simplifications of war propaganda. Too often, soldiers learn to think in terms of *us* versus *them*, treating the enemy as if he were not even human. Such ugly terms as *Hun*, *Jap*, or *Gook* bear witness to our need to define the other side as utterly unlike us. Merely patriotic poets have sometimes been complicit in this process of flattening, misusing their art to versify slogans and cheers. Poets true to their calling, however, use the full range of poetry's powers to express the full range of our contradictory responses to war, including our ability to find beauty amid the horror.

Like the ocean, great fires, and destructive storms, war is attractive to poets as an instance of the *sublime*, an experience bringing together

awe, terror, power, and reverence on a grand scale. When Yeats writes of the “terrible beauty” of the Easter Rising, he may be thinking of the way the English put down the revolution by indiscriminately shelling the center of Dublin, starting fires that burned much of the city. In acknowledging the beauty inherent in fire and destruction, Yeats participates in a long tradition stretching back to Homer. Poets celebrating eighteenth-century revolutions were especially fond of the military sublime. In *The Columbiad*, a book-length poem on the American Revolution, Joel Barlow describes the Battle of Saratoga as if it were the Last Judgment, invoking the sublime in all its glory:

Now roll like winged storms the solid lines,
The clarion thunders and the battle joins;
Thick flames in vollied flashes load the air.
And echoing mountains give the noise of war;
Sulphureous clouds rise reddening round the height,
And veil the skies and wrap the sounding fight.⁷

Like many eighteenth-century poets, Barlow believed that ancient languages were better suited to epic grandeur than modern ones. But he also believed that modern war, because of its scale and horror, was a better subject for poetry than ancient war. He makes both points in the preface to *The Columbiad*:

The shock of modern armies is, beyond comparison, more magnificent, more sonorous and more discolored to the face of nature, than the ancient could have been; it is consequently susceptible of more pomp and variety of description. Our heaven and earth are not only shaken and tormented with greater noise, but filled and suffocated with fire and smoke. If Homer, with his Grecian tongue and all its dialects, had had the battle of Blenheim* to describe, the world would have possessed a picture and a piece of music which it will never possess.⁸

Barlow's enthusiasm for war as an occasion for the sublime music of epic poetry is political as well as aesthetic. In an earlier passage, he predicts that “righteous Freedom” and “protected Industry” will cure the rage of war.⁹ Convinced that “good wars” could advance the inevitable progress of mankind toward freedom, democracy, and

* The major battle of the War of the Spanish Succession, in which forces under the Duke of Marlborough defeated the French on 13 August 1704.

brotherhood, Enlightenment poets often connected the magnificence of warfare to the supposed nobility of its aims. Their words helped create the idea of a “war to end all wars.” Modern commentators, aware of the terrible failure of that hope, have been less likely to associate the beauty of combat with political progress. According to the critic Walter Benjamin, writing on the eve of World War II, our capacity to experience warfare as beauty has nothing to do with virtue or freedom. It comes from the dulling of our senses by technology and the twisted logic of Fascism:

Fascism . . . expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. . . . Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic.¹⁰

In our own times, witnesses to war have tried to separate the beauty of combat from *any* political or moral meaning, arguing that it has “the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference – a powerful, implacable beauty.” Those words come from Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, a profoundly lyrical treatment of the war in Vietnam. Many who served in that war were deeply skeptical about its aims, but O’Brien, one of the most eloquent of those skeptics, has the courage to write about the war in language we may recognize as sublime:

For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket’s red glare. It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference – a powerful, implacable beauty – and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.¹¹

By quoting a phrase from “The Star Spangled Banner,” O’Brien signals his awareness of his poetic forebears. When he speaks of “the rocket’s red glare” in the same breath with napalm and white

phosphorus, he invokes the tradition of the military sublime and undercuts it at the same time. Like Francis Scott Key, he sees the incendiary beauty of bombardment. Unlike Key or Barlow, he cannot connect that terrible beauty to the ideas of liberty and progress.

Despite the skepticism about the political and moral meaning of war expressed so memorably by O'Brien, a doubt he shares with many modern poets, politicians continue to draw on older poetic traditions when seeking support for military ventures. Sometimes they are entirely unaware that the chivalric, patriotic, or magnificent language they are using comes from poets; sometimes they willfully flatten or misrepresent the traditions on which they draw. I have written this book to complicate that picture, to show that poetry can offer thoughtful readers precious insights into war – moral, political, and aesthetic ways of understanding war that are valuable precisely because they are not simple, flat, or formulaic.

Poetry is an art of memory, and in poems on war, memory is both a purpose and a subject. When poets assure the dead that their heroic acts will not be forgotten, living readers are more likely to believe those claims if the poems are memorable. Before the alphabet, poetry served to strengthen memory and preserve essential knowledge by giving stories and beliefs a rhythmic and musical shape.¹² In the modern world, we preserve knowledge in print and on hard drives, but we still commit some essential truths to memory, using the rhythm and music of poetry to help us hold them in our hearts. In Yeats's refrain, for example, the repetition of the word *changed* has incantatory power, and the strong triple rhythms of the second line make it impossible to forget:

All changed, changed utterly,
A terrible beauty is born.

Because its formal techniques for engaging our memory have ancient origins, poetry connects us to old ways of hearing and feeling. Like their forebears, modern poets must choose words that make sense, and even if they have abandoned traditional meters, they must fit those words to some meaningful rhythm, some shapely form. A reader attentive to both syntax and form will hear several kinds of meaning at once in poetic language.

At a different level, poetry helps cultures remember their pasts, and because every poet is inevitably dependent on earlier poets, we may hear in each new poem enriching echoes of poems from the past. Many poems about war attempt to honor heroism and sacrifice by evoking the weapons, customs, and poetic diction of earlier eras, deliberately distancing us from the ugly details of the current conflict. Sometimes this process yields only sentimental nostalgia, but in other cases, the summoning of past heroes and their language casts a fresh light on the present.

The formal ordering of verse and the echoing of previous poems are ways for poets to enclose or contain the horror, to assert control over the uncontrollable. By using traditional patterns of meter and older conventions of language to describe scenes of present chaos and violence, poets offer a more thoughtful account of war than television or print journalists, who must focus on the immediate moment and the hard facts. Poetic form and poetic allusion, which require contemplation and consideration, encourage readers to look at war from more than one perspective, and thus to think more deeply about its meaning.

Poets have given memorable expression to the personal motives that send men forth to fight: glory, honor, shame, comradeship, revenge. They have also helped to shape the larger, more corporate ideas that nations and cultures invoke as incentives for warfare: patriotism, religion, empire, chivalry, freedom. Some poets devote their talents to celebrating courage. Others focus on regretting loss. The greatest war poets do both at once: they praise the victor while mourning the victim; they honor the dead while raising deep questions about the meaning of honor. Even when the poet's main purpose is to praise the heroic efforts of one side, the fruitful ambiguity inherent in poetic form allows doubts, fears, and sympathy for the enemy to infiltrate the lines of verse.

Practicing the skills required to make words both meaningful and musical, to find images from the past that illuminate the present, helps poets develop the moral subtlety required to honor courage and sacrifice while regretting cruelty and loss. Because they are used to keeping both syntax and meter in play, poets are able to sustain other kinds of tension between conflicting forces. Some of the modes of emphasis made possible by poetic form lend themselves to irony,