

“THE MIDDLE GENERATION” OF AMERICAN POETRY

Wars in the Private and Public Realms



When she was five, the poet Elizabeth Bishop saw her widowed mother for the last time. It was 1916 and Canada was at war. As children do, she protected herself from reality by pretending Gertrude had died: “My mother was not dead. She was in a sanatorium, in another prolonged ‘nervous breakdown.’ I didn’t know then,” she later wrote in “The Country Mouse,” “and still don’t, whether it was from shame I lied, or from a hideous craving for sympathy, playing up my sad Romantic plight. But the feeling of self-distaste, whatever it came from, was only too real.” She was never again to see her mother, who was immured in the sanatorium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia until her death in 1934. As contributor Sandra Barry tell us, in a violent obsessive episode in the spring of 1916, Gertrude Boomer Bishop believed *she* was the cause of the First World War. Now, in essence, an orphan, young Elizabeth began the first of the many uprootings in her life, as she was spirited away to her father’s family in Worcester, Massachusetts. War and madness, war and suffering, war and dislocation: the intimate interconnections between the political and the personal, the public and the private were crystallized in Bishop’s traumatic childhood.

This issue of WLA features, as its special focus, seven essays on the effects of the two World Wars and the Cold War on the life and works of Bishop and her contemporaries— a nexus of mid-century poets we have come to call “The Middle Generation.” These poets— including Bishop, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Gwendolyn Brooks— have come into prominence since the 1940s for their ability to give utterance to either private confessionals (especially Lowell and Bishop) or public statements

about race (Brooks) and war (Jarrell). What these seven essays do is underscore how valuing these poets has, in effect, reinforced a bifurcation between private and public, personal and political.

But these convenient classifications of The Middle Generation, as either public or private poets, ill-serves a fuller understanding of how these poets, however much they are “private” on the surface, in effect, may at least also offer a meditation on, or critique of, the phenomenon of war in the twentieth century. Our seven essayists together provide insight into how the experience of war in the twentieth century smashes the boundaries of the private and the public. Camille Roman’s essay on Bishop’s almost—but not quite—disabling tenure at the Library of Congress, at the height of anti-Communist hysteria, exemplifies a current critical trend in historicizing the supposedly “private” lyric voices of The Middle Generation. Bishop’s anomalous status as a government official, a public servant, was a source of the utmost private anguish. Going further back in time, to the Great War, Sandra Barry and Gary Fountain give due attention to the upheavals occasioned by the events of 1914-18 to recreate the parallel traumas between Bishop’s childhood and a world undergoing Total War. Indeed, Bishop understood the degree to which modern war provides a fundamental way of knowing about the self. By the same token, Thomas Travisano explores how Lowell’s meditations on war are densely interwoven with a history of personal family conflicts. The domestic *agon* in the panelled drawing rooms of Boston’s Back Bay was, for Lowell, a kind of refined “boot camp” training for a high profile, and troublingly manic and exhibitionistic, conscientious objector and Cold Warrior in the public realm.

On the other hand, as Steven Gould Axelrod shows in his comprehensive survey of The Middle Generation’s response to World War II, public poets like Brooks, who speak on behalf of marginalized or excluded groups, can also embed more personal responses to the destructive effects of war, even ventriloquizing across gender boundaries (as Brooks does in “Negro Hero”). In her essay on Jarrell’s ambivalent responses to a war which covered its heroic Allied combatants with both shame and glory,

Lorrie Goldensohn analyzes how, at the level of the individual male body, the State at War both creates and destroys the private individual's identity as a participant in the geopolitical realm. The Ball Turret Gunner is only the most well-known of the individual victim-heroes in Jarrell's pantheon of Everymen who exist, and perish, in public history, by offering the most personal, and private, of testimonials to the havoc wrought by what e.e. cummings punningly dubbed "this busy monster, manunkind."

This special focus on The Middle Generation grew out of sessions at a 1997 conference devoted to Elizabeth Bishop at Worcester Polytechnic. We were mindful of the appropriately rich irony of convening a celebration of Bishop at this venerable institution of technological education in her first place of motherless exile. Bishop's poetry, since it responded to wars from the Great War ("In the Waiting Room") to Vietnam ("12 O'Clock News"), is compelling for its artful, and subversive, engagement with the fusion of public and private history in the lyric poem. By placing her at the center of a generation, we can see how her contemporaries also used poetry as the vehicle to articulate how poets, as witnesses to history and warfare, also exist in, and are formed by, the wars of this, our most blood-soaked century. Special thanks go to Camille Roman and Thomas Travisano for sparking the special feature focus of this issue into being. And gratitude to Michigan artist Kathleen Carlton Johnson for her rendition of the Great War memorial in Great Village, Nova Scotia—a poignant link between Bishop's girlhood village and the world of war to which the poet was to bear witness as an adult. ☺

— *D.A. Boxwell*
Guest Editor