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AMERICAN SOLDIER POETS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by

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INTRODUCTION

The dissertation which follows is a theme study. Its primary concern is with the effect of the Second World War upon the themes of those American poets who wrote about the war while serving in it. But its approach is historical as well as literary, and it is also concerned with the relationship between the poet soldier's view of his war experience and that of his generation of men in uniform who were not poets. The question it will seek to answer is whether the poet soldier acted as a spokesman for his contemporaries, that is, whether his view of the war was significantly like theirs. The premises behind this question are, first, that the American soldier poets of the Second World War had enough in common in their view of the war to allow them to be considered as a group, and second, that the views of the entire generation of American servicemen with regard to the war are subject to some generalization. Obviously, the validity of the first premise can be satisfactorily evaluated far more easily than that of the second, but, as I will show, both premises have often been simply assumed valid by critics when treating the poetry of the Second World War.

My purpose, then, is to reveal the extent to which

the American soldier poet spoke for his generation, and, in doing so, to establish the pervasive themes of the soldier poetry of this war, and, to a limited extent, to examine some of the significant currents of thought among those who served in the American armed forces. I must make clear at the outset that I am not primarily concerned with critical evaluation of the soldier poetry, although some critical comments are made when aesthetic distinctions are necessary. In spite of this, my study will, I think, have some secondary critical relevance. It may prove useful, for example, in the study of the effect of such an emotionally powerful event as war upon the creative process. It may also prove useful in providing a clearer definition than now exists for the term "war poem," a classification in which there is a begged question: whether the poetry of war is a special kind of expression.

Because it is an historical study, this dissertation will show the American poet soldier of the Second World War in his role of soldier almost as much as in his role of poet; it will place him within the larger group of all American servicemen of this war as well as within the smaller group of poets who were in the armed forces, and it will indicate thereby to what extent and in what way his thoughts, expressed in his poetry, were shared by his fellows who were not poets. With this purpose, it is clear that my primary concern must be with the soldier poem as an expression of

ideas, as a vehicle for theme, rather than as an aesthetic object.

The need for this study will emerge, I think, from the following quotations, all written during wartime, which together present the problem of the relation of the poet (not always the soldier poet) to his war experience, to his audience, and to his generation. Is the war poet more imitative of reality than other poets? Does he try to affect his reader with his message more than other poets with other messages? Is the war poet more of a spokesman for his contemporaries than other poets? Wilfred Owen, perhaps the best known British soldier poet of the First World War, said in the preface to a book of his poetry which he never had the chance to complete:

> This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory.
> They may be to the next. All a poet can do is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.[1]

In this passage Owen made clear that he saw himself as a

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[1]Wilfred Owen, Poems, ed. Edmund Blunden (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949), pp. 40-41.

spokesman, a spokesman who knew the horror of the battlefield, whose mission it was to convey a warning to the next generation. As we will find subsequently, it is clear that Owen did not mean his poetry to record a strictly private reaction to war. He thought he spoke for the British infantry soldier who had seen combat in the trenches; he thought he was speaking to a generation that could prevent war's recurrence; he thought that his poetry was more important as the vehicle of a truthful and forceful message than as a literary utterance. The relevant question that arises here is to what extent Owen really was speaking for the British infantryman. I will not attempt to answer this question, but will later pose the question and attempt to answer it in relation to Owen's American counterparts of 1941-1945. In any case, Owen felt that the war poet had to deal with his subject--war--truthfully, and that this truth might warn the next generation about the dreadful reality of modern warfare.

To further illuminate the problem of the war poet's relation to his subject, we find Wallace Stevens, in the postscript to an edition of his poems published early in the Second World War, making this statement:

> The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a con-

> sciousness of fact. If that is true, it follows that the poetry of war as a consciousness of the victories and defeats of nations, is a consciousness of fact, but of heroic fact, of fact on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one's thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic.
>
> It has been easy to say in recent times that everything tends to become real, or, rather, that everything moves in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the direction of fact. We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in the periods that we call peace. But in war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming.
>
> Nothing will ever appease this desire except a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be.[2]

The war poet, according to Stevens, is overwhelmingly moved to record fact as he sees it. Whereas Owen described his own poetry and enjoined other poets to follow his example, Stevens generalizes about what direction the creative process must take in time of war, and implies that the poet has no choice in the matter. In spite of their different approaches, the statements of Owen and Stevens agree that war poetry is a distinct genre in that it is more factual (Owen: "truth-

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[2]Wallace Stevens, Parts of a World (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), p. 183.

ful") than other poetry. But Stevens does not leave fact completely relative to the individual perception of each poet. He suggests that there exists a community of values with regard to what fact should be, hence his last sentence: "Nothing will ever appease this desire except a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be." With this statement, Stevens' relativistic view of the relationship between the war poet and fact as he sees it moves close to Owen's absolutist view of the relationship between the war poet and truth. According to both Owen and Stevens, the relationship of the war poet to his subject is intimate and direct, with the result that war poetry is more factual than imaginative. In a way, this study will test these opinions. It will compare and contrast the American soldier poet's view of the facts of war with that of his fellow servicemen who were not poets. Although we cannot pass judgment on the truthfulness of the American soldier poet's expression of the facts of his Second World War experience, we can at least partially determine to what extent his expression corresponds with that of his generation. I believe that this would meet Owen's criteria for "truth"; it would certainly meet Stevens' for "fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be."

If the following statements about soldier poetry of the Second World War could be accepted as completely true,

there would be no need for a significant part of this dissertation. Early in the United States' participation in the war, the New Republic sponsored a "Soldiers' Verse Competition" which invited entries from servicemen, offering the usual payment for entries that were published in the magazine, and prizes for the winners. In the announcement of the competition, the following statement was made: "All these poems will appear in the New Republic in the near future, and at that time we shall comment on what American soldiers are thinking about, as evidenced in the large number of entries."[3] The assumption here is obvious: a large sampling of the verse written by American soldiers is a reliable indication of what American soldiers in general are thinking about. It is significant, I think, that a scrutiny of subsequent issues reveals that the commentary upon "what American soldiers are thinking about" never appeared in the New Republic. Perhaps the editor in charge of the competition realized that he had begged an important question in his original announcement when it came time to generalize about the thoughts of servicemen on the basis of the verse submitted for judging. He would be saying the equivalent of nothing if he reported that their verse showed that servicemen wished that the war were over and that they missed their wives and sweethearts. If, on the other hand, he reported the consensus

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[3]"Soldiers' Verse Competition," New Republic, CVI, No. 26, 878.

of the entries about political and social matters and attributed this to American servicemen in general, he would probably find himself in the midst of an unwelcome controversy. Such controversies about what the American serviceman is thinking were common in the letters-to-the-editor sections of popular magazines during the war. Perhaps prudently, the New Republic dropped this hot potato.

In a dissertation on British poetry of the Second World War, Stephen H. Goode makes an assumption similar in its unsubstantiated implications to that of the New Republic. In speaking of the cynicism that he finds prevalent in the British soldier poetry, Mr. Goode says:

> Although the rudiments of this cynicism can be seen in the work of the predominantly pastoral poets like Henry Treece, John Pudney, and Vernon Watkins, it is best seen in the work of the three poets who most adequately reflect the soldier's attitude toward the Second World War, Roy Fuller, Julian Symons, and Henry Reed. Highly sophisticated, and diverse in themselves, they and their generation knew, as Roy Fuller did, that, indeed, 'life is terrible.'[4]

Mr. Goode's tendency to view soldier poetry that is cynical and free of patriotic bombast as a reflection of "the soldier's attitude toward the Second World War" is shared by Oscar

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[4]Stephen H. Goode, "British War Poetry of the Second World War" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Pennsylvania, 1958), p. 129.

Williams, the best known anthologist of Second World War poetry. Mr. Williams takes the view that true war poetry is "authentic," that it expresses a genuine reaction of the individual poet to war. He speaks slightingly of the "patriotic versification" of Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Alfred Noyes. He believes battlefield poetry to be the most "authentic" war poetry:

> While it is true that these gifts of talent, imagination and character which go to construct good verse fall to individuals whether or not they are soldiers, war poetry written by a poet in the midst of actual physical war conditions has greater authenticity than that written by a poet physically safe and free from regimentation, provided the talents are equal.[5]

What Williams means by "authenticity" he makes clear in the following passage:

> But real poets do not become Noyeses or Millays after a Dunkirk or a Pearl Harbor. They, like the evacuees in the boat, or the sailor passing ammunition, speak, not for the purposes of propaganda or with literary bombast, but from the depths of the individual organism, of the plain feeling of individual men. It is this speech which is the poem; it differs from the speech of soldier, sailor, or refugee not in emotional spontaneity, but in the precision of rich and subtle feeling at the source and with it produce works of the imagination out of suffering toward truth. And such is the nature of the

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[5]Oscar Williams (ed.), "A Little Anthology of Poems from the Forces," New Republic, CX, No. 26, 843.

> poetic imagination that the more freshly it creates the more closely it approaches truth, ceaselessly resolving, recording and forming anew the emotional forces that affect human beings.[6]

The question that arises here is how one can determine whether poets "speak . . . of the plain feeling of individual men" unless one is certain of how these individual men feel. We must raise this question about all of the above assertions about the soldier poet's expression of the experience of war. How can we reliably determine its truth or authenticity without recourse to some outside control?

But the New Republic, Mr. Goode, and Mr. Williams should not be taken to task too severely for the logical shortcomings of their statements. These statements were made, I believe, upon recognition of the striking uniformity of response to the Second World War in much of the soldier poetry. It was assumed that this uniformity of response was tantamount to authenticity or truthfulness of response, and that, assuming this truthfulness, the soldier poet could well act as a spokesman for the servicemen of his generation, since the responses of human beings with similar backgrounds to a given set of circumstances will, by and large, be similar. But there is too little fact and too much assumption in this se-

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[6]Oscar Williams (ed.), New Poems 1943 (New York: Howell, Soskin, 1943), pp. vi-vii.

quence of reasoning, and it points up, I think, the need for this study.

My basic method throughout this dissertation will be comparison and contrast. In the first chapter, the famous British soldier poetry of the First World War will be compared and contrasted, in a general way, with its American counterpart of the Second World War. This will serve to determine what is distinctive in the latter, as well as to provide a general background for a more detailed thematic study of the American poetry. Next, in a series of four chapters, each of the dominant and pervasive themes of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War will be established by inference from the poetry itself and will be discussed in connection with a variety of non-poetic commentary about the effects of the war upon the ideas and feelings of American servicemen. The greatest emphasis within this non-poetic commentary will be placed upon the ideas and feelings expressed by servicemen themselves, but I will also deal occasionally with the thoughts attributed to servicemen by reliable first-hand reports. This approach is meant to determine with as much certainty as possible the degree of congruity between each poetic theme and significant and pronounced currents of thought among American servicemen during the Second World War. I must emphasize that my primary purpose is not to determine with systematic completeness the prevailing thoughts

and feelings of American servicemen about their war experience, but to infer a set of pervasive themes from the soldier poetry, and then to determine, as far as possible, the extent to which these themes are voiced by servicemen who were not poets. My conclusions will be stated in the final chapter. The least conclusive segment of my data will be found in my necessarily limited survey of the currents of thought among American servicemen which will be used as a reflector for the themes of the poetry. Absolute certainty, or anything close to it, with regard to how widespread or deep-rooted certain currents of thought were within the American forces would be impossible to obtain. Even if we could turn back time and take a series of Gallup Polls on the reaction of servicemen to various aspects of their experience during the Second World War, the reliability of the findings of such polls would be open to serious question.[7] But the Gallup Poll kind of quantitative certainty is unnecessary here, even if it were possible. Instead, the thoughts and feelings of this generation of servicemen will be sought from a variety of sources: the expressions of the servicemen themselves in published letters and personal narratives, the reportage of ser-

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[7]A study which makes wide use of soldier-opinion surveys is the work of Samuel Stouffer et al., The American Soldier: Studies in Social Psychology in World War II (4 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). The statistical approach of this study reveals little of the purely individual reaction to the war that would be useful here.

vicemen's thoughts by first-hand witnesses, and, tangentially, the fictional accounts of the serviceman's experience in some of the more notable novels of World War II. From these sources together, I think, we can obtain a rough index of soldier thought which will serve to give some indication of how representative are the themes of the soldier poets of the ideas of their generation.

CHAPTER I

THE LARGER VIEW: SOLDIER POETRY IN TWO WARS

In the British National Review there appeared in the spring of 1917 an article which surveyed the British soldier poetry of the war then in progress. Its thesis was that this extremely patriotic poetry reflected the thoughts of British soldiers in general:

> More often those deep, unutterable thoughts and feelings, never spoken by Englishmen in ordinary talk between man and man, have found expression in the wonderful poetry of the trenches. It has been said that on the banks of the ugliest ditches often blow the tenderest and most delicate flowers; the horrors of trench warfare seem to have stirred to widespread life among our English fighters that great gift of song which has been the peculiar and unique glory of the English people from the days of Caedmon and Chaucer. That strong tie to home and country . . . has found expression in wonderful and varied form in these poems which are inspired with an intensity of patriotic devotion and tenderness that can hardly be measured.[1]

This article was selected for reprinting by Living Age, an

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[1]Scriptor [pseud.], "The Soul of England," National Review, IXX (May, 1917), 376-77.

American digest, the following month.[2] More significantly, however, it was reprinted in a slightly changed form in the magazine in which it originally appeared twenty-three years later, early in England's participation in the Second World War.[3] The National Review, at the time of its second publication, made no mention of when the article originally appeared. The significant thing here is that the view expressed in this article, that the British soldier poetry is extremely patriotic and indicates how cheerfully the soldiers serve their country upon the battlefield, should be published as late as 1940. For many, Rupert Brooke wrote the definitive soldier poetry of the First World War. Even in 1940, the editors of The National Review could publish an article which did not so much as recognize the existence of such poets as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon. But these were times, 1917 and 1940, when many felt that there was a great need for frankly patriotic verse. Poetry was viewed by many as a tool, a weapon of warfare, a device to inspire patriotism and to bolster morale.

In 1941, Norman Cousins wrote in the Saturday Review:

> Poetry can hardly be without some use today when it can be called on by the leaders of

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[2]Living Age, CCLXXXXIII (June 9, 1917), 599-606.

[3]National Review, CXIV (June, 1940), 709-18.

> free culture in order to express, as Wordsworth put it, the "spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings." It is no coincidence that the chief executives of the democratic states have thus on several memorable occasions quoted from poetry while the chief executioners of the totalitarian states have never strayed beyond bombast.[4]

Mr. Cousins goes on to say that poetry is definitely on the side of the good and the just in this conflict, and notes specifically that Roosevelt and Churchill have quoted poetry in their speeches, while Hitler has not. A year later in the Saturday Review, W. R. Benet had this to say:

> We still admire Sassoon's attitude toward war which, as he said, is "a bloody game," however you view it. But at the same time it is neither idle nor base to die for one's country in a struggle like the present one, and we need the poets to give us a few rousing songs to march by.[5]

The above quotations are typical of many pleas that appeared in British and American journals during both wars, calling upon the poets for "a few rousing songs to march by," and praising those poets who seemed to fill the bill. In the popular mind the terms "war poem" and certainly "soldier poem" mean verse that is strongly martial and patriotic. Moreover, in time of war there is the widespread feeling that

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[4]"No Time for Poetry?," Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (May 3, 1941), 8.

[5]"Poets and the War," Saturday Review of Literature, XXV (April 25, 1942), 12.

poetry should answer the call to the colors and serve to inspire and encourage.

My purpose in this chapter is to outline how the British soldier poets did, in fact, respond to the First World War, and to compare and contrast this response with that of the American soldier poets of the Second World War, in order to provide a background for the later poetry, and also to determine the distinctive features of the American response. Ideally, of course, the group which will be studied more closely later, the American soldier poets of the Second World War, should be compared in their response to war with their American counterparts of the First World War. But this would be impossible for there is no substantial body of American soldier poetry which grew out of the First World War, perhaps because of the relatively short duration of American participation.[6] The British soldiers who fought in the First World War did produce a significant body of poetry which must be considered as background for any treatment of the poetry of the Second World War, British or American. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that many of the American soldier poets of the Second World War knew this earlier poetry and were affected by it, although I will not

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[6]Alan Seeger, whose work will be treated subsequently in this chapter, comes to mind as a possible exception. Seeger, however, did not serve in the American army, but was one of a group of young Americans who volunteered for service with the French Foreign Legion before the United States entered the war.

attempt to trace this effect here. What I am primarily concerned with in this chapter is the comparative responses of representative soldier poets, first British, then American, to the two great wars of the twentieth century. It is in the responses to war in their poetry that we find the most significant differences among them.

Beyond the Battlefield: The view of war in the poetry of Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and Edmund Blunden, with a note on Alan Seeger

The British soldier poets of the First World War fall into two fairly distinct groups. The difference between these groups does not lie in the bellicosity of one and the pacificism of the other, as one might be tempted to think. It is rather found in the focus of each group's view of war. The view of one group was focused upon a variety of things which lay beyond the battlefield; that of the other was focused upon the immediate facts and events of their war experience. It is this second group which viewed war in a way similar to that of the American soldier poets of the Second World War. The first group looked beyond war and wrote about the glory of death, in the case of Brooke, cavalier stoicism, in the case of Graves, or a kind of pastoral nostalgia, in the case of Blunden. Ironically, it is this group which seldom looked directly at war which is often popularly credited with having provided the only significant soldier poetry of

the First World War. This is perhaps primarily due to the greater romantic appeal of this poetry, and also to the literary reputations which most members of this group have gained over the years.

The fame of Rupert Brooke as a soldier poet rests upon the six sonnets which together he called "1914." These sonnets fired the patriotism of England at the beginning of the First World War. In general, these sonnets are songs of joyful resignation in the inevitability of death on the battlefield. In them the young soldier sings of the glorious fulfillment which death will bring. In a sense, these poems can be called suicidal. Looking neither to right nor left, his gaze fixed upon death, the speaker of the poems flings himself off a kind of precipice. This abandoned suicidal leap is clear in the first of the sonnets, "Peace:"

> Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
> And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
> With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
> To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
> Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
> Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
> And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
> And all the little emptiness of love!
>
> Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
> Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
> Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
> Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there

> But only agony, and that has ending:
> And the worst friend and enemy is but
> Death.[7]

And so, throughout all of these sonnets, Brooke looks upon death as deliverance and refuge, mentioning war only as the shadowy passage through which the young hero must pass before Valhalla is reached. The second sonnet, "Safety," ends:

> War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
> Secretly armed against all death's en-
> deavour;
> Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men
> fall;
> And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.

For Brooke, death was the omnipotent fixative, preserving forever youth, dawn, sunset, the colors of the earth, slumber and waking, love, and the touch of his "flowers and furs and cheeks." Brooke, in fact, did not look at war at all closely in his poems; war exists in them only as a hazy presence. And perhaps much of Brooke's popular appeal over the years has actually resulted from his failure to come to grips with war in its ugly and unglorious aspect. Brooke died in 1915 before having ever been directly involved in combat, and with-

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[7]Rupert Brooke, 1914 and Other Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1916). For the sake of simplicity, when the work of one poet is treated at length, the edition from which all quotations are taken will be noted, without page numbers, after the first quotation only.

out ever having really written about war.

The reception of Brooke's "1914" sonnets is interesting in that it shows a public willingness, perhaps even eagerness, to accept a soldier poetry which does not look closely at war but which fixes its attention upon such things as Holiness, Love, Pain, Honour, and Nobleness.[8] Brooke's sonnets were read from the pulpit when they first appeared in print, and their appeal has been strong ever since. In several editions of the British Poetry Review in 1946, a controversy was carried in the letters section about an article which contrasted "The Soldier," the fifth sonnet of "1914" with several poems of the Second World War.[9] The author

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[8]These abstract entities are invoked in "The Dead," the third of the "1914" sonnets.

[9]"The Soldier" is undoubtedly the most famous of Brooke's poems. The text follows:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England. There shall be
> In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
>
> And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
> A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
> Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
> Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
> And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

picked apart Brooke's poem in the following manner:

> It was, then, a poem for an occasion, but limited to it and not able to stretch across time and have significance to another generation. For today, after another war, the young men, most of them conscripts in an impersonal war which they know was fought for other causes than national glory or individual adventure, do not feel that here is an expression of their own thoughts. They do not wish to spread the British Empire with their mortal remains; they do not consider their own bodies richer than the soil of France or Poland; they do not feel "blest by suns of home," but look back upon an England struggling to solve gigantic internal problems; they do not think of themselves as pulses in the eternal mind, for they are not certain that there is such a thing; "gentleness" no longer exists as an exceptionally English quality; there is no "English heaven." Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the English soldier of today would scoff at the old-fashioned, adolescent sentimentalism of the poem and remind you that he has lived since 1918. He knows that 1918 was different from 1914.[10]

This article provoked several heated defenses of Brooke and attacks upon "modern" poetry. Sections from two of the more striking responses follow:

> Brooke, Mr. Bebbington says, was at the close of the war superseded by others whose voices were more up-to-date, more in keeping with the times: "Gone already, so far as serious, sensitive men were concerned was the subject of Brooke's sonnet: his temporary truth was already out of date . . ." What though the significance of its day had passed? Do not all days pass beyond the portals of human memory? Yet they are no less dear for, ultimately their very youthfulness will prompt as many cherished turnings of the yellowing pages as there are days

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[10] W. G. Bebbington, "Of the Moderns Without Contempt," The Poetry Review, XXXVII, No. 1, 19.

> gone by. Who are we to deny the flame of a genius which knew not the unleashing of atomic energy? Should we not rather cling to him as an escape from the present fear of butcherdom which vents its constant spite upon us?
>
> [Mary V. Kernick]
>
> I can only say that young men--of whom I am one--in their thousands still do echo the sentiments of Brooke and Nichols; still think of themselves as "pulses in the eternal mind"; still pray, and ask their friends to pray for them, in the heat and dust of battle; and are proud to acknowledge faith in a God Who sustains them in their tragic day. And for these an intellectual approach to poetry is utter vanity. They know that true poetry flows from the heart and speaks to the heart. Its blood is emotion; its flesh music; its life is faith and fire.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Poets are visionaries. What matters metre, rhyme, image, symbol or figure of speech if the poetic content is diseased? The world needs comfort in its anguish, vision in its darkness, a rock of faith in its sea of uncertainty; God grant there are enough poets to give it these, and to call mankind back to build, not an annex to "the Hall of Fame," but the New Jerusalem upon the rubble of the old.[11]
>
> [Wilfred H. Bartlett]

The significant thing about these responses to Bebbington's treatment of Brooke is their praise of the poet precisely inasmuch as he avoids a direct treatment of war. The first writer seeks in Brooke "an escape from the present fear of butcherdom," and the second sees Brooke as providing the world with "comfort in its anguish, vision in its

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[11] The Poetry Review, XXXVII, No. 2, 155-57.

darkness, a rock of faith in its sea of uncertainty . . ." Both writers affirm that a world at war or under the threat of war is horrible, but believe that the poet's mission in such a world is to turn the minds of his readers away from the horror. My concern here is not with these statements as critical evaluations of the role of soldier poetry, but as confirmations of Brooke's failure to deal with war as such, and as indications of the readiness of a large portion of his audience to turn with him in disgust, and perhaps panic, from a more intimate picture of modern war.

In his failure to confront the facts of war in his poems, the American poet Alan Seeger has much in common with Rupert Brooke. Although an American citizen, Seeger served with the French Foreign Legion, and, unlike Brooke, did participate in heavy fighting. The case of Seeger, an American fighting for France, is a special one. He is the only non-British soldier poet of the First World War who will be discussed here. We can hardly call Seeger an American soldier poet because the war claimed his life before the United States had even entered the war, but any consideration of the soldier poetry in English of the First World War would be incomplete without mention of him. Before he was killed in action in the summer of 1916, Seeger had written a substantial number of war poems.

Like Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger fixed his gaze beyond

war upon a series of romantic entities. In the first of a group of twelve sonnets which he wrote in 1916, he states his position:

> SIDNEY, in whom the heyday of romance
> Came to its precious and most perfect
> flower,
> Whether you tourneyed with victorious lance
> Or brought sweet roundelays to Stella's
> bower,
> I give myself some credit for the way
> I have kept clean of what enslaves and lowers,
> Shunned the ideals of our present day
> And studied those that were esteemed in yours;
> For, turning from the mob that buys Success
> By sacrificing all Life's better part,
> Down the free roads of human happiness
> I frolicked, poor of purse but light of heart,
> And lived in strict devotion all along
> To my three idols--Love and Arms and Song.[12]

Seeger does not list in the last line of his sonnet, however, the idol that is perhaps most pervasive in his war poems. It is Death. And this, too, he shares with Brooke. Seeger's most famous poem which begins "I have a rendezvous with Death/ At some disputed barricade . . ." sounds a note which echoes throughout his war poetry. Seeger looks backward to the ideals of antique chivalry, looks down on the mob, looks forward to certain death, looks everywhere but directly at the war in which he fought. In keeping with the theme of death in Seeger's poems, there is a strong fatalism. It is this which permits him to be so little concerned with the daily business of war. According to this belief, all of

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[12]Alan Seeger, Poems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917).

man's actions have been predestined and the strong man acts without concern for the consequences since the outcome of all actions has already been written. In "The Hosts," Seeger describes the armies as bigger than life:

> They are big with the beauty of cosmic
> things.
> Mark how their columns surge! They seem
> To follow the goddess with outspread wings
> That points toward Glory, the soldier's dream.

In Seeger's vision here, not only are the armies cosmic entities, but it does not matter whether they are friend or enemy: "Friend or foe, it shall matter nought;/ This only matters, in fine: we fought." And finally, Nature, Destiny, overrule all moral considerations:

> Let idlers argue the right and wrong
> And weigh what merit our causes had.
> Putting our faith in being strong--
> Above the level of good and bad--
> For us, we battled and burned and killed
> Because evolving Nature willed,
> And it was our pride and boast to be
> The instruments of Destiny.

Like Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger did not write a war poetry in which we are able to see much of the war in which he fought. His themes of overriding romance and fatalism worked against a minute examination of his battlefield life. His headlong dash was too swift to permit any pondering of the events along the way, and when we see these events at all they are too blurred to allow us to recognize detail or even proportion.

In the war poems of Robert Graves, who was a captain in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, we find only an occasional direct look at war. His gaze is fixed upon more distant things also, but these things are quite different from those which Brooke and Seeger were concerned with, and his poetic pursuit of them is far less simple-minded. Graves' values and attitudes, as they emerge from his World War I poetry, were those of the fin-de-siècle English gentleman, the fox-hunting man, the soldier of the king.[13] Graves looked beyond war itself to the comradeship which the army provided, and a future time when one could live quietly with his hounds and his books and his friends. The tone of his war poems is often mildly cynical; even when we find Graves praising those things English that Brooke worshipped, we gather that he is not anxious to die for them, for he finds the prospect of life, even old age, rather good, if only for its own sake.

In his poem "1915," Graves assumes one of the stances that he commonly takes in his war poems. He addresses his listener:

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[13]Ironically, Siegfried Sassoon, whose war poetry is vastly different from Graves', shared many of these values with him. Their backgrounds were similar, and the two were friends. Graves addressed some of his war poems to Sassoon. cf. Sassoon's Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man and Graves' Goodbye to All That.

> Dear, you've been everything that I most
> lack
> In these soul-deadening trenches--pictures,
> books,
> Music, the quiet of an English wood,
> Beautiful comrade-looks,
> The narrow, bouldered mountain-track,
> The broad, full-bosomed ocean, green and
> black,
> And Peace, and all that's good.[14]

War is something that deadens the soul, so the poet looks beyond it to "Peace, and all that's good." And yet Graves is aware in these poems that this recurring vision of "all that's good" is the vision of a man in the trenches, and that his dream stands a good chance of never being realized. In "Over the Brazier" he recounts the dreams of the future of two of his comrades. One wants to go to Canada, the other to a "Coral Isle," and the speaker himself wants:

> . . . A cottage in the hills,
> North Wales, a cottage full of books,
> Pictures and brass and cozy nooks
> And comfortable broad window-sills,
> Flowers in the garden, walls all white.
> I'd live there peacefully and dream and write.

But the speaker sees the dreams of his two friends wrecked by "Mad War" and despairs of his own hopes finding any happier issue. We find here a glimpse of Graves' profound pessimism: war is the shadowy destroyer and mocker of men's dreams. In "Dead Cow Farm," the depth of this pessimism

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[14]Robert Graves, Poems 1914-1926 (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1927).

is plain:

> An ancient saga tells us how
> In the beginning the First Cow
> (For nothing living yet had birth
> But elemental Cow on Earth)
> Began to lick cold stones and mud:
> Under her warm tongue flesh and blood
> Blossomed, a miracle to believe;
> And so was Adam born, and Eve.
> Here now is chaos once again,
> Primaeval mud, cold stones and rain.
> Here flesh decays and blood drips red,
> And the Cow's dead, the old Cow's dead.

This is the pessimism, bordering on cynicism, which, in his poem "Goliath and David," has Goliath, "steel-helmeted and grey and grim," kill the plucky David who had trusted in God to give him the victory. Young David is no match for the brute, for "God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut."[15]

Perhaps the most direct view of war which Graves recorded in the poems which he wrote between 1915 and 1919 is the brief fragment which he included at the end of his "Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon," a fanciful verse reverie in which Graves looks forward to "apres-la-guerre" when he and Sassoon will travel through the world to recuperate from the war. This fragment is not formally connected with the text of the poem which precedes it, but provides a sharply focussed glimpse of reality which contrasts shockingly with the playful fantasy of the poem which comes before:

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[15]This poem is dedicated to Lieut. David Thomas, one of Graves' war comrades, who was killed in 1916.

> . . . to-day I found in Mametz wood
> A certain cure for lust of blood,
> Where propped against a shattered trunk
> In a great mess of things unclean
> Sat a dead Boche: he scowled and stunk
> With clothes and face a sodden green:
> Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
> Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

Graves seldom presents as direct a picture of war as this, but the reader now and then gets the impression that this kind of thing, left unsaid, lies behind the somewhat abstracted observations of his war poetry. But one must look elsewhere for a sustained direct view of the First World War in poetry.

With the poems of Edmund Blunden we approach a more direct view of war. His poems have a strong pastoral emphasis, and war frequently appears in them as a destroyer of the peaceful countryside. "A Farm near Zillebeke" illustrates this theme exceptionally well:

> Black clouds hide the moon, the amazement
> is gone;
> The morning will come in weeping and rain;
> The Line is all hushed--on a sudden anon
> The fool bullets clack and guns mouth again.
> I stood in the yard of a house that must die,
> And still the black hame was stacked by the
> door,
> And harness still hung there, and the dray
> waited by.
>
> Black clouds hid the moon, tears blinded me
> more.[16]

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[16] The Poems of Edmund Blunden (New York and London: Harper and Bros., n. d.)

The farmhouse that is soon to die, or has already died, is a recurrent image in Blunden's poems. The dominant theme of his poems is pity for all of the country things that have been ravished by war: trees that have been "murdered" and "shell-chopped," orchards that have been "starved."

But not all of Blunden's war poems are pastoral elegies that mourn the farms and trees that have been destroyed. In "Third Ypres," "The Welcome," and Pillbox," he deals with the death and madness that ensue when a shell strikes a concrete pillbox. These are narrative poems which present a clear and direct view of war: the rain, mud, gas, and death. "Third Ypres" ends:

> Still swept the rain, roared guns,
> Still swooped into the swamps of flesh and
> blood,
> All to the drabness of uncreation sunk,
> And all thought dwindled to a moan, Relieve!
> But who with what command can now relieve
> The dead men from that chaos, or my soul?

"Pillbox" tells of a man who is merely scratched by a shell fragment, but who goes mad and dies. Blunden does not moralize in these poems, but allows frank description to communicate the pity of the suffering and death of trench warfare.

In this context of the relative directness of their views of war, Edmund Blunden can best be recorded as a transitional figure among the British soldier poets of the First World War. Although much of his poetry treats war as a

destructive abstraction which disrupts the peaceful landscape, in some poems he does bring the battlefield itself into sharp focus, presenting the distinct details of the war in France as no one but a participant could have. Yet even in these latter poems, we find Blunden mournfully looking backward upon the people and things, once whole, which the war has destroyed, rather than concentrating his attention upon present reality. And this is why Blunden is properly placed with those soldier poets who looked beyond the battlefield in their poems, although he is close to those poets whose work grew out of a more direct view of war itself.

It must be emphasized that in many respects, the soldier poets grouped in this section are strange bedfellows. The war poetry of Robert Graves is in many ways different from that of Rupert Brooke, and Edmund Blunden's war poetry is different from that of both of them. This is so because the classification which comprises all of these poets is a negative one. That is, they are considered together here because of what they did <u>not</u> do in their poetry: they did not view war directly, but looked beyond it. This grouping has meaning, therefore, only in connection with the group of soldier poets to be considered next, a group of British soldiers who did look directly at the First World War and tried to record in their poems what they saw.

War Without Glory: The view of war in the poetry of W.W. Gibson, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon

In the second group of First World War soldier poets to be considered here we find a diversity of approaches to the event which put them into uniform, but a common willingness to look at war directly without avoiding the facts of the conflict. In their pointed and candid presentation of these facts in their poetry (in many cases these facts are their poetry), this group is different from the first. This is not to say that this latter group is completely uniform in its reaction to these facts of war, but only that its members did not turn aside from these facts or fix their attention upon things that lay beyond them. Hence we have, for example, the fact of the disorientation of a soldier in battle in Gibson, the fact of a burying party in Rosenberg, the fact of the effects of exposure in the trenches in Owen, the fact of a counterattack in Sassoon. The development of subject within the poems of this group is most often from the particular to the general, and the particular is frequently so vivid that there can be no question of its having been evoked by personal experience. It is this involvement in the facts of the battlefield that characterizes this group.

No British poet of the First World War was more involved in the thoughts and feelings of his fellow soldiers than Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. His recurring theme is the mad-

ness that results from the soldier's inability to come to terms with the reality of war, the disorientation that takes place when he cannot make the mental adjustment necessary to cope with the shift from the relative calm of his previous life to the maelstrom of the battle. In this emphasis upon the destructiveness of war, Gibson is similar to Blunden, but Gibson is more concerned with the animal-like confusion of the individual soldier than Blunden. Gibson's soldier appears mystified about why he is where he is and why he is doing what he is doing. He even wonders who he is. Gibson's "Back" illustrates a soldier's bafflement about his very identification:

> They ask me where I've been,
> And what I've done and seen.
> But what can I reply
> Who know it wasn't I,
> But someone just like me,
> Who went across the sea
> And with my head and hands
> Killed men in foreign lands . . .
> Though I must bear the blame
> Because he bore my name.[17]

When the bafflement of the above poem goes beyond a certain point, it becomes madness. Although this kind of madness is the theme of many of Gibson's poems, it is perhaps best illustrated in a poem entitled simply "Mad." It is evident that the schoolboy simile in the second stanza has striking appropriateness here; the real source of the madness is the

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[17]Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, Battle and Other Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

disorientation of the schoolboy turned soldier:

> Neck-deep in mud,
> He mowed and raved--
> He who had braved
> The field of blood--
>
> And as a lad
> Just out of school
> Yelled: "April fool!"
> And laughed like mad.

Gibson's attention seldom wanders from the battle and those involved in it. The title he chose for his collected war poems was, appropriately, "Battle." The only relief from war in these poems is when the mind of the soldier wanders back home to the cow he left sick or the beer tap he left running, but even here the present reality impinges upon the soldier's reverie in the form of bullets or shells and sudden death. It is this disorienting and ironic juxtaposition of the calm of the past with the deadly furor of the present that is the essence of Gibson's war poems.

The poems of Wilfred Owen were also concerned with the reality of war in the trenches. In the preface to his poems, quoted in its entirety above, Owen says of his book, "The subject of it is War, and the pity of War." And Owen goes on to say in this preface that his poems must be a truthful representation of present reality so that they might warn the next generation of the true nature of war. Whether Owen's poems were written with this mission in mind, or

whether he projected this purpose upon them after they were written, does not matter here. The important thing is that Owen's war poems convey a clear and direct picture of war by a poet who was intimately concerned with recording his view of war and his emotional reactions to it. His reaction was pity, and this sets the tone of his war poems.

In his poem "Arms and the Boy," Owen takes his typical stance. His point of view is external; the speaker in the poem stands aside, looking with frank pity upon the boy who is emblematic of all youth under arms:

> Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
> How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
> Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
> And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.
>
> Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
> Which long to muzzle in the hearts of lads.
> Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
> Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.
>
> For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple,
> There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
> And God will grow no talons at his heels,
> Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.[18]

The theme here is the unnaturalness of making soldiers of youths. The boy is without nationality and completely innocent. He is not necessarily English; he could as well have

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[18]Wilfred Owen, Poems, ed. with a memoir and notes by Edmund Blunden (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949).

been German. The most animated and vital entities in the poem are the implements of war. They demand the reader's attention much more than either the youth who wields them, whose "teeth seem for laughing round an apple," or "the hearts of lads" which receive their fatal thrusts. The boy who tries the bayonet-blade and the bullet-heads is a victim, but Owen does not seek to fix the blame beyond this: the boy is simply a victim of war.

Owen's poems are filled with the instruments of war and their victims. To him, these things are synonymous with war. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is characteristic:

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.
> No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
> Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,--
> The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
> And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
>
> What candles may be held to speed them all?
> Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
> Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
> The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
> Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
> And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The instruments here are the guns, the rifles, and the shells. Owen sees the victims dying like cattle without civilized observances, and the poet's words are full of pity.

But Owen does not always stand aside to view the victims of war in his poems. In "Exposure" and "Spring Of-

fensive," from the point of view of a participant, he presents the misery of the trenches. "Exposure" opens:

> Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east
> winds that knive us . . .
> Wearied we keep awake because the night is
> silent . . .
> Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of
> the salient . . .
> Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious,
> nervous,
> But nothing happens.

In this poem Owen describes the confused despairing thoughts of soldiers in the trenches in winter, their questioning why they are there, why God permits them to be there, and the refrain of the poem shifts from questioning to doubt and finally back to the only certainty, which is not a certainty at all: "But nothing happens."

Beyond clear description of war and frank pity for its victims, there is often in Owen's poetry an ironic commentary upon the glorious myths of war. In this respect, Owen goes beyond Gibson, who is content to stop after placing his rabbit-eyed youth in the insane environment of battle. In one of his poems he calls the ringing phrase dulce et decorum est pro patria mori "the old Lie," after he describes the blood that comes "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" of the victim of a gas attack. But although he is moved to irony by the enormity of war's capacity to cause grief, suffering, madness, and death, he does not seek to place the blame upon anything more specific than war itself. His

concern does not penetrate more deeply than war and its victims. As much as it might seem to the contrary, there is implicit in Owen's poems a faith in humanity that seldom wavers. He believed that once the horror of war was known, no sane person would permit it to recur. According to his own words, he made it his mission to show the sane people of the world what war truly is. He had implicit faith that this would be enough.

In the war poems of Siegfried Sassoon we find a full-blown bitterness and cynicism that contrasts with the outraged faith of Owen's war poetry, even though it is evident that Sassoon's work grew out of a similar experience. While Owen hoped to awaken horror and pity in his audience with his reportage of war and his commentary upon it, Sassoon used a similar reportage as a club to beat a distorted view of the war out of his audience. This club of Sassoon's is made of irony, ridicule, and simple complaint. The pattern of Sassoon's poem, "Attack," is typical of much of his war verse. The poem opens with simple reportage of the sequence of events that occurs before and during an attack. The poet then comments upon these events: time is indifferent to them and the hope of the soldiers is dying. The poem ends with an outraged complaint:

> At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
> In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
> Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke
> that shroud

> The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
> Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire,
> The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clum-
> sily bowed
> With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-
> gear,
> Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling
> fire.
> Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with
> fear,
> They leave their trenches, going over the
> top,
> While time ticks blank and busy on their
> wrists,
> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling
> fists,
> Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop![19]

In "Counterattack," another Sassoon poem, although the pattern of development is similar to that of "Attack," Sassoon is more subtle as he uses irony rather than open complaint. His irony in this poem, as in many others, is directed at the comfortable members of the British Establishment, who, he felt, were indifferent to the suffering in the trenches. Here he uses their chins-up thumbs-up manner of speech in a description of misery and death. In the first stanza, the speaker describes the tired troops' preparation to fend off the inevitable counterattack:

> We'd gained our first objective hours before
> While dawn broke like a face with blinking
> eyes,
> Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke.
> Things seemed all right at first. We held
> their line,

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[19]Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems 1908-1956 (London: Faber and Faber, n. d.).

> With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,
> And clink of shovels deepening the shallow
> trench.
> The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy
> legs
> High-booted, sprawled and groveled along the
> saps;
> And trunks, face downward in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sand-bags, loosely
> filled;
> And naked, sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
> Bulged, clotted heads, slept in the plastering
> slime.
> And then the rain began--the jolly old rain!

"The jolly old rain!" This ironic cheeriness of speech continues in the poem as the onslaught of the Germans begins: "And then, of course, they started with five-nines/ Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud."[20]

The objects of Sassoon's irony are all those who are insensitive to what the front-line British soldier had to bear, the chauvinistic politicians, the overfed clergy, the selfish women. But Sassoon does not blame these people for anything more than their insensitivity; he does not blame them for causing the war or even for permitting the kind of world to exist in which war is inevitable. Sassoon's soldier poems are far more outraged than they are accusing. And, like Owen, frankness was important to Sassoon's purpose. He wanted to disillusion the naive and shame the insensitive as he bluntly reported the war in France.

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[20]See Alan Page, "Siegfried Sassoon: Keeping the home fires burning," Stand, IV, No. 3, 39. This article treats Sassoon's attacks on the Establishment.

Frankness, but neither irony nor complaint, is the striking attribute of the "Trench Poems" of Isaac Rosenberg. These poems differ from those of Owen and Sassoon in their almost complete involvement in the experience of battle. Rosenberg does not stand aside long enough for a preachment or ironic comment in the manner of Sassoon, nor does he stand aloof to survey the victims of war in the manner of Owen. While Owen shows great pity for the soldiers about whom he writes, Rosenberg shows an enveloping sympathy. There is implicit in Rosenberg's war poetry a sense of the imbalance of mankind which allows the destruction of life, and the consequent need for what one critic calls a "realignment" of human values.[21]

In "Dead Man's Dump," perhaps his most startling poem, Rosenberg approaches his subject with direct seriousness and compassion. The subject of this poem is more horrible, perhaps, than any which came out of the First World War. In it, Rosenberg presents a vivid picture of a vast pile of dead at a crossroads, increasing in size as the battle goes on. The speaker of the poem rides in the collecting cart which carries the dead to the dump:

> The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
> But pained them not, though their bones
> crunched,
> Their shut mouths made no moan.

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[21]Jon Silkin, Isaac Rosenberg 1890-1918. A catalogue of an exhibition held at Leeds University May-June, 1959, together with the text of unpublished material (Leeds: Partridge Press, 1959), p. 3.

They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.[22]

The speaker relates these dead to the "maniac Earth" to which they are returning:

Earth has waited for them,
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!

The speaker's tone in this poem expresses great wonder and bafflement at a situation in which human lives in great quantity are abruptly destroyed and bodies are piled in a heap. The poem is the record of a man's reaction to such an unthinkable situation, a record which tries to capture and fix the dazzling insanity of it all. But the poem is not ironic; the poet lacks the detachment that is necessary for irony. And in this we see a major difference between Rosenberg and Sassoon and Owen. Sassoon needed far less horrible a situation than this to move him to irony. And even Owen, in "Dulce et Decorum Est," is bitterly ironic as he presents a scene similar to that of "Dead Man's Dump" in which a man who has been gassed is flung up on a hospital collecting wagon. Owen's poem ends:

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[22]The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg, ed. Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding, foreword by Siegfried Sassoon (New York: Schocken Books, 1949).

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted
> lungs
> Bitten as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
> My friend, you would not tell with such high
> zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro Patria mori.

Rosenberg could not have written in this way. His poetry shows him to have been so involved with his "brothers dear," that he could not have flung their deaths in the face of his listener.

Rosenberg's anti-war conviction, his involvement in the community of human suffering, and his sense of the imbalance of man can all be found in his poem, "Break of Day in the Trenches." He addresses himself here to a "queer sardonic rat" whose "cosmopolitan sympathies" draw him from the German to the English trenches, among the

> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
> Less chanced than you for life,
> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

In the midst of the chaos of war, the poet picks a poppy from the parapet in front of the trench and places it behind his ear, remarking

> Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
> Drop, and are ever dropping;
> But mine in my ear is safe,
> Just a little white with the dust.

Rosenberg's pervasive sense of man's lack of balance is perhaps most clear in his poem, "Returning, We Hear the Larks." Man, who should enjoy the beauty in his life in peace and safety, is forced to be constantly wary of the insane forces that would destroy him. He describes in his poem a group of men returning to their camp where they anticipate "a little safe sleep." As they approach the camp, they hear the song of larks come out of the night sky. For a moment they experience "joy--joy--strange joy," but when they reflect, the joy vanishes because it cannot exist side by side with the terror of war:

> Death could drop from the dark
> As easily as song--
> But song only dropped,
> Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
> By dangerous tides,
> Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no
> ruin lies there,
> Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

The view of war among the foregoing soldier poets--Gibson, Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg--is remarkably similar. All of them looked upon the war as it was fought in the trenches with a sustained candor. There is a minimum of ruminative philosophizing in this poetry. The reader is constantly aware that this poetry is the direct result of the poets' participation in the war in the trenches. But beyond the directness of their view of war, there are other ingredients in their poetry which binds this group together.

All of this poetry is anti-war. Owen and Sassoon

raised a cry of outrage at the inhumanity of war; the anti-war sentiment in Gibson and Rosenberg is less vociferous, but no less certainly present. But this poetry is also primarily concerned with men as human beings rather than with social and political issues. And it is out of this concern for men that the anti-war sentiment comes. The poetry is anti-war because war causes men to suffer and die, because war is inhumane, rather than because war is the manifestation of a social or political evil. Sassoon attacks the clubmen of the British Establishment because they seem to him insensitive to the suffering of the British troops in France and not because they belong to the wrong political party.

"Anti-war" is a more accurate term to describe the bulk of this poetry than "pacifistic." These poets seem to have written as they did in reaction to what they saw on the battlefield rather than out of any self-conscious set of beliefs. A possible exception to this is the poetry of Rosenberg from which we infer a belief in the lack of balance in man which causes in him an insane bellicosity. But a deep involvement in human suffering is a much more striking attribute of Rosenberg's work than any carefully articulated philosophical position.

Because the British soldier poets of this latter group spoke from no clearly defined social, political, or philosophical position, they did not propose how war could be avoided. Their only certainty was that it must be avoided.

Although there is a note of accusation and blame in Sassoon's poetry, the reader gathers that there is a desperate shifting of the objects of this. He never settles on a single person or institution that he holds blameworthy of starting or sustaining the war. His poetry is angry, but the objects of his anger are vague. Sassoon, along with the rest of these poets, is concerned more with effect than cause, more with present reality than abstract speculation.

The unity of theme and subject, then, of the war-without-glory group of soldier poets is striking. The war about which all of these poets wrote appears as unmistakably the same war. The pervasive emotional reaction to the war among these poets is pity for those who suffer and die. Their poetry is anti-war, but there is no concerted attempt to blame anyone or anything but war itself. One writer attempts to account for the unity within this group in the following manner:

> This then, was the reason that poets with the temperament of a Sassoon, an Owen, and a Read could not have hoped to escape setting down the terror and hideousness of the First World War, for no matter what position they held or what branch they fought in, the experience was much the same, for as long as they were committed to combat, each branch, each position, bore the same experience. In short, the First World War was an infantry war, and this underlay the apparent unity in theme and subject of these poets' First World War verse.[23]

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[23]Stephen H. Goode, "British War Poetry of the Second

This explanation is plausible, I think, as far as it goes. But it can account for the differing form that the poetry of Graves or Seeger takes only by attributing to these poets a different temperament, since they also participated in an infantry war. When we begin to attribute varying temperaments to poets, we find ourselves in the area of after-the-fact speculation and subject to all of the pitfalls therein. But aside from this, the observation that the uniformity of the war experience of most of the British soldier poets of the First World War brought about a like uniformity in the broader aspects of their poetry appears sound. My purpose, here, however, is not to account for the dark poetry of this group, but to describe it sufficiently to be able to compare and contrast it with the American soldier poetry of the Second World War in order to provide a background for the main body of this study.

The World at War: The view of war in the American soldier poetry of the Second World War

Because the themes of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War will be closely studied subsequently, this section will be comparatively brief and general, emphasizing the overall character of this American poetry.

Early in the Second World War, Babette Deutsch, while

World War" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Pennsylvania, 1958), p. 9.

contrasting the British poetry of the First World War with the still fragmentary poetry of the Second, made the following observation:

> In the fourth scene of that moving and muddled drama, "There Shall Be No Night," Miranda Valkonen says to the young American soldier poet: "When I was a young girl my greatest hero was Rupert Brooke. Maybe now that you're here--and have all this experience--maybe you'll write as he did." The young man demurs: "I'm afraid I could never write like Rupert Brooke even if I were that good. He was always singing of the heroism of war." "And you see it as unheroic?" "Yes, Mrs. Valkonen, I do." It is doubtful whether many young American poets would confess to an admiration for Brooke. Moreover, it was before Brooke had any experience of war that he glorified it in verse. Had he lived, his disillusionment might have found an expression that would have won him the suffrage of the moderns. In any event, it is certain that the attitude of the poets of 1941 is different from that of the poets of 1914.[24]

Further in the article, this distinction is expanded in connection with an anthology of Second World War poetry:

> Nowhere in the book, nor in any recent poem I have read elsewhere, is there an affirmation comparable to that with which Brooke and his fellows greeted the war of 1914. Nor is there the savage indignation of the later years; only great pity and a new weariness, for boredom appears to be not the least of this war's cruelties.
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> There is an ancient Egyptian poem in which the singer recites the troubles that attend every sort of worker, the blacksmith, the car-

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[24]Babette Deutsch, "War Poetry Then and Now," The New Republic, CIV, No. 16 (April 21, 1941), 565.

> penter, the fisherman, and declares: "I have seen violence, I have seen violence, give thy heart after letters." The poets of 1941 have seen violence undreamed of by the men of 1914. If they give their hearts after letters it is because they know that poetry, though it is no substitute for anti-aircraft guns, is the stronghold of that awareness which alone gives the guns a meaning. But at this juncture the poets can do no more than celebrate awareness, and in troubled accents. Unlike their predecessors, they understand that this war is no joyous adventure, no crusade, but a dirty job, and that the winning of the war may be less difficult than the winning of the peace.[25]

This early appraisal of Second World War poetry, as general as it is, is a tribute to the writer's perceptiveness. What she says here of all Second World War poetry in English holds true for American soldier poetry throughout the war. Even if we question her view of the cause for the form that this poetry took, we must grant that she has described well the poetry itself.

Unlike the British soldier poets of the First World War, the American soldier poets of the Second cannot be divided into a small number of distinct groups on the basis of their views of the war. War to them appears as a far more diffuse thing than the bayonet thrust and the artillery barrage which Wilfred Owen saw from his point of view within the trenches of France in 1914. The American soldier, and in this war we must add the sailor and airman, saw the war from

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[25] Ibid., p. 566.

a vast variety of points of view. The war was fought on many fronts; it was far more a world war in this sense than the 1914 War had been. And the soldier's war experience was more than geographically diffuse. He was sometimes a specialist, sitting before a typewriter or reading gauges or navigating an airplane. Each infantryman at the front needed a host of these specialists to support him. The war for many, as Babette Deutsch observed, was boring.[26] This variety of experience, boring and otherwise, is reflected in the American soldier poetry.

In addition to these reflections of the diffusion of geographical locations and jobs in the American poetry, there is also an awareness of the complexity of philosophical, social, and political issues intrinsic in or provoked by the conflict. In this sense it can be said that this poetry is more "intellectual" than any written by the British soldiers of the previous generation. At times, indeed, it appears that some of the American poetry is concerned solely with one or another of these intellectual issues. But it would be inaccurate, I think, to divide arbitrarily this kind of expression from that which deals with the physical conflict itself. To the American soldier poets of the 1940's, war had many

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[26]Two of the navy novels of World War II emphasize this killing boredom. Thomas Heggen's Mister Roberts presents it amusingly, while Herman Wouk's Caine Mutiny presents it as a constant source of tension. In each book, a major character tries hard to escape the stultification of his particular job by seeking a transfer to another

faces; it was fought on many planes of experience. The soldier poet who wrote about man's hunger for power felt that he was viewing war just as directly as the poet who wrote about the bombing of a city, but on a different level of abstraction.

Thus far the differences cited between the British soldier poetry of the First World War and the American poetry of the Second can be accounted for largely by the differences between the two wars in their extent and complexity. But there are further differences which cannot be accounted for as simply. The tone of the American soldier poetry, as Babette Deutsch points out, is weary, in contrast with both the exuberance of Brooke and the "savage indignation" of Owen and Sassoon. None of the American poets echoes the awful wonder of Isaac Rosenberg before the overwhelming profusion of the war dead: "Earth! They have gone into you!" Many of these later American poets write almost as if they had been through it all before. It is an end-of-innocence poetry. Pity is there, as it was in the earlier British poetry, but this, too, is more diffuse. In the British poetry, the suffering trench soldier was the primary object of the poet's pity. But the objects of the American soldier poet's pity are more diverse, and the reasons for his pity

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ship more directly involved in combat. To them, the danger of a fighting ship is preferable to the boring routine of a support vessel.

extend beyond simple suffering.

In brief, then, the American soldier poet of the Second World War viewed war as a much more diffuse and complex phenomenon than did his British counterpart of the First.[27] The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to the discussion of an illustrative sampling of the American soldier poetry written during the course of the Second World War. For this purpose I have chosen selections from the work of three poets, Karl Shapiro, Richard Eberhart, and Randall Jarrell. These poets are selected partly because of their service in different branches of the armed forces; Shapiro was in the Army, Eberhart in the Navy, and Jarrell in the Army Air Force. In addition, all three are well known, and each wrote many war poems while in the service.

No American poet who wrote while in the armed forces during the Second World War showed more unwillingness to assume the role of "war poet" than did Karl Shapiro. In spite

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[27] On p. 9 of his aforementioned dissertation, Stephen Goode discusses the unity of the British war poetry (not only soldier poetry) of the Second World War. He sees in it a greater resignation and cynicism than that shown by the First World War poets, an almost complete lack of the pained outcry of the First World War, and an insistence on the rebirth of mankind in a spirit of greater love. This cynicism of the poets of the Second World War, according to Mr. Goode, "is a cynicism that rises not from the war but from life itself, and the terror of war became to them only a part of the larger terror of living." There are clear parallels between the British and American soldier poetry of the Second World War, but these cannot be developed here.

of this expressed resistance, however, his war poems appear in many important respects as very much a part of the body of poetry written by his fellow servicemen during the war. In them, war appears as a complex historical phenomenon, awesome in its proportions. These poems also show an awareness of weighty intellectual issues evoked by the war. But the uniqueness of Shapiro's war poetry, and that which is most expressive of his resistance to being branded a "war poet" is found in his reaction to this complex situation of a world at war. This reaction was to turn inward and produce a poetry that was intensely personal. In the introduction to V-Letter, a volume that contains most of his war poems, Shapiro explains his position:

> Since the war began, I have tried to be on guard against becoming a "war poet." We know very well that the most resounding slogans ring dead after a few years, and that it is not for poetry to keep pace with public speeches and the strategy of events. We learn that war is an affectation of the human spirit, without any particular relation to "values."[28]

Because Shapiro sees war deeply rooted in the human spirit, he shies away from comment in his poetry upon the issues that other poets sometimes ventured to comment upon. Any such comment, he feels, must be oversimplified.

"Troop Train" illustrates Shapiro's view of war as in-

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[28]Karl Shapiro, V-Letter and Other Poems (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), p. vi.

evitable and his resignation in its inevitability. The poem opens with a description of the slow passing of a troop train through a town, and the reactions to it of a variety of people:

> It stops the town we come through. Work-
> ers raise
> Their oily arms in good salute and grin.
> Kids scream as at a circus. Business men
> Glance hopefully and go their measured
> way.
> And women standing at their dumbstruck
> door
> More slowly wave and seem to warn us back,
> As if a tear blinding the course of war
> Might once dissolve our iron in their sweet
> wish.

From this point in the poem, the train becomes a timeless metaphoric vehicle of war, moving "through crummy continents and days," carrying to life or death "the good-bad boys of circumstance and chance." To Shapiro, the soldiers are not the victims of a sick society or warped values, but simply the victims of chance. War happened to catch them rather than others. But there is no outrage here--no outcry against a world which periodically places the lives of its youth in the balance of chance. This is simply the way things are. War is part of the way things are. The last stanza of the poem treats this shell game of survival or death unforgettably:

> Trains lead to ships and ships to death or
> trains,
> And trains to death or trucks, and trucks
> to death,
> Or trucks lead to the march, the march to
> death,
> Or that survival which is all our hope;

> And death leads back to trucks and trains
> and ships,
> But life leads to the march, O flag! at
> last
> The place of life found after trains and
> death
> --Nightfall of nations brilliant after war.[29]

Shapiro does not take a completely pessimistic view of chance here--the soldier does have hope for survival and happiness.

In "Christmas Eve: Australia," another aspect of Shapiro's view of war is apparent. In this poem, he self-consciously turns away from the complex issues of the war. Feeling the crushing weight of war, but despairing of finding his own answer and rejecting the answers which others think they have found, he turns inward. This turning inward is clear in the second stanza of the poem:

> I smoke and read my bible and chew gum,
> Thinking of Christ and Christmas of last
> year,
> And what those quizzical soldiers standing
> near
> Ask of the war and Christmases to come,
> And sick of causes and the tremendous blame
> Curse lightly and pronounce your serious
> name.

Rather than ignoring "causes and the tremendous blame," the speaker has become sick of them. Rather than insensitivity, there is weariness here. The speaker shows that he has considered the overwhelming issues, and that the frustration in

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[29]Karl Shapiro, Poems, 1940-1953 (New York: Random House, 1953).

the face of grave issues has created this tone of weariness and resignation.

Karl Shapiro's struggle to find a personal expression while participating in a bloody mass conflict is a source of tension in his war poetry. This tension is illustrated in an exchange of published verse-letters between him and Selden Rodman which appeared in the New Republic in 1943. Rodman, also in the army, was stationed in the United States when he directed the first verse-letter to Shapiro in the Pacific. The poem is built upon a series of questions involving many of the issues evoked in the mind of the sensitive man by the war. The first stanza follows:

> Karl, from your beachhead on that hollow
> island,
> Under the world's waist, with its eager
> people
> Whose past is yesterday, and who, like
> us,
> Quarry the future out of hard sensation--
> Tell me the score: Are men more nearly
> brothers
> Under an iron heaven? Is the heart
> "Made great with shot"--or hard? We
> soldiers, Karl,
> Are lonely men who cannot be alone.
> Is Superman still our hero? Or does war,
> The inglorious kind, make ranks and
> races one?

Rodman continues with his questions, some of which are ironic: What faith sustains the sensitive man in a world which seems meaningless? Is a confused America, full of injustice,

> . . . The land of promise
> The poets hope, the politicians roar
> And the radio builds its sordid sales upon?

But the poem ends with hopeful affirmation: a new America can be built upon love. The war can be made to mean something:

> America, which died or our neglect,
> Out of our sufferings can be reborn.
> Distance unites us. War engenders love
> No less than hate: the edge of what we are
> Tuned to a prop's pitch on that terrible thinness.[30]

The view of the world at war in this poem, and the poet's reaction to it, are typical of much of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War. The war appears as far more than a conflict of arms; it is indicative of a sickness in society brought on by hatred and indifference; it will mean something only if society is changed as a result of it to something more worthy of man's better nature; and the sickly America, the sickly world, must be reborn in a spirit of love and understanding among human beings.

Karl Shapiro's answer to the above letter was weary. Unwilling to crusade, unwilling to see things as completely black or white, he writes a poem which contrasts with Rodman's. But the difference between these two poems is largely a matter of reaction to a similar view of war. Shapiro's reaction to the issues that Rodman's poem raises

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[30]Selden Rodman, "V-Letter to Karl Shapiro in Australia," New Republic, CVIII, No. 24 (June 14, 1943), 789.

is far more private and personal than his correspondent's. Shapiro first disclaims any authority to give answers to the big questions that Rodman puts to him:

> No, I am not your New Guinea bard,
> Not half heroic as you imply
> But anonymous like the other guy,
> Doing my duty, wondering why.

And the anonymity that Shapiro longs for means the freedom to react privately to the ugly world. He will not be in the vanguard of any crusade, for he does not know in which direction a crusade should embark. At the moment he is sure only of the great complexity and weight of the issues Rodman has brought up, and he expresses a guilty wish to avoid pronouncement upon them. He declines to answer Rodman's question whether men have become more nearly brothers in time of war: "this," he says, "asks for inspired synthesis." But he tries to answer another question that Rodman puts, whether man is caught in Marxian cycles, by saying:

> . . . I'd rather think we move
> Generally forward, not in a groove
> But eccentrically like Moses' band
> Threading its road to the Promised Land
> (Which venture failing--this is my clue--
> The old gave way and supplied the new).

Shapiro denies that Superman ever was an American god, and writes that he looks forward to a future neither of capitalist Utopia on one hand nor international man on the other, but a future which is more in keeping with human abilities, one in which each man has a "nice right emphasis on Number

One." He does not find distasteful but desirable such ordinary things as his image in a shaving mirror and his wife's eyes; he looks forward to a Chevrolet and a Guggenheim grant. But he says all this self-consciously and somewhat defensively. Thoroughly aware of the importance of the issues Rodman has placed before him, he avoids them not out of cowardice or undue selfishness, but out of a feeling of the inadequacy of himself or anyone else to comprehend them fully and to pronounce upon them responsibly:

> Look Selden, let's not follow the gleam;
> It's dynamite now to try to dream.
> I'm sorry. I'm letting you down I know,
> But I'm disappointing myself also.

In the final stanza of his letter, Shapiro repeats his plea for the privacy to pursue his human-sized goals:

> My visions are mine. Since I began
> I've wanted to be a private man,
> Pale in winter, in the summer tan.
> I want to retrace my steps and find
> The start of the maze within my mind,
> The exquisite patter of mankind.
> Quiet I want to grace my page,
> While toleration for a gauge
> To improve the manners of our age;
> And some day when the skies are fine
> And seas have lost their incarnadine
> Dinner with you, your wife and mine.[31]

Unwilling to be anything less than completely tolerant and balanced in his view of the world, even the world at war, Shapiro will not voice precipitate outrage or blame nor will he leap to oversimplified solutions. But perhaps more important than these demurs, there is implicit in Shapiro's

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[31]Karl Shapiro, "New Guinea Letter," New Republic, CIX, No. 2, (July 12, 1943), 46.

verse statement the conviction that his poetry must serve no master but himself: "My visions are mine." In the face of Rodman's plea to become politically and socially involved, to become a kind of versifying propagandist, Shapiro has written a defense of poetry as the visions of the "private man," whether he is a soldier or not. In "New Guinea Letter," Karl Shapiro shows that his respect for and understanding of the role of the poet is too great to permit him to become a "war poet" or "poet of social protest" or any other kind of poet. Labels like these seem to him far too restrictive of the poet's scope, and destructive of true poetry. We must credit the clarity of Shapiro's vision here, for the best American soldier poetry is that which seems to have resulted from a strictly individual view of war.

A reaction to war that is less personal than that of Karl Shapiro, is found in the war poems of Richard Eberhart. At the center of these poems is a sorrowful consciousness of the warlike nature of man himself. Where Shapiro appears resigned to the inevitability of war, not wishing to explore the issue further than this, Eberhart places the blame upon the animal in man which is fascinated with the infernal machines of war. There is a dichotomy in Eberhart's view of mankind at war; like Swift, he views individual men in one light, and the "beast" in man in another. Individual men are worthy of great pity, for they are the victims of the "beast" within the race of man. This dichotomy is evident

in "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment:"

> You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
> Would rouse God to relent; the infinite spaces
> Are still silent. He looks on shock-pried faces.
> History, even, does not know what is meant.
>
> You would feel that after so many centuries
> God would give man to repent; yet he can kill
> As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
> No farther advanced than in his ancient furies.
>
> Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?
> Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?
> Is the eternal truth man's fighting soul
> Wherein the beast ravens in its own avidity?
>
> Of Van Wettering I speak, and Averill,
> Names on a list, whose faces I do not recall
> But they are gone to early death, who late in school
> Distinguished the belt feed lever from the belt holding pawl.[32]

The evil in man cannot be purged for it is inextricably part of him. Yet Van Wettering and Averill as men must be pitied. They are the victims of "man's fighting soul," which schooled them in the instruments of destruction, in this case the components of a machine gun.

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[32]Richard Eberhart, Collected Poems 1930-1960 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

Eberhart's reaction to the "beast's" gaining the upper hand in the struggle for man is to lament the fall of a creature who could be noble, but who has been seduced by his craving for violence and destruction. A stanza from "The Preacher Sought to Find Acceptable Words" illustrates the poet's view of man's seduction and his reaction to it:

> Closeness to machines going fast gives man
> brazenness,
> Lags him back to brute-heart: who should be
> Full of moral imperatives does what he is
> told,
> Is cheerful, counts not the cost, gets in
> his licks.

As in the above excerpt, Eberhart's war poems are full of themes and images involving machines. Man the specialist, the scientist, the engineer, creates machines which corrupt his higher nature and render him incapable of thinking in anything but machine-like terms. The last three stanzas of "Dam Neck, Virginia," a poem which describes the effect upon the poet of watching anti-aircraft gunners practicing at night, illustrates this use of image and theme:

> The men are firing tracers, practising at
> night,
> Each specialist himself precision's in-
> strument,
> These expert prestidigitators press the
> luminence
> In knowledge of andignorance of their
> doing.
>
> They do not know the dream-like vision
> ascending
> In me, one mile away: They had not
> thought of that.

> Huddled in darkness behind their bright
> projectors
> They are the scientists of the skill to
> kill.
>
> As this sight and show is gentle and
> false,
> The truth of guns is fierce that aims at
> death.
> Of war in the animal sinews let us speak
> not,
> But of the beautiful disrelation of the
> spiritual.

The specialists who operate the guns have knowledge only of the mechanics of their specialty. They are ignorant of the effect their display has upon the poet who views it from a distance, and, more important, they are ignorant also of "the truth of guns." The "beast" in man is insensitive to everything but that which will satisfy its avidity for warfare.

Evaluated aesthetically, the poems of Richard Eberhart are among the best of the soldier poems of the Second World War. Like Shapiro, he maintains an individual point of view with regard to the subjects of his poetry. But his point of view is more autonomous and consistent than Shapiro's, and therefore seems even more distinctly his own. His speaker is always the deeply religious Christian who is struck with awe, not at the glory of God, but at the magnitude of man's ability to destroy spectacularly. The eloquent complexity of Eberhart's poetry is in the speaker's internal conflict between fascination with the devices of destruction which man creates and uses, and his awareness that modern

man is acting out the ancient role of Cain in a colossal new way. This is the dilemma of the soldier who pursues his craft diligently, yet who fears God. But because he is a Christian, the speaker of Eberhart's war poems holds out hope for man's redemption, a redemption that is the more marvellous for the enormity of man's sins against himself and God.

In contrast with both the unity of Richard Eberhart's view of war and the private reaction to war of Karl Shapiro, we find in Randall Jarrell a non-personal reaction to the war in a poetry that is tight with many tensions. Jarrell struggles with the issues of reality, guilt, fate, evil, and various combinations of these abstractions with mixed success.

The subject of Jarrell's "Port of Embarkation" is similar to Shapiro's in "Troop Train," but here Jarrell characteristically goes beyond Shapiro in his efforts to consider, on a non-personal level, the issues of war. In both poems the external action is similar: soldiers are being conveyed to the battle, by a train in Shapiro's poem and by ships in Jarrell's. But once both poets see this military migration as part of a continuum of similar movements throughout history, and once they establish a tone of almost hushed resignation in the presence of this timeless march, their reactions diverge. Jarrell's poem follows:

> Freedom, farewell! Or so the soldiers say;
> And all the freedoms they spent yesterday
> Lure from beyond the graves, a war away.
> The cropped skulls resonate the wistful lies
> Of dead civilians: truth, reason, justice;
> The foolish ages haunt their unaccepting eyes.
>
> From the green gloom of the untroubled seas
> Their little bones (the coral of the histories)
> Foam into marches, exultation, victories:
> Who will believe the blood curled like a moan
> From the soaked lips, a century from home---
> The slow lives sank from being like a dream?[33]

Here chance plays no part in the soldiers' fate. Their doom is certain as they flow into the timeless sea of death in war. The poem is placed outside of time. The embarkees are dead even as they are alive: their freedoms "lure from beyond the graves." It is not their heads that are cropped in the G.I. haircut, but their skulls, and their skulls "resonate the wistful lies of dead civilians." The poet cynically sees the dead as the victims of the high-sounding lies of politicians, also dead. But in the context of this poem it does not matter, for the politicians always lie and the soldiers always march to their death and become the nameless substance of human history.

In "Eighth Air Force," Jarrell deals with guilt. An

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[33]Randall Jarrell, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

old moral and religious issue is implicit in this poem: are men who kill the enemy in war guilty of murder? But the issue in the Second World War was even more complex than this because the bombers flew six miles above the earth and killed soldier and civilian, enemy and non-enemy indiscriminately. The poem follows:

> If, in an odd angle of the hutment,
> A puppy laps the water from a can
> Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving
> Whistles O Paradiso!--shall I say that man
> Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?
>
> The other murderers troop in yawning;
> Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one
> Lies counting missions, lies there sweating
> Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.
> O murderers!....Still, this is how it's done:
>
> This is a war....But since these play, before they die,
> Like puppies with their puppy; since, a man,
> I did as these have done, but did not die--
> I will content the people as I can
> And give up this to them: Behold the man!
>
> I have suffered, in a dream, because of him,
> Many things; for this last saviour, man,
> I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?
> Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:
> I find no fault in this just man.

The bomber crew in their hutment does not look or act murderous. They sing, play a game, sleep, and worry about dying on the eve of their salvation. The moral problem of the speaker of the poem is that of Pontius Pilate, and the poem echoes the Gospel accounts of the examination of Christ. The speaker sits in judgment upon the bomber crew and disposes

of them as Pilate disposed of Christ. But he cannot wash his hands of guilt, for he is one with them, and their guilt or innocence is his own.

The widely anthologized "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is one of the most striking poems to come out of the Second World War. As compressed as Jarrell can make it, at its center is the issue of blame for the unfulfilled lives that war has cut short:

> From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur
> froze.
> Six miles from Earth, loosed from its dream
> of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare
> fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret
> with a hose.

The ball turret is a hemispherical blister of plexiglass that revolves in the belly of a bomber. In it, the gunner must assume the foetal position in order to operate the machine guns that protrude from the turret. In this poem the gunner tells how he fell from the protective womb of his mother into the metal and plexiglass womb of the "State," of society, all while asleep. And the "State" permits its unaware, unsuspecting, unfulfilled charge only one moment of the consciousness of what has been done with him before his death. The sleep of youth before the jolting awakening of war is one of the recurring themes of Jarrell's war poetry. In other poems, he speaks of mother-love, family-love, high school, all as soft dreams which dissolve before the hard

reality of how society uses its young members.

In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the sleeping gunner hunches like a foetus in the belly of the bomber while the cold of the high altitude turns his breath to ice on his fur collar. The gunner awakes from his sleep only at the instant of "black flak and the nightmare fighters," the instant of his death, and when the bomber lands, the remains of his expendable, interchangeable body are washed out of the turret with a steam hose so that the turret will be tidy enough for the next sleeper.

The point of view in the war poems of Jarrell seems less personal than that of Eberhart or Shapiro; because of this, the poet often seems somehow less committed to the content of his poems than the others. This impression is intensified by Jarrell's greater concern with effect: he tries to arouse his reader, often to shock him. Jarrell seeks to bring this effect about by startling imagery and wide allusiveness. As a result, his poems are sometimes merely loud rather than powerful, when the latter effect is what he is seeking.

Poet and Soldier: A conclusion and an introduction

Although only a brief sampling of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War has been discussed thus far; enough has been covered, I think, to give some indication of how this poetry contrasts with the best-known war

poetry of this century, the British soldier poetry of the First World War, and an overall view of this poetry before we move on to further discussion and thematic analysis in succeeding chapters.

Like the British war-without-glory poets of the First World War, the American poets of the Second looked directly on war as they knew it. But because of the various points of view with regard to the war, and the vastness and complexity of the conflict itself, war appears as if reflected by the bits of a shattered mirror rather than the integrated image of the trench war of the earlier poetry. Also like the war-without-glory poets, the Americans provided none of the "rousing songs to march by" that such writers as W. R. Benet looked for.[34] But at the same time, they cannot be described as simply anti-war, a description that does fit the earlier British poets. War presented so many different aspects to them that such a simple position would have been impossible.

A pertinent question here is to what extent does poetry provide an accurate view of the environment from which it springs. The answer to this question depends on what meaning we assign to the word "accurate." Since all individual views of the world are to some degree subjective, and we must receive our knowledge of a segment of human ex-

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[34] Supra, p. 12.

perience, whether it be a decade, an era, or a war, through this subjective medium, accuracy can be interpreted as common elements which run throughout a good sampling of individual views.

The American soldier poets of the Second World War covered a wide variety of experience in their poetry, but there are several clearly discernible themes which run through much of it. Can these themes be taken as expressive of the universal concerns of this generation of servicemen? It is a safe assumption that they can if they are reinforced by their recurring expression in letters, essays, and other writings of servicemen. In his introduction to Literature and the Image of Man, Leo Lowenthal takes the position that the creative writer is not only a reliable source of knowledge about his environment, but is more reliable than the writers of letters, autobiographies, and memoirs:

> The writer indeed develops believable characters and places them in situations involving interaction with others and with the society in which they live. He must present what he considers to be the essentials of the individual largely through the behavior of particular characters as they face concrete situations. Of course, the historian does not neglect such considerations. But he often depersonalizes the reaction of the individual to other individuals and to society in order to reveal the broader political, economic, and social forces at work. At the other extreme, memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and letters might be offered as sources of data at least as personal and specific as the contents of imaginative literature. In such personal documents, however, rationalization and, particularly, self-justification often blur

> or distort the image of social reality. It is the artist who portrays what is more real than reality itself.
>
> . . . The artist's desire to re-create the unique and the important often leads him to explore hitherto nameless anxieties and hopes. He is neither an articulate recording machine nor an inarticulate mystic, but a specialized thinker, and it is often only after his creative tasks have been performed that society recognizes its predicament.
> . . . . . .
>
> The writer achieves greatness because of the depth of his insight into the human condition. The fact that literary genius is rare and its audience small, presents in itself a sociological problem, but this in no way detracts from the writer's role as interpreter. More important is the question of his relation to various population groups, as a participant or observer. For if a group has no opportunity to express its own emotional or intellectual experiences, and is isolated from the literate sector of society, it may lie beyond the artist's range of observation. To the Greek tragedian, for example, the feelings and thoughts of slaves were of little significance. The contemporary American writer, on the other hand, has almost unlimited access to behavior on all social levels, from the industrial tycoon to the migrant farm laborer. The problem here is simply to be as clear as possible about the scope of the author's view.[35]

The scope of the soldier poet's view of the war itself and of the thoughts and feelings of his fellow servicemen in the American armed forces of the Second World War was in some ways extremely broad, in others limited. It was broad in that he was a serviceman, a participant in the war, as well as an observer of it. As such, the soldier poet shared with all sol-

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[35]Leo Lowenthal, Literature and the Image of Man: Sociological Studies of the European Drama and Novel, 1600-1900 (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957), pp. i-iv.

diers the remarkable sameness of military life. From the clothes he wore and the food he ate to the temporary buildings in which he lived and the regimen he was subjected to, his experience was shared by millions of his generation. He was nearly the same age as his companions, and looked upon his experiences from the point of view of young manhood. These things and a myriad of others, growing out of the uniformity which a modern industrialized nation is capable of imposing upon its armed forces in time of war, produced a soldier poet eminently able to speak for his fellow soldiers if he should choose to do so.

As has been discussed before, however, a modern industrialized nation at war also demands great specialization from its soldiers. Some servicemen lived out the war behind desks or in power stations. The Second World War saw a great diminution in the relative number of men who were directly engaged in combat with the enemy. The scope of vision of a soldier who served as a clerk or technician would seem to be small. But it should be borne in mind that the combat soldier's view of the war was also strictly limited. The infantry war in North Africa was different from the war in Italy, and the war in the South Pacific was different from both. The infantry was directly aided by a variety of other combat arms and services, the members of each of which, we may be sure, also saw the war from a distinctly limited point of view. The important thing is that specialization, with its concomitant limitation of the scope of observa-

tion, was the rule rather than the exception in the American armed forces of the Second World War. But if a new specialization worked for the isolation of points of view, there were many forces that worked for a universality of perception. There is little personal expression, artistic or otherwise, coming out of the American forces of the Second World War, which does not have wider relevance than to the individual writer. The Army Air Corps pilot's specialty was far different from that of the seaman on board the destroyer, but both were fighting the same war; were subject to constant danger; were far from home; were, in their separate ways, regimented; were close to each other in age. These common factors tended to produce a basic similarity of expression. The soldier novelists caught and recorded the community of experience in the service in their works. In The Naked and the Dead, Norman Mailer devotes several passages, which he calls "choruses," to the almost completely undifferentiated reactions of his soldiers to the everyday routine of war. No matter who voices them, the complaints, the desires, the frustrations are the same. Similarly, Irwin Shaw, in the following passage, records the universal utterances of soldiers in training during the Second World War:

> And they said, "They got all the rating in the Air Force."
>
> And they said, "You don't get killed in the Artillery."

> And they said, "This is the worst company at Fort Dix. They found the cook buggering a KP and they court-martialed him and reduced him to the rank of Staff Sergeant."
>
> And they said, "This is the first night I'll be sleeping away from my wife since 1931. I don't think I can manage it."
>
> And they said, "Hey, look, they give you condoms for nothing in this joint."
>
> And they said, "What do you know, you can buy the Bible for a quarter. Paper covered."
>
> And they said, "Oh, Christ, they're closin' up."[36]

This similarity of expression is found in several themes that pervade the body of American soldier poetry. Not every poet voices every theme, but it is safe to say that the theme of a given poem will seldom stand alone; it is much more likely that it will be echoed and re-echoed throughout the whole body of poetry. The method here will categorize the poetry by theme and not by poet. The work of several poets will therefore fall into each major thematic division. The obvious difficulty here is categorization. Strictly speaking, there are as many themes as there are poems; no two poems voice precisely identical themes. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, my resolution of this problem has been to set up a relatively small number of broad thematic categories which encompass a wide range of variations in theme. Each of these thematic categories has been assigned a chapter.

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[36] The Young Lions (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 255.

In each chapter, once the theme and its variations have been defined and illustrated, non-poetic material will be introduced. Here letters, personal narratives, and journalistic material will be discussed together with the poetry. The use of this non-literary material should not be construed as an attempt to survey exhaustively the ideas and feelings about war of the American servicemen; such a survey would obviously call for methods which go far beyond those employed here. The illustrative sampling of soldier thought given in the following chapters is meant to serve solely as a rough sensing device to determine whether a theme of the poets is expressed to any significant extent by the servicemen who were not poets. Such a method will not yield conclusions which can be supported statistically, but it will give a general indication of the relevance of the themes of the soldier poetry to the broader context of soldier thought.

My thematic analysis of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War has yielded four pervasive themes: (1) war is a historic entity that will immutably occur and recur as long as human beings remain as they have always been, (2) in modern war, the machine menaces man in many ways, (3) the soldier at war is disoriented with regard to home and reality, and (4) war occurs because the society of men is impotent to meet the task of preserving peace. In the following chapters, these themes will be developed under the titles, "Historic War," "Man and the Machine," "Home and the Problem of Reality," and "The Failure of Society."

CHAPTER II

HISTORIC WAR

The American soldier poetry of the Second World War has been called "weary." But this weariness should not be confused with battle fatigue. It is not the weariness that comes from being too long involved in battle, but rather from being involved in the retelling of an old story. And this accounts partly for why this poetry lacks the angry tone of the British First World War poetry. The American soldier poet may regret the recurrence of war throughout history, may wonder at man's inability to learn from his past mistakes, may sorrow in the death and suffering that war has produced over the years, but he does not lament these things with the shocked outcry of first discovery.

The theme of historic war is perhaps best exemplified in "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," by Richard Eberhart, the text of which has been included on page 62 above, where the poem has been discussed in another context.[1] The tone of this poem is astonishment and regret. The speaker of the poem questions the nature of man and the nature of God, but one suspects that he knows the answer within himself. It

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[1] Collected Poems 1930-1960 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 90.

is the nature of man to wage war. This is the reason men have fought through the centuries. This is the reason Cain killed his brother Abel, and this is the reason that young Van Wettering and Averill were killed in action after having been schooled in the tools of warfare. The belt feed lever and the belt holding pawl are parts of a machine gun which the novice gunner must learn in the same way that a schoolboy must learn the parts of speech. The irony of teaching young men the art of war in a kind of senior seminar is clear. That modern war is the culmination of a historic succession of bloody conflicts that victimize the young is the theme of this poem. Eberhart's attitude toward this affirmation is wonder that it should be so, and regret that it cannot be otherwise.

Another Eberhart poem, "A Ceremony by the Sea," expresses the same theme, although somewhat less explicitly. In this poem, a wartime Memorial Day ceremony is described. Although the ceremony is obviously a real one, taking place in a moment in time during the Second World War, the poet places it against a timeless background. The poem opens:

> Unbelievable as an antique ritual,
> With touch of Salamis and Marathon,
> Through what visions of rebirth and death
> At Atlantic's blue, hot, and sparkling edge--
>
> War's head is up, war's bloody head--
> The thirtieth of May beats through America
> With here the band, the boardwalk, and the
> speeches
> Masking with blaze the parted beach crowds.
> . . . . . .

But the poem makes clear that although this ceremony is a re-enactment of an ancient ritual, the deaths which it marks are present and real. As in "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," the dead are called by name, which has the effect of making their deaths seem more actual and immediate:

> . . . . . .
>
> With solemn tones the names are called,
> John Pettingill,
> Roger Ashcroft, Timothy O'Shaughnessy,
> Patrick
> O'Shaughnessy, Olaf Erickson, Alan
> Hieronymus,
> William Henry Cabe, Neil Campbell, Victor
> Giampetruzzi . . .
> . . . . . .

Toward the end of the poem, the past and the present are brought together in the image of the parents or grandparents of one of the dead soldiers:

> . . . . . .
>
> . . . And lastly I saw an aged Italian
> couple
> Too old to stumble through that catching
> sand,
>
> The backs of their bodies bent like man him-
> self,
> Ancient as Marathon or as Salamis,
> New and ancient as America,
> Diminish with laborious march toward the
> water.[2]

The tone of sad resignation here is more restrained than that of "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment." In this poem the speak-

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[2] Ibid., pp. 94-96.

or describes what he sees as a lull in man's historic slaughter of his own kind, during which he pays sorrowful tribute to the dead. But there will be more dead: the poet refers to the young servicemen who swim out to sea with the ceremonial floral tribute as the "new fated." These have yet to die.

In "Conscription Camp," Karl Shapiro presents war in a more limited historic scope than we have seen in the Eberhart poems discussed above. "Conscription Camp" is addressed to the Virginia countryside which has been the site of wars and preparations for wars throughout American history. The basic training camp in Virginia is viewed in a historic perspective: the Indian skirmishes, the French War, the American Revolution, the Civil War, and now the Second World War. The speaker asks:

> Is it for love, you ancient-minded towns,
> That on the tidy grass of your great graves
> And on your roads and riverways serene
> Between the corn with green flags in a row,
>
> Wheat amorous as hair and hills like breasts
> Each generation, ignorant of the last,
> Mumbling in sheds, embarrassed to salute,
> Comes back to choke on etiquette of hate?
> . . . . . .

The basic trainees are unmindful of the historic role which they are reenacting. They are aware only of the present. The poem ends:

> . . . . . .
> The sunrise gun rasps in the throat of heaven;
> The lungs of dawn are heavy and corrupt;

We hawk and spit; our flag walks through
the air
Breathing hysteria thickly in each face.

Through the long school of day, absent in
heart,
Distant in every thought but self we tread,
Wheeling in blocks like large expensive
toys
That never understand except through fun.[3]

The setting of Lincoln Kirstein's "Basic Training" is also Ft. Belvoir, the army installation in Virginia through which hundreds of thousands of trainees passed during World War II. In this poem, the speaker's attention is drawn to the relics of the Civil War in the Virginia countryside. He observes that this antique war seems ironically closer to him than the distant battles of the present war, and tries to imagine his training exercises as Civil War skirmishes. The poem concludes with the speaker's linking of the death of a childhood friend with the dead of the Civil War:

Yesterday, in some clippings from home I
chanced to have read Dick Hales is dead.
Slid his flakked plane sidewise low over Sussex
to spare a girls' school;
No trick for coward or fool
He had the presence of heart or head to make
his enormous bet.
Now is he hero, haloed and holy. His mummy
can get
Used to life's being cruel.

Dick: what is left of you now, with my civil
war please coincide.
Kidding aside,

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[3]Karl Shapiro, Poems, 1940-1953 (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 30.

Accept sprig of apple or plum which pitiless April has brought,
The meager tribute I've got;
First to fall among men I have known, always sure to get hit--
Or, after the fact, seems so--your crash links history a bit:
Minié ball, flak, grapeshot.[4]

Unlike the above poems, "Basic Training" presents the concept of historic war as something which must be accepted without undue sorrow. The tone of the poem is not really serious: the speaker plays at war and refuses to get upset by it. Dick Hales' mother will just have to learn to accept the cruelty of life. Dick Hales has been killed, but so have thousands of others throughout history. It is not sadness for the dead, but the interplay between past and present that moves this poem.

In all of the above poems it is only the speaker in the poem who seems aware of the mad or terrifying old story of war; the soldiers who appear in the poems are like dumb actors who unquestioningly act out their prescribed roles. Just who or what has prescribed this historic warlike role for man, the poets do not always tell us clearly. Richard Eberhart wonders if it is not just human nature to fight. Karl Shapiro and Lincoln Kirstein avoid consideration of the reasons for the recurrence of war throughout history. Randall

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[4] Rhymes of a PFC (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 13-15.

Jarrell, however, is more explicit in his explanation of the causes of war: wars are caused by sick societies and bad political systems. "Lullaby" is typical of Jarrell's attribution of cause:

> For wars his life and half a world away
> The soldier sells his family and days.
> He learns to fight for freedom and the
> State;
> He sleeps with seven men within six feet.
>
> He picks up matches and he cleans out
> plates;
> Is lied to like a child, cursed like a
> beast.
> They crop his head, his dog tags ring like
> sheep
> As his stiff limbs shift wearily to sleep.
>
> Recalled in dreams or letters, else forgot,
> His life is smothered like a grave, with
> dirt;
> And his dull torment mottles like a fly's
> The lying amber of the histories.[5]

Jarrell stresses in his poetry what he sees as the historic victimization of ordinary men by the ruling power in society. Ordinary men are treated like mere instruments of warfare and, down through the ages, are sent off to battle. Jarrell emphasizes this instrumentalization and dehumanization of men with recurrent startling images: the soldiers' heads are "cropped," their "dog tags ring like sheep." This historic exploitation of men by states is expressed in particularly bitter form in another Jarrell poem, "The Sick Nought:"

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[5]Randall Jarrell, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 163.

Do the wife and baby travelling to see
Your grey pajamas and sick worried face
Remind you of something, soldier? I re-
member
You convalescing washing plates, or
mopping
The endless corridors your shoes had
scuffed;
And in the crowded room you rubbed your
cheek
Against your wife's thin elbow like a pony.
But you are something there are millions of.
How can I care about you much, or pick you
out
From all the others other people loved
And sent away to die for them? You are a
ticket
Someone bought and lost on, a stray animal:
You have lost even the right to be con-
demned.
I see you looking helplessly around, in
histories,
Bewildered with your terrible companions,
Pain
And Death and Empire: what have you un-
derstood, to die?
Were you worth, soldiers, all that people
said
To be spent so willingly? Surely your one
theory, to live,
Is nonsense to the practice of the centuries.
What is demanded in the trade of states
But lives, your lives?--the one commodity.[6]

Jarrell's concern with effect is evident in the bitter tone of this poem, and the superior, sneering quality of the poem, even though it is meant to be ironic, strikes the reader as overdone. The problem of blame in the American soldier poetry will be treated in greater detail in the chapter on social criticism below.

Like Richard Eberhart's "Ceremony by the Sea," Hubert

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[6]Ibid., p. 168.

Creekmore's "Row Five, Grave Two" is about the war dead and ceremonies to mark their passing. But Creekmore questions the purpose of these deaths in his poem. In the first six stanzas, the various marked and unmarked resting places of dead soldiers are described. But then the poet asks:

> . . . . . .
> . . . Is no vital knot of purpose to swell,
> Triumphant cord of their mortal union
>
> Through a mad geography of divers
> Wars? We may have sealed in with these
> dead
> A purpose in their death. It may have fled
> Into the tomb, fearful of survivors'
>
> Apathy when peace has come, and guarded
> Its memorial against the hold
> Of minds that memorize control and gold.
> Its home is here, among the graves, green-
> swarded.
>
> Lacking sounder monuments, caretakers
> Will tend our hollow testimony, keep
> The grass trim, and let the pilgrim weep
> At "Row 5, Grave 2" in acres
>
> Of intentions solemnly entombed. We suffer
> No caretaker for our spirit, miss
> No money spent on graves and archives. This
> Is all that we who bury you can offer:
>
> A sign for country, a sign for love and pain,
> A sign for life. And if there be no more
> Than a neat plot and record, God rest you, for
> This is the ancient deathless tale again:
>
> A million young hearts gone for nothing.[7]

Because it is a long-established custom to remark at cere-

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[7]Hubert Creekmore, The Long Reprieve (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 26-27.

monies held in military cemeteries that the victims of war have not died in vain, Creekmore's poem has an ironic effect. But, unlike Jarrell's poem, the tone here is not outspokenly bitter. It seems that the consciousness of a historic tragedy of such proportions precludes bitterness. Throughout history men have died professing good intentions. Succeeding generations have honored their memory and solemnly marked their graves, but the purposeless war deaths have gone on.

Some Second World War poets saw recurring war as part of the larger cycles of history; war recurs, but then so does everything else. This view is often accompanied by a fatalism which denies the efficacy of man's striving toward anything. Typical of this kind of poem is Ray Smith's "To Love a Changing Shape:"

> Man--what can analytic mind
> See worth clinging to?
> Boisterous appetite or lewd or wrong,
> Truly generous moments few!--
> A shape changing like the changing days,
> His beloved a slim and changing form;
> His war a temporary cause
> Though as for the last of wars he arm.
>
> Still as if his love, as if his faith
> Knew farther than he sees,
> He loves; he arms again;
> Framing eternal hopes in flesh that dies.[8]

Here the speaker in the poem stands apart and comments upon

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[8]Poetry, LXVI, 2 (May, 1945), pp. 67-68.

the human lack of awareness of the mutability of all things, including himself. Man constantly renews his loving and fighting as though oblivious to the loving and fighting of generations that have come before. The poet sees this, but the mass of men do not. More explicitly fatalistic than Ray Smith's poem is one by William Jay Smith, "Columbus Circle Swing." This poem emphasizes the helplessness of human beings before the power of the forces that mold history. The last stanza and refrain follow:

> The world's an egg, ah through and through.
> It was decided for us.
> You can always change a line or two;
> you cannot change the chorus
>
> O where shall we go when it rains all day,
> and what shall we do when its over;
> will the day be as bright when it dawns
> at Calais
> As it was after dark at Dover?[9]

This use of a recurring refrain to reflect the recurring cycles of the world is also present in James E. Schevill's "Siege of Leningrad." This poem describes a newsreel account of the fighting at Leningrad which brings to the poet's mind a realization that wars have been fought and cities besieged since the beginning of time. Throughout the poem, the following refrain recurs: "Life is a fugue repeating war./Time is the calendar of scars."[10]

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[9] Poetry, LXIII, 6 (March, 1944), p. 327.

[10] Poetry, LXV, 4 (January, 1945), p. 179.

In all of the poetry which has been treated thus far, war has been presented abstractly. As it occurs in these poems, the Second World War could be any war in almost any period of history. Not only is this poetry not chauvinistic, but it does not present war as a dispute between the right side and the wrong side or the good side and the evil side. Most Second World War soldier poetry would take the position that war is powerless to overcome evil in any final way, even if the "right side" wins. In "The Trail," Edward Weismiller presents the theme that although this war might give evil a temporary setback, evil will certainly assert itself again, and war after war will occur in the future. Evil appears as a fugitive monster in the final stanza:

> And you will come, historian and traveler,
> And speak our names, and say we did not fail,
> And say: The monster here fled from his cavern;
> Here: here is his trail.[11]

Even though our war has driven the monster out of the cavern, the monster will live to plague future generations.

A variation of the historic war theme is the poem that conveys the speaker's feeling that he is involved in a scene that somehow has been played many times before. Harry Brown,

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[11]Oscar Williams (ed.), The War Poets (New York: John Day, 1945), p. 300.

in "The Drill," compares marching soldiers with somnambulists in a recurring dream:

> They wheel and turn. The eternal convolutions
> Of close-order drill-Right Flank or To The Rear--
> Hold them as though, somnambulists, they moved
> In the imposing caverns of some recurring dream
> Where the only escape is to awake. But the night is very long.[12]

In "Place Pigalle," Richard Wilbur presents the dalliance of soldiers with the prostitutes of another country as a ritual which must be seen in the light of all history. The soldier and the prostitute of the poem are identifiable contemporary figures (he is an American soldier out for sexual adventure, she is a Place Pigalle whore with dyed hair), but their meeting in an off-limits bar appears in the poem as the reënactment of an ancient scene:

> . . . . . .
> Now at the corners of the Place Pigalle
> Bright bars explode against the dark's embraces;
> The soldiers come, the boys with ancient faces,
> Seeking their ancient friends, who stroll and loll
> Amid the glares and glass: electric graces.
>
> . . . . . .

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[12]Richard Eberhart and Selden Rodman (ed.), War and the Poet (New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1945), p. 205.

> Ionized innocence: this pair reclines,
> She on the table, he in a tilting chair,
> With Arden ease; her eyes as pale as air
> Travel his priestgoat face; his hand's thick tines
> Touch the gold whorls of her Corinthian hair.
>
> "Girl, if I love thee not, then let me die;
> Do I not scorn to change my state with kings?
> Your muchtouched flesh, incalculable, which wrings
> Me so, now shall I gently seize in my
> Desperate soldier's hands which kill all things."[13]

The poem's allusion to the pastoral love-suits of As You Like It in the forest of Arden adds an ironic dimension which enriches its meaning and adds to the interplay between past and present.

In a similar vein, "This Spring," by W. W. Gibson (no relation to the British poet), presents war as the re-running of an old motion picture film, a trite love story of a soldier about to leave for the front, and his sweetheart. The form of this poem is a parody of Shakespeare's Sonnet 33, "Full many a glorious morning I have seen. . ." There is a weary sophistication in this poem that is typical of much of the American soldier poetry. The last stanza of "This Spring" follows:

> Full many a double feature I have seen
> Flatter the past with sentimental hue;

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[13] The Beautiful Changes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company), p. 12.

I did not realize the movie queen
Would fix the aspect of my future too.
Aware by now it's all gone on before,
I know my lover's role, my hero's lot;
This is the final technicolor war,
And early reels betray the hackneyed plot.
The first gay kisses under springtime
stars
Are close-ups in this old scenario;
And now the climax: waiting railroad
cars,
The farewell clinch, and off the soldiers
go.

Yours are familiar lips that breathe,
that sigh,
My khaki arm cliché that waves goodbye.[14]

In the notes on contributors in the issue of the New Republic in which the above poem appeared, the editors made the following comment:

> Our readers will notice that in so far as Sergeant Gibson's poem has an "editorial policy" it disagrees with that of The New Republic. We mentioned this difference, just as a matter of interest, to Sergeant Gibson, who makes this comment in a letter: I would like to be the first to agree that the sentiments expressed in my poems are scarcely appropriate to the fighter for democracy. But let me reassure the reader fearful for the cause of freedom. Although I believe that the U.S. soldier is, ideologically speaking, confused and at a loss, the same has been true of soldiers since the beginning of wars. Furthermore, it is well to remember that a poet who finds himself temporarily in uniform does not necessarily represent the attitudes of an army.[15]

Let us try to determine now, in so far as possible, the ex-

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[14] New Republic, CVII, No. 4 (July 27, 1942), 108.

[15] Ibid., p. 126.

tent to which W. W. Gibson's poem, as well as the other poems treated in this chapter, "represent the attitudes of an army." There is no question that the theme of historic war, expressed in various ways, is pervasive in the American soldier poetry of the Second World War, but whether this theme reflects the feeling of other men in uniform is another question.

To look upon a war that is very much here and now and to view this war as part of an historic succession requires a perspective that few servicemen who wrote personal narratives possessed. We can understand this when we consider that the reality and immediacy of war is what is the concern of the participant and not its historic background. The soldier poet, it appears, is atypical of servicemen in general in this respect. What is true of the poetry is not true of the prose; one is much more impressed in the soldier prose with the sudden and startling realization of the reality of war than with the philosophical placement of war in a historic context. In the prose we find an awakening to the present much more than an awareness of the past. By and large it was the poet who placed the Second World War against the background of all human history.

Some examples of the few prose selections that deal with war in a historic context follow. These are the exceptions. The first is from the war memoirs of an Army Air Force flier who was killed in action when he was twenty-three years old:

> One man gone, a million more to go, maybe even a billion before this is over. Maybe everyone in the world will get it this time. There are shells enough to go around. If some efficiency expert could just figure out a way, there would never have to be another war. We could wipe out the human race this time.
>
> In a steady endless procession, wars have swept the world, eaten away at its heart, growing from stupid little brawls with clubs and rocks to the mechanical perfection of a city flattened out in the night, so many bombs to the acre, so many planes for the job. Fill up the bomb bays and send them over, send in the ground troops to bayonet the ones who were only stunned.[16]

In a letter written on December 7, 1941, Roger B. Goodman, then in the army, appears less cynical than the Air Corps man quoted above in spite of the shocking events of the day on which the letter was written:

> . . . . . .
> It is almost impossible to realize that this is a "Here and Now" story, that after all our reading, our talking, the planning of years and years, here is another war at our doorstep. Do I sound romantically, youthfully idealistic or silly when I say that now that we are in, our job must be to see that the result of this war will be what all of us crave--lasting peace built on a foundation of bonebrick and the common blood of all lands--friend and foe alike? Reading

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[16]Bert Stiles, Serenade to the Big Bird (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1952), pp. 98-99. Stiles was a bomber pilot with the Eighth Air Force which bombed Europe from bases in England. Much of this was "saturation bombing" from high altitudes. On several occasions in his book, Stiles expresses his feeling of guilt for this near-indiscriminate destruction. His sentiments on these occasions echo those in "Eighth Air Force," a poem by Randall Jarrell, which deals with the guilt felt by the bomber crews. The text of this poem is found on page 67 above.

> our history makes us aware of the fact that human progress is marked by birth-pains of growing intensity; from feudalism, to our present society, to whatever comes next--every step marked by bloodshed, hate, and suffering.[17]
> . . . . . .

Finally, an ex-serviceman in a rehabilitation program shortly after the war has this comment:

> Another World War is over, but is it really over? We've been fighting wars for the past two thousand years, and what have we learned? Two thousand years of progressive civilization have taught the world no better conception of equality than existed before the rise of man to rule the animal kingdom.[18]
> . . . . . .

These prose commentaries on war as a recurring historic phenomenon reflect the poetry in both content and tone, but prose observations of this kind are rare. One should notice that of the above quotations, one was written on the first day of the United States' participation in the war, another after the war was over, and the third, although written during the war, was written by a college-educated serviceman who showed himself to be interested in poetry although he

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[17] A Book of War Letters, ed. Harry E. Maule (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 39.

[18] Rosario Joseph Aloisio, "What Have We Learned?," The Purple Testament, ed. Don M. Wolfe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1946), p. 272. This collection of personal narratives is a rich source of commentary by servicemen about the war. It was collected as part of a rehabilitation program for returning servicemen.

wrote none himself. The poets, it seems, were those who saw the war in its historic context; the non-poets, at least insofar as is evident in their writing, did not. The reason for this appears to be that the soldier poetry moved inexorably toward abstraction--and the eruption of war throughout history is an abstract concept--while non-poetic expression remained on the level of the concrete, the here and now. Further discussion of these tendencies will be reserved, however, for the concluding chapter below.

The non-poets, however, do provide us with a striking record of awakening to the brutal present reality of war. It is almost as if the American soldier poets took this aspect of war for granted: of course war is hell. While the poets dealt with war as an historic entity, the non-poets in their personal narratives and letters echo the First World War lines of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Paul G. Bruce, recalling a plane crash in which a friend died, has this to say:

> . . . . . .
> Reflecting upon this incident, I realize anew that war is hell. The blood and mud of the battlefields are hell. The sinking ships with their cargoes of human lives are hell. War makes us want to hate and kill to avenge the loss of our buddies. That, too, is hell. I never saw the battlefield of the mudholes of Europe or the Pacific islands. I didn't hear the drop of the bombs, or the whir of bullets as they sped past on their errands of destruction. But the hell of hells is to stand by and see your best friend

lowered to his last earthly resting place.[19]

Another serviceman, commenting upon the vast difference between real war and the war of the Hollywood films, recounts a personal experience:

> . . . . . .
>
> All this play-acting is just so much rot, an insult to those who died in real battles. Death cannot be imitated by such a display of mock heroics dreamed up by fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year script writers. Writers who could not accurately describe the death of an alley cat.
>
> What can they know of the actuality, a drama of real life . . . and very real death, such as this?
>
> The ship was under attack from the air. At the first shots, men ran to battle stations. One young gunner never reached his station. An enemy bullet tore through his neck. He collapsed like a bag of rags, face down. There was little blood. No sound. No heroics. He was dead before he hit the deck. His mother's pains in bearing and birthing him, and his twenty years of life, all over . . . and that was all.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Before I entered the service, the thought of death never entered my mind. Death . . . it was just a word, something that happened to other people now and then in automobiles or crossing the street. It is different now. Death is a reality, the thought of which terrifies, yet fascinates me. I shall always remember those who died on my ship . . . those poor dead faces, the sightless eyes, the clenched hands. They died violently, yet with dignity. No speeches. No cigarettes. No drama.[20]

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[19]"From Dust You Came," ibid., pp. 180-81.

[20]Anon., "Death and Drama," ibid., pp. 186-87.

A marine writing from Guadalcanal tells his parents of his awakening to the brutality of war. At the end of this excerpt, there is an ironic comment upon the vast gap between the safe and civilized world at home and the nightmare of Guadalcanal:

> . . . . . .
>
> We started out again when I heard my first 1,000-pound bomb falling with a gigantic ssssssh. I was paralyzed. It sounded as if hell was opening to swallow us for what we had just done. The bomb exploded 75 yards away. We were thrown to the ground and bounced around until I thought I was dead. I learned then how cheap life is, how we take it for granted and so quickly and brutally it's taken away. Let me tell you that sudden death is horrible and absolutely inglorious.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I got a letter from Dad, written in July, delivered in September just before an air raid. My buddy and I were sitting on the edge of a foxhole and I was reading the letter to him. The Zeros came along and started to strafe us. We shoved our helmets on and dove to the bottom of the hole. I kept reading: "Your mother and I pray that when you receive this letter you will be well and safe." And the Zeros answered: "Brrrp--Brrrrrrrrp--Pa...poom...poom...poom."[21]

In his personal narrative of the Iwo Jima campaign, Allen R. Matthews describes the kind of battle experience which would completely rule out all reflection upon anything but saving one's life. This book, The Assault, covers the first twelve days of the Iwo Jima fighting, and nowhere in it is there mention of the author's or any of his companions' concern for anything but the danger, the disasters, the small

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[21]John J. Conroy, op. cit., ed. Maule, p. 181.

comforts, and the exhaustion of the battle. And Matthews is obviously a sensitive and aware observer. His book is typical of many of the battle narratives which came out of the Second World War: it is concerned with the fears, maneuvers, discomforts, and deaths of a small number of men in a relatively small geographical area. We find in it no extended discussion of the psychological reaction to the war of the servicemen which the book is about--not that there was no reaction to the stress of combat, but the book is basically concerned with what happened, not why it happened, or the psychological reaction to what happened of the participants in the action. The following paragraph of The Assault shows the tremendously constricted scope of attention and the limited perspective of the Marines during the struggle for Iwo Jima:

> It was a deep hole, and wide, but we knew it was far too crowded for our safety and we shouted ahead to find out if there was room there for us. Usually there was not but occasionally the word came back that there was "a little" and by ones and twos we would trickle forward and soon those holes would be overcrowded. And we knew that as long as the units in front of us were pinned down we were pinned down, too. But soon it became even more elemental than that, for the snipers and the machine guns began to concentrate on our own sector and we ceased to think in any terms except of the here and now.[22]

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[22]Allen R. Matthews, The Assault (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1947), pp. 188-189.

". . . except the here and now." The soldiers who wrote about their foxhole experiences describe a world that begins and ends within a few feet of their dangerous refuge, a world that began at the last shell burst, and will continue, perhaps, until the next.

The major American war novelists also do not show their characters as concerned with the recurrence of war throughout history; even the sensitive and educated among these characters usually show concern only for things close to them. On one occasion in The Young Lions, the fact that France was the scene of another war only twenty-five years before occurs to Michael Whitacre. He notes this, but does not seriously ponder it:

> It started to rain. Curtains of water sifted down over the ancient earthworks and the rotting wooden posts that had supported the wire in 1917. . . They passed a little fenced-off plot next to the road where ten Frenchmen had been buried on the retreat in 1940. There were faded artificial flowers on some of the graves, and a little statue of a saint in a glass case on a gray wood pedestal. Michael looked away from the Chaplain, thinking vaguely of the overlapping quality of wars.[23]

In The Naked and the Dead, the historic recurrence of war does enter the philosophic discussions of Lieutenant Hearn and General Cummings, but these two men are hardly ordinary soldiers and their discussions seem to be Mailer's means to

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[23]Irwin Shaw, The Young Lions (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 626.

air the clash between liberal and fascistic political and social ideas more than anything else.

The soldier poet, then found little echo among his fellow soldiers for his theme of historic war. This fact, perhaps, can serve as a confirmation of the poet's role of one who looks upon present events with a depth and breadth of perception that is beyond the ordinary. This fact may also indicate that the theme of historic war is somehow more at home in poetry than in the straightforward reportage of the prose commentator or in the fictional account of the novelist. Even Ernie Pyle, the reporter who was most beloved by the servicemen about whom he wrote, is virtually never struck by the historic overtones of the war. In the following excerpt from one of his personal essays, Pyle expresses his wonder at the enormous panorama of a world at war:

> I couldn't help feeling the immensity of the catastrophe that had put men all over the world, millions of us, to moving in machine-like precision throughout long nights--men who should have been comfortably asleep in their warm beds at home. War makes strange giant creatures out of us little routine men who inhabit the earth.[24]

A realization of "the immensity of the catastrophe" is here, but it is a present catastrophe that Ernie Pyle is speaking of. It was left to the poets to show this catastrophe in

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[24]Ernie Pyle, Here Is Your War (Chicago: Consolidated Book Publishers, 1944), p. 143.

relation to similar catastrophes throughout human history:

> You would feel that after so many centuries
> God would give man to repent: yet he can kill
> As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
> No farther advanced than in his ancient furies.[25]

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[25]Richard Eberhart, "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," supra, pp. 59-60.

CHAPTER III

MAN AND THE MACHINE

The Second World War was a machine-age war. It was a conflict among industrialized nations and was perhaps won and lost on the basis of one side's ability to produce machines of destruction and machines to manufacture machines of destruction more rapidly and in greater numbers than the other.

This emphasis upon the machine caused many changes from earlier wars in the way the Second World War was fought. Logistics became much more important. A greater proportion of men were involved solely with the maintenance and supply of these machines of war. Special vehicles were used just for the transportation of machines: aircraft carriers and special landing ships for tanks, for example. Machines were used as a defense against machines: anti-tank guns and mines, and anti-aircraft artillery. Whereas today the push-botton war is the ultimate ideal of many military theoreticians, the ideal was then the mechanized war.

Man's relationship with the machine during the Second World War was intimate. If the man were to live, his machine must function properly. Bombers were pampered, pray-

ed over, and cursed. They were given names. Infantrymen cursed the tanks that remained stationary in their vicinity because the huge vehicles drew enemy artillery fire. And, although it was nothing new in this war, sailors loved or hated their ships. None of this intimacy of the soldier with his weapons, as a matter of fact, was wholly new. What was new in this war was the complexity, deadliness, and profusion of his weapons and those which were arrayed against him.

The mechanized presence of the Second World War forced itself upon the men who participated in it. They had to come to some terms with the machine; they could not just ignore it. Bomber crews lived in constant fear of the law of averages which stated that a certain number of their machines must go down on each mission. Infantrymen learned to react in different ways before the various deadly devices which sought their lives: you move through artillery fire; you seek cover from aerial bombardment; you can only feel regret when you hear the blast of an anti-personnel mine, for someone has already been killed or maimed.

The soldier poetry of the Second World War reflects the concern of man with this machine which he uses to destroy life or which threatens to destroy him. In the poems which will be considered below, man is cast into a variety of relationships with the ubiquitous presence of the machine.

A pervasive sub-theme in the poetry of the machine

is the helplessness of man before a contrivance which seems to have a life and infernal will of its own. A poem by Alan Dugan, entitled "Aubade: Chant of the Innocents," presents the reaction of an airplane mechanic to his specialized task. He works with great concentration upon the machine, becoming machinelike himself. The poem ends:

> Until the time that I can say:
> All in all I remember it (and you)
> with a good deal of nostalgia,
> I shall mop the floor and stand reveille,
> and when the hangar doors open in a huge yawn
> I shall enter its noisy intestines
> to perform the function for which I am best
> fitted.
> I shall stand with mechanics, grouped like
> surgeons
> over the engine. (Whose black blood
> will camouflage fumbles, delicacy,
> waving of words and change all hands
> into ratchets, wrenches, and soft, ineffectual mallets.)
> I shall work with pleasure in great intensity.
> I shall say, Good morning. Good morning.
> What a fine morning.[1]

As Dugan presents them here, man and the machine have grown close together by long and concentrated association. The machine is described in human terms (its oil becomes "black blood" as it is operated upon by the mechanics), and the men are described in mechanical terms (the mechanics' hands become tools.) But the men are still men and as such are weak and inept. The engines' oil must camouflage their un-

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[1]Alan Dugan, "Aubade: Chant of the Innocents," Poetry, LXV, No. 4 (January, 1945), 196-97.

certainty and their hands turn into "soft, ineffectual mallets." The machine, then, demands machine-like servants to sustain it, but no matter how machine-like the mechanics become, they are still flesh and blood and can never be as unequivocal in their purpose as the war machine.

In a poem entitled "The Bulldozer," by Donald A. Stauffer, the mechanic welcomes his function as a machine-like servant to the machine. Whereas the mechanic in Dugan's poem is conscious of his unconvincing role as surgeon to the airplane engine, the mechanic in this poem attempts to throw himself into his job body and soul, but he is not wholly successful. The last three stanzas of the poem follow:

> Worthless the puzzled or the injured brow.
> The world's here. Better receive it.
> For, brother, this is war, and this is now.
> Take it or leave it!
>
> Mechanic complication in the fog!
> Tremendous shape that's worth the waiting!
> I'd rather be a cog, than log or dog,
> In what's creating.
>
> Get thee behind me, Buddha! Through the frost,
> The heat, the turning world, the hail,
> I promise this machine will not be lost
> For want of this one nail.[2]

The mechanic here is not completely successful in his bluff attempt to give his total allegiance to the machine. His

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[2]Donald A. Stauffer, "The Bulldozer," Oscar Williams (ed.), The War Poets (New York: John Day, 1945), pp. 242-44.

failure is signalled first by the tone of the poem, a tone that protests too much, and second by the telltale final stanza in which the mechanic reveals his inward struggle with Buddha and speculative passivity. Like the mechanic in the Dugan poem, the mechanic of "The Bulldozer" cannot make himself party to the simple and unequivocal purpose of the machine without looking back. The triteness of the language of this poem causes the reader to doubt further the speaker's sincerity in his blustering affirmation of resolve; or perhaps this is a defect in the poem itself. In any case, the statements "I'd rather be a cog, than log or dog," and ". . . Through the frost,/The heat, the turning world, the hail," detract from the reader's sense of the speaker's conviction.

This unequivocal deadly purpose of the war machine that mocks man's great potential as a reasoning and idealistic being is the theme of an ironic poem by Walter Benton entitled "Summary of the Distance Between the Bomber and the Objective." In this poem the lethal dive bomber is presented as the culmination of the intellectual, religious, and artistic accomplishments of man through the ages. The poem ends:

> Behold the stark embodiment of the millennia
> of mind--
> myth and mechanical, prophetic, proved...
> Euclid's theorems, Phidias' chiseled curves,
> the Flood, redemption...and the Song of Songs--
> Rembrandt, Beethoven, Steinmetz, Plato, Christ:
>
> All the oldest principles, all the latest fea-
> tures

> Capsuled in a swift and shining shape--
> blown out of context and material time,
>
> bringing peace to many.[3]

For the speaker of the poem, it is unbelievable that generations of intellectual and spiritual accomplishments should culminate in the "swift and shining shape" of the dive bomber that exists for the simple purpose of destruction. But there it is. Man is a complex and ambivalent being whose purposes are variegated and constantly shifting. The bomber, however, is starkly simple in its purpose, and its purpose seems greatly unworthy of man its creator. This, in one sense, is "the distance between the bomber and its objective": it is the distance between man's aims and his deeds.

In "Dam Neck, Virginia," Richard Eberhart deals with the distance between spiritual man and technical man, the user of the war machine.[4] In this poem, he describes the aerial display of anti-aircraft artillery being fired at night and the effect that this produces upon the viewer. The bright paths of the projectiles are beautiful, but their purpose is deadly. Each gunner is described here as "precis-

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[3]Walter Benton, "Summary of the Distance Between the Bomber and the Objective," The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: John Day, 1945), p. 89.

[4]Richard Eberhart, Collected Poems (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 89-90. For a discussion of this poem in a larger context, see supra, p. 64.

ion's instrument" as he fires his weapon, creating a vision of beauty for the observer. But this vision is "gentle and false," a great distance from "the truth of guns" which "aims at death." Again in this poem, the tension is provided by the contrast between the single-purpose business-like war machine and the man who is multi-purpose and often unbusinesslike, the man who delights in a vision of beauty in the night sky until he realizes that this beauty is not truth. For Eberhart, the truth of the aerial display lies in the purpose of the guns and in man's animal instinct for war.

In a later poem, "Aesthetics After War," Eberhart develops in greater complexity the proposition of "Dam Neck, Virginia." The poet's guilty fascination with the modern war machine seems to be the mainspring of this poem also, but here the abstract implications of man's relation to all reality are examined in the general question, "What is the relation of aesthetics to philosophy?" In its four parts, the poem develops this question from the asking itself to a view of Christ as "the most aesthetic man" in his redemption of insensitive and evil man. But at the center of the poem is the modern war machine with its mechanical grace and the ability to kill elegantly. The dedication of the poem is to a gunner who has been killed in action. A servant of his machine, the aerial gun sight, he became the victim of the machine of the enemy:

(To A. Nykyforcza,
Student of Sighting.

The floating reticle became your eye,
You saw flashing battle,

You returned in the death lists.)

The man here is presented as an extension of the machine: the sight reticle has become part of him.

As an extension of the machine, man kills, often with as little effort as the flick of a finger. But this killing seems telescopic and somehow disassociated from the killer. The poet asks:

> What has the aesthetics to do with society?
> Was the Italian airman crazy
> When he saw aesthetic purity
> In bombs flowering like roses a mile below?
> He could not see nor feel the pain of man.
> Our own men testify to awe,
> If not to aesthetic charm,
> On seeing man's total malice over Hiroshima,
> That gigantic, surrealistic, picture-mushroom
> And objectification of megalomania.
> A world of men who butcher men
> In the arsenical best interests of several states,
> The modern warring maniacal man,
> Is this world of men inimical
> To the postulates of the study aesthetics?[5]

Part II of "Aesthetics After War" is devoted to the instruments of war: the electric gun sight, radar, and aircraft. These ingenious appliances of war fascinate the poet, but he wonders whether their beauty and mystery are products of the

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[5] Ibid., pp. 122-28.

objects themselves or of man their creator. The ultimate resolution of the poet's wonder at this and the other questions which he poses which strike at the mystery of man's warlike nature is faith in Christ's redemption of man. But for our purposes, Eberhart's questions are more important than his resolution of them. These questions show the poet's awareness of the great implications of man's relation to the highly developed machines of modern war.

An important sub-theme involved in this relationship of the fighting man with the machines of war is death in the machine. During the Second World War there were many fighting machines which carried man: tanks, planes, ships, self-propelled guns, submarines. All of these machines had been used in war before, but never in such profusion. It is understandable that death in the machine should become a preoccupation with the crews of these machines. Death on the open battlefield has been feared by generations of soldiers through the ages, but mechanized war brought with it this new fear of death while imprisoned in the belly of the machine.

In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Randall Jarrell describes the death of the crewman of a war machine, in this case a bomber. The unaware young boy is carried aloft in the womb of the aircraft and meets his death as the shells of enemy fighters rip through the turret and the anti aircraft shells explode around him.[6] The human being here appears as

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[6]Randall Jarrell, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 137. For a more general treatment of this poem, see supra, p. 68.

soft and unformed in contrast with the hard reality of the bomber and the enemy fighters. Helpless, he is the passive victim of malevolent forces beyond his control.

The helplessness of the machine-borne fighter is the theme of another Jarrell poem, "A Front." Here the poet describes the crash of a bomber near a fogbound airbase. The bomber is blinded by the weather and does not hear the radio warning of ground control. Blind and deaf, the plane crashes:

> Fog over the base: the beams ranging
> From the five towers pull home from the night
> The crews cold in fur, the bombers banging
> Like lost trucks down the levels of the ice.
> A glow drifts in like mist (how many tons of it?),
> Bounces to a roll, turns suddenly to steel
> And tires and turrets, huge in the trembling light.
> The next is high, and pulls up with a wail,
> Comes round again--no use. And no use for the rest
> In drifting circles out along the range;
> Holding no longer, changed to a kinder course,
> The flights drone southward through the steady rain.
> The lowering patter of the engines grows;
> The roar gropes downward in its shaky orbit
> For the lives the season quenches. Here below
> They beg, order, are not heard; and hear the darker
> Voice rising: Can't you hear me? Over.
> Over--
> All the air quivers, and the east sky glows.[7]

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[7] Ibid., p. 167.

The men inside the machine are disoriented, their senses clouded, and their communication with those who would save them cut off. Here it is not the direct action of the enemy that brings the bomber crew to their deaths, but the elements and mechanical failures, constant threats to the lives of airmen. This poem lacks the bitterness toward "the State" of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," but is more explicit in its presentation of the helplessness of the riders of the machine before the malevolent whims of hostile forces: the enemy, weather, and mechanical failure.

It is obvious that, in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Jarrell is aiming for universality. The poem is highly distilled and emblematic. But in "A Front," in spite of its discursiveness and relative lack of elegance, Jarrell has succeeded in catching a dramatic moment much more effectively than in the former poem. The last line of the poem seems inevitable in view of what has come before, whereas the last line of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" ("When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.") seems artificially affective. The reader is brought much closer to the danger of the bombers in "A Front" than he is in the highly abstract "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner."

A poem that echoes the bitterness toward society of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is Dick Roberts' "Duty to Death, LD" (the initials "LD" stand for "in the line of duty.") Here the airplane crewman is presented as a passive, helpless creature, a pawn in the hands of the policy makers

of society. The airman is undeveloped, unformed; he has not yet begun to realize his potential as a man before he is sacrificially killed in the machine:

> See now, dead friend,
> Where they have taken you,
> The men who persuaded you of patriotism?
> First into the clouds and high in glory,
> And then let fall your vehicle
> And washed its stricken machinery with
> The vivid liquids of your body.
> And perhaps I follow, less gloriously.
> Grubbing in the dust,
> Crawling from duty to death
> While all the duties of my soul
> Go unperformed.[8]

It is the waste of life, not simply death, that most troubles the speaker of the poem. Like the fallen airman, he too may meet death before he fully lives, before he has a chance to perform "the duties of my soul." The injection of the personal in the last five lines of this poem makes it convincing. The fallen airman is not viewed distantly. His fate has drawn the speaker close to him in fear for his own life.

The gestation theme of Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," is echoed in a pair of death-in-the-machine poems by John Ciardi, "Two Songs for a Gunner." In these poems, the airman is again pictured as a helpless child who is borne aloft in the bomber without a full awareness of what is happening. The tone of the poem is ironically naive. The metaphor has to do with insemination, conception, and death.

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[8] Op. cit., ed. Oscar Williams, p. 216.

I. Firing Tracers
When I was dangerous tracers leaped from
me.
What a wild fountain I sprayed at the
zodiac
Falling how-many-colored to sea-dark
Of the world's body under, where power-
fully
I rode it and rode it done. "Look,
Mother, how gay
And luminous a sperm I spend in play!"

II. Being Fired At
When I was danger's the tracers' endless
Jeweled cobra struck at my running tomb
In a cloud. How chaste and sweet a womb
I cowered in to praise its luminous
Waver and fall from power. And as it
fell,
How deep an egg I curled in very well.[9]

The metaphor of the embryo in the womb that turns into a coffin is precisely that of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," but in this poem there is no mention of the "State" that puts the boy into the lethal machine. There is implicit in the poem a contrast between the playfulness of the child and the cold deadliness of the equipment he uses and the machine in which he rides. While this is hardly a moving poem, Ciardi's skillful use of image and metaphor make it a successful one. The irony of the poem is heightened by its childish tone: the second part has the ring of a nursery rhyme.

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[9]John Ciardi, From Time to Time (New York, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1951), p. 69.

Another air force poem which deals with death in the machine is William Meredith's "For Air Heroes." The theme of this poem is similar to that of the above poems, but here the tone is different. The airmen still die in their machines after having lived mute, unfulfilled lives, but the poet hears in their fiery deaths the utterance of something transcendent. To him their deaths mean something:

> I sing them spiralling in flame,
> Them gliding, all fuel spent,
> Checked by no opening silk plume:
> Themselves quite lost,
> Articulate at last;
>
> Sing them telling what they meant,
> No small repeated dream,
> As public and grandiose their want
> As their last lowering scene:
> Burning, dropping host,
> Articulate at last;
>
> And sing them making purchases
> Beyond our furthest means,
> Themselves the greatly valued pledges;
> Oh, let the contract somehow be redeemed!
> They speak for most,
> Articulate at last.[10]

The dead airmen have exchanged their lives for a better world. In their deaths they give voice to the transcendent motivation of their sacrifice. Even though the tone of this poem is much more optimistic and affirmative than those considered above, here too the doomed airmen are mute and passive as they ride their soaring vehicles toward death. It is only

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[10]William Meredith, Love Letter From an Impossible Land (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 49.

in their final glorious dives to oblivion that they find their voices, that they are "articulate at last." But there appears more yearning than faith in this poem in spite of the positive form of the poet's statements. The poet's desire to "Sing them telling what they meant" is much more evident than the air heroes' telling of it. What did they mean? And how shall we redeem our contract with them? There is a silence at the center of this poem that is equivalent to the silence of the dead airmen. The poet has surrounded this silence with a yearning which he hopes, perhaps, will conceal the silence. The success of this poem lies not in enlightening the reader about the meaning of the airmen's deaths, but in conveying to him the frustrated yearning of the speaker.

In "Mission," John Ciardi stresses the undeveloped state of the boys who fight from the bombers. Childish and as yet uncivilized, they manipulate the instruments of mechanized death. The last two stanzas of the poem follow:

> Ah, Father, had you guessed this penitence
> In days of wooden rooms and barns of hay,
> Or rapt Sunday silence, organ voiced,
> The gnomic priest's forlorn embroidery.
>
> That space might bend so, and the taken air
> Shudder on this abyss and infinite plain,
> And boys be magnified to this dimension
> Still ignorant of pity, cause, and plan.[11]

The bomber crews ride miles above the earth in their marvels

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[11] Poetry, LXIV, No. 4 (July, 1944), 184.

of science, dropping and spraying the air with death. But the boys into whose hands such unforeseen power has been placed are undeveloped, childish, unaware of the larger implications of their actions, "still ignorant of pity, cause, and plan." Like the Meredith poem above, "Mission" conveys to the reader the speaker's state of mind more clearly than that of the people who constitute his subject. It is not the ignorance of the boys that moves the poem as much as the speaker's despair at this ignorance. But the sophisticated religious and scientific allusiveness of Ciardi's poem tends to detract from the conviction which it carries. Because of this, Meredith's poem seems more fresh and genuine.

It is understandable that most of the machine poetry of the Second World War should have to do with aircraft: the Second World War was the first major conflict in which aircraft played a truly decisive part. But poems were also written about what is perhaps the most basic weapon of war, even mid-twentieth-century war, the rifle.[12] In the three examples of poems involving rifles which follow, the basic theme of much of the machine poetry can be found: the machine is a simple, single-purpose, hard, black, instrument of war,

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[12]The best-known poem about the rifle to come out of the Second World War is "The Naming of Parts," by Henry Reed, a British soldier poet. The theme of this poem is that modern man has lost perspective about the most important things in life, has lost his "point of balance" (an ironic allusion to the rifle's point of balance), and has drifted toward a mechanized existence of which war is a part.

while the man controlling it is confused, unsure, and at cross purposes with himself.

"Inner Brother," by Stephen Stepanchev, deals with the inner conflict of a soldier. His conscience, his "inner brother," speaks out against his warlike activities while his other self is aware that the enemy is very real and very near and will kill him if given the chance. The tension in the poem is in the soldier's conviction that war is wrong, and in his knowledge that such a conviction would be fatal if it were implemented. With this tension gripping his mind, he disassembles his rifle. The poem concludes:

> So I turn to my M-1 rifle and take it apart--
> The trigger housing group, the barrel, the spring--
> And gently oil the pins and replace them again
> And stare at the hand-smooth piece with ironic grin,
> Remembering how I learned to name its parts
> To savage imprecations of a corporal's hate,
> Recalling the lessoned feats of the rifle range,
> With elaborate notion of windage and shifted height.
> And now I can say I'm scientist to my gun's working,
> For I know its intricate nature and precise use,
> And I turn to the forward hours confident of my aim
> And confident of the oh so personalized foe
> Rustling the grass blades where we made Tom's grave
> But oh for a like science, a like aim, and like gun,
> To take my troubling, grisly, inner brother.[13]

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[13] Op. cit., ed. Oscar Williams, pp. 251-52.

The "intricate nature and precise use" of the rifle can be known and controlled, but the "troubling, grisly, inner brother" is unfathomable and uncontrollable. Even in the face of "the oh so personalized foe" which has destroyed his companion and is bent on his own destruction, the soldier's "inner brother" continues to trouble him.

In "The Gun," Karl Shapiro develops a relationship between the soldier and his rifle in which the soldier becomes infatuated with the power, accuracy, and destructiveness of his weapon. Lying on the ground and taking careful aim, the soldier fires and produces in the wind "a white hole that is small and unseen as the bite of the asp." The bullet finds its mark and the enemy falls dying. In the last two stanzas of the poem, the soldier places the blame for this action on himself and not on the gun; even though the gun has seemed to him a living thing with a separate existence, it is only an instrument which he has used:

> O the valley is silent and shocked. I absolve from your name
> The exaction of murder, my gun. It is I who have killed.
> It is I whose enjoyment of horror is fine and fulfilled.
> You are only the toy of my terror, my emblem of blame.
>
> Come with me. We shall creep for his eyes like the sweat of my skin,
> For the wind is repaired and the fallen is calling for breath.
> You are only the means of the practical humor of death

Which is savage to punish the dead for the
sake of my sin![14]

We find the same infatuation of the soldier for his rifle in "Careless Love," by Stanley Kunitz, but in this poem, the gun exploits the man, seducing the lonely soldier:

Who have been lonely once
Are comforted by their guns.
Affectionately they speak
To the dark beauty, whose cheek
Beside their own cheek glows,
They are calmed by such repose,
Such power held in hand;
Their young bones understand
The shudder in that frame.
Without nation, without name,
They give the load of love,
And it's returned, to prove
How much the husband heart
Can hold of it: for what
This nymphomaniac enjoys
Inexhaustibly is boys.[15]

The soldier is the victim of the insatiable lust of the gun; unthinking, he gives himself to "the dark beauty" which offers comfort in his loneliness.

"Load," by Lincoln Kirstein, echoes the sexual theme of "Careless Love." Here, the explosions of the shells of a huge German artillery piece bring about the frightened reaction of masturbation in the speaker and his companions. One

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[14]Karl Shapiro, Poems, 1940-1953 (New York, Random House, 1953), p. 69.

[15]Stanley Kunitz, Selected Poems, 1928-1958 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), p. 95.

of the striking aspects of this poem is the explicitness of the poet's identification of the human body with a machine:

Our dirty dreams in ragged sleep:
   Kick off that blanket, creak that cot,
And all our billet, ankle-deep
   In dry-lipped dozing, waits the shot.
Upon some secret siding trained
   Forty miles over the Moselle
Nestles a long-range railroad gun
   Which slings a two-ton super shell.
It splits some slumber, rips a roof,
   Priming our chest-pumps overtime;
Set to sweat out this noisy night
   We mark the hours' quartered chime.

I am a tube, dry at both vents,
   My molars ground, my sphincters tight,
But damp in oxter, palm, and crotch,
   A hose for cowardice or fright.
I am a stack of plastic tubes,
   Liquids and solids to transform;
Bundled in armies, my moist friends
   Frame our vast sieve to strain the storm.
One supple pipe from lip to prick,
   One coiled long loop from mouth to ass,
A modest million drippings drain
   Letting each pissy droplet pass.

These thin-spray every fluent fear,
   Greasing its shudder, gag, and shock.
Wow! Here it comes! Just feel this floor
   Rise to the blast, bend, crack, and rock.
Well aimed from forty miles away
   Are steel-turned tubes the Jerries use,
But the most harm their banging does
   Is stiffen us to self-abuse.
Waiting the next note from their gun,
   A hot hand strokes an aching hard.
Nervousness exceeding fun
   Jacks a poor peter to its yard.

All eyes and ears on fire, in dark;
   Livid the iced, unspoken noise,
Threatening to madden, stunt the growth
   Of me and my lot of naughty boys.
Kraut cannon crouches, skins it back.
   Self-murder's tool is terror's goad.

It crashes about three blocks off.
Its big load splashes my small load.[16]

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker's body is identified with the gun: "I am a tube, dry at both vents." In the fourth stanza, the explosion of the shell is compared with the speaker's sexual explosion: "Its big load splashes my small load." Throughout the poem, Kirstein deftly presents the interrelationships between the gun and the men. There is the cause-effect relationship of the big gun frightening the men into frantic masturbation, and there is the previously mentioned identification of the men with the gun.

Kirstein's use of the soldier vernacular here is remarkable for its appropriateness, ease, and lack of self-consciousness. His skill in allowing the soldiers to speak in their own language makes him unusual among American soldier poets and adds much to the quality of authenticity which his poems carry.

There is striking uniformity of theme in this machine poetry. The machine is seldom considered by itself but most often in connection with man. In general, the machine is presented as making man conscious of his humanity; his flesh and blood is weak by contrast with the hard metal of the war machine. The machine is meant for but one thing: to fly

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[16] Rhymes of a PFC (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 126-27.

through the air, or to hurl a projectile, or to scoop up the earth. But what was man meant for? His humanity causes him to be unsure of himself, weak, and subject to all of the passions and cross purposes which the machine lacks. The soldier poets saw the machine as having a separate existence beyond a mere artifact of human ingenuity. Once made, the machine caused man to be conscious of himself as both something less and something more than the airplane, the gun, or the bulldozer.

The soldier poets feared the machine for its awesome destructive capability. Its hard metal could slice through human flesh like nothing. The airplane or the tank could carry their crews to a sudden fiery death. It was out of this helplessness and vulnerability of man before the power of the machine that much of the soldier poetry grew.

Unlike the theme of historic war which is strong in the soldier poetry but not significant in prose, the theme of man and the machine in all of its variations is echoed vigorously in American soldier prose. This is understandable, for mechanization was an everyday reality in the Second World War, and the profusion of vehicles, airplanes, and various weapons constantly forced itself upon the awareness of American servicemen. This awareness of the sheer weight and number of machines that were used by the American forces is illustrated well by the following excerpt from a personal history by Allan Lyon. The infantry is advancing through

France when Lyon observes:

> We left the town, marching in the usual two columns with five- to ten-yard intervals between men. We stuck to the road and moved slowly. On each side of the road we passed batteries of big guns, firing constantly. While we marched, we had to give way to tanks, trucks, and jeeps. The din was terrific. The tanks rumbled ponderously. The concussion of the guns reverberated through the air and snapped in our eardrums. Overhead, observation planes flew gracefully toward the front.
>
> We stopped often. We'd sit on the ground near sections bordering the road that had been marked as possible mine fields. When the columns moved, we'd pick ourselves up patiently and continue the slow, dreary advance.
>
> The vehicular traffic flowing between the two columns went slowly too, like Sunday traffic at home coming back to the city. Sometimes the vehicles going forward would meet a few tanks coming back, and then there'd be a traffic jam. The tanks would rumble toward the side of the road, their motors roaring. The trucks would veer awkwardly around the tanks. And we'd scramble out of everybody's way. Sometimes a jeep would break out of the column impatiently and race ahead to a clear spot up the line. At other times the vehicular column would be deadlocked, and we'd trudge slowly past a few trucks and jeeps before they'd start again and shove us over to the side once more . . .
>
> This, then, was the advance proper. The irresistible advance of overwhelming power, of mountainous equipment, and well-fed efficient troops. This was the advance that backed up the long, thin columns of lonely, weary foot troops.[17]

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[17]Allan Lyon, Toward an Unknown Station (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 160.

To Lyon, the foot troops among which he served seem less significant, infinitely weaker, and less important than the machinery of war. It is the infantrymen who must give way to the mechanized equipment. The foot troops in actual contact with the enemy are characterized as "lonely" and "weary," while the advance of the mechanized column is described as "irresistible" and "overwhelming." Later in his book, Lyon tells of an encounter with friendly tanks that further emphasizes this contrast between the foot soldier and the machine. The machine is described here as big and powerful in relation to the man who is small and timid. This excerpt is reminiscent of Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians:

> Then from behind us there came a loud rumble. I turned and saw a whole row of our tanks come roaring toward us. They gnashed the earth like great lumbering beasts, and I felt a thrill of relief to see our armored monsters come forward in their overwhelming charge. They chewed up the muddy ground, clanking fiercely, their great snouts pointed triumphantly skyward. From my demeaning position, flat on the ground, their frightening aspect was heightened and my sense of relief was mixed with the fear that they would crush us in the overpowering advance.
>
> But they were surprisingly maneuverable. They avoided us easily, swerving around us, roaring forward without losing speed, and leaving giant tracks between us as final contemptuous evidence of the contrast between our puny bodies and their colossal size and power. They passed us and raced swiftly ahead until they reached a steep hill several hundred yards in front of us. They charged up and over the hill and out of sight.[18]

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[18] Ibid., p. 209.

In a manner similar to the above excerpt, a gunner on a bomber crew contrasts his new aircraft with himself in the following selection from a personal essay. The machine can be renewed, but the man cannot:

> Plenty of ammunition this trip. Clean and oil my guns first. Glad I had my 'chute checked the other day. We've been lucky. First trip for our new ship. Old tired Nelly too old to stand the gaff. Three new engines, four hundred plus holes, three tanks, and two crewmen killed. Should call this one Young Nelly. New 17, new guns, new electric, new everything. Old me.[19]

This excerpt typifies the attitude of bomber crewmen toward their planes. Realizing that his life depends upon the proper mechanical functioning of the aircraft and its armament, he becomes an extremely solicitous servant to his machine, regarding it as a near-living thing. The gunner's solicitude is compulsive; the plane has the power of life and death over the man, over "old me."

A letter from a bomber crewman published in the Wise collection gives an interesting view of the airman's emotional relation to his plane both before and after a combat mission. Before the mission, the crewman gives himself completely to the plane and to his particular job. His fears and all of his human emotions are submerged in the mission of the man-machine team. The man becomes machine-like him-

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[19]Milton K. Williams, "Last Sortie," The Purple Testament, ed. Don M. Wolfe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1946), pp. 114-15.

self. It is only after the mission is over that the airman is able to feel human emotion: "heavy tiredness . . . sharp hunger . . . elation." Excerpts from the letter follow:

> [Before the mission:]
>
> Then away you go, piling into trucks, cracking jokes, having a last cigarette, and then the plane is reached. Bombs O.K.; ammunition O.K., etc. The starter whines, the motors cough their way to life. You mechanic gives you a cheery thumbs-up and you're cut to your take-off position.
>
> There, engines are given a final check, the field comes to life with the roar of living engines and the dust swirls out behind and curls lazily into the air. Your eyes are glued to the instruments watching for the smallest indication of trouble. She must be perfect. This is it. This is the big double or nothing throw. . .
>
> [After the mission:]
>
> All of a sudden the guns are quiet. The planes are gone and a great relief sweeps over you as your field is sighted. All this time you've been too busy to think or to be afraid. As your wheels touch and you park your plane you're conscious of a heavy tiredness and a sharp hunger and an elation that's too sweet to describe.[20]

Another letter in the Wise collection emphasizes this disrelation of humane man from machine-tending man. This writer sees the American fighting man becoming coldly busi-

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[20] Very Truly Ours, ed. James Waterman Wise (New York: Dial Press, 1943), pp. 149-50. All of the letters in this collection are anonymous.

ness like when he turns to his war machinery, even though he is very humane under other circumstances. Part of the letter follows:

> I can tell you that our boys are not soft. You would never be able to comprehend exactly what I am driving at unless you were out here and could see it with your own eyes. The Japs may get their courage from a fanatical love of their Emperor or their religion; the Germans may get theirs from the belief that they are the superior people and that nothing can happen to them.
>
> It's a different case with us, the British, and Australians, and the other English-speaking people that I have come in contact with. With us, we know we have a job to do and we want to get it over as soon as we can. These boys are no supermen, no heroes. But they are just plain everyday folks.
>
> They may be plenty scared when they go into action, but as soon as they go to work with their airplanes, their tanks, their artillery, or any other mechanical affair, they forget about everything except their machinery and what it is supposed to do. The result is they go out and do things that no man in his sane mind would do.
>
> An example of this is what happened when the Marine fliers knocked off 14 transports that were trying to land on a very famous island in the Southwest Pacific. There were so many dead Japs in the water that you could have walked from New York to Port Jefferson down the Long Island Sound without getting your feet wet. They were packed so tight on the deck that when the fighters went over strafing, the dead ones couldn't fall over.[21]

Although the men may be "plenty scared when they go into ac-

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[21] Ibid., pp. 126-27.

tion," the attention which their machines demand drives all fear from them. They become so fearless as a result of their intentness upon their machines, according to the above writer, that "they go out and do things that no man in his sane mind would do." The Japs have their Emperor, and the Germans have their Nietzschean ideal, but the English-speaking people have their machinery. Here is the machine-like side of man that Ciardi, Eberhart, and Shapiro speak of in their poetry.

The one-sided development of the flier is revealed in the following excerpt from a letter written by an Army Air Corps pilot. He has gone directly from school into the service, and his sole adult experience is his military specialty---he can do nothing else but fly his plane:

> I hope old F.D.R. figures out a way to get us jobs after the war. Most of us will know nothing but how to fly and how to fight. Flyers will probably be a dime a dozen after the war. The Army will keep a few, and the airlines will use a few, and the rest will join the bread lines. Too bad we can't really learn something of value while we fight, but there is really no time for anything outside of taking care of your plane and guns. We have learned lots of valuable tricks that give us a better chance of surviving this war, but nothing that will help us survive a depression after the war.[22]

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[22]Kendrick R. Bragg, A Book of War Letters, ed. Harry E. Maule (New York: Random House, 1943), p. 119.

Undeveloped in every way but in the care and use of his war plane, the young man is uncertain and timid as he looks toward the non-military world of the future. Ironically, it is peace and not war that he fears. He understands his machine, and has learned to live with death, but he does not know how to function in the peacetime world.

There are numerous prose accounts which echo the death-in-the-machine theme of the poetry. One cannot help thinking of Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" when reading these accounts of the helplessness of men trapped in war machines under attack. One such account is in a letter from a flier who is describing a mission in which his plane came under heavy anti-aircraft fire:

> As soon as we left the scene I crawled out of the nose and went back to see if everyone was O.K. They told me Wilson had been hit, so I went back to the tail. He was lying on his back swathed in his heavy flying clothes. He had been hit in the back by a shell fragment. . .[23]

Another description of the death of an airman, this time a Japanese airman, is interesting because it deals with a duel of machines: the strafing airplanes against ground-based machine guns. The letter from which the following passage is excerpted came from Guadalcanal. Perhaps the attitude of the writer toward the dead enemy flier is partly the result

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[23] Op. cit., ed. Wise, pp. 135-36.

of the bitter fighting between the American and Japanese forces for Guadalcanal. In any case, the pilot of the downed plane is looked upon as a mere extension of his machine. He is almost equated with a piece of the wing and the motor plate:

> We heard "Three Zeros about the strafe field from north." Dove into dugout and stuck our heads out to watch. Sure enough--the three came out of a diving turn. Seeing that we were about 50 yards to the left of their line of fire, we watched and yelled. They put on a pretty aerial show, held their triggers down, but hit nothing but the ground. A couple of lads with machine guns had one in flames as he passed close by us; another smoking badly. Other witnesses say the score was 3 out of 3. We cheered like madmen, and rushed to the first wreck. I enclose a piece of his wing. Took off the motor plate (bearing serial number, date, and other data) and gave it to Intelligence. The pilot was brown on all sides, and ready for the A-1 Sauce. His head had been snapped off, and his feet also--all he needed was a spit through him and he'd have passed for roast mutton. Or am I spoiling your appetite?[24]

The following account describes the stricken helplessness of a sailor in the fire control center of a warship when the ship is struck by a Kamikaze plane:

> We all knew what was coming: a suicide dive. We made an emergency turn and waited for the explosion. It came, in a thunderous roar and simultaneous explosion, directly amidship. The concussion was so violent that my face was smashed against the instrument panel. It seemed there was a whirring, buzzing sound, and everything went black. Slowly the blackness faded. I was wondering if I were dead. My head cleared slowly. My back ached,

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[24]Danforth Miller, Jr., op. cit., ed. Maule, pp. 192-93.

> and I couldn't move my legs. My God! I am paralyzed! I noticed the glass on the instrument panel was smashed. There was blood on it. My blood! I raised my arms and knew that my neck was not broken. My body and head were numb. I touched my face with my hands, and had no sense of feeling. I looked at my hands; they were covered with blood from my face. Good God! Would I be disfigured? What about my legs? I tried to move them; it was no use.[25]

An account similar to the one above describes a direct hit from enemy artillery on a self-propelled gun. Rather than going through the painful inventory of his limbs like the sailor above, the serviceman here is concerned with his fellow crewmen:

> . . . I imagine that I can still hear the pitiful screams and terrified yells of the bleeding, shocked, suffering men who lay there with me on the floor of the M-7, which has a 105 mm. howitzer, mounted on a medium tank carriage minus a turret, from which we had been firing all afternoon. I hazily remember being lifted from the tank and carried over to a deep gulley just in time to avoid a second shell which lands right in the middle of the tank, silencing forever the screams, pain, and misery of three of the men who had soldiered with me for two years.[26]

An account of death in the machine that is unusual because it reveals an American serviceman's feelings of pity and guilt for the loss of enemy lives is a letter by Meyer

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[25]John N. Nemeth, "Nemeth's Last Target," op. cit., ed. Wolfe, p. 164.

[26]Arthur W. Miller, "Memories in the Night: African Tragedy," ibid., p. 236.

Davis, Jr. to his girlfriend. Davis was stationed on a destroyer on anti-submarine duty. His rationalization of U-boat killing in this excerpt is revealing: he is not killing men, but machines:

> It was reported to me, via my phones, that after the first seven [depth charges] were released, a great deal of oil came to the surface, and one of the lookouts reported seeing some wreckage come to the surface, with the bubbles of our first charge. So it is pretty definitely established, at least to our satisfaction if not to yours, that there are widows and orphans in Germany tonight. I'm sorry that I have to be so hard-boiled about it, but this is no Girl Scout Outing, or Rotary Club Picnic, and if we hadn't gotten them, it's a cinch they would have had us. . .
>
> The fact that men die down below us doesn't really come into the mind, they just happened to have the misfortune to be inside the sub when it went down. Essentially, we are killing submarines, not men--if they want to have the bad judgment to be in the vicinity, that's their hard luck.
>
> Perhaps the foregoing is only a rationalization of an uncomfortable feeling that today I helped kill some men that had wives and sweethearts, mothers and children back in Germany, but I have to try to be quite ruthless or I won't be much use in this war. . .[27]

It is the machine that kills the machine. The men in the machine "just happened to have the misfortune to be inside the sub when it went down." And the man who has had a hand in killing the submarine must control his human feelings and become machine-like himself; he concludes, "I have to try to be

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[27]Meyer Davis, Jr., Letters Home, ed. Mina Curtiss (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), p. 124.

quite ruthless or I won't be much use in this war. . ."

It was not only in combat with the enemy that the modern war machine instilled fear in the hearts of those who operated it. The machine was dangerous even in training; hundreds of flight trainees were killed as the result of accidents. The following excerpt is from a letter of a naval air trainee:

> We are working very hard and it is a grind but I guess everyone is putting up with a lot these days. These planes do give one a few gray hairs. I have made two forced landings so far but luckily I was near a field both times. They were due to motor sputtering, high oil temperature and low oil pressure. You ask why I never laugh in any more of my pictures. I guess it is because this is a grim business and there is not too much to laugh about. . .[28]

Fatalism is evident in this letter: the pilot is ready for death at any time. Many of his comrades have already been killed in training. The nervous strain of flight, in or out of combat, was terrific, and many fliers cracked. A dramatic account of such a crack-up is related in the following excerpt from a letter by a Marine pilot:

> Another time a fighter pilot went nuts high above the clouds. He picked up his microphone and for fifteen minutes we heard through

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[28]Jack H. Redinger, ibid., p. 170.

> our headpieces the wildest, most devastating final speech, part raving and part sane--the most tragic thing I have ever heard--and then he came spinning down past us.[29]

Finally, an account of an incident which occurred in the Italian campaign illustrates every aspect of the machine theme of Second World War soldier thought and writing: the helplessness of man before the machine, the inhuman precision which the machine demands of those who operate it, and the fiery death of those who fight within the machine. The account tells of a tragic mistake in which a flight of American planes is torn apart by anti-aircraft fire from their own ships. An excerpt follows:

> Now the AA's and 40 mm.'s are training their sights on the approaching craft. Slowly but surely they elevate their guns. Comes the order, "Commence firing!" and trajectories of tracer shells ascent in flaming parabolic arcs to encircle the entire flight. "What the devil is the matter with those fool Heinies?" I think. Do they wish to die for their glorified paper hanger? Hit after hit we score until ship after ship bursts into flames or falls spiralling into the sea.
>
> But something is wrong. From the wounded ships parachutes come fluttering, some to fall in flames into the sea among a maelstrom of shells, others to billow out in slow descent. Then some trigger-happy gunner aboard another ship decides to pick off the supposed helpless Jerries. Soon every gunner is firing away at the helpless troopers who dangle limply beneath the umbrellas of their 'chutes.
>
> Too late for many of these helpless men comes the command, "Cease firing! Cease firing! Stand by to pick up survivors. Stand by to pick up survivors." Only then does the dreadful realization

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[29]William N. Ellison, op. cit., ed. Maule, p. 204.

> descend like a sledge hammer upon us. We have wantonly, though inadvertently, slaughtered our own gallant buddies. . .[30]

A poem of Randall Jarrell, "Pilots, Man Your Planes," describes an incident similar to the above in which a flier returning to his aircraft carrier flies into his own ship's anti-aircraft fire and is shot down. The flier survives the crash, although badly hurt, and is pulled from the water an embittered and frustrated man. The poem ends:

> . . . the pilot,
> Drugged in a blanket, straining up to gulp
> From the mug that scrapes like chalk against
> his mouth,
> Knows, knows at last; he yawns the chatter-
> ing yawn
> Of effort of anguish, of hurt hating helpless-
> ness--
> Yawns sobbingly, his head falls back, he sleeps.[31]

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[30]Herbert N. Bair, "Tragedy at Palermo," op. cit., ed. Wolfe, pp. 172-73.

[31]Jarrell, op. cit., pp. 146-49.

CHAPTER IV

HOME AND THE PROBLEM OF REALITY

As an approach to the soldier poets' view of home and the problem of reality, let us first look at Richard Wilbur's "First Snow in Alsace:"

> The snow came down last night like moths
> Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
> Covered the town with simple cloths.
>
> Absolute snow lies rumpled on
> What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
> Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.
>
> As if it did not know they'd changed,
> Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
> Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.
>
> The ration stacks are milky domes;
> Across the ammunition pile
> The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.
>
> You think: beyond the town a mile
> Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
> Of soldiers dead a little while.
>
> Persons and persons in disguise,
> Walking the new air white and fine,
> Trade glances quick with shared surprise.
>
> At children's windows, heaped, benign,
> As always, winter shines the most,
> And frost makes marvelous designs.
>
> The night guard coming from his post,
> Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow

And warms him with a boyish boast:
He was the first to see the snow.[1]

In this poem, unusual in its similarity to some of the First World War pastoral poetry, we find the ironic juxtaposition of snow, which symbolizes peace, home, childhood, and things going right, with the war and things gone wrong. The snow of pleasant memories and associations falls on a series of unpleasant objects, associated with the war: the fear-gutted homes, the ration stacks and ammunition pile, and the dead. The sight of the snow brings about a strange disorientation among those who bear witness to it. As always, the snow has transformed the appearance of the world into something beautiful and new, but here, in the midst of war, such a transformation seems inappropriate and unreal. Reality lies in the supply dump and the dead. Yet the sentry feels the pull of his past life as he remembers the first snows of his boyhood.[2]

When does a young man awake to his own identity and to the true nature of "reality?" It is obvious that there is no pat answer to this question. The face of reality, as

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[1] The Beautiful Changes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), p. 10.

[2] A poem that is similar in theme and subject is John Ciardi's "First Snow on an Airfield," Poetry, LXIV, No. 4 (July, 1944), 186. As the speaker of this poem contemplates the first snow, his thoughts are drawn away from his memories by the demands of the business of war--he has a manual of guns to learn.

it is perceived by different people, will appear different. And some people grow into a mature awareness of their surroundings and their identity sooner than others. But for a generation reaching military age during wartime, the problem of reaching even a relative awareness of reality is a special one. Young men are removed from the protective circle formed by the family and other insulating institutions, and are placed in military service, which, to an extent, is also protective and insulating. Society has made all of the major decisions for them. To the young men in the military service, what is "reality," or "normality," or "the true state of things?" Is it the home they left behind? Is it the war? Is it a future life after the war? And what is the soldier's relation to this reality: what is his identity? The resolution of this problem is made urgent by the life or death business of war in which the soldier is involved.

Central in the soldier's problem of reality is his home, home in the sense of both his family and the civilization he left behind. For most servicemen, some concept of home became one of the few constants in a world of maddening variables. This was something they could depend on as a source of comfort, as something they could look forward to after the war was over, and as something they could look back on in moments of nostalgia. But what was the reality of home? People, especially the young, do not often look upon familiar things objectively, especially if one must be

away from these familiar things. Home for the soldiers was often a romanticized fiction of complete fulfillment, a "big rock candy mountain." The soldiers kept and nurtured this fiction and became understandably upset when anything threatened to shatter it, such as the "Dear John" letter, news of strikes or political unrest, or domestic problems. The vision of home had to be perfect and unchanging in its perfection if it was to make a satisfactory contrast with the various kinds of unpleasantness, discomfort, and danger in the service. The soldier poets knew this, and home as an unreal vision, sometimes meretricious, sometimes mawkish, is a constant theme in their poetry.

To begin our survey, we find a young soldier's confusion about reality and his identity in Kenneth Koch's "Poem for my Twentieth Birthday." The speaker of the poem, a soldier who is far from home, stands at a point between past and present, looking in both directions in an effort to find reality and to find himself:

> Passing the American graveyard, for my birthday
> the crosses stuttering, white on tropical green.
> the years' quick focus of faces I do not remember...
>
> The palm trees stalking like deliberate giants
> for my birthday, and all the hot adolescent memories
> seen through a screen of water....
>
> For my birthday, thrust into the adult and actual:
> expected to perform the action, not to ponder

the reality behind the fact.
the man standing upright in the dream.[3]

The soldier sees his past life as vague and unreal, and the present as "adult and actual." But the groping tone of the poem shows that the soldier has by no means come to terms with the present. He does not feel adequate "to perform the action" because he is not sure of his identity. Having been uprooted from his past and thrust into a war far from home, he does not know who he is. He sees himself as "the man standing upright in the dream." The contrast between the birthdays of the past and this one triggers this poem as the contrast between snowfalls past and present triggers Richard Wilbur's "First Snow in Alsace." In both cases, the present events--the birthday and the snowfall--seem appropriate only in the context of the past. In the environment of war they seem disturbing and unreal.

"Nostalgia," by Karl Shapiro, treats the same problem of past and present, but here the soldier's past is presented as not so much unreal and adolescent as it is selfish and narrow. The poem opens:

My soul stands at the window of my room
And I ten thousand miles away;
My days are filled with ocean's sound of doom,
Salt and cloud and the bitter spray.
Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.

My selfish youth, my books with gilded edge,

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[3]Poetry, LXVII, No. 2 (November, 1945), 80.

Knowledge and all gaze down the street;
The potted plants upon the window ledge
Gaze down with selfish lives and sweet.
Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.[4]
. . . . . .

The speaker does not idolize the past; he realizes that he can never return to it again for now his world is much larger, if not so selfishly insulated from unpleasantness. His present world of death and "salt and cloud and the bitter spray" is more real than the world of his youth which had in it only a small corner of reality. The war has opened the speaker's eyes to a larger, fuller, and more terrible world than he had ever known before. Shapiro repeats this theme in another of his war pieces, entitled simply, "Poem:"

Lord, I have seen too much for one who sat
In quiet at his window's luminous eye
And puzzled over house and street and sky,
Safe only in the narrowest habitat;
Who studies peace as if the world were flat.
The edge of nature linear and dry,
But faltered at each brilliant entity
Drawn like a prize from some magician's hat.

Too suddenly this lightning is disclosed:
Lord, in a day the vacuum of Hell,
The mouth of blood, the ocean's ragged jaw,
More than embittered Adam ever saw
When driven from Eden to the East to dwell,
The lust of godhead hideously exposed![5]

In his past life, the speaker has avoided "each brilliant entity" in life and therefore finds war too much to bear.

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[4] Poetry, LXI, No. 2 (November, 1942), 415.

[5] Ibid., LXII, No. 5 (August, 1943), 242-43.

The face of reality is too overpowering for him to look upon. His sheltered youth has not prepared him for this. But he knows that the security of the "narrowest habitat" of his youth was illusory and that in order to know his place in relation to the real world, he must face "the lust of godhead hideously exposed."

The disquieting truth of reality when contrasted with the comforting fiction of illusion is the basis of the second of a pair of poems of Robert Wistrand. The first poem, "Field Hospital," deals with the efficacy of words to comfort those who are in pain. But the second poem, "Reply," is a bitter denial of this:

> What does it matter and what does it prove
> that words still follow the pattern of love:
> Virginal dreams are a rarity here
> and none of the words anesthetize fear.
>
> None of love's counterfeits, secrets or codes
> shelter us now as the jungle explodes;
> none of those tender, undying affections
> protect us from bullets, or change their directions.[6]

The cynicism of this poem would grant reality to only the tangible and present. "Love's counterfeits, secrets or codes" are neither material themselves, nor can they influence the material. Therefore they are worthless. Words cannot protect soldiers from the reality of the exploding jungle and the flying bullets. The trite jingle of these lines in-

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[6] Poetry, LXIV, No. 3 (June, 1944), 138.

creases their irony. Protestations of love are trite, ineffectual, and cruelly misleading with regard to the nature of reality.

The contrast between a dry historical account of a battle and the awful reality of the event itself is the theme of "History Lesson," by H. Lee Dutton. The speaker of the poem is a soldier who knows how it really was in the battle of Mount Calvi. The last two stanzas follow:

> They took it and went on,
> met stiff opposition,
> and went on,
> a minor obstacle taken,
> forgotten, noted perhaps
> in a phrase my son will memorize
> for some stiff-backed maiden
> smelling of chalk and eau de cologne.
>
> Blake, boy, I was miles away
> but I saw the men of Mount Calvi,
> saw them stacked like sides of beef
> in the back of a two ton truck,
> blood dried brown on the white cloth covers,
> their worn boots sticking out.[7]

The speaker of the poem will insist on describing to his son the reality of the battle even if it is distasteful and shocking. The shocking reality is the number of men who were killed fighting for Mount Calvi and the utter finality of their deaths. Like "Reply," Dutton's poem bitterly denounces the illusory and sharply elucidates the real. The frank purpose of this poem is to shock, and the picture of the dead soldiers "stacked like sides of beef" <u>is</u> grim and shocking.

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[7]<u>Poetry</u>, LXVI, No. 1 (April, 1945), 8-9.

But the bitter tone of this poem and the Wistrand poem above precludes almost any feeling but shock. Unlike some of the poems of Owen and Sassoon which were also meant to shock the reader, these poems do not evoke sympathy for the victims of war because the speakers of these poems themselves, when their tone is closely evaluated, do not seem to feel sympathy. Theirs are the cold emotions of shock, bitterness, and hostility.

Mail from home brought servicemen into contact with a world which was vastly different from the one in which they lived, whether it be a camp in the United States or a remote foreign station. Letters gave the soldiers a glimpse of home, and often intensified their problems of reality and identity. Mail call, although eagerly anticipated, gave soldiers occasion to wonder about their place in a confused world. If all was well at home, the soldier might feel that he was not missed; if all was not well, he had to bear a burden of worry. The simple problem of communication by the written word was a great one, and the long delays between the sending and receiving of letters added to the soldier's sense of isolation. There were several poems written about soldiers' mail by soldier poets, two of which will be treated here.

"Mail Call," by Randall Jarrell, shows the soldier's problem of identity in a world at war. In this poem, home appears as a shadowy presence, remote and unreal, toward which the soldier gropes in an attempt to find himself. The

setting of the poem is a traditional army mail call in which the mail clerk stands with a stack of letters in his hand in the midst of a group of soldiers who strain to hear their names as they are called. As the clerk reads off the name on each envelope, the recipient sounds off, and the clerk flips the letter in his direction. As the stack of mail grows smaller, the soldiers who have not yet had their names called have less and less hope that there is a letter for them.

> The letters always just evade the hand.
> One skates like a stone into a beam, falls like
> a bird.
> Surely the past from which the letters rise
> Is waiting in the future, past the graves?
> The soldiers are all haunted by their lives.
>
> Their claims upon their kind are paid in paper
> That establishes a presence, like a smell.
> In letters and dreams they see the world.
> They are waiting: and the years contract
> To an empty hand, to one unuttered sound--
>
> The soldier simply wishes for his name.[8]

Unsure of the past and of the future, unsure even of who he is, the soldier waits for his name to be called. The loneliness and disorientation of the soldier are evident in the poem. Blocking out the unpleasantness of present reality, he sees the world "in letters and dreams," and when no letter comes he feels deprived of what his soul feeds on. The sol-

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[8]Randall Jarrell, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 164.

dier of "Mail Call" knows no reality, no identity.

In "Letters Home," Hubert Creekmore presents the letter-writing soldiers as unthinking somnambulists who have trouble writing because they have nothing to say. The poem satirizes the institutionalized phrases which the soldiers put on paper in an effort to communicate, to keep in touch, or simply to reciprocate the letters which they have received. But their problem is more than communication; the isolated soldiers are trying in vain to draw meaningful words out of a vacuum. Part I of the poem follows:

> Now, in a foreign land,
> The fighter winds in words the ties
> That wrote the meaning of his life,
> Enriching it, so he presumed,
> With attitudes he cannot spell.
> Emotions suicide by magic
> When they face a verbal system.
>
> Jute twines with the blossoms bloomed
> In artificial tanks of home, whose
> Affections yearn in movie guise,
> To vitaminize the lean feelings
> With a letter. Yes: he "takes his pen
> in hand";
>
> But what can he say who never felt anything
> to say?
> Or he who never had to make the words say
> it?
> A middleman had always handled their ex-
> pression--
> The grower of Mother's Day flowers,
> The sewer of Father's Day ties,
> The odor of Christmas perfumes,
> The chromo of greeting card verse.
> And so these thousands of letters
> Shuttle between the inarticulate
> Outposts of war and well-swept firesides--
> Procession of dried and inky characters
> Epic in its pathos.

The shoulders shadow paper
Chaste for warm confession;
The pen props in the fingers,
Ink awaits the art.
But grinding thought unshapes in arctic
words
The love that tenderly should burst,
Visibly, achingly, like the cereus
Spreading its cloud on rose-stained wall.

Our faith redeems our failure:
We have embraced the rite,
Stayed unfamiliar to its spirit.

The boys who have been drawn into the service from a thousand different small corners of the nation find themselves in a kind of limbo. Too insecure and upset to be really perceptive of their present existence, and in their youthful dependent acceptance never having been really aware of their lives at home, their letters bespeak the pathos of their positions. In Part II of "Letters Home," Creekmore has the soldiers speak for themselves:

Footnotes to economics I enclose
two dollars or no pay since San Francisco
and I need some shaving cream, so please
send me a dollar if you can spare it.

Statistics have not placed these in a context with
afraid you're stepping out with other men...
I'm sending you my pay, not playing around
and you better stay true to me. Do you
go out with them? Is Buck hanging around?
Do you--?

Acid in the arteries. And heart acidified:
"Boy-does-he-know-how-to-handle-women!"
Mails a brief note to his wife, and four
Of postcard passion to four pick-ups.
And the milk of doubt which starts each sentence
"Darling...

Boyish, they bound with the village church,
The courthouse square, the meadow streams,
The sitting room, their world.
The circumscription gave them strength;
It wound upright their weakness.
Has Rosa had her calf?...John help you with
the harvest?
And bravado filtered through the sieve
Of newspaper propaganda.
The circle breaks:
Although I only saw you twice,
you are my ideal girl. I dream of you
every night...wonder if you're mad
you haven't answered my last three letters.
It's over three months now--

The pitiful veil
Held out by lonely hands, can never cover
That fugitive flesh. Homespun. Rayon.[9]

The letters which the soldiers send reflect their groping for security, reality, and identity. The soldiers' search for words is indicative of a deeper search for themselves.

The second part of this poem catches the spirit of the soldiers' letters by using their own words. This technique puts the poem in touch with its subject directly and adds to it a quality of concreteness that the Jarrell poem lacks. The soldiers of this poem seem to be real people, while those of "Mail Call" are shadows.

The motion pictures which were shown for the entertainment of servicemen overseas gave the soldier poets an opportunity to explore the fantastic world of the films and the contrast the illusory with the real. Two of these poems will

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[9]Hubert Creekmore, The Long Reprieve (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 19-21.

be discussed here: Hubert Creekmore's "Outdoor Movie--Noumea," and Louis Coxe's "Movie Party, Tulagi." Creekmore's poem presents the movie as a modern satyr play which hypnotizes those who gather on the hillside to watch it. The image on the screen lacks substance, but so do those who watch it. The poem ends:

> Around our emptiness we draw the disguise
> Of movies. Oh, men at Thermopylae,
> This hero is a ghost.
> And all are lost upon the hillside, lost
> Beneath the dance of gigantic thighs
> Projected on our will.
>
> Shadows, watching shadows, imitate,
> Drain their dwindling substance through
> Each others' pallid cores.
> Beyond the eastern range the great moon pours
> On screen of clouds, then breaks, great
> Cascade of longing, to
>
> The desert of our dreams, breaks that screen
> Hiding the world of man from man,
> And probes the only real
> We know within ourselves. Its mirrors steal
> Us from the hypnotist. The lean
> Sinews knot and wake.[10]

The rising moon makes the watchers awake from the hypnotic trance produced by the film by probing "the only real/ We know within ourselves. . ." The moonlight's probing of this internal reality is enough to dispel the falsehoods of the movie screen which hide "the world of man from man." But the watchers of the film are not unwilling subjects of the hypnotist; they submit because of their own emptiness.

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[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

Louis Coxe, in "Movie Party, Tulagi," also contrasts the make-believe and the real. Reality is dangerous, unpleasant, and sad, while the "loud philosophy" of the films promises a never-never land of fulfillment which answers the soldiers' dreams of desire and escape:

> This loud philosophy in black and white
> Conducts behavior and a way of life.
> Patterns of wishing set, the hunter night
> Recoils. Beyond the coral in the reef
> Reality is there
> Here we are safe.
>
> Forever beautiful the blondes persuade
> Triumph of home-coming to lust and wealth.
> O believe this. Every hero shall be paid
> Eternal youth, a progress back in state
> Where fortune simpers
> And all the girls are game.
>
> What are the mind's dimensions? When the dark
> Chokes off the final passion we must close
> Again with the drowned and gutted who have struck
> Across to hidden lives. Whispers below the tide
> Are patternless and quick
> Where men have died.[11]

The counterfeit world of Hollywood where no one really dies is vastly different from the real world of Tulagi where hundreds of the comrades of those who are watching the movie have been "drowned and gutted." When the film ends, the viewers must return to the reality "where men have died."

The above poems are strikingly similar in their presentation of the cruel fictions of the movies, the yearning of the soldiers, and their disorientation with regard to

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[11]Louis O. Coxe, Sea Faring and Other Poems (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), p. 15.

reality. Far from home, the soldiers are exposed to the "loud philosophy in black and white" which presents them with a kind of myth that is particularly enticing to their loneliness. Because of the strength of its imagery, the Creekmore poem tends to involve the reader more. Somewhat less effective, the Coxe poem tends to greater abstraction as it tells the reader what the Creekmore poem shows.

A sometimes painful confrontation with his past life came when the soldier returned home, whether it be on leave or after his discharge from the service. After returning home, the soldier often faced disillusionment as he looked objectively upon those things which seemed perfect while he was away from them. At home the soldier might discover for the first time who and what he is, or he might find that he does not know this after all and must seek an identity separate from his past. Four poems that deal with this confrontation of the soldier with his home will be discussed here: "Leave of Absence," by James E. Schevill; "Legacy," by Frederick Ebright; "Ten-Day Leave," by William Meredith; and "V-J Day," by Louis Coxe.

James E. Schevill's "Leave of Absence" is a poem about disillusionment. The soldier who returns home on a brief leave realizes that he is not the boy who left home to enter the service; his youthful idealism is gone, and he realizes the futility of an old dream that would change the world. The poem ends:

. . . Open the door and in.
Walk up to the mirror and say hello
But the shine in your face is not as before.
A war has come out of the war of your games
And all you have left is only your name.

Up the stairs where the Indian drum hangs
And into the room that was your own.
Rugs on the floor glitter with color
And paint on the walls has cracked
And the windows add dust to your dreams.
Here you slept one night and out of your face
Stole the dream that would steal the world,
Cities rising out of the cold sea
To free an age that wants to be free.[12]

"Ten-Day Leave," by William Meredith, also deals with a soldier's thoughts upon going home on leave, but rather than discovering that he has lost something, the soldier here affirms his identity. He has found himself. The soldier has often dreamed of home, and has depended on this dream to sustain him in troubled times and in far-off places. In returning home, he joyfully finds that the dream has substance. Home for this soldier is good; he finds that it is what it is supposed to be. Rather than being disillusioned when confronted with his home, he finds that his dream is anchored in reality:

House that holds me, household that I hold dear,
Woman and man at the doorway, come what will
Hospitable, more than you know I enter here,
In retreat, in laughter, in the need of your
love still.

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[12]Poetry, LXIII, No. 6 (March, 1944), pp. 178-179.

More perhaps than you fancy, fancy finds
This room with books and answers in the walls:
I have continual reference to the lines
I learned here early, later readings false.

More than you dream, I wake from a special dream
To nothing but remorse for miles around,
And steady my bed at this unchanging scene
When the changing dogs dispute a stranger town.

Oh, identity is a traveling-piece with some,
But here is what calls me, here what I call home.[13]

The two soldiers who are the speakers of these poems reach different conclusions about home and the past as the center of identity. The speaker of "Leave of Absence" rejects his home and the person he was at home, while the speaker of "Ten-Day Leave" affirms the values of home and finds them genuine and worthwhile. In both of these poems, the leave of absence represents a test of reality. In each case the soldier is testing the vision of home which he nurtured while away in the service against the real thing.

"Legacy," by Frederick Ebright, could almost serve as a commentary upon Schevill's "Leave of Absence." The poem deals with servicemen returning from the war who find that their past lives before going into the service are irrelevant dreams, and that they can no longer function unselfconsciously in the homes they left behind. Either the war has

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[13]William Meredith, Love Letter From an Impossible Land (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 50.

changed them, or somehow home has changed while they have been away, or perhaps the home that they pictured never really existed. These thoughts cause them confusion:

> Wars end, and men come back from them
> Into another world not of their knowing,
> And strangers they to their own blood and bone
> Who remember them before their going.
>
> Dumb with what knowledge, blinded by what light:
> Of strange ways and dreams, and alien speaking;
> Sit they thus and stare beyond the hills
> Or, lost, walk restless forever seeking
>
> That time they knew, the place, the word;
> As children tricked by a conjurer's illusion,
> Children with puzzled eyes, and oddly old,
> Confused at their own sad confusion.[14]

"V-J Day," by Louis Coxe, cynically focuses on the disillusionment not only of the soldiers' homecoming, but of peace itself. This poem also depends upon the contrast between illusion and reality. As "V-J Day" presents it, peace is "the other half of war," holding no more than war for the returning veterans:

> Peace in this anchorage
> Assumes a fervent myth
> With many values. The edge
> Of night fear, the path
> Followed by guileless friends
> Knows lighter ways to death
> Now that this dying ends.
>
> Swung on three shots of chain
> My vessel, obsolete,
> Describes a slow turn;
> The Nazi and the brute

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[14] New Republic, CVII, No. 13 (September 28, 1942), 378.

Delivered from their pride
To ours have learned too late
How hardly dead men died.

The northern cities squander
Ticker tape and crowds
As the heroes' legal tender,
The stars have given the boys
Their pin-up charts of lust
To follow if allowed--
False bearings for the lost.

Oh, the dead shall have their laugh
Who knew it all the time:
Peace is the other half
Of war. The dreams of home,
Gorgeous and built with care,
Swing on three shots of chain
And burn out in the air.[15]

The poem presents a somber view of post-war reality that blots out the "fervent myth" of peace. The values of society are false and insidious, and any peace that is based on these (the "lighter ways to death," the false pride of the victor, the "pin-up charts of lust") is false. And the soldiers' dreams of home have no substance. They are fabrications of the soldiers' longing, "gorgeous and built with care," but have no reality.

Like the prose expressions on the theme of historic war, there is relatively little direct soldier prose commentary on the theme of home and the problem of reality. There are few prose accounts which frankly tell of a soldier's realiza-

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[15]Louis O. Coxe, op. cit., p. 24.

tion that he is confused about his sense of identity and unsure of his relationship with home and his life before entering the service. This kind of probing seems to have been largely the province of the poets. This becomes understandable when one considers that a person's sense of reality and identity are not ordinarily objects of intense introspective examination, especially in the insecure situation of the armed forces in wartime. The poet, however, whether he is in the service or not, must comment upon what he sees within himself and those around him. This can account for the more direct and complete rendering of this theme in poetry than in prose narratives. But in spite of their scarcity, there are some prose accounts which echo the poets' theme of the soldiers' disorientation with regard to home, reality, and identity, in virtually all of its variations. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a sampling of these.

An article which appeared in Yank, a weekly publication for Army enlisted men, entitled "The Personal History of an Infantryman in the South Pacific," provides a good background for a study of this theme as it occurs in soldier prose. The amateurishly written article tells how Sergeant Kevin McCarthy was precipitately thrust from civilian life into the heavy fighting in the Pacific islands with very little time to ponder the transition. McCarthy's youth in the Midwest was typical:

. . . . . .

Like most Americans in the Army, Mac had not planned to be a soldier. At St. John's [Academy] he took a business course, typing and shorthand. For several summers he worked on Dakota wheat farms. One summer he was a laborer in Yellowstone Park, and another he worked with his father, a section boss for the Northern Pacific Railroad.

Ever since he can remember, Mac has gone rabbit hunting in the winter. He was a Boy Scout, a member of the Catholic Youth Organization, and played football and basketball in high school. . .

Nobody thought much about it when he and 64 other Jamestown boys left for Camp Claiborne, La. They were going away for a year; that was all. . .

Late in November a corporal from New York City was making bets that the United States would be at war with Japan by Dec. 12. Everybody laughed at him --until he collected $500 the morning of Dec. 8. That morning the 164th was alerted and on Dec. 12 started for the West Coast.

The account goes on about training in Australia and New Caledonia before McCarthy's unit is shipped to the Solomon Islands and the war:

About the time they'd decided they'd be in New Cal for the duration, secret orders came through. Sergeants from headquarters said it was Guadalcanal. On the evening of Oct. 12, 1942, they saw the dim, shadowy outline of the Solomon Islands. It was Mac's twenty-first birthday.

The first scouts left the ship in Higgins landing boats at a spot near Lunga Point on the north central shore of the 'Canal. At 5 A.M. Mac's party landed, and an hour later they were bombed for the first time by two-motored Mitsubishi bombers.

"Sure we were scared," Mac will tell you. "Show me a man who says he isn't scared when he's under fire, and I'll show you a liar."

The writer next describes in some detail Sergeant McCarthy's part in the Guadalcanal fighting, and the article ends with

the following account of his desires, hopes, and observations:

> Mac is no story-book soldier. He does not pretend he enjoys war. He's been in the South Pacific for almost a year and a half now, and he wants to hear American spoken again. First, however, he recognizes that a war must be won. . .
>
> Sometimes he worries about what will happen after the war, worries about a job and whether he wants to spend the rest of his life in Jamestown or whether he'll stay in the Army. He worries mainly about the fact that in the Infantry he hasn't learned a trade, and he thinks the Army ought to give all infantrymen a chance to learn one after the war.
>
> Meantime, he's anxious only to finish the hard fighting that he knows lies ahead. "It's like going to the dentist; you don't like it, but it has to be done."
>
> Down on the 'Canal he got acquainted with Capt. (now Maj.) Joe Foss of Sioux Falls, S. Dak.
>
> What did they talk about?
>
> "We talked about home, of course," says Mac, "and wondered how the crops had been and if things would be changed much when we get back. What else is there to talk about?"[16]

This story, which is certainly typical, illustrates the basis in fact for the poets' theme of home and the problem of reality. In very short order this young man was transported from the boyscouts, the C.Y.O., and the high school athletics of his adolescence to the bloody struggle for Guadalcanal. His concern for the crops back home, a postwar job, and "if

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[16]Sergeant Merle Miller, "Sgt. Kevin McCarthy, The Personal History of an Infantryman in the South Pacific," The Best from Yank the Army Weekly (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1945), pp. 22-24.

things would be changed when we get back" show a fear for the permanence of the things which he left behind, and an apprehension about his future place in the old scheme of things. Now, in the explosive world of Guadalcanal, there is nothing stable in his life. His concern about a stable future, therefore, is understandable. Will he survive the war? If he does survive, should he return to Jamestown, North Dakota, or should he stay in the Army? If he does return home, will he find a job? The poets spoke of thousands of Kevin McCarthys, young men cut off from their roots and uncertain about their place in relation to the reality of the past or the future.

In the following reminiscence of the Guadalcanal experience, we find the soldiers' tremendous need for good memories of home in the midst of danger. The account begins with a description of a stretch of beach on which the narrator found himself during a lull in the fighting. Here he had time to consider the things that sustained him in time of great danger:

> . . . . . .
>
> It was here that we came to try and answer our own questions of why we, who were supposed to be free men, were engaged in this hell, this destruction, and it was to this beach we came to thank God that this same hell was here, a million miles from our homeland and loved ones. Our loved ones! On this beach the magic images of home dispelled momentarily the stench of death and the screams of our buddies. That ribbon of moonlight, stretching away until it became a sliver of nothingness, became solid and strong to support our weary feet as we trudged the long, long miles back through our mind's eye, to them. And once

> again we were home! . . . This was the one place in this whole island of destruction and catastrophe and chaos where we could summon up the memories of the things which we missed so much, the things we were fighting for, and dare not forget, lest we go mad. . .[17]

Thoughts of an idealized home come to the soldier in "magic images" which dispel "the stench of death." These thoughts offer him a momentary escape from the dreadful reality of the present and give him something to live and to fight for. Without these sustaining images, he will "go mad." Another idealized picture of home and the past is found in the following brief excerpt from a different reminiscence in the Wolfe collection:

> . . . And going back even to pre-teen-age days, this moon played a most important part in my childhood. Without the moon, games such as "I spy the moon sheep" would not have been. Those days were, as I look back, nearly "heaven-like."[18]

Even though the "magic images" of home and the "heaven-like" childhood days might not be grounded in fact, they served as a refuge for the young fighting men from the "destruction and catastrophe and chaos" of Guadalcanal and other battlefields.

The symbols which stood for home in the soldiers' minds indicate often that this concept was ill defined and

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[17]Wallace I Reid, "Red Beach," The Purple Testament, ed. Don M. Wolfe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1946), p. 76.

[18]Walter B. Spencer, "The Moon's a Thing I Can't Understand," ibid., p. 97.

unrealistic. But unrealistic as this concept of home might be, it had to serve to anchor the soldier to sanity and to provide a purpose for his fighting. An example of this symbolism is found in the following portion of a letter which presents a Christmas tree as standing for "the comfort of home and the security of loved ones:"

> The moon is shining brightly and the morning is calm and peaceful. Between the mess halls stands a pine tree decorated with colored lights. It stands out sharply in the early morning darkness. A symbol of what we are fighting for. It is clear to us what we are fighting for! The comfort of home and the security of loved ones are predominant above all.[19]

For this soldier, the fantastically decorated symbol of the high festival of Christmas stands for the homelife which his memory clings to in this confused time. It would seem to be a homelife of perpetual Christmas, when all are well and happy, gifts are given and received, and holiday food and drink give everything in sight a halo of rightness.

Since servicemen depended upon more or less romanticized visions of Mom and Dad, the girl next door, the small town street, ice cream, the high school football game, and home cooking for comfort and sustenance, they became disturbed when there were indications that all was not running smoothly at home. "Dear John" letters and dunning letters from collection agencies became well established in soldier lore during

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[19]John C. Liefert, A Book of War Letters, ed. Harry E. Maule (New York: Random House, 1943), pp. 29-30.

the Second World War. These were particularly disheartening because the soldiers who received them felt not only betrayed, but helpless in their betrayal.[20] Of particular annoyance and disillusionment to servicemen was news of labor unrest at home. This also caused the soldiers to feel betrayed; while they underwent danger and discomfort, people in the security and comfort of the United States dared to prolong the war by striking for more money. Ernie Pyle says of this:

> There was one thing concerning home life that soldiers were absolutely rabid on: that was strikes. Just mention a strike at home to either soldier or officer, living on monotonous rations in the mud under frequent bombings, and you had a raving maniac on your hands.[21]

Part of a letter from a soldier in North Africa bears out Pyle's observation:

> You know that we get news bulletins here. Well, I just read about all the strikes going on in the States. Boy, those guys make me sick! I know a lot of fellows who would gladly take over their jobs, only that they're doing a much more important job, right now. If the leaders of those strikes

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[20]Examples of these letters, with comment upon them, can be found in The Best From Yank the Army Weekly, pp. 35, 83-84, 142. A narrative poem on this subject is Lincoln Kirstein's "Dear John," Rhymes of a PFC (New York: New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 157-62. This poem was not discussed above because its theme, a humorous and cynical view of the rationalization of a "Dear John" recipient, is not the concern of this chapter.

[21]Here is Your War, (Chicago: Consolidated Book Pub-Publishers, 1944), p. 96.

> were sent here for only a few days, I'll bet they wouldn't "strike" again. For crying out loud, they ought to be shot. Money's all they're thinking of. They don't have to worry whether the next bomb is going to land in their laps.[22]

As the poetry indicates, few events were more welcome to servicemen than mail call. Letters were precious because they kept the soldier in touch with his roots. Letters gave servicemen individuality as they read their names on the envelopes. Letters gave them comfort as they saw themselves addressed in terms of endearment. Letters gave them identity as they read of people and things which are not the same without them. The following passage is from the letter of a serviceman who was in the Middle East:

> One of our planes returning from Cairo radioed it had on board a sack of mail. Perfect news. It had the same effect as throwing a stick of dynamite into our midst. Not having a post office, we all crowded into the officers' tent and started reading out names. You can imagine the excitement. Everyone passing around clippings, shouting, free drinks being passed by proud fathers, some drowning their sorrows over not getting any mail, others over hearing that their best girl friend was married or getting married. Everyone was happy, the party turned into a community sing, minus any tune.[23]

The soldiers' moods are lifted by the surprise arrival of mail from home not because they have been brought into contact with the outside world, but because each has been put in touch with his own closed world, the refuge of home.

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[22]Robert G. Vandewater, op. cit., ed. Maule, pp. 148-49.

[23]Joseph H. Walker, Jr., ibid., pp. 146-47.

The above account could well have provided the raw material for Randall Jarrell's poem, "Mail Call." The letter, however, simply describes the event, while the poem interprets it and comments upon it. And this is the case generally with the relationship between the poetry and prose on this theme. The prose is usually merely descriptive, while the poetry is interpretive; the prose appears as the poets' raw material.

It is interesting to note that Michael Whitacre of The Young Lions does not fit into the poets' picture of how the soldiers felt with regard to home and reality. But Whitacre is not the typical G.I.; he is somewhat older than the average soldier, well educated, and jaded. His memories of the places and people of home are largely unpleasant, and he seeks something in which he can believe at the front:

> As the noise of the guns among the distant ridges grew nearer and nearer, Michael had the feeling that now, finally, he was going to find that gentle citizenship, that openness of heart, that million-throated, inarticulate yea-saying of which he had dreamed before he went into the Army and which, so far, had eluded him. Somewhere just ahead of him, he felt, under the constant trembling of the artillery among the hills, he was going to find that America he had never known on its own continent, a tortured and dying America, but an America of friends and neighbors, an America in which a man could finally put away his over-civilized doubts, his book-sourced cynicism, his realistic despair, and humbly and gratefully lose himself. . .[24]

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[24]Irwin Shaw, The Young Lions (New York: Random House, 1948), pp. 635-36.

Unlike his fellow soldiers, Michael Whitacre holds no romanticized picture of home. Ironically, he seeks fulfillment in the place where most soldiers see only destruction, having been disillusioned with the place where most soldiers seek comfort.

Strictly speaking, the subject of home and reality cannot be considered a <u>theme</u> except in the poetry. The poets, perceiving the soldiers' problems of reality and identity and the importance of their vision of home, shaped this material into an articulate theme.

CHAPTER V

THE FAILURE OF SOCIETY

The fourth dominant theme of the American soldier poetry of the Second World War states that war occurs because the society of men has been impotent to meet the task of preserving peace. This is not to say that the poets take the position that society is out-and-out evil. For most of them, the absolute criteria of good and evil cannot be properly applied to the vast and complex organism of society. But they do see society as weak, directionless, and indifferent to the suffering of its members. In general, the American soldier poetry of the Second World War is much more a poetry of social criticism than it is of social blame. We do not find this kind of social criticism in the British First World War poetry. In this, we have Sassoon's poetry of outrage, Owen's poetry of warning, the pastoral poets' poetry of regret, and W. W. Gibson's and Isaac Rosenberg's different poetic approaches to the human values which war destroys, but the kind of social awareness which we find in the American Second World War poetry came into being after 1918.

In spite of the American soldier poets' indictment of the failure of society, their poetry is not completely

pessimistic. They do not turn their backs on society in a bitter rage; the very act of their criticism testifies that they are facing society with hope for better things. There is implicit in much of their poetry the conviction that if future war is to be prevented, it is only a changed society which will be able to do it. But this hope for the future can hardly be said to be dominant in their expression; it is accompanied with the wariness and caution that grows out of the knowledge that the present order of things has betrayed an entire generation. The betrayal will happen again unless society can change radically.

The soldier poets do not, however, provide a definite plan for social change. Their prescription for the ills of society is neither Marxist nor doctrinaire in any other way. These poets would simply have society more willing to put its humanitarian ideals into practice, to be more tolerant, to be less selfish, and to love more. If this prescription is general and vague, it is because its application is meant to be universal and its effect lasting. The soldier poets saw no pat, quick-acting panaceas for the sickness which brought into being the most terrible war which the world had yet seen.

The poems on the theme of the failure of society fall into five groups, each of which deals with one area of society's shortcomings. These sub-themes are (1) the indifference of society, (2) the impotence of the intellectual in society, (3) the intolerance of society, (4) the selfishness

of society, and (5) the lack of love in society. Each of these sub-themes will be illustrated and discussed in turn.

Many of the soldier poets take the position that peace must soon end when society takes it for granted and becomes indifferent to its preservation. This passive indifference of society is seen by the poets as criminally destructive. In "The Last Picnic," Stanley Kunitz envisions peace without vigilance as a summer picnic, an interlude of revelry, which, after the guests have fled, is taken over by creatures of destruction and violence which lurk in the surrounding wilderness:

> The guests in their summer colors have fled
> Through field and hedgerow. Come, let's pick
> The bones and feathers of our fun
> And kill the fire with a savage stick.
>
> The figures of our country play,
> The mocking dancers, in a swirl
> Of laughter waved from the evening's edge,
> Wrote finis to a pastoral.
>
> Now the tongue of the military man,
> Summoning the violent,
> Calls the wild dogs out of their holes
> And the deep Indian from his tent,
>
> Not to be tamed, not to be stamped
> Under. Earth-faced, behind this grove,
> Our failures creep with soldier hearts,
> Pointing their guns at what we love.
>
> When they shall paint our sockets gray
> And light us like a stinking fuse,
> Remember that we once could say,
> Yesterday we had a world to lose.[1]

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[1]Stanley Kunitz, Selected Poems, 1928-1958 (Boston:

Peace is merely a "country play," acted out by "mocking dancers," and when the pastoral celebration is over, "the violent" are summoned forth and the failures of society are manifested in war. But the forces of war have advanced into the open only after the guests have fled and the fire is killed. The "military man" calls forth his forces from their dark hiding places only after the default of peaceful man. And so it is that an indifferent society produces war.

"Prisoners," by Randall Jarrell, pictures a grim future world of perpetual warfare and despairing subjugation. But this new world will not be thrust upon us by an foreign power or by the sudden appearance of some aberration within our own society. The implication is strong within the poem that the evolution of the garrison state will be passively accepted by those within it; we will have allowed "our own new world" to develop:

> Within the wire of the post, unloading the
> cans of garbage,
> The three in soiled blue denim (the white
> P on their backs
> Sending its chilly North six yards to the
> turning blackened
> Sights of the cradled rifle, to the eyes
> of the yawning guard)
> Go on all day being punished, go on all
> month, all year
> Loading, unloading; give their child's,
> beast's sigh--of despair,
> Of endurance and of existence; look un-
> expectingly
> At the big guard, dark in his khaki, at

Little, Brown and Company, 1958), p. 93.

the dust of the blazing plain,
At the running or crawling soldiers in
their soiled and shapeless green.

The prisoners, the guards, the soldiers--
they are all, in their way, being
trained.
From these moments, repeated forever, our
own new world will be made.[2]

In a note to this poem, Jarrell explains that the prisoners are Americans who are being guarded by Americans. They are performing fatigue duty as punishment, while trainees perform their military maneuvers nearby. In Jarrell's view, however, all of the figures in the poem are trainees for a future which will know neither peace nor freedom, in which everyone will resignedly accept his role of either prisoner, guard, or soldier. As in "The Last Picnic," the forces of anti-peace have inexorably moved in, and the old world has been lost.

"Dividends," a bitter poem by Hubert Creekmore, is, in the words of the poem itself, "a sort of report to the stockholders" about their investments. The stockholders are the American citizens whose indifference and selfishness have helped to bring about a war in which thousands of their sons have been killed and maimed. The setting of the poem is a ship which bears "some cancelled notes,"

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[2]Randall Jarrell, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 159.

wounded servicemen, home from overseas. These sacrifices of the young are the citizens' return on their investments. Early in the poem, the speaker, addressing the stockholders, fixes the tentative blame:

> . . . . . .
> Item: a sailor, leg cut off,
> Credit: votes for irresponsible politicians
> Item: a soldier, right arm missing.
> Credit: copy and blurbs for a depraved press.
> Item: a marine, face gone.
> Credit: . . . . . .

But the citizen-stockholders are themselves the ultimate cause for the death and maiming of the war; they cannot pass the blame to the press and politicians. The irate speaker of the poem accuses the stockholders directly:

> . . . . . .
> This is the return on your investment,
> The "good buy" the Brokers told you about.
> It was so cheap; yours for only sloth
> And the glorification of ignorance.
> "Thank God, I'm just an ordinary man,"
> You always said, and you scorned everything but money.
> When you should have thought, you went to sleep.
> When you should have read, you took the comic strip.
> When you had to vote, you were in the movies.
> When you should have acted a citizen, you acted a fool in a night club.
> Well, death is ordinary, too.[3]
> . . . . . .

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[3]Hubert Creekmore, The Long Reprieve (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 66-67.

The angry poem concludes with the statement that "These loans are cancelled forever;" the notes owed by the younger to the older generation have been paid in full by the sacrifice of the young servicemen. An indifferent society has invested in its youth and has realized dividends which are far greater than it deserves.

More pointed in its attack than "Dividends," "The Asphidistras," by Frederick Ebright, is directed against the smugly secure middle-class ladies who live their lives oblivious to the war. While the world suffers and is forcibly changed by the conflict, these ladies are quietly indifferent, their lives the antithesis of change. The first stanza of the poem establishes its angry and ironic tone:

> Dear ladies, safe-walled in a row house,
> like all the others houses of
> its row,
> This war (or any crude disaster) can never
> now invade your sphere:
> Well shod, swathed in Burne-Jones and nib-
> bling after dinner mints,
> Your lives are timeless as the asphidistras
> in your window jardiniere.[4]

The polite ladies are blamed for their failure to involve themselves in the "crude disaster" of war, and for confining themselves in a small, safe world, aloof from the holocaust without.

Of the four poems above on the indifference of society,

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[4] New Republic, CXII, No. 13 (March 26, 1945), 419.

the first two, by Kunitz and Jarrell, are clearly the more effective. The conviction, the "right to talk," which these poems convey is strengthened by the participant point of view of each. The speakers of the latter two poems stand outside and play the role of accuser. The outraged accusations of "Dividends" reach the point of ranting; the heavy irony of "The Asphidistras" seems inappropriate for the middle-aged ladies who are its object. The objects of the accusations of "Dividends" and "The Asphidistras" are clichés. Because of this, the poems lack their intended bite. The relatively restrained regret and warning of the former poems is much more convincing.

In the foregoing poems, we find the soldier poets attacking the indifference of society toward the forces which cause war, and its indifference toward war itself as long as war does not interfere too much with normal activities. In the next group of poems to be considered, the soldier poets focus on the impotence of the intellectuals to improve society. These poems criticize the intellectuals because their high-flying abstractions are too far removed from real life to do much good in a world of violence. Since their gaze is directed upward, they are oblivious to what is going on around them.

In "The Supper Before Last," a poem in which the dramatic situation is similar to that of "The Last Picnic," Stanley Kunitz portrays the intellectuals dreaming at their

feast of mythical fare while the scavenging crow gobbles "the honeyed mortal game" flung beneath the table:

> The intellectuals at the feast
> Emaciated on their fare,
> Clap hands at the fabulous new beast
> Upon the massive platter borne.
> Their tongues rejoice, steeped in the rare
> Juices of the unicorn;
> While drunk with ptomaines now, the crow
> That hoarsely to the table came,
> Snatches at gobbets flung below,
> And smirking in his greasy frock
> Clamps beak on the honeyed mortal game
> Under the dreaming hip and hock.[5]

While the dreamers are unaware, a lower form of life moves in to consume the rare food under the table. The fantastic situation which Kunitz creates in this poem is appropriate for his subject and theme. The image of the effete company of intellectuals sampling the "rare/ Juices of the unicorn" while the base greedy crow waits for them to lapse into dreaming is strikingly imaginative and relevant to the poet's purpose.

While the tone of "The Supper Before Last" is regretful, that of "The Intellectual," by Karl Shapiro, is scornful. The prologue of the poem asks, "What should the wars do with these jigging fools?" The "jigging fools" are the effete intellectuals who hold themselves aloof from life and do not participate, producing nothing. The poem ends with an enjoiner to the intellectual to do something, but

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[5]Kunitz, op. cit., p. 97.

if he will not, at least to leave those who participate in life alone:

> . . . . . .
> Do something! die in Spain or paint a green
> Gouache, go into business (Rimbaud did),
> Or start another Little Magazine,
> Or move in with a woman, have a kid.
>
> Invulnerable, impossible, immune,
> Do what you will, your will will not be done
> But dissipate the light of afternoon
> Till evening flickers like the midnight sun,
>
> And midnight shouts and dies: I'd rather be
> A milkman walking in his sleep at dawn
> Bearing fat quarts of cream, and so be free,
> Crossing alone and cold from lawn to lawn.
>
> I'd rather be a barber and cut hair
> Than walk with you in gilt museum halls,
> You and the puma-lady, she so rare
> Exhaling her silk soul upon the walls.
>
> Go take yourselves apart, but let me be
> The fault you find with everyman. I spit,
> I laugh, I fight; and you, l'homme qui rit
> Swallow your stale saliva, and still sit.[6]

The defensiveness of the speaker of "The Intellectual" tends to detract from its effectiveness. The poem seems to be an angry counter to an insult which the speaker has experienced. His very defensiveness puts his conviction in some doubt. The title of this poem would indicate that it is about the intellectual but the reader of the poem does not have to supply much to infer that it is more about the speaker's angry hurt. The Kunitz poem above, although much

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[6]Karl Shapiro, Poems, 1940-1953 (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 80-81.

shorter, is more convincing in its portrayal of the shortcomings of the intellectuals who dream rather than participate.

In another of his poems, "The Conscientious Objector," Shapiro deals with a different kind of intellectual. Although he does not fight, the conscientious objector suffers for an ideal. He is impotent to prevent war, but it cannot be said that his belief is completely in vain. The final stanza of the poem praises the conscientious objector who has been imprisoned for his stand:

> You suffered not so physically but knew
> Maltreatment, hunger, ennui of the mind.
> Well might the soldier kissing the hot
> beach
> Erupting in his face damn all your kind.
> Yet you who saved neither yourselves nor us
> Are equally with those who shed the blood
> The heroes of our cause. Your conscience is
> What we come back to in the armistice.[7]

In time of peace, society can not only tolerate the conscientious objector, but is perhaps influenced by his conscience. But his conscience is not enough to prevent war. And here is the ironic impotence of the conscientious objector: when his message is relevant, he is imprisoned: when his message is irrelevant, he finds an audience. Unlike the speaker of "The Intellectual," the speaker of this poem is not angry with his subject. He respects him. This

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[7] Ibid., p. 27.

is because the conscientious objector is a participant in the recurring human drama of war; although he does not fight, he participates by his suffering. While the intellectual detachedly observes, the conscientious objector commits himself to a moral position and is willing to suffer for that commitment. The greater objectivity of the speaker's point of view in "The Conscientious Objector" makes the poem more successful than "The Intellectual." The speaker is generous without being patronizing toward his subject, and the poem seems balanced and complete. "The Intellectual," by contrast, seems a sneering fragment.

During the Second World War, Negro servicemen were segregated from white. The War Department defended this policy by stating that it merely followed the precedent of civilian life, and that war was not the time for social innovation. There was particular irony in this bias toward the Negro servicemen, however, first because these servicemen were placed in the position of fighting to preserve a nation which insisted that they play a subservient role, and second because the United States proclaimed to the world its unequivocal opposition to Nazi racism. This irony is emphasized in the four poems which will be treated here which deal with the Negro soldier. In them, the poets condemn the intolerance of society.

"The Last Letter," by Hubert Creekmore, describes a situation in which a Negro mother receives notification by

the War Department that her son has been killed in action. The first part of the poem could have been written about any mother who remembers her boy growing up:

> . . . . . .
> The curling mite, the child at the gate,
> The boy who helped to wash the clothes,
> The man who came from loving late
> And gay. . .

But the latter half of the poem can be relevant only to the Negro mother whose son has died in a distant land to uphold a nation which has demanded everything--life itself--but will not grant justice in return. The poem concludes with the speaker's comment:

> He died for a land whose word was false,
> But his country, his work, his anguish.
> Yet
> The conflict in his heart exalts
> The motive and the debt.
>
> His mother wipes her dark stained cheek.
> White folks' cooks better not be late.
> "Us niggers" move when patricians speak:
> Life and grief must wait.[8]

A second poem by Creekmore, "It's Me, Oh Lord, Standing With a Gun," draws out at greater length the ironic injustice of the Negro soldier fighting for a "freedom fraud." The situation of this poem is the invasion of a Pacific island. A landing barge approaches the hostile shore, full of black and white men who share for a time

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[8]Creekmore, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

the common fear of death:

> . . . . . .
> Undiscriminating death
> Appraises his approaching guests,
> Uniform in gear, beneath
> Which shiver bodies, black and white skinned,
> But uniform in value
> As currency of life. Their insight
>
> Penetrates the island's pull,
> Magnetic jointure of here-after.
> Across the rail, the Negro full
> In death's face stares and blinks, beside him
> Son of owners of slaves,
> Floating to a mortal hyphen, tongue-tied.
> . . . . . .

On the barge, a Negro and a Southern white man are on an equal footing, even though they are products of a past which has been built on the subservience of one of them. But the Negro, even though he can anticipate nothing more than "Jim Crow life for me and my folk," even though he is fighting for what seems to him a lie, wades ashore and faces death. The poem ends:

> The strakes grate on the shore, defy
> Horizon turned foreground of slaughter.
> Whether I, the Negro, lie
> Here or return, by all these tokens,
> Medals are for white men,
> Jim Crow life for me and my folk.
>
> Upon the coral shingle they leap
> And rush the smoking jungle. Round
> Their legs the salt-curls break and seep,
> Crumbling soon the mold of foot-prints.
> Streaks of red, shell-studded,
> Blot in sand, in waves are washed mute.[9]

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[9] Ibid., pp. 48-50.

The speaker of "New Georgia," by Randall Jarrell, is a dead Negro soldier. He lies beside his rifle which has been planted upright into the ground to mark his body, and remembers the days before the war when he was an abused black prisoner in Georgia. Somewhere in his past, the dead man "had learned to obey," and so he was "used" to fight in a war. The poem follows:

> Sometimes as I woke, the branches beside
> beside the stars
> Were to me, as I drowsed, the bars of my
> cell;
> The creepers lumped through my blanket,
> hard as a bed
> In the old ward, in the time before the war--
>
> In the days when, supperless, I moaned in
> sleep
> With the stripes of beating, the old, hard,
> hampering dream
> That lay like the chains on my limbs; till
> I woke
> To a world and a year that used me, when
> I had learned to obey.
>
> By the piece with a notch on the stock, by
> the knife from the States,
> The tags' chain stirs with the wind; and
> I sleep
> Paid, dead, and a soldier. Who fights for
> his own life
> Loses, loses: I have killed for my world,
> and am free.[10]

The concept of paying a debt through death and gaining freedom thereby, which emerges in the last stanza of this poem, is similar to that of the two Creekmore poems quoted earlier, "Dividends," and "The Last Letter." In these poems

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[10]Jarrell, op. cit., p. 176.

also, death and mutilation are the fees which society exacts from the young. The soldier of "New Georgia" has been made to submit, has killed for his world, has been killed himself, and in his death knows the only freedom which he has ever known.

The above poems on the Negro's plight appear in ascending order of their success. Creekmore's first poem, "The Last Letter," proves to be as sentimental as its title. The view of the boy growing up and his mother's bitter sorrow upon hearing of his death are banal, and the one passage in the poem which promises more than sentimentality ("The conflict in his heart exalts/ The motive and the debt") is left undeveloped. The ironic pairing of the Negro and the Southern white in "It's Me, Oh Lord, Standing With a Gun," is also conventional, but the poem offers a little more than "The Last Letter" in that Creekmore creates a genuine buildup of tension as the landing craft approaches the unknown dangers of the shore. The final image of the footprints being washed away by the waves, however, returns us to the banal. Although the dead Negro soldier's recollections of the Georgia chain gang in Jarrell's poem involve a kind of stage-suffering, the last stanza of this poem does speak eloquently and convincingly of sacrifice.

A far more effective poem than those discussed above is Lincoln Kirstein's "Black Joe." This poem presents a much more authentic commentary on the relationship between

white and Negro because it is spoken from the white point of view--no attempt is made to record the feelings of the abused Negro:

> This Norman coastal meadow lies in a chill
> grey haze of light;
> A soldier first sees France by day; he'd
> hit the beach at night.
>
> Stepping over snoring men, he tries to
> find him fire;
> Uncle Tom cooks for Uncle Sam as once he
> had for hire.
>
> Our soldier thanks the happy black, returns
> to his own group,
> And from those borrowed embers brought, a
> sharp new flame up.
>
> One by one his drowsy gang uncoils from
> each stern bed,
> Stiffens to stretch, scratch, realize not
> one of them is dead.
>
> Around our fire, like bugs to light, amble
> a few dazed oxenstray
> Negro troops who've slogged all night,
> orchard from beachhead, miles
> away.
>
> We whites, with gummy eye, but brave, as
> our blond blood stirs to its
> round
> Stare hard the dark intruders down to stand
> our own usurpèd ground.
>
> With psyches sound, but half-awake, we
> keep possession of our pyre,
> Warding the somber soldiers off; this
> shall remain a white-man's fire.
>
> Thus hard arrayed, fright against fright,
> upon the first dawn of our fight
> In common against a common foe, smoulders
> their wrong against our right.[11]

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[11] Rhymes of a PFC (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 65.

The situation described in "Black Joe" occurs immediately after the poet's unit has landed in Normandy. The irony of the poem, of course, lies in the white soldiers' refusal to grant the Negroes a place by their fire (which has been provided by a Negro) even in the face of the dangers of battle. The last couplet of the poem is devastating in its irony: in their first morning in France, the blond-blooded soldiers win their first encounter with a "common foe" who is not the Nazi, but their fellow G. I. The Damon Runyon diction and jingling couplets of the poem reinforce the characterization of the soldiers who will not give up their conventional American prejudices. Unlike the poems above, the Negroes here serve only as foils to evoke the bigoted reaction of the whites.

The fourth sub-theme in the soldier poets' indictment of society has to do with the selfishness of commercial man as he carried on "business as usual" in the face of the horror of war. The orientation of the poems on this theme is not Marxian. Man's selfishness in his commercial activities appears as a reflection of man's larger selfishness and insensitivity. The poets do not restrict their indictment to any one class of society.

The insensitivity of the advertiser to the great calamity of war is the theme of two bitter poems by Frederick Ebright: "Memorial to the Great Big Beautiful SelfSacrificin Advertisers," and "Tonight Over WXOZ." During the Second

World War, many advertisers attempted to emphasize their patriotism and unselfishness, while keeping their product before the public eye, by advertising that their product "had gone to war," and would return to the market after the end of hostilities. It is this advertising approach that is treated ironically in "Memorial to the Great Big Beautiful Self-Sacrificing Advertisers." This poem makes the point that the manufacturer's sacrifice of civilian production seems petty beside the sacrifice of thousands of servicemen and their families. The poem ends:

> The woman in Saginaw who reads the telegram
> of regret
> from the government, for her only son--
> and the lad on the cruiser who's just seen
> his pal
> blown to hell in a loud flash--
> They too feel the impact of war, but they
> can't put their grief
> in a $5,000 lithograph and ask you to cry
> with them.
> There is a dignity in silence.[12]

Like Jarrell's "Sick Nought," this poem ironically juxtaposes the personal hurt of the individual soldier and his immediate family, and the impersonal, telescopic participation in war of many of the institutions of society.[13] In "Tonight Over WXOZ," Ebright reiterates this theme of the indifference of society's economic institutions, this

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[12] The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: John Day, 1945), p. 127.

[13] See supra., pp. 62-63.

time focussing on the "business as usual" attitude of radio programming while the world is engaged in a bitter mortal struggle. The speaker of the poem catalogues the pap on the radio, both programs and advertisements, and then, in the final stanza, is thrown into the despair of a man who cares in a world that does not care:

> By now cerebral softening accommodates
> the news:
> Drivel implicit in conjectural propaganda
> served on toast.
> But yet, among soap plugs and ships and
> sealing wax and shoes,
> Remember, please, the Laxative whose maker
> is your host.
>
> Oh, weep no more, America, for what the
> hell's the use?. . .[14]

The antiseptic insensitive efficiency of the soldier morale program of the Red Cross is the theme of "Red Cross," by Lincoln Kirstein. This poem is more effective than the Ebright poems on the advertisers who display the same kind of patriotic insensitivity because Kirstein is concrete where Ebright is abstract. Ebright simply mentions "the woman in Saginaw" and "the Laxative whose maker is your host," while Kirstein makes the longing soldiers and the "society virgins" live. The Ebright poems are heavy with bitterness, while "Red Cross" maintains a light irony until the last stanza proclaims the yearning of the soldiers which the Red Cross has done nothing to assuage.

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[14] New Republic, CX, No. 24 (June 12, 1944), 786.

Come, fellas, all: react with glee. A
special treat's in store today.
At half-past nine, peculiar time, the Red
Cross will a visit pay.
We are not wounded; no, nor slain; but
there's real pain in every breast:
We're filthy homesick and we crave the
cushion of a female chest.

The Red Cross operates a van endowed by
Kohn's Department Store,
Equipped with hot plate, radio, and society
virgins three or four.
Our CO sniggered when he said we'd best
change shirts and scrape our
chins,
And even officers are glimpsed abluting
shyly, trim as pins.

. . . . . .

The soldiers line up to receive the doughnuts and coffee distributed by the "Redcrosstitutes" whom the speaker equates with the stainless steel equipment of their van. The poem ends:

"Now, soldier, where do you hail from?
Utah Dakota well that's fine
Step lively please we've lots to serve
you're all too sweet the war's
divine."
Yet her efficient insincere hard-boiled
charm and stenciled smile
Are quite undone by her machine; for,
honestly, we're touched the
while

That radio bass-baritone incanting o'er
her doughnut stove
Sings innocently "Water Boy," making us
all think thoughts of love--
Of mother, mistress, kiddy, wife;
melting each eye by simple song:

"Jack O'Diamonds, Water Boy . . ." sobs
home is far as war is long.[15]

The central irony of the poem is that the old chestnut sung by the bass-baritone reaches through the hard exteriors of of the soldiers in a way that the Red Cross girls cannot. Although portraying the sentimentality of soldiers, the poem itself is not sentimental. The tone of the poem is restrained, while that of the Ebright poems overflows with outrage, giving the impression of loss of control.

The fifth sub-theme of the poetry which deals with the failure of society states that love is the only answer to war. It is only through love for one another that men can overcome the forces in the world that represent the antithesis of love and produce war. A kind of definition for this love that can overcome war is found in "Fear is Why" by Hubert Creekmore. The poem describes how fear produces war:

. . . Shamefaced,
Afraid of death by gadgets, we embraced
The onanistic glories of gold braid.

But love can supplant this fear in the hearts of men, and without this fear there will be no war. But, ironically, it takes war to impress upon men the need for love:

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[15]Kirstein, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

We found it out although an awful lot
Of blood it took to show us. Love isn't
sex,
Love isn't the movies, love is what
We hid ashamed in human youth, forgot,
Betrayed to gilt-edged sewer architects.

But their securities no longer leech:
Without love there is always fear.
Behind war's inhumanity, each
Of us, relieved of money's fear, could
reach
Again to human-kindness, could find it
near.

In years of cringing peace its fresh
imprint,
Strange with life, will shine in the
darkening night;
And most will know how close they
went
To the simple secret of a man's intent.
But we are dumb in the factory of fright.

The honest arm crooked round our shoulder
will
Endure, though we, afraid, may bury it
deep.
Its nobler paradox--to kill
By rules taught us something of love--
until
A day of faith, must hide in the heart
and sleep.[16]

The love that "isn't sex," and "isn't the movies" is the kind of brotherly love that can unite men.

Walter Benton's This is My Beloved is a collection of love poems placed against the background of war. Although war is seldom mentioned in these poems, it exists as a presence which produces in them a sense of catch-the-moment immediacy. In all of these poems, love is presented

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[16]Creekmore, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

as a personal answer to the "slow negative death" of war. But it is also presented as a universal answer. It is only the positive force of love which "can turn the tide." The first poem in this collection provides an apologia for the intensely personal love poems which follow:

> Because hate is legislated . . .written
> into
> the primer and the testament,
> shot into our blood and brain like vaccine
> or vitamins
>
> Because our day is of time, of hours--and
> the clock-hand turns,
> closes the circle upon us: and black
> timeless night
> sucks us in like quicksand, receives us
> totally--
> without a raincheck or a parachute, a key
> to heaven or the last
> long look
> I need love more than ever now . . .I need
> your love,
> I need love more than hope or money, wisdom
> or a drink
>
> Because slow negative death withers the
> world--and only yes
> can turn the tide
> Because love has your face and body . . .
> and your hands are tender
> and your mouth is sweet--and God has made
> no other eyes like yours.[17]

"Night Letter," by Stanley Kunitz, echoes the theme of personal love in the face of chaos of the Benton poem. The speaker of "Night Letter" enumerates to his beloved all of the terrors which are abroad in a world at war, and

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[17]Walter Benton, "Entry April 28," This is My Beloved (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 3.

all of his disappointments in himself and his generation:

> . . . . . .
> Where is your ministry? I thought I heard
> A piece of laughter break upon the stair
> Like glass, but when I wheeled around I
> saw
> Disorder, in a tall magician's hat,
> Keeping his rabbit-madness crouched inside,
> Sit at my desk and scramble all the news.
> The strangest things are happening. Christ!
> the dead,
> Pushing the membrane from their face,
> salute
> The dead and scribble slogans on our walls;
> Phantoms and phobias mobilize, thronging
> The roads; and in the Bitch's streets the
> men
> Are lying down, great crowds with fractured
> wills
> Dumping the shapeless burden of their lives
> Into the rivers where the motors flowed.
> . . . . . .

The only hope for the world is love, but the speaker fears that even love is failing in the twentieth-century nightmare of war:

> My dear, is it too late for peace, too late
> For men to gather at the wells to drink
> The sweet water; too late for fellowship
> And laughter at the forge; too late for us
> To say, "Let us be good unto each other"?
> The lamps go singly out; the valley sleeps;
> I tend the last light shining on the farms
> And keep for you the thought of love alive
> As scholars dungeoned in an ignorant age
> Tended the embers of the Trojan fire.
> . . . . . .

But the poem is not completely pessimistic, for the speaker, in writing this letter to his beloved, is re-enacting a timeless situation: one suffering person reaching out to another.

There is hope in this:

> . . . What the deep heart means,
> Its message of the big, round, childish
> hand,
> Its wonder, its simple lonely cry,
> The bloodied envelope addressed to you,
> Is history, that wide and mortal pang.[18]

In spite of recurring wars, man will survive and will turn to his fellow man with the love born of mutual suffering and mutual dependence. Man will survive, but far from glorious, his survival will be recorded as the "wide and mortal pang" of history.

A traditional view of the essential evil of man and the redemptive power of love is found in "At the End of War," by Richard Eberhart. The poem is a prayer for God's forgiveness for:

> . . . . . .
> The Admiral with his cap and the private
> with his can,
> The aviator shrouded in goggles and the
> marine bayoneted,
> The men in the bureaus mating rubber stamps,
> carbonizing history,
> The poets raving in their uncontestable
> ravening
> The war poets who were ever at war
> Before the wars, and after the wars.
> . . . . . .

The speaker of the poem sees man as a creature of "imperfection," "eternal frivolity," and "animal passion," who

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[18]Kunitz, op. cit., pp. 101-102.

exercises his will to do evil and therefore is guilty and subject to God's wrath. The society of man is evil because it has not learned the lesson of divine love from from which all love springs. The speaker of "At the End of War" finds hope for the world not in the ultimate power of human love, as do the speakers of the Benton and Kunitz poems, but in the love of God. The poem ends:

> But may, pray God Almighty,
> Man the cocky fighter,
> The stupid and the self-destroyer,
> The selfish and the vain,
> The harmful cheater
> The malicious debater,
> The incurable self-lover
> And the boring warrior,
> The simpleton killer
>
> May he learn humility
> May humility be insinuated
> More subtly than evil
> Which brought ruin rocking him
>
> May he turn the other cheek
> Not bitten yet by worm of hate
> May joy be his abandonment
> In Thy forgiveness early and late
>
> And may he learn not to fight
> And never to kill, but love,
> Never, never to kill, but love,
> May he see Thy holy light.[19]

The last stanzas of Eberhart's poem, except for their emphasis upon divine redemption, can serve as a summary of the indictment by the soldier poets of the failure of society. Wars are not started because of the appetitiveness, depravity,

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[19]Richard Eberhart, Collected Poems (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 91-94.

or vanity of one nation or another; they are started because of these weaknesses and others ingrained in all of human society without regard for political boundaries. The American soldier poetry of the Second World War is remarkable for its lack of the bitterness of the moment directed against the black-handed Hun or the slant-eyed Jap. Any bitterness that is in it, and there is more disappointment and disillusionment than bitterness, is directed against the inherent shortcomings of human society at large.

The prose statements of American servicemen about the failure of society generally reflect those of the poets, although they do not fall neatly into the various thematic categories of the poetry. In the prose, however, there is more direct emphasis upon the horror and foolishness of war than there is condemnation of the society that causes war. From the lack of idealistic fervor, the disgust with combat, and the absence of a "cause" in the prose, we can infer a lack of faith in society that corresponds to the poets' theme, although it is less explicit.

It would be inaccurate to state, however, that all of the soldier prose commentary shows this lack of faith in society. The writing of some servicemen, especially before they experienced combat, shows that their ideals are unshattered. The majority of the available commentary,

nonetheless, reflects a bleaker view of war experience. The writers of most of the prose accounts evidently fought out of a sense of duty to their comrades, or because it would have been unthinkable for them not to fight, and their writing shows virtually no patriotic fervor, no avidity for glory on the battlefield. Their attitude is expressed in the Stars and Stripes cartoons of Bill Mauldin: Willie and Joe plod through Europe, killing when they have to, more often being acted upon than acting, finding comfort only in comradeship.[20] The applause which the Mauldin cartoons received from countless servicemen seems indicative of the accuracy of their portrayal of the American combat soldier in Europe during the Second World War.

Excerpted below are passages from three servicemen's letters which were evidently written early in the war. None of the writers has yet participated in combat, and all three show conventional responses to the call to arms. The first is written by a marine to his wife:

> First let me say that I welcome the opportunity to go out and take part in this conflict. I think it is only fitting that I should go because winning this struggle means more to me than to any man in the

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[20] A selection of Mauldin's Second World War cartoons, along with the cartoonist's personal commentary on the war is found in Up Front (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1945).

> entire world. That's a large statement, but I can back it up. I happen to have married the most wonderful woman in the world and we have a definite idea on how we want to spend our life together. As long as certain influences now trying to enforce their malicious doctrines are present we cannot live the life we have planned. Thus, it is primary that I should have an integral part in ridding the world of these influences.[21]

The next is written by a soldier shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

> There isn't any way to know what will happen to us. All of us are rather bewildered at the sudden reality of war, but at the moment all we can do is wait for orders. It's natural that all of us are ready to fight, because the 350 soldiers who are dead in Hawaii are our brothers and all of us want to strike back at the killers.[22]

The third is written by a serviceman to his mother early in the war:

> Mom, I can't see why you want to pray that all the boys in the service that you know won't have to go across. You seem to be forgetting that if some of us boys don't go, then we are fighting a losing cause. You don't want the enemy to get over here on our own doorsteps and do their fighting, and rape, and all the destruction

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[21]Edward G. Weber, A Book of War Letters, ed. Harry E. Maule (New York: Random House, 1943), p. 28.

[22]Very Truly Ours, ed. James Waterman Wise (New York: Dial Press, 1943), p. 13.

> they have been carrying with them, here, in our beloved country.[23]

The conventional point of view of the above letters is supplanted by a grimmer point of view as we look into the writings of servicemen who have experienced battle. In these, we find virtually no mention of patriotism or "what we are fighting for." Instead, there is an emphasis upon comradeship in adversity, getting a distasteful job done, and pity for the victims of war. These writers do not criticize society in the pointed manner of the soldier poets, but one can see in the experience that is reflected in their writing the raw material of the poets' criticism. A marine writes from a hospital after being evacuated from Guadalcanal:

> Of course I'm not insane. But I've been living the life of a savage and haven't quite got used to a world of laws and new responsibilities. So many of my platoon were wiped out, my old Parris Island buddies, that it's hard to sleep without seeing them die all over again. Our living conditions on Guadalcanal had been so bad--little food or hope--fighting and dying each day--four hours sleep out of 72--the medicos here optimistically say I'll pay for it the rest of my life. My bayonet and shrapnel cuts are all healed up, however. Most of us will be fairly well in six months, but none of us will be completely cured for years.[24]

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[23] Ibid., p. 31.

[24] John J. Conroy, op. cit., ed. Maule, p. 181.

Another marine, this one an officer, provides a slightly different point of view with regard to the Guadalcanal fighting:

> It's relatively quiet now. Perhaps I can, without fear of violating naval censorship regulations, bring you some idea of these three months' active combat.
>
> Green troops, and we were green although excellently trained, have a quantum of fearlessness almost approaching foolhardiness, and, well led, will accomplish their mission against veterans. This battalion of Marines (the one I was in) saw their first combat and rode roughshod over the Nips. We attached tremendous importance to our every step, and, emerging victors, thought ourselves world conquerors. Then we began to look around, at the casualties, at the defeated enemy, and finally at ourselves. We were under control only because of training. We lost many more than was necessary. We had wasted all our energy in a few hours. Nerves and excitement kept us intact from there on. There were no instances of cowardice; many of cool bravery and courage . . .
>
> What has it done to me? What does it mean to me?
>
> I know that I have not become cruel or callous. I am sure that I am hardened. If a man cannot produce, I'll push him into the most degrading, menial task I can find. A man that shrinks from duty is worse than a man lost. He should be thrown out of the entire outfit. He's not fit to live with the men with whom he is not willing to die. Death is easy. It happens often.
>
> The toughest part is going on, existing as an animal. Wet, cold and hungry many times, a man can look forward only to the next day when the sun, flies, and mosquitoes descend to devour him.
>
> . . . Our stomachs have been ravaged

> with the food we've eaten and the way in which we eat. We've fought the Japs for water and cigarettes. Often we have shot and ripped off a Jap's pack and canteen before he has a chance to fall. I've buried both Japs and Marines. That is probably the most odious task of all. Decomposition begins within four hours in this climate. Some of the sights I've had to see would sicken a good interne. But I have to go back and eat lunch. There may not be another for a while . . .[25]

The emphasis on duty in the above letter is echoed in the following passage from the letter of a soldier in the European campaign:

> Jimmy, I know now for a fact what I thought once. That is, for all the cursing and griping of American soldiers, they are one hell of a tough bunch when the chips are down. I'm not flag-waving, either. I hate this war and everyone who started it, but I'm proud as all get out, too, of being amongst the first Americans to meet the Germans in the present conflict . . . If I'm lucky enough to come back from this war . . . I hope never to hear of the war and army again. Right now--well, I'm to be with a fighting outfit and will do my best in whatever I'm told to do. What more can I do?[26]

The easy-going, unglamorous longsuffering of the infantryman, who expects to be forgotten, is the theme of this excerpt:

> I never thought much of the infantry myself; in fact, the infantryman himself

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[25]John B. Doyle, Jr., op. cit., ed. Maule, pp. 184-86.

[26]Op. cit., ed. Wise, p. 147.

> is a condemned bastard. You know the jingle the men in Bataan had--"No Momma, no Poppa, no Uncle Sam!" They expect to be forgotten and to receive rough treatment, and that is why, I think, they did so well in New Guinea. Because, I can assure you, they had no picnic. They had weeks of mud and rain and filth. But they took things as they came, and the most disagreeable and dangerous jobs as simple routine details. I have seen more bitching by KP's than I saw in the most nasty situations up there. As I said, the infantry is definitely not a glamour outfit. Almost without exception, these soldiers hate the Army, and that, I think makes them able to take unpleasant things in stride.[27]

But while the infantryman viewed his part in the war as a nasty job, had little conventional patriotic sentiment, and could harden himself to personal discomfort, he had a strong fellow feeling which made him sensitive to the suffering of others caught in the war, both soldiers and civilians. The following two excerpts from letters sent by soldiers in the Italian campaign illustrate this sensitivity. The first describes the aftermath of a German dive bombing attack which hit an Italian emplacement by mistake:

> Of all the bombs they dropped, only one actually hit anything. I went to a pill box to have a look and there were 2 dead Italian soldiers lying there. One was lying face down in the entrance, his back all blood. His fingers were grasping at the wall. It was utterly pitiful and horrible. Here it was quiet with a slight dusty haze and the sun shining in and here

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[27] Ibid., p. 77.

> was this little dead Sicilian. (The whole race seems small.)[28]

The second account describes the plight of Italian civilians:

> The worst part of all is the fact that the civilians get killed and sometimes hundreds get buried under the rubble. It's something to come into a town newly captured and smell the bodies. Many of them are lying in the streets just decomposing. Many times groups of people are to be seen digging in the ruins of their homes looking for relatives. I have seen women in the worst stage of grief standing by while their husbands dug in the wreckage for some child that was buried underneath. At the same time they salvaged what few belongings they could from all the rubble.[29]

In a reminiscence of the African campaign, the soldier quoted below tells of his pity and frustration in the face of the starvation of an innocent victim of the war:

> About this time the K.P.'s set out the garbage can. You can well imagine what went on around it. In a very few minutes it was as clean as if it had been washed in soap and water. I went over to my pup tent and got two cans of C rations to give to the blonde little girl. The first sergeant saw me, came over to me, and gave me hell for giving away G.I. food. This is one of those times when you really want to kill the top kick. Promising to beat the hell out of him the first time I saw him out of uniform, I went to bed, not hungry, but angry and cursing. Racking

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[28] Letters Home, ed. Mina Curtiss (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), p. 89.

[29] Ibid., pp. 93-94.

> my feeble mind for an answer to all of this, I soon fell into troubled slumber.[30]

While the above writers stand a long way from enthusiastic support of the war, they do not seriously question the morality of the conflict. Theirs is a kind of passive acceptance; they do not "reason why." There is another group of servicemen, however, who, in their personal correspondence and narratives, begin to question the need for war, begin to react against a society which demands their participation in war, and begin to be disgusted by the business of war. "Begin" is an important word here, for these servicemen do not go beyond a beginning of protest. They express the futility of war without developing this expression beyond a beginning, much less carrying it to a conclusion. The following four statements of servicemen who are involved in the war in various capacities illustrate this beginning. The first excerpt is from a letter by a serviceman en route to the battle zone:

> Edith, to see the fellows singing and laughing on deck makes you stop and wonder about the unfairness and futility of the whole thing. In a few short weeks many of them will be in the middle of battle with death all around them and to what

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[30]Floyd R. Mauk,"African Sand and Powdered Eggs," The Purple Testament, ed. Don M. Wolfe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1946), pp. 84-85.

> purpose? Some will come back and some won't, but to look at them you would think they were all out on a pleasure trip. Right now as I write, my stateroom is full of them playing cards and telling big lies.[31]

The next is from a man involved in amphibious training:

> You know, it seemed strange--the nights we would stay on the ship, the ocean seemed calm and cool; but the nights we would go out on a "problem," it was always rough. One night it stormed so that lightning hit one of the small boats and caused it to split in two. Fortunately, no one was in it. I can't help interpreting this as the revolt and protest of the elements against the disturbance caused by the burst of firepower, the revolt of the sea against the inhumanity of man to man.[32]

The third is from the letter of a serviceman who has seen action:

> If the truly gallant fight these men are making--if the horrible suffering I've seen--the shattered bodies and decimated personalities--if the courage and devotion and bravery and determination--if these things are again to be for naught--if our leaders let us down again--if this isn't the war to end wars, then truly mankind has no right to survive.[33]

Finally, a marine who served on Guadalcanal writes of his

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[31] Op. cit., ed. Wise, p. 80.

[32] Ibid., pp. 69-70.

[33] Ibid., p. 140.

puzzlement about the irrationality of human behavior in war:

> When does sanity end and madness begin? On many a hot morning on Guadalcanal, my fellow Marines and I questioned our sanity as we looked out upon the corpses of the enemy. Why did we extract such extreme delight in firing a burst of machine-gun fire into already dead Japanese? Their bodies sprawled, their lifeless eyes staring into nothingness, their sagging jaws open, gold teeth gleaming in the sun, their sardonic grinning mouths--these sights somehow impelled us to fire volley after volley. As the bodies jerked and quivered, we would laugh hysterically and gleefully. Only when the bullets tore open the corpses, emitting a stench that stung our nostrils and turned our stomachs, did we snap back into sanity, turning our backs now on the dead enemy, disgusted with our behavior. Why did we do this? What subconscious motive prompted our action? Was I "cracking up?" Was this the outpouring of hatred, accumulated in three previous campaigns? Even yet I do not know. Like my fellow Marines, I still wonder what thin line, if any, divides sanity from madness.[34]

The last and smallest group of servicemen whose prose statements will be recorded here is that which pointedly criticizes society for its injustices. But even here, the criticism is not particularly vehement or sustained. It is not the criticism that is the product of the bitter disillusionment of the erstwhile idealist. Rather, it seems to be the criticism of the person who never expected too much,

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[34]Anthony Coulis, "When Marines Wondered," op. cit., ed. Wolfe, pp. 173-74.

but whose experience has fallen short of even a modest expectation. Typical of the tone of this kind of social criticism is the following excerpt from the personal narrative of Bert Stiles, an Air Corps pilot:

> When a civilization pays professors $1800 a year, and pimps and jockeys and swoon-singers make triple and fifty times the dough, then something is likely to go wrong in that civilization, sooner or later . . .
>
> Lost education is harder to catch up than shortages in .50 cliber armor piercing, or bombers or knitting needles. But a shortage of men with wisdom to run the world, has always been the most acute shortage on the books, men with enough background to know what has been, and who have some idea of what may come next, and at least a wry dream of what might come next . . .[35]

Stronger in its tone than the above selection, yet showing considerable restraint under the circumstances, is the following remarkable letter, first published in Yank, and subsequently given wide circulation. It could have served as inspiration for the poems dealing with the injustices faced by the Negro soldier and his family:

> Dear Yank:
>
> Here is a question that each Negro soldier is asking. What is the Negro soldier fighting for? On whose team are we playing? Myself and eight other soldiers

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[35]Bert Stiles, Serenade to the Big Bird (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1952), p. 193.

> were on our way from Camp Claiborne, La., to the hospital here at Fort Huachuca. We had to lay over until the next day for our train. On the next day we could not purchase a cup of coffee at any of the lunchrooms around there. As you know, Old Man Jim Crow rules. The only place where we could be served was at the lunchroom at the railroad station but, of course, we had to go into the kitchen. But that's not all; at 11:30 A.M. about two dozen German prisoners of war, with two American guards, came to the station. They entered the lunchroom, sat at the tables, had their meals served, talked, smoked, in fact had quite a swell time. I stood on the outside looking on, and I could not help but ask myself these questions: Are these men sworn enemies of this country? Are they not taught to hate and destroy . . . all democratic governments? Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for this our country? Then why are they treated better than we are? Why are we pushed around like cattle? If we are fighting for the same thing, if we are to die for our country, then why does the Government allow such things to go on? Some of the boys are saying that you will not print this letter. I'm saying that you will . . .
>
> Fort Huachuca, Ariz. --Cpl. Rupert Trimmingham[36]

Perhaps the best illustration of the cynical, low-pressure social criticism among certain American soldiers is found in the following moment of dialogue from Allan Lyon's Toward an Unknown Station. The narrator and a group of other soldiers are discussing the danger and discomfort of the battle field and the fact that the ordinary G.I. must face this alone:

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[36]The Best from Yank the Army Weekly (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1945), pp. 212-13.

> "Maybe the presidents and the generals are too smart to be wasted here with the rest of us. So what? It's not going to help us any if we have to slop around like pigs so they can go down in history. And don't forget the big shots aren't the only ones that got it made. There are plenty of soft jobs around. And when it comes to soft jobs, I can sit on my ass with the best of them. But I'm on the bottom of the pack and the guys on the bottom have to do this to win the war. The others work where they keep their feet dry."
>
> "But that's the only way it can be done," I said. "There is no other way."
>
> "Listen. There are millions of suckers in this world. But we're the biggest suckers of all. I don't care what the big shots say, they're doing all right. And we're the fall guys no matter what way you look at it and no matter what happens."
>
> No matter what happens? Even if we live and win? But nobody else said anything. Either the conversation was getting too serious or nobody disagreed. Or nobody knew.[37]

The reaction of the soldiers to the cynical criticism of the political hierarchy and the military high command in this passage is typical: "Either the conversation was getting too serious or nobody disagreed. Or nobody knew." The soldiers whom Lyon describes do not voice either agreement or disagreement with the malcontent in their midst. What he says probably has something to it, but in any case this line of talk will not shorten the war. "Suckers" or

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[37]Allan Lyon, Toward an Unknown Station (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), pp. 263-64.

not, the soldiers will continue to do their jobs, finding what solace they can in the comradeship of their fellows and in thoughts of a better existence. The numbness of servicemen with regard to the important issues of the war and anything which threatened to hurt them is also illustrated in the following passage from Thomas Heggen's Mister Roberts. Ensign Pulver has just learned of Mister Roberts' death:

> He came to the wardroom and he thought of telling the people there. But the moment he looked in, he saw it was impossible. Carney and Billings were playing acey-deucy. Keith was sitting at one table writing letters, and Ed Pauley was drinking coffee. Moulton was over at the turntable playing records. It was all just the same. It was just as every night, days without end. Nothing had happened; and now Pulver saw that, in plain truth, nothing ever could happen to these men. The higher centers where action was absorbed, where thought impinged and desires spoke, had been determinedly shut off and allowed to atrophy, and all that remained was an irritable surface with an insatiable hunger for triviality. Apathy then was not a state of negation, but a faith of positiveness, and to practice it was to surrender to it. It had seemed to the men of this ship the only possible faith that could accommodate the facts of their existence, and at its demand they had reduced life to the monotone reflex that was the only efficient, and, in the last analysis, the only possible, survival.[38]

It is clear that the soldier poets are more incisive,

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[38] Mister Roberts (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), p. 219.

more articulate, and more developed in their criticism of society than the prose commentators, but it is clear also that there is no major divergence of opinion between the two groups about the tragic failure of society. The poets put their conviction about this failure into words, while the background for these words is provided by the prose commentators. The Jarrell poem which begins:

> Do the wife and baby travelling to see
> Your grey pajamas and sick worried face
> Remind you of something, soldier? . . .

could have been drawn from the experience related in the letter by a hospitalized Guadalcanal veteran, "Our living conditions on Guadalcanal had been so bad--little food or hope--fighting and dying each day--four hours sleep out of 72--the medicos here optimistically say I'll pay for it the rest of my life." The hospitalized marine does not go on to picture himself as an item of exchange in the "trade of states" as Jarrell portrays his hospitalized soldier, but neither does he express pride in his personal sacrifice. He describes himself and the other Guadalcanal wounded as victims of a hellish experience who will never fully recover. This example illustrates the relation between the poetry and the prose. The social criticism of the poetry, although it is more incisive and developed, is not inconsistent with the prose; the poet goes further in his attempt to touch the heart of the matter, to make a point, to reach a conclusion. But this is the poet's role.

CONCLUSION

In a review of Lincoln Kirstein's Rhymes of a PFC, W. H. Auden says the following about the difference between the literatures of World Wars I and II:

> It must be admitted, I think, that the Second World War has produced, so far at any rate, less literature of outstanding merit, whether in verse or prose, than the First. For this I can see three possible reasons. The more mechanized warfare becomes, the fewer the number of soldiers directly engaged in combat compared to the number engaged in services behind the firing-line; fewer, that is, are directly confronted by the "naked face" of war. Then, remembering the reckless waste of human lives in the First, the military authorities in the Second were determined to save as many lives as possible and to assign the individual soldier to a post which matched his character and talents. As a result, a draftee with the education and sensibility required to become a writer was very unlikely to find himself among the combat troops; most probably he would end up as a Tec Sergeant with a desk job . . . Lastly, the emotional attitude of an Englishman or an American to the Second World War was more complicated. In 1914 the nations of Europe had blundered into a war none of them wanted and without the faintest notion of what a modern war would be like. Whatever their politicians and generals might think, by 1916 no common soldier on either side could see a reason why they should be fighting each other. Consequently, what Wilfred Owen called "The pity of war, the pity war distilled," was a simple emotion of compassion for one's fellow sufferers

> in the common nightmare, which made no distinction between friend and foe.[1]

As Auden indicates, there were no Wilfred Owens or Isaac Rosenbergs among the American soldier poets of the Second World War. Neither were there Siegfried Sassoons, for that matter. The "simple emotion of compassion for one's fellow sufferers," and the loud, clear outcry of the wronged innocent produced the classic war poetry of the twentieth century. This poetry possesses the freshness and purity that comes with first reaction. The later American poetry cannot match it in these attributes, but then the American poets did not observe the carnage in the trenches as did Owen and the rest. Bearing witness to the birth of modern warfare gave the British poets of World War I the license of outspoken reaction to it. The American soldier poets of the Second World War had no such license. Theirs was a latter-day war whose face was clouded with complexity. It seems ironic that the best of the British World War I poetry was a direct reaction to battle, while the best American World War II poetry was generally far removed from this. The differences between the two wars are reflected in their poetry. Siegfried Sassoon could write an effective poem which cried out from the trenches against the British Establishment, but when the American poet

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[1]"Private Poet," New York Review of Books, III, No. 7 (November 5, 1964), 9.

Frederick Ebright lambastes hypocritical advertisers in the same spirit, his poem is not nearly as effective. It is not as effective because it comes twenty-five years later when other poets are viewing hypocritical advertisers, and even war itself, as symptoms rather than causes. And this evaluation of these two poems is not solely dependent on the reader's knowledge of their separate historic contexts: Sassoon's poem has within it the genuine ring of innocent outrage, while Ebright's seems merely brooding and bitter.

The best British soldier poets of World War I were battle poets in a way that their American counterparts of World War II were not. The immediacy of the shooting war so completely enveloped them that they could not look very far to left or right, and herein lies a second contrast between the soldier poets of the two wars that also seems ironic. The best American soldier poetry of the Second World War is concerned with war as part of a much broader context. Auden says of the role of the modern war poet:

> The problem for a poet in writing about modern war is that, while he can only deal with events of which he has first-hand knowledge--invention, however imaginative, is bound to be fake--his poems must somehow transcend mere journalistic reportage. In a work of art, the single event must be seen as an element in a universally significant pattern: the area of the pattern actually illuminated by the artist's vision is always, of course, more or less limited, but one

> is aware of its extending beyond what we see far into time and space.[2]

This is not to say that the British First World War poets concentrated only on the single event in a concrete sense, but that their attention was more limited than the later American poets. We find this contrast illustrated in Wilfred Owen's statement, "My subject is War, and the pity of War./ The Poetry is in the pity," and Karl Shapiro's judgment that "We learn that war is an affectation of the human spirit . . ." Owen concentrates on the pity of war, while Shapiro looks beyond war to the nature of man. The reader frequently feels that there is something important missing in a First World War soldier poem (one of Brooke's, for example) that does not consider the facts of battle and their relation to the men who fought; but he also feels that there is something important missing in a Second World War soldier poem that considers only these facts.

The best soldier poetry of the Second World War is that which not only keeps the event which has evoked it in clear focus, but places this event in the "universally significant pattern" that Auden speaks of. Some examples of poems that have been discussed above that meet this criterion are Richard Eberhart's "Dam Neck, Virginia" (p. 49), Randall Jarrell's "Prisoners" (pp. 123-24), Lincoln

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[2] Ibid.

Kirstein's "Black Joe" (pp. 131-32), Karl Shapiro's "Troop Train" (pp. 42-43), and Richard Wilbur's "Place Pigalle" (p. 67). The events of these poems--the guns firing at night, the stockade prisoners, the soldiers around a camp fire, the journey of the troop train, and the whoring soldiers--all are presented vividly and seem completely authentic. But in each case, the artistry of the poet places the event into a more or less abstract context that is rewarding aesthetically. This leap from the concrete to the abstract is usually longer in the American soldier poetry of World War II than in the British poetry of World War I: the American poets leap farther into abstraction. The American soldier poems which are not successful aesthetically also follow this general trend toward abstraction, but tend to make the leap before they establish a base in the concrete. Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (p. 52) is an example of this: the reader of the poem is given no sense of the gunner-victim's concrete reality before the poet makes him a representative entity and blasts him into eternity.

My purpose here, however, has been to illuminate the themes of the American soldier poetry and not to evaluate it aesthetically. In relation to the letters and journalism, as well as the war fiction, the soldier poetry is again more abstract, more intellectual, and more interpretive of experience. The soldier poet began with the factual experience

of the prose commentator and added to it his artistic interpretation and carried it to a conclusion in the realm of the abstract. This conclusion, in its broad aspect, is not completely personal because it is often shared by other poets who have reached a similar conclusion when given similar premises. There is therefore a community of conclusions, based on the body of Second World War fact, which the soldier poets have reached. These conclusions are the pervasive themes of the American soldier poets of the Second World War. When the soldier poet spoke his theme of historic war, he had already begun relatively high on the scale of abstraction. History, especially when it extends beyond the memory of the present generation, is itself an abstraction: it is a complex of cause and effect relationships that is subject to infinite interpretation. It is for this reason, I think, that the poets' theme of historic war is rare in the soldier prose. Generally, the soldier prose concentrates on the concrete facts of present reality; it is descriptive rather than interpretive.

We find a great many prose statements that echo, in nearly all of its variations, the poets' theme of man and the machine. We can understand this when we consider that machines were part of almost every serviceman's daily existence in World War II. Machines were objects of present reality; it was not necessary to intellectualize the various relationships and attitudes of men toward these war machines;

one need only observe them. It is significant that there is more prose commentary on the machine theme than any other, and that this commentary follows the poetry closely in its ideas, for it is this theme which is most concrete. Vastly more abstract than this is the theme of home and the problem of reality. As with the theme of historic war, there is little soldier prose that develops this as its theme. But here the inexorable movement toward abstraction of the poetry becomes most clear. The prose writers' simple description of their feelings about home, the past, and the future are obviously the starting point of the poets' movement toward generalization and abstraction. There is a smaller gap between the concreteness of the prose and the abstraction of the poetry with the theme of the failure of society, but here too the principle seems to hold: the various matter-of-fact statements of the prose are synthesized into generalizations in the poetry.

Like the non-literary prose, the major American soldier novels of the Second World War do not, generally speaking, reflect the themes of the poets. In their concern with a realistic portrayal of war experience, they are much closer to the letters and personal narratives than the poetry. The novelists seldom intrude their own thoughts and feelings between the reader and the characters which they have created, and these characters are generally much more concerned with their companions, their memories, their

everyday routine, and with their superiors and their subordinates than they are with the abstract themes of the poets. Typical of such characters are the common soldiers of The Naked and the Dead. On the subjects of women, food, their superiors, and the enemy, most of the Reconnaissance Platoon think along the same lines. Norman Mailer has them air these thoughts in a series of choruses which appear here and there throughout the book. In these, Brown, Minetta, Stanley, and Polack cynically and amusingly set forth the idiomatic dicta of an entire army on a certain limited range of concrete subjects. Like the chorus of a Greek play, they speak the popular consensus.

The characters in the foreground of Mailer's novel are clearly differentiated, but these characters are presented as somewhat woodenly acting out the kind of people that they are. Lieutenant Hearn and General Cummings circle each other like wrestlers in their conversations about social and political issues, most of which are highly abstract, but their points of view on these issues are seemingly unaffected by the war which crackles around them. They might as well have been arguing in a university symposium. The war provides them with substance for their arguments about cause and effect, but the philosophical position of neither seems materially affected by the death and disruption of the conflict. Both are determined by their backgrounds and temperaments to certain set positions.

Similarly, Sergeant Croft must be sadistic and homicidal because of the forces that molded him. Mailer's "Time Machine" technique in the novel emphasizes his deterministic view of behavior.

In The Naked and the Dead, then, we have either the completely undifferentiated reaction to the war of the chorus, or the very private reactions of the principal characters which have to be explained by the author's "Time Machine." In both cases, we have a reaction to war that does not approach the kind of abstraction that we find in the poetry.

In The Young Lions, Irwin Shaw is also concerned with the molding forces in the backgrounds of his characters, but he is less painstaking and clinical in his dissection of these forces than Mailer. Shaw's main characters are too concerned with coming to personal terms with the war to turn their attention out from themselves and the concrete realities of the war for very long. The clergyman whom Noah Ackerman hears in England preaches his sermon on guilt, death, and terror, stating that the soldier of the allies must have high purpose in his killing, but the servicemen in the novel do not think of these things in the abstract; the war is too close to them for this.[3] Michael Whitacre in this novel is an intelligent, educated, and

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[3] The Young Lions (New York: Random House, 1948), pp. 417-19.

sensitive man, yet he is primarily concerned with his survival, comfort, and sex-life. Throughout much of the story, Whitacre tries to escape involvements of various kinds, and deliberately avoids considerations which would threaten to upset him.

In the confined world aboard ship in Mister Roberts and The Caine Mutiny, we find even less concern for larger issues than we find in the army novels that have been discussed above. Even though these books are quite different in their purpose and point of view, they are similar in their presentation of the uninvolved navy man. Perhaps because of the boredom that is part of life aboard the Reluctant and the Caine, the officers of these ships turn inward in their attempts to preserve their sanity. Mister Roberts, although the idol of the wardroom and crew, keeps his thoughts to himself. Like Michael Whitacre, he deliberately refuses to ponder, to speculate, to philosophize. He stubbornly maintains himself in a world of small thoughts, small goals, and small victories. Like Tom Keefer of the Caine, a transfer means more to him than anything else.

The Second World War fiction which we have examined reinforces the impression of the serviceman which we receive from his own words in personal narratives and letters. Whatever else he was, the American serviceman was not moved to protracted consideration of the abstract. To what extent,

then, can the American soldier poets be considered spokesmen? In that they used concrete experience which they held in common with their fellow servicemen in their poetry, we can consider them, to this extent at least, spokesmen. But the soldier poets did not stop with a poetic rendition of common experience. From this common experience they moved toward a series of abstract statements in their poetry which often set them apart from their fellow servicemen. Even though we can find few instances where letters and personal narratives run counter to the themes of the poets, we likewise find too few instances of complete congruence between them to allow us to generalize. Most often, the poetry and the prose exist on two different planes of abstraction.[4]

The American soldier poets of the Second World War brought to the wartime experience which they shared with millions of other servicemen a special insight which made them more than spokesmen, if "spokesman" means one who does no more than voice the consensus of a group. According to

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[4]The soldier poet who is most successful in conveying a sense of the immediacy of concrete experience is Lincoln Kirstein. His collection of war poetry, published almost twenty years after the end of the war, contains much that is frankly reportorial. His poems portray real situations and real people to an extent not approached by other soldier poets. Many of his war poems, however, are more than simply journalistic verse, as those which are quoted and discussed above indicate. Kirstein is also eminently successful in catching the G.I. speech patterns, something that is not attempted by most of his fellow poets.

Shelley, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." More than spokesmen, the American soldier poets were the interpreters of experience, prophets, and law-makers of their generation. They spoke of the common experience of their contemporaries, but with a scope and penetration of vision that transcends mere reportage.

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