FLYING WHILE STANDING STILL


Is there within the title Winn chooses for his book, The Poetry of War, as well as the obvious indication that his subject is poetry written about war, an implicit acknowledgement that war has a poetry of its own? Certainly, his introductory chapter shows a mind that wants to hold true to the whole story, wants to show the complexities in the relationship between poetry and war, wants to avoid the sorts of simplification which a plain anti-war stance could lead to. The war poets he most admires, he writes, ‘enlist the forces of memory, meter and irony to help us confront, in all its contradictory power, the terrible beauty of war’. The appropriation of Yeats to give this flourishing conclusion to his chapter is to an extent justified. Earlier he had cited ‘Easter 1916’ and spelt out what he took to be the nature of such ‘beauty’: ‘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’. Yeats, he suggests, may have been thinking of ‘the beauty inherent in fire and destruction’ as manifested in ‘the fires that burned much of the city’: ‘he may be thinking of the way the English put down the revolution by indiscriminately shelling the centre of Dublin’.

Winn is generally more careful and more persuasive than this, but before I show how that is so, I must offer, as a kind of health warning, evidence of how he can slip too readily between categories. ‘The greatest war poets’, he writes, ‘praise the victor while mourning the victim; they honor the dead while raising deep questions about the meaning of honor’. Are we to conclude that Owen, say, Randall Jarrell and Bruce Springsteen (all discussed here), did ‘praise the victor’? Or that they cannot be counted among ‘the greatest war poets’? If so, then who for the last hundred years can be? Is he offering as his fundamental criterion terms which are in fact making a historical distinction – no one can write like Homer and Virgil today? If so, his case is lost, as his archaic phrasing simultaneously carries him away and roots him to the spot.
To restore this sentence to its context in Winn’s introduction will offer the fairness which Winn’s own fair-mindedness deserves. He is, as he implies in his acknowledgements, trying to write ‘seriously about literature for a broad readership’, and in two paragraphs portrays accurately the purpose, method, and nature of his book.

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 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.

What this demonstrates is the difficulty, the impossibility perhaps, of making generalisations about ‘war poetry’ which can span history. One just has to think for a moment about Winn’s list of ‘motives that send men forth to fight’. Today you would have to add state compulsion through draft or
conscription, the *fait accompli* of being invaded or occupied; and such terms would send us back to wonder in fact how many in the armies of Homer or Virgil had the luxury of acting through personal motives?

Yet the very virtues of Winn’s book do derive from his attempt to do the impossible. Morally, he refuses to separate past and present, literature and its political use, poetry and war. His talk of ‘the greatest poets’ grows out of a genuine love for Homer and Virgil as makers of works alive today. His account of the interaction between poetry and war from Homer onwards is an attempt to show, with the pain and disaster of Bush’s ‘Liberty’-proclaiming and ‘imperial-minded’ invasion of Iraq very much in mind, how the representation of war by politicians, the military, and educators has been created out of the writings of poets, and how, in turn, the writings of poets counter such politically useful myths. Rightly, Winn looks at a two-way process: the way war poetry of the past – most notably that of Homer – has been adapted, re-read, and used, and how subsequent poets have in turn responded to that appropriation.

Winn first looks at ‘Honor and Memory’. From MacArthur’s 1962 speech he shows how his notions of ‘honour’ stemmed from ‘poetic gestures’ which had survived in rhetoric; and through Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, and then Lovelace he exposes the term before coming back to MacArthur, whose ‘flowery flattery’ could not ‘soothe the dull cold ears of the 80,000 men he left behind on the Bataan peninsula’. It is the process of echo and appropriation and revision set beside war’s costs which concerns him here. Then Winn moves right back in his discussion of ‘Shame and Slaughter’. He starts by placing the poetry in the historical context scholars now find for it: Homer’s writing from a ‘shame culture’; his honouring of martial and physical prowess; the literalness of the required ‘honour’ – booty, slaves, and women – which defines his meanings while his poetry (more brutally realistic about battle than even that of the First World War poets) unflinchingly presents the consequences of such a culture. Homer rightly and effectively towers over this chapter.
Virgil has similar prominence in ‘The Cost of Empire’ but, valuably, is shown in more varied metamorphoses as he is rewritten, quoted, and used in the portrayal of empire and its wars. Winn shows how readers contemporary with Virgil had a body of knowledge about events and political figures which he could imply and they could pick up through ironies. He restores these to restore Virgil as he might have been. He then focuses upon how, by omitting such ironies, selectively quoting, or translating, writers of empire could employ the Virgil they make for their political, expansionist, and imperial purposes. His poets use Virgil or extend his themes, sometimes, as with Dryden, to pose questions, sometimes, as in Kipling’s ‘short-sighted and racist poem’ of the American conquest of the Philippines ‘The White Man’s Burden’, for propaganda purposes. The living pressure of such issues leads Winn to allow himself condemnation of this kind, again, drawing virtue from keeping in mind the general reader. After such frankness, however, the fair-minded academic in him will quickly intervene, ‘even in this short-sighted and racist poem, there are moments of insight’.

Reading poetry of war, for Winn, teaches the power of contradictions, raises deep questions, shows complexities, and encourages thoughtfulness and the awareness of more than one meaning. His task is to help his audience read more carefully, as an act not only of decency to past writers but of moral and immediate political importance. ‘If they had been better readers of Virgil’, however, European apologists for empire ‘might have recognized his awareness of another cost of empire: its harmful effects on the imperialists themselves’. Winn brings us Kipling within two pages of Dido and Aeneas – ‘Virgil shows us the painful struggle between duty and human feeling. Too many of his later readers saw only the power of duty’ – and before the page-end Kipling has led us straight through to the present: in ‘the recent campaign in Iraq, coalition forces were willing to do almost anything to secure the oil fields, but content to leave the museums and libraries to be looted and burned’ (original emphasis). Of course such condensing of history might work more strongly in the classroom than on the page (provided the audience was
granted time to say: ‘Hold on a moment, how does that connect with...and how about...’), but it does show the virtues in the thinking as well as defining its method; for thinking, within Winn’s account, is a sequential business: bold statement, qualification, new evidence, broad sweep, reservation, warning, and so on. A method which takes us next through ‘The Myth of Chivalry’.

Chrétien de Troyes, violence, the conduct of wars, honour, the invention of cannon, ‘The Song of Roland’, ‘The Vision of Columbus’ by Joel Barlow, and Tennyson, all receive purposeful and evidenced treatment. Winn pauses to look briefly but tellingly at the church’s early attempts to justify, condemn, or get in on war; from St Augustine’s theory of a ‘just war’, through Pope John XV to Urban’s ‘crucial reversal on the part of the Church’ in his sermon at Clermont; as Winn explains, ‘the Church was willing to bring arms and armed men inside its doors in order to gain control over knighthood’. Here, as elsewhere, Winn makes straightforward but pleasing use of pictorial images which are included as illustrations. After dealing with the church and ‘chivalry’, he turns to the new importance given to women within the shifting codes of chivalry and their depiction of the motives and purposes appropriate to war: ‘By imagining handsome knights performing heroic deeds for the sole purpose of gaining a smile or a nod from a virtuous lady, poets further obscured the true motives driving medieval warfare’. Finally, with reference to Spenser’s Britomart, he briefly shows how ‘The writers of renaissance chivalric epics took the next logical step by creating female knights who could defeat male knights in combat’. Winn sustains this historical observation to bring insight into the often female statuary raised in commemoration, Victory and Mourning. His chapter ends with a quotation from Virginia Woolf and the observation: ‘I know of no finer refutation’ of ‘the murderous falsehood’ within the use of chivalry ‘to pretend that the fundamental motive of military violence is the service of men on behalf of women’. So, characteristically, he uses her words for the point apposite to his current argument, passing without comment the host of potential insights on gender that these few lines from Woolf open up:
If you insist upon on fighting to protect me, or ‘our’ country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect myself or my country.

Winn has chosen his own focus, but what is lost in that process couldn’t be more painfully exposed than it is here. His next chapter starts ‘As Woolf doubtless understood…’, but he will make no mention of all she has offered, say nothing on patriarchy, nothing on gender.

His chapter is on ‘Comrades in Arms’, and for his purposes what Woolf would have understood is that men desired through chivalry ‘to obscure or suppress the feelings that men in combat have for each other. In wars of all places and times… men have formed strong bonds’. The absence in this book of matters of gender is acute. On feelings of men for men in combat Winn writes well. Virgil is employed to show how changes have taken place over history in what can be spoken and what is to be left silent, what is culturally to be assumed or found to be censored, in poetry’s presentation of male comradeship and love on the battlefield. Through Winn’s account of how Euryalis and Saluis were translated and rewritten we have an introduction clear enough to lead on to his treatment of F. T. Prince’s ‘Soldiers Bathing’ and poems by Owen. Again in this chapter he returns to and uses well Saint-Gauden’s Civil War relief in Boston, illustrated within the book. His chapter is a valuable introduction to the issues involved, as is his final chapter, ‘The Cause of Liberty’. In both, the instructive mode rubs off some of the exciting edges; we could do with more uncertainty, more offering of problems rather than solutions. The chapter on the cause of liberty, however, does have a fervour and immediacy which make a number of things look new.

Attacking Enlightenment fudging about wars conducted on behalf of others, Winn really draws energy from his moral dismay at what is happening in Iraq in the name of liberty. Addison’s Cato is offered as a seminal text echoing and
resounding through the Civil War. The 1814 ‘Star Spangled Banner’ is exposed: ‘Most of us only know the opening stanza of Key’s poem which is embarrassing enough. The others are appalling’. Woodrow Wilson, John Greenleaf Whittier’s ‘Worship’, and the powerful seductress ‘Liberty’ as she moves through Delacroix and US coinage take us, with pace and conviction, through the fatal ideology. James Thomson’s ‘Liberty’, Joel Barlow’s version of American Revolution in ‘The Columbiad’, the poets of the Civil War, and ‘the dirty little war in the Philippines and beyond’ are well discussed, and expose ‘the progress and falsehoods involved in ‘traditional poetic language about liberty’. The strength of this account builds in the reader a frightening awareness of the false god which leaves us, even in the after-glow of Obama’s election victory, fearful.

In such a book, the examples chosen and the ground which is covered are to be judged by results. This is not a book giving a history nor is it a scholarly study of The Poetry of War. The reader could be misled as it moves from Homer to Virgil, but within Winn’s method, a single poem by Lovelace can command more attention than the whole of Shakespeare; Tennyson receives close attention, Clough none. Blake and Shelley are nowhere to be seen. In an American book with, to the English reader, a valuably American angle, the implication that there wasn’t much poetry of the Second World War, however, is alarming. Poets from America such as Jarrell, Nemerov, Dickey, and Ciardi created a vital body of work which retains an unfortunately direct relevance: testing the morality of aerial bombardment, exposing the terms ‘civilian’ and ‘fighter’, and revealing the long-term effects of war. To return, in the light of such material, to Winn’s generalisations on motives for fighting and on the virtue of traditional patterns of metre etc. is to find further limitations. Nothing is here on the question taken up by poets as to whether poetry can be adequate to modern war and genocide, and little is said on their various attempts to remake poetry itself. Nothing in his excellent account of aggressive ‘liberty’ takes on the question of poetry from those under occupation, from those demanding and fighting for their own liberation, whether in
Palestine today, or Warsaw in 1944, or in the forests of Lithuania with the Jewish guerrilla poets Abba Kovner and Abraham Sutzkever. In the end it is not the poetry of war which is Winn’s subject but the representation of war by poets, together with aspects of the cultural history of this representation. Nor is his book on war as such, though it certainly acknowledges war’s reality. What he does, he does with fair-mindedness: were his subject war, as the poets show us, fair-mindedness would prove inadequate.

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

DESMOND GRAHAM

doi:10.1093/escrit/cgp018

ELECTIVE FELICITIES

Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions. By MICHAEL SNEDIKER. University of Minnesota Press, 2009; $25.

Queer theory’s disparate origins in gay and lesbian studies, post-structuralism, and the AIDS epidemic make for an unwieldy lexical body; squeeze one part and a conspicuous bulge appears in another. To say ‘It has to do with homosexuality’ may seem innocuous enough as a first step, but the second must then involve a disquisition into many queer thinkers’ repudiation of this and other historically fraught, potentially constrictive identity categories. ‘Queer’ has always had to emerge from this clash; in recent years, two versions of this fraught category have come out of a debate between a ‘positive’ and a ‘negative’ queer politics. In one camp, so the story goes, lies a future-oriented ‘good liberalism’; here we find gay monogamy, child-rearing, and the ultimate goal of greater social inclusivity. Partisans of the other camp defiantly take up the stereotype of the queer as a figure of unassimilability and even death, and celebrate the disruptive capacity of queerness as a social principle. Michael Snediker’s objection to these choices – a ‘utopic optimism’ that ‘attaches to a future’ or an allegiance to queer theory’s origins in narratives of suffering and bereavement –