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THE MIDDLE GENERATION AND WWII

Jarrell, Shapiro, Brooks, Bishop, Lowell



*for my father, Dr. Bernard Axelrod (US Army Air Corps 1942-46)
and in memory of my mother, Martha Gould Axelrod
their eyes saw*



The meanings of WWII seem clearer now, more than half a century after the event.¹ We understand what the agreements are and what disagreements still remain. We've moved into a period similar to the one that occurred about a half century after the Civil War, during which many tributes were created or enacted: Augustus St. Gaudens' memorial to the 54th Massachusetts regiment of free African American soldiers; Daniel Chester French's Lincoln Memorial; Gutzon Borglum's Sitting Lincoln; the 1913 restaging of Pickett's charge; the Confederate Memorials at Arlington and Stone Mountain; the Lincoln Highway; and even, in a sense, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. In a similar vein, we have recently witnessed or are now witnessing the completion of the Holocaust Museum and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC; President Clinton's commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in Normandy; the publication of Studs Terkel's *The Good War* and Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*; and the release of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. All of these recent commemorative efforts reveal a national wish to recall and to re-narrativize one of the climactic events of American and world history, in which an American generation now slowly passing from the scene sacrificed hundreds of thousands of its young in order to intervene successfully and—many of us believe—beneficially in history. The impulse is to try

to understand anew a trauma in our past as well as to honor a heroic generation while many of its members are still alive.

During the war itself, however, narratives of support and dissent were not so clearly defined. In the cultural confusion that accompanies the political and military fog of war, American poets occupied a diverse range of subject positions, arguing with each other, past each other, and with themselves. They produced a variety of texts whose complexities and contradictions are at odds with the simpler structures of even our most sophisticated present-day narratives of WWII. In this essay, I propose to look closely at texts by five poets belonging to what has been termed “the Middle Generation.”² These poets, all born between 1910 and 1920, occupy a literary space between the great Modernist enterprise of Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, and Langston Hughes (all of whom were born between 1874 and 1902 and who published their classic texts from the teens through the forties) and the Postmodern project of such poets as Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Sylvia Plath, Amiri Baraka, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Frank Bidart, Wanda Coleman, Charles Bernstein, and John Yau (all of whom were born between 1926 and 1950 and who produced their classic texts after 1955). Nevertheless, the “Middle Generation” poets do not so much stand between the two (Post)Modernisms as beside them. Whereas the Modernists and Postmodernists tend to foreground language, pattern, and style, the Middle Generation poets foreground public and private history. Their texts oscillate between the space of appearance (the *polis*) and the space of introspection and domesticity (the *oikia*).³ Ranging in age from about twenty-five to thirty-five in the early 1940s, and prepared to contemplate culture in both its communal and personal aspects, the Middle Generation poets were especially well positioned to make poetry of the Second World War experience. Their poems reflected the conditions and stakes of the war back to their readers. The significances they identified were more immediate and cathected than the schematic notions we are apt to repeat today.

Certainly other generations of poets wrote importantly about WWII. Among the older poets, Marianne Moore’s eloquent and turbulent “In Distrust of Merits,” William Carlos

Williams' chilling "These" and elegiac "Paterson V," Hilda Doolittle's "The Walls Do Not Fall," T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," Charles Resnikoff's "Holocaust," Langston Hughes' many poems combining anti-Nazi and anti-Jim Crow themes, and Richard Eberhart's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" and "Brotherhood of Men" come to mind, along with—from the other side—Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. Among the younger poets we might think of James Dickey's "The Firebombing," Lewis Simpson's "Carentan O Carentan" and "The Battle," W. D. Snodgrass' *The Fuehrer Bunker*, poems about the Holocaust by William Heyen and Sylvia Plath, poems of the Japanese-American internment by Mitsuye Yamada, and John Yau's beautiful "Cenotaph." But the Middle Generation composed most of the discordant poems through which the age represented itself to itself.⁴ If we wish more than a superficial or presentist gloss on the history of WWII, we do well to listen to those voices again.

Of the five poets I shall consider here, two were soldiers (Randall Jarrell and Karl Shapiro); two were civilians (Elizabeth Bishop and Gwendolyn Brooks); and one was a conscientious objector (Robert Lowell).⁵ Jarrell wrote the best-known and most devastating poem to emerge from the war: "The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner." The war poems of Shapiro, though little read today, were widely disseminated and appreciated during the war itself. Brooks composed the most resonant evocations of African American soldiers in WWII: "Negro Hero" and "Gay Chaps at the Bar." Bishop wrote the most dazzling critique of the war in "The Roosters," which she immediately complicated in "The Fish." And Lowell wrote perhaps the most complex and unsettling poem of all: "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." Typical of Middle Generation poetics, many of these poems place human beings at the center of their discourse, and all of them put public and private realms in relation to each other. Moreover, they all refuse to glorify war. Despite these similarities, the poems provide sharply divergent perspectives on the war. Their hallmark as a group is not unity but difference.

Randall Jarrell (1914-1965), a sergeant in the Army Air Corps and a celestial navigation tower operator at Davis Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona, never saw combat himself.⁶ Yet his biogra-

pher William Pritchard suggests that his “safe distance from battle helped make his poems happen” (110). That is so because Jarrell did not write about himself but about the airmen he observed and, even more, about what he imagined would happen to them. The keynote of his nine poems about Air Corps flyers is an ironic and haunting interplay between experience and separation. Danger explodes in their faces, yet they remain eerily apart from the earth, from the enemy, from each other, from the blood of battle. In these texts WWII functions as a metonym for the impersonal and destructive elements of modernity itself. The poems suggest the detached and mediated nature of modern air war, in which combatants sit nestled in a technological cocoon. The poems explore the aspect of war that would eventually, in the Persian Gulf War, come to resemble a video game, but one in which real human beings die.

“The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” exemplifies this ironic juxtaposition of distance and immediacy, game and reality, modernity and ancient sacrifice (*Complete Poems* 144). The poem reads in its entirety:

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.

This brief dramatic monologue is a far cry from Horace’s “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country” (*Odes* 3.2.13). The speaker resembles an objective reporter more than he does a patriotic or ennobled warrior. The poem reveals what has happened to the discourse of war in the twentieth century, after Wilfred Owen and Ernest Hemingway, after the Somme and the Normandy invasion. What it shows is not the glory of war but the random horror.

Paralleling the fall from innocence in Eden, the “I” asserts that he “fell” from his mother’s womb to the care of the State and then to the womb or “belly” of a bomber plane. The State has become a modern “double” or opposite of the life-giving mother—not just a “harbinger of death,” as Rank and Freud had it (Rank 76; Freud, “Uncanny” 235), but death’s active

agent. Chilled at an altitude of 30,000 feet, sweating and perhaps urinating with fear, the “I” is less an individual human consciousness than a wet and terrified furry animal, a “foetus in the womb” (as Jarrell puts it in a note [8]), or Eliot’s “infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing” (“Preludes”). He wakes from his “dream of life” only to encounter the “nightmare” of history, of combat, of violent death. The poem’s final verse resembles the eerie moments in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* when we realize that the dead do speak—and indeed narrate the very words we are hearing. The shock of death thus appears at the heart of Jarrell’s poem as a discursive event readers are forced to undergo as they read. War death is enacted as a textual trap from which there is no escape. Because readers generally identify themselves with narrators, an effect this poem does everything to encourage, it is we ourselves who symbolically die. We are forced to feel what was to be a young man blown to smithereens in the ball turret of a bomber plane. We move with him from the maternal womb to the brutal, phallic order of planes that bomb, guns that kill, and hoses that scour. The reader must share the young gunner’s journey from being a barely conscious animal, at once hardly human and all too human, to being mere physical debris, aborted blood and body parts needing to be washed away. The poem’s succinct interplay of separation and immediacy, modernity and sacrifice, ends not with a whimper but a bang followed by silence.

Another poem in which a dead airman speaks is the eloquent “Losses,” which evokes both the pity of individual death and the sheer scale of the casualties (145). The narrator, at once a singular “I” and a pluralized Everyman, again inhabits the body of a naïve young man, really a boy:

We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.
(When we left high school nothing else had died
For us to figure we had died like.)

Like the previous poem, “Losses” emphasizes ironies: the soldier’s physical involvement in and psychic separation from his actions; youthful unawareness juxtaposed with sophisticated technological power. Such ironies appear most starkly toward the end of the poem:

In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school—
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among
The people we had killed and never seen.
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;
When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."
They said, "Here are the maps"; we burned the cities.

We see here, again, a Thoreauvian anti-institutionalism, a skepticism or even cynicism toward the State, here represented by the faceless and nameless "they." The war-making State is a machine designed to use the individual for its own ends and to trivialize individual losses. As in "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the narrator does not seem to understand why he was called on to fight, why he agreed to do so, or why he died. His death is equated to the deaths of the civilians he had "killed and never seen." The poem ends in mutual incomprehension as the bombed cities ask: "Why are you dying? / We are satisfied if you are; but why did I die?"

Jarrell consistently de-heroicizes WWII. In his discursive realm, soldiers and civilians function as automatons, pawns, and victims, never as conscious agents. The war for them is a dream. They themselves are more dreamed than dreaming; and the boundaries between dream and actuality, life and death, map and territory, one soldier and another, and one nation and another, are forever dissolving. For Jarrell the war is suffused with pathos and blankness, and it reflects a dehumanized drive quite apart from those who fight, kill, and die in it. The poems de-idealize almost everything concerned with the war. They pay no attention to principles of patriotism, democracy, and self-defense, and they postulate individual soldiers as dream-like and interchangeable. What they highlight—in the manner of Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, and Wilfred Owen—is the sheer carnage of war. Jarrell's themes are the irony and sorrow of war, the impersonality of modern warfare, and the stunning losses of civilians and of young soldiers who had not yet learned to live.

Apart from the poems about crew members on aircraft and carriers, Jarrell wrote thirty-five additional poems about soldiers, civilians, and children during WWII. The poems written in the first years of the war foreground the daily activities of

American enlisted men: “the night K. P.’s / Bent over a G. I. can of beets,” the mail calls, the mopping of corridors (147, 170, 174). These texts articulate the soldiers’ moods of resignation, boredom, and depression, and their quiet sense of futility. Although the poems attempt to give attention to individuals who seem to have become mere cogs in the war machine, the characters are frequently abstract or composite, which has the ironic effect of further dissolving their individuality. A typical poem in this genre is “Lullaby,” in which the generalized enlisted man, like the airmen in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” and “Losses,” silently sacrifices his existence to “the State” and its nameless representatives, “they”:

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. . . .

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. (169)

These poems appropriately evoke the melancholy and bitterness of men (never women) plunged into regimentation, routine, and the possibility of a premature death. Nevertheless, they capture little of the soldiers’ humor, camaraderie, and distinctiveness—the qualities that make the life of men in groups tolerable and recognizably human.

In the last years of the war and in the years following it, Jarrell wrote poems focusing on American military prisoners and on the victims and survivors of Nazi death camps. “A Camp in the Prussian Forest,” “In the Camp There Was One Alive,” “Jews at Haifa,” and “Protocols” are among the first poems about the Holocaust written by a major American poet. “A Camp in the Prussian Forest” begins:

I walk beside the prisoners to the road.
Load on puffed load,

Their corpses, stacked like sodden wood,
Lie barred or galled with blood

By the charred warehouse. No one comes today
In the old way
To knock the fillings from their teeth. . . . (167)

The "I" observes that a million souls were killed in this camp: "Here men were drunk like water, burnt like wood." He makes a grave marker in the shape of a star of David, but thinks it befouled by the "smoke," the "ash," and the "filmy trash" still seeming to curl from the "monstrous chimney" of the crematorium (167-68). Finding no words or actions fitting for the scene of horror, the narrator-observer is reduced to compulsive and tragic laughter:

. . . I laugh aloud
Again and again;
The star laughs from its rotting shroud
Of flesh. O star of men! (168)

This is surely one of the most powerful poems Jarrell wrote about the war. Yet the "I" remains almost entirely uncharacterized, as do the murdered Jews. The narrator attempts to connect himself to the seen and the felt, to become more than the distanced, dazed subject familiar from Jarrell's other war poems, but his success in inhabiting his own psyche and in finding a language for what he has encountered remains limited. Such silences as his, however, are endemic in Holocaust poems by Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Sylvia Plath, and Dan Pagis. The holes in rhetoric suggest the impossibility of writing poetry "after Auschwitz."⁷

Jarrell, a child of divorce who grew up "as alone as children ever are" (*Letters* 64), wrote his most enduring war poems about issues of separation and loss. William Carlos Williams wrote that "Divorce is / the sign of knowledge in our time" (*Paterson* I), and that was certainly true of Jarrell's own way of articulating experience. His sense of modern war's technological and social separations taps into his traumatic memories of being "betrayed and confined" as a child (Flynn 17). WWII provided conditions perfectly adapted to the kind of poem, and the kind of

pain, he was prepared to write. The words he wrote describing one character, a pilot, could be applied to many: "He is alone; and hangs in knowledge / Slight, separate, estranged: a lonely eye" (*Complete Poems* 153). Jarrell's strongest poems about WWII construct isolated and denatured voices confronting a landscape of injury and death that they are involved in yet apart from, "trapped in pain" (153).

Karl Shapiro (born 1913), a nascent poet drafted into the Army in March 1941, soon found himself attached to a medical unit stationed first in Australia and then in New Guinea.⁸ In his autobiography he asserts that he was not a "war poet" but "a poet who happened into a war, and how could you write poetry in the middle of a war and leave the war out?" (*Younger Son* 167). Nevertheless, it was precisely as a war poet that Shapiro made his mark. *V-Letter*, published in 1944 while its author was a corporal serving in New Guinea, won the Pulitzer Prize and was an immediate critical and popular success. Shapiro's later poetry and prose, devolving to egotism and crankiness, gradually lost him his audience, and the early poetry was ultimately swallowed up in the wreck he made of his career. Yet *V-Letter* and *Trial of a Poet* (published in 1947) contained the most popular and rewarded war poems of their time. They deserve another look.

Shapiro's war poems are at once more conventional than Jarrell's and more rhetorically bifurcated. They veer between hard-headed reportage— which, as Hemingway recommended in *A Farewell to Arms*, eschews such grand abstractions as "glory" and "honor"— and a sentimentalized discourse of national ideals and simplified personal emotions. The lachrymose word "tear," always a danger signal, appears with Henry Mackenzian regularity. Yet despite such manifestations of the poet as a "man of feeling," the poems are remarkably free of compassion or empathy. Hemingway's Jake Barnes recommends "irony and pity" as a Modernist response to war. Shapiro's poems show little of either quality. What they do offer, in their best passages, is complex and specific observation of the events and scenes of the war in the Pacific.

"Troop Train" evokes and then contemplates the train ride of soldiers to their war-bound ships (*Collected Poems* 57). The poem begins with a burst of vital description:

It stops the town we come through. Workers 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.

This writing is at once more boisterous, more heterosexual, and more overtly sentimental than anything in Jarrell. Are those feminine “tears” that threaten to dissolve the masculine wills of “iron” a wish-fulfillment fantasy— or a projection of the narrator’s feelings, across a rigidly sex-stereotyped border, from the male self to the female admiring gaze? Whichever the case, the figures of maternal care are almost immediately transformed in the soldiers’ imagination into sexual objects sprayed with the men’s “catcalls” and “leers.” Once deprived of their female audience and spectacle, however, the soldiers, in the narrator’s representation, lose strength and purpose:

And on through crummy continents and days,
Deliberate, grimy, slightly drunk we crawl,
The good-bad boys of circumstance and chance,
Whose bucket-helmets bang the empty wall. . . .

In the second part of the poem, the evocation of the soldiers’ departure and deflation yields to a two-part meditation on their fate. Initially the narrator contemplates the possibility of the soldiers’ deaths: “Luck also travels and not all come back.” Then his thoughts shift from death to “that survival which is all our hope.” The poem ends with a vision of the flag and peace:

. . . O flag! At last
The place of life found after trains and death—
Nightfall of nations brilliant after war.

This is a kind of uplift almost unknown in serious twentieth-century writing and certainly absent from Jarrell’s somber, ascetic

lyrics. The conflicting motives and troubling emotions “Troop Train” so powerfully evokes dissipate here in platitudes. The poem jumps the track and smashes up just before reaching its destination—a pattern of repressing a destabilizing insight that recurs in many of Shapiro’s poems.

Although the poems in *V-Letter* effectively suggest the day-to-day quality of Army life in the South Pacific, they often succumb in the end to a drive for ringing affirmation. As Hilene Flanzbaum rightly says, “In *V-Letter*, Shapiro steadfastly attaches himself to an idea of American unity, victory, and cultural vitality” (259). The poem called “Aside,” for example, focuses on “mail-day,” almost in the manner of Jarrell’s “Mail Call”; but it soon transfers attention from the “bundles of letters” and “our faces / Of total absorption” to higher considerations: “In agony too there is time / For the growth of the rose of the spirit astir in the slime” (*V-Letter* 3-4). In his introduction to *V-Letter*, Shapiro writes that he is preoccupied with “the spiritual progress or retrogression of the man in war” (vi), and that interest often interrupts and weakens the powerful current of the verse. In “The Gun” a soldier addresses his gun, at first almost erotically—“the kiss of your blast is upon me, O friend”—but ultimately in a moralistic and even legalistic manner: “I absolve from your name / The exaction of murder, my gun. It is I who have killed” (*Collected Poems* 67). In “Full Moon: New Guinea” the sound of falling bombs disturbs the soldiers’ sleep:

The small burr of the bombers in our ear
Tickles our rest; we rise as from a nap
And take our helmets absently and meet,
Prepared for any spectacle or mishap,
At trenches fresh and narrow at our feet.
(*Collected Poems* 66)

The poem concludes in a tone of awkward, though for once not uplifting, eloquence: “Breathe and wait, / The bombs are falling darkly for our fate.” “The Leg,” in which a soldier’s limb has been amputated, begins harrowingly, but ends, like so many of the poems, in rhetorical high gear (82). The amputee prays to God for the “understanding” that would allow him to say that

even "if Thou take me angrily in hand / And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!"

The major poem of *V-Letter* manifests the same strengths and weaknesses as the shorter poems. "Elegy for a Dead Soldier" commences with a richly detailed description of the funeral of a fallen soldier, in which "a white sheet on the tail-gate of a truck / Becomes an altar" and the blood of the fallen man recalls "hibiscus that a marching man will pluck / To stick into his rifle or his hat" (*Collected Poems* 89-92). The narrator recalls seeing the soldier die while being transfused: "And then the strangulation, the last sound" (90). Scorning quantified methods of understanding death, for "nothing political" impinges on "this single casualty," the narrator attempts to depict him in his uniqueness. A man of few ideals, the soldier was a gun-loving racist, yet no one can say what he would have meant to his children or how he might have advanced the causes of "toleration" or "peace" (91-92). The burial and mourning necessarily take little time because "we know that others on tomorrow's roads / Will fall, ourselves perhaps, the man beside" (92). Up to this point the poem is sharply detailed in its scene-drawing and convincingly objective in its representation of the fallen man. Yet the soldier, in common with the other characters in Shapiro's war poems, is not allowed to speak in anything approaching his own voice. Absorbed by the narrator's observations and meditations, these monological texts provide no space for the voice of the other. And whatever conflicts manifest themselves in the monologues are ruthlessly pruned and reshaped by the end. "Elegy for a Dead Soldier," like "Troop Train," stills its tensions in a jaw-dropping display of conventional wisdom. An "epitaph" advises the reader:

And passing here, if you can lift your eyes
Upon a peace kept by a human creed,
Know that one soldier has not died in vain.

One need not be a soldier or a poet to write lines like that, merely a person with a pencil. In his war poems Shapiro has an evil genius for undoing his own best effort, for trying to spoil all the good that has come before, for repressing the frightful insights his poems continually approach.

Shapiro's subsequent volume, *Trial of a Poet*, includes two poems that bring his poetic discourse of war around full circle. The first, "Homecoming," serves as a bookend with "Troop Train," describing the soldiers' return from war (*Collected Poems* 95). The narrator remorsefully asks "forgiveness of the things that thrust / Shame and all death on millions and on me." The ship reeks with "the stench of humiliation"; some of the returning men are dead or insane; and even the majority, "untouched by steel / Or psychoneurosis," stare "with eyes in rut." This is an amazingly inglorious, sullen, and guilt-ridden homecoming. It points to monsters in the male soldiers' psyches. Yet once more, all that is powerful, original, and strange in the poem dissipates at the conclusion. When the ship enters American waters, a "terrible joy" liberates the soldiers in a "burst of love."

"The Conscientious Objector" in a sense supplements all of the poems of *V-Letter*, for it pays surprising tribute to those who opposed the war (96). Indeed, it is more positive about conscientious objectors than any of the poems on that topic by Robert Lowell, who was himself one. The poem concludes:

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.

In his war poems Shapiro, like Jarrell, refuses to castigate the enemy. The words "Japan," "Germany," and their variants do not even appear. In a similar vein, this poem insists that the war-hater is just as "heroic" as the warrior. Shapiro's early texts express an interest in reconciliation rather than division. Yet "The Conscientious Objector," so humanly attractive in its spirit, displays the same limitations that mark the war poems. It simplifies and reduces, finally closing out competing voices, ideas, and feelings. It speaks confidently of what "your" conscience is and what "we" come back to. Each is one transcendent thing, and the narrator knows its essence. The boisterous human contact of the opening sections of "Troop Train," the seedy modernity of trucks and ships and the moments of terror and

confusion in other poems— those passages of discursive, psychological, and cultural power regularly get overwhelmed by a wave of “spiritual progress” at the end. The duality of Shapiro’s WWII poems is that they promise to give us vivid images of the war, and then they airbrush the images that begin to appear.

Gwendolyn Brooks (born 1917) was, like the other poets discussed in this essay, a fledgling poet in her mid-twenties when WWII began.⁹ Unlike the others, however, she was a black poet in a dominant culture that, consciously or unconsciously, marked blacks and women as minor or anomalous artists, inhabiting at best the galleys and domestic spaces of the ship of poetry. Up to that time, for example, there had never been a Pulitzer Prize awarded to an African American writer, though many such writers were more than worthy. Although she took no formal part in the war, Brooks had male friends and relations who served in the armed forces, some of whom ultimately died in combat. Unlike other civilian poets such as Roethke, Berryman, and Schwartz, she had a vital interest in the war and a stake in an Allied victory. At the same time, her personal relationships with black soldiers, as well as her own position as a struggling young black poet, gave her a consuming interest in the role race played in the military. Like her precursor Langston Hughes, she portrayed the war as dual: a battle waged against foreign totalitarian forces and a battle waged against white supremacist practices within the American armed forces themselves. Like Hughes, she noted the bitter irony of battling injustice and racism abroad while maintaining only somewhat less virulent varieties at home. Also like Hughes, she sought to foreground that political irony as a weapon for social change— as a tool for making the armed forces and, ultimately, American society more just. As Hughes wrote in 1944, in the voice of a black G. I:

You can't say I didn't fight
To smash the Fascists' might.
You can't say I wasn't with you
In each battle.
As a soldier, and a friend.
When this war comes to an end,

Will you herd me in a Jim Crow car
Like cattle?

Or will you stand up like a man
At home and take your stand
For Democracy? (“Will V-Day be Me-Day Too?”)

The effort eventually bore fruit as President Truman culminated a series of incremental improvements during the war years by integrating the armed forces in 1948, as the United States Supreme Court integrated civilian public spaces in the mid-1950s, and as the black-led Civil Rights movement accomplished additional progressive change in the succeeding decades. Writing at about the same time as Hughes, Brooks wrote two major poems about the war that highlighted its racial dilemmas: the well-known “Negro Hero” and the less-read but even more complex “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” both of which appeared in Brooks’ first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). She returned to the topic once more in “Memorial to Ed Bland,” which appeared in her next book, *Annie Allen* (1949), the book that brought down a racial barrier by winning a Pulitzer Prize for its author.

“Negro Hero” evokes the life story of Dorie Miller, a black galley cook in a ship bombed at Pearl Harbor (*Blacks* 48-50). Consigned to the lower decks by the Navy’s discriminatory practice of the time, Miller violated orders by going on deck, shooting down several of the attacking planes, and saving the life of a crew member (Kent 71; Schweik 117). Years later Miller died in battle. Brooks’ poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by a black soldier who resembles Miller. He speaks in six- or seven-line free-verse stanzas, in which the third to last line and the very brief last line rhyme, a single harmonic grace note in a text of discord. The poem swerves powerfully from its chief precursors. Unlike Hughes’ “To Captain Mulzac,” addressed to a “Negro Skipper” of a ship with a mixed crew, Brooks allows her black sailor to speak for himself, and what he portrays is not Hughes’ idealized ship of “Freedom, / Brotherhood, Democracy” but a vessel wracked by discrimination and violence. Unlike Marianne Moore’s “decorous frock-coated Negro” in her poem, “The Hero,” Brooks’ “Negro Hero” is undecorously frank in addressing the racial dimension of a war

that is not simply “inward,” as Moore put it in her great “In Distrust of Merits,” but historically situated as well.

The poem begins by forcefully establishing racial defiance as a form of national duty: “I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them” (48). Trapped in a polity in which the law is not “ours” but “theirs,” the Negro Hero must violently disobey commands if he is to help repel violence from without. Under attack by two distinct antagonists, foreign and domestic, he must aggress against both in order to defeat the first and to save the second. Ironically, his rebellion reveals a desire for national commonality that members of the white power elite simply do not feel. Anti-institutional in a manner that goes back at least to the abolition movement, the Negro Hero must commit civil disobedience against his nation in order to rescue it. He escapes punishment only because his valor cannot be denied:

It is good I gave glory, it is good I put gold on their name.
Or there would have been spikes in the afterward hands.
But let us speak only of my success and the pictures in the
 Caucasian dailies
As well as the Negro weeklies. For I am a gem.
(They are not concerned that it was hardly The Enemy my
 fight was against
But them.) (48)

Stanzas three and four represent the deeply ambiguous heart of a poem that might at first seem transparent. In stanza three the Hero deprecates his motives for fighting as merely a “boy itch to get at the gun” followed by a “swallow of the liquor of battle” which made him “wild.” In stanza four he counters this admission by claiming a higher motive as well:

I loved. And a man will guard when he loves.
Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady.
With her knife lying cold, straight, in the softness of her
 sweet-flowing sleeve. (49)

The critique of black masculinity in stanza three and of white femininity in stanza four destabilizes the text, subverting any uncomplicated notion of the poem’s positioning on war, race, or

gender. In stanza three, is the hero speaking sincerely, as Susan Schweik thinks (*Gulf* 120-21); or is he sardonically mimicking anti-black-male stereotypes, as Harry B. Shaw thinks (“Perception” 138)? In stanza four, is he representing himself appropriately, as Shaw thinks; or is he reduplicating “the most misogynistic figures” of masculine war poetry, as Schweik thinks? By making both of these mutually exclusive interpretations possible and plausible, the stanzas expose aporias about nation, race, and gender that are latent throughout the poem and indeed in the national symbolic as well. These stanzas are an abyss that draw the rest of the poem into it. Once one realizes how unstable they are, one begins to notice contradictory elements elsewhere. Recall, for example, that even in the seemingly straightforward second stanza, the Hero declares that his fight was against “Negro weeklies” as well as “Caucasian dailies,” implying that he resisted not only white discursive power but trans-racial misapprehensions and injustices. Similarly, the potentially misogynistic female “knife” of stanza four transforms itself into (potentially misandrous) male “knives” in stanza seven. In such passages the dramatic monologue form works particularly well to reveal the contradictions and limits in any single perspective, even a Hero’s, and of course to separate the narrator’s position from the text’s.

In stanza five the Negro Hero explores the dangerously liminal space he inhabits in the Navy. He asks: “am I good enough to die for them,” “am I clean enough to kill for them,” or “is my place . . . / In the galley still?” (49). Must he stay “still” (in the senses of silent, immobile, and always)? Or may he begin to move and speak as a member of the *polis*? And must he outperform in order to be allowed to perform at all? An interpellated white supremacist voice, speaking parenthetically in repetitious, monosyllabic rhymes that suggest his rigidity, then affirms the Hero’s worst fear, that no performance, however heroic, will suffice:

(Indeed, I’d rather be dead;
Indeed, I’d rather be shot in the head
Or ridden to waste on the back of a flood
Than saved by the drop of a black man’s blood.)
(49)

Nevertheless, the Hero remains undeterred. He avers, in the seventh and last stanza, that “the important thing is, I helped to save them, them and a part of their democracy” (50). His heroism lies not only in his physical courage but in the moral courage of loving men too small, greedy, or afraid to love him back—and in understanding their slogan of “democracy” better than they do themselves. Indeed, he understands *them* better than they do themselves. His heroism is finally intellectual as well as emotional and physical. No longer liminal, he feels “well and settled” in himself

. . . because I believe it was a good job,
Despite this possible horror: that they might prefer the
Preservation of their law in all its sick dignity and their knives
To the continuation of their creed
And their lives. (50)

The poem thus ends in achieved and justified self-esteem for the African American Hero. But it leaves white patriarchy suspended between realizing its ideals at long last or abandoning them to face what James Baldwin called “the fire next time.” More importantly, the unruly questions the poem has raised about war, racism, and sexism have received none of the “tidy answers” Brooks characteristically disdains (see *Blacks* 79).

“Gay Chaps at the Bar,” a sequence of twelve slant-rhymed and unmetred sonnets, examines black participation in the war by means of a fragmented and elliptical series of monologues (*Blacks* 64-75). Brooks labels the poem a “souvenir” for her brother, a staff sergeant in the Army, and for “every other soldier” (64). The title derives from a letter from the front she received from her literary friend, Lieutenant William Couch, who wrote of young soldiers, recently “gay chaps at the bar,” now returning from battle “crying and trembling.” The beginning sonnets focus on the swift transition these young black men had to make from late adolescence to jeopardized adulthood. As one such soldier puts it:

. . . No stout
Lessons showed how to chat with death. We brought

No brass fortissimo, among our talents,
To holler down the lions in this air. (64)

Another tells himself to keep his nourishing dreams in little jars
“till I return from hell” (66).

In the middle and ending sonnets, various soldier-speakers reveal their overwhelming feelings of grief. Wounds in the object-world, Freud tells us, may become a wound in the subject (“Mourning” 247-49); and wars especially give rise to “traumatic neuroses” in which experiences of fright and loss result in flashbacks and a deepening, possibly suicidal, melancholy (“Beyond” 12). In Brooks’ fifth and sixth sonnets, a soldier imagines a postwar future similar to that of Virginia Woolf’s Septimus Smith. His projected self, incapable of sexual or aesthetic rejuvenation, drowns in a sea of homosocial mourning:

My best allegiances are to the dead.
I swear to keep the dead upon my mind.
Disdain for all time to be overglad. (69)

Just as Freud asserts that “the shadow of the object” may fall on “the ego” (“Mourning” 249), so the soldier pledges fealty to his dead comrades, takes their “ghosts” as his mentors, and vows to live henceforth in “the midnight that is mine and theirs.”¹⁰ Immediately following this evocation of post-traumatic despair, the seventh sonnet describes white soldiers who find their racist assumptions crumbling “when the Negroes came” (70). This surprisingly hopeful interpellation yields, in the remaining sonnets, to voices of black soldiers questioning their faith in God or indeed in anything:

This morning men deliver wounds and death.
They will deliver death and wounds tomorrow.
And I doubt all. . . . (73)

The sequence concludes darkly. The voice of the last sonnet, speaking for many others, examines the price he has paid for survival:

Still we applaud the President's voice and face.
Still we remark on patriotism, sing,
Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice
For death of men who too saluted, sang.
But inward grows a soberness, an awe,
A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.
For even if we come out standing up
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step
Of iron feet again. And again wild. (75)

The voice describes an unfillable emptiness in the self, an inability to smile or relax, and a dread that the "iron feet" of totalitarians will return, and with them a need yet again for the liquor of battle that makes one "wild."

This powerful monologue concludes not only the sequence but Brooks' first volume. Her second volume begins with one last WWII poem, an elegy for her friend Ed Bland, a budding poet and critic killed in Germany at war's end, on March 20, 1945 (*Blacks* 79-80). The elegy is a moving tribute to a gifted and irreplaceable man. But Brooks' deepest meditations on war, it seems to me, appear in the earlier and longer poems. Far from the battlefield, which she visited only through the discourse of her correspondents and through her own vast and imaginative empathy, Brooks created WWII texts as responsive to war experiences and as subtle about psychological and political issues as any ever written.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) worked briefly in the optical department of the US Navy in 1942-43 but had no close friends in the military and had no deep connection to WWII issues. She did, however, write two poems that touched on the war.¹¹ These poems are central to the canon of this poet, who is now perhaps the most widely admired of her generation (see Travisano, "Bishop Phenomenon"). The poem that bears most directly on WWII is "Roosters," completed in October 1940 when the war was barely a year old and before the United States had entered it. "Roosters" appeared initially in *The New Republic* in 1941 and then in Bishop's first volume, *North and South*, in 1946. The second

poem, which functions as a companion piece, is "The Fish," written at about the same time and published in *Partisan Review* in 1940 and then in *North and South*.

"Roosters" may be the most brilliant poem to emerge from WWII (*Complete Poems* 35-37). Indebted to a mode that M. H. Abrams termed "the greater Romantic lyric," in which natural description frames a philosophical meditation, and employing insistently rhymed tercets, the poem contemplates the early-morning crowing of roosters in a ramshackle village modeled on Key West, where Bishop lived between 1938 and 1947. The poem's emotional charge immediately signals that it has more than roosters in mind. Descriptive phrases like "gun-metal blue," "cries galore," and "green-gold medals" link the description of roosters to the discourse of war, implying that the two verbal realms must be thought of together, as tropes for each other. The impassioned evocation of the roosters becomes an indictment of war and of the warrior mentality, which the poem attributes to an ethos of hyper-masculinity. In contrast to the desexualized perspectives of Jarrell, the unselfconsciously masculine orientations of Shapiro and Lowell, and the empathic qualities of Brooks, "Roosters" boisterously and disdainfully satirizes war as a specifically male practice. The poem begins:

At four o'clock
in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock

just below
the gun-metal blue window
and immediately there is an echo. . . . (35)

The roosters' crowing figuratively suggests the echoing sounds of gunfire and bombs, portrayed as a phallic activity. (The word "cock," like so many other words in the poem, does double duty.) The roosters, mindless and primitive, glare at each other

with stupid eyes
while from their beaks there rise
the uncontrolled, traditional cries.

The cries— emanating from “protruding chests, / in green-gold medals dressed, / planned to command and terrorize the rest”— impose a “senseless order,” an order of pain and cruelty, over the town (35-36). In a letter to her mentor Marianne Moore, Bishop defended the poem’s “‘violence’ of tone,” explaining that it was intended “to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism” (*One Art* 96). She wrote that she was thinking in the poem not only of Key West but of “those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over” and of the “violent roosters” appearing in Pablo Picasso’s antiwar and anti-Fascist masterpiece *Guernica*.

As the poem proceeds, its application to WWII becomes ever more manifest. Perched on the village’s churches is not a cross, or even a star (as in Moore’s “The Steeple Jack”), but a “tin rooster” (36), reminiscent of a tin dictator or the “tin wreath” in Pound’s anti-WWI “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly.” “Glass headed pins” (36), as Bishop explains in *One Art* (96), evoke not only the rooster’s eyes but the pins on a war map. Eventually, in an apostrophe to the roosters, the narrator explicitly names— rather than figures— war:

. . . you whom they labeled

“Very combative . . .”
what right have you to give
commands and tell us how to live,

cry “Here!” and “Here!”
and wake us here where are
unwanted love, conceit, and war?” (36)

After directly referring to war, for the only time in the poem, the text immediately returns to its master trope of roosters, who now “fight each other” by twos, exhibit “raging heroism,” and cause injury and death (37). Throughout these increasingly violent evocations, the narrator punningly portrays war as an archetypally masculinist activity caused by the “cock”— an “excrescence” that makes a “virile presence” and possesses a “vulgar beauty” but causes brutal aggression, tyranny, and destruction (35, 37). Domesticity, conversely, is the realm of females who, in a

complicit fashion, “admire” the males while being subjugated and “terrorized” by them:

the many wives
who lead hens’ lives
of being courted and despised. (35)

If war is clearly gendered as male, it is also classed (the warriors wear a red “crown”) and even raced (the warriors are admired for their proper color). This conflation of gendered, classed, and raced hierarchies finally results in mass death. A “fallen” rooster, flung on the ash-heap, lies in dung, “with his dead wives” and “with open, bloody eyes” (37).

The poem concludes with a meditation on Christian art and narrative that inspires the narrator to think that the dreadful rosters might change into a sign of “forgiveness,” that “‘deny deny deny’ / is not all the roosters cry” (38). In the final lines, day breaks, the narrator wonders how the night could have come to such “grief,” the cocks become “almost inaudible,” and the sun climbs into the scene, “faithful as enemy, or friend” (39). This conclusion might be read as an effort at uplift better managed than, but not inherently different from, those in Shapiro’s poems—though Schweik makes a compelling case for its ambiguity (*Gulf* 227-29).

Considered as a linguistic construction “Roosters” is, to my mind, one of the great poems of the century, every vivid, resonant word echoing gorgeously off of every other word. Yet the poem has its limitations as well. Bishop agreed with Stéphane Mallarmé’s celebrated rejoinder to Edgar Degas that poems are made of words, not ideas (*One Art* 94). But words, in their function of terms and tags, convey ideas. And in its web of ideational implications, “Roosters” has two interrelated features that trouble me, as they seem to have troubled Bishop herself. First, the poem’s initial twenty-six stanzas fall into the category of what Yeats (in *Mythologies*) termed rhetoric rather than poetry: a quarrel with others rather than with oneself. The text scorns base male militarists, but it occludes from view the aggression that is not so easily ascribed solely to others but exists within the observer as well, even the observer whose identifications set her apart from the privileges of masculine power. The initial section

of “Roosters” scapegoats others in just the way that Moore’s “There never was a war that / was not inward” does not. In Bishop’s text the war is outward, a product and activity of others, with whom the poem displays not a shred of empathy. Bishop’s narrator-observer occupies no liminal or potentially complicit space but one that seems to me unexamined.¹² Moreover, “Roosters” may be the first antiwar poem that expresses no compassion for victims.

The second problematic feature of “Roosters” is its ethos of moral equivalence. Despite Bishop’s epistolary reference to the Nazi occupation of Northern Europe, the poem itself makes no distinction between opposing forces. All “roosters,” in this text, are equally culpable; indeed they are interchangeable. The poem treats war as an essence—a timeless and inevitable result of masculine folly. The unchangeable story is that both sides in a war are primitive, trivial, and destructive. The poem thus dehistoricizes war, situating it in ever-recurrent myth. Brett Millier, in her fine biography of Bishop, calls “Roosters” Bishop’s “first politically relevant poem, and the only one that addressed World War II at all directly” (*Elizabeth Bishop* 159-60). But it seems to me that the poem is not political at all, if politics means taking sides in public controversies. When Mercutio shouts “A plague o’ both your houses!” in *Romeo and Juliet* (III.1), it is a wrenching and profound political assertion because he had previously identified himself with one of those houses. But when individuals who have never affiliated themselves with any enterprise larger than themselves proclaim of political parties or forces at war, “a plague on both your houses,” it is only a facile and complacent gesture. Bishop’s poem in effect sits out the war by reducing both sides to the status of “roosters”—small-brained, irritating creatures with whom it would be impossible to identify oneself.

Bishop began to compose “The Fish” after “Roosters” was underway but before it was completed, and when she published both poems in *North and South* she positioned “The Fish” several pages after “Roosters.” These facts suggest that this animal poem responds to or even compensates for the other. Considered together as a dialogue, the poems achieve a complexity and openness lacking in “Roosters” alone. In “The Fish” the textual subject employs a series of magnificent figures to evoke a

“tremendous fish” she has caught and ultimately decides to free (*Complete Poems* 42-44). In the first sections of the poem she ambivalently projects her own aggressivity onto the fish: his gills are “frightening,” his lip “weaponlike.” Although she herself is the invasive character in the scenario and the fish the passive one— “he hadn’t fought at all”— her suspiciousness of others and her repressed awareness of her own hostility lead her to posit her own drives in him. As the poem progresses, however, her understanding of the fish, and therefore of herself, deepens. Among the multiple tropes involved in her evocation of the fish, the figure of the military veteran is crucial. The fish is “battered and venerable,” a survivor of many battles. From his lower lip hang five old pieces of fishing-line, vestiges of his past triumphs over human antagonists, which the narrator describes in wonder-struck awe:

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw. (43)

As the narrator just stares at the fishing-lines that have become medals and beard, “victory” fills up the little rented boat, and she lets the fish go (43-44).

This poem, which valorizes a fish grown too old to fight and a fisherwoman’s decision to free it, shares the pacifist orientation of “Roosters.” Nevertheless, it revises “Roosters” in several antithetical ways. Whereas “Roosters” portrays aggression as other, “The Fish” acknowledges it within the self. And whereas “Roosters” aligns the will to destroy with the phallic father, “The Fish” suggests no simple gender marking. Indeed, it associates the fish, figured as male and military, not with senseless cruelty but with its opposites: pacific wisdom, stoic suffering, dignified survival. Bishop’s use of the culturally cathected word “victory” at the poem’s turning point is especially significant. Whereas she implicitly distances “Roosters” from the American “victory culture” of WWII— the desperate desire for national triumph against odds that spoke through such phenomena as Victory Gardens, Victory Boulevards, V-Letters, and V-E and V-J Days— she participates in that narrative in “The Fish.”¹³ The

poem positions the “I” in such a way that she may mobilize not only pacifistic values but also the value of fighting, if required, for survival and freedom.

In 1942 and 1943 Robert Lowell (1917-1977) composed a series of poems opposing WWII, and then he served time in prison for refusing the draft.¹⁴ However tempting it may be, we must resist the simple narrative of Lowell as a gentle and idealistic pacifist-poet, because it does not fit the facts and the emotions of Lowell’s career. In the early 1940s there was nothing gentle or simple about him. Lowell exhibited a variant strain of what Tom Engelhart has called America’s “victory culture,” but Lowell contemplated not a victory *of* America but a victory *over* it. The defiance, fury, and grandiosity he displayed in the early 1940s, and episodically for the rest of his life, were richly overdetermined—partly a psychic malady for which he found no cure, and partly a confluence of social attitudes and positionings. Lowell was brought up in an anxiety-ridden, authoritarian, upper-class milieu skeptical of democracy and of non-whites. Initially obedient to his class perspective, he published in his prep school magazine an article called “War: A Justification,” arguing that Northern nations had a duty to wage war on other lands:

Why should Germany be limited to a population of seventy million? . . . The most progressive and advanced peoples should have the most territory, the largest population, and the greatest wealth. . . . The benefits of war are so great that [its] temporary misfortunes and horrors, important as they are, can be forgotten War is the greatest maker of nations. (“War” 157-58)

Although as he grew older he explicitly rebelled against his family culture, he continued implicitly to conform. In a letter to his mother in 1940, for example, he wrote of taking “aristocracy and family tradition seriously” (Lowell Collection, Harvard). At the same time he felt abandoned and disowned by his family. His resentment reveals itself in a “joking” bit of doggerel he and two friends sent to his mother in 1936:

We wish you joy
We wish you health
But would destroy
You for your pelf.
(Lowell Collection, Harvard)

Lowell's anger and sense of superiority were reinforced in his college years by his association with members of the Agrarian movement. In the 1930s, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren—all of whom tutored Lowell—mounted an assault from the right on American capitalism and democracy, promoting an elitism that had anti-urban, racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic components. Lowell's assumption of cultural privilege, which he had lived with since birth along with feelings of neglect and instability, was thus strengthened by his mentors as well as by the writings of rightist intellectuals such as Pound, Eliot, Christopher Dawson, and Jean de Ménéscé and perhaps even by the reactionary radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin (see Mazzaro, "Apocalypse" 322-26; Mariani, *Lost Puritan* 87-116). Under these influences, Lowell's initial "justification" of war transformed itself into opposition. At least he opposed a war against Germany, one of the Northern nations he had earlier hoped would rule the world.

Although Lowell volunteered for the armed forces in the months following Pearl Harbor, by the time he was drafted in August 1943 his patriotic fervor had changed to resistance. Citing "family traditions," he sent President Roosevelt a "Declaration of Personal Responsibility," which he simultaneously released to dozens of relatives and friends and to the press (*Collected Prose* 367-70). Echoing the position of Lowell's friend Jarrell, the Declaration idealistically denounces the Allied bombing of civilian centers such as Hamburg (367). At one point it calls the American war effort "patriotic" at its inception (370), though at another it states that Lowell only "imagined" the country was in peril after Pearl Harbor (368). At its climax, however, the Declaration accuses President Roosevelt and the Allies of aiding and abetting the Soviet Union (370). The document's master phobia is not against war but against Communism. It begins with the dubious premise that the war has already been won by mid-1943: "Today these adversaries are being rolled back

on all fronts and the crisis of war is past" (369). It confidently asserts that the demand for unconditional surrender means that the Allies "intend the permanent destruction of Germany and Japan" (370). And it concludes by hitting home its chief geopolitical idea: "If this program is carried out . . . it will leave China and Europe, the two natural power centers of the future, to the mercy of the USSR." Therefore, the United States is "collaborating" with the most "unscrupulous and powerful of totalitarian dictators"—Stalin—in a war that constitutes "a betrayal of my country" (370). This is not the argument of a pacifist. In my judgment, this is the argument of someone who wishes Nazi Germany to survive, for strategic or other reasons. Lowell's Declaration accuses the President, the armed forces, and the nation's majority of "betrayal"—of treason (370). Although the statement foreshadows Senator Joseph McCarthy's "twenty years of treason" speech, it goes far beyond anything the senator would ever say.¹⁵ It could have been read verbatim on the Rome wireless by Pound or on the Berlin wireless. Perhaps it was.

At about the same time as Lowell was composing his defiant statement, he was also writing the antiwar poems that he published in his first small book, the privately printed *Land of Unlikeness* (1944). These poems, like the Declaration, depended on a mix of contradictory motives. A passionate, though temporary, convert to Roman Catholicism, Lowell undoubtedly felt a deep moral horror at the American bombing of non-combatants (though he was quiet about civilian killings by the Axis powers). He may also have tended toward pacifistic views as a reaction formation against his own anger and propensity toward violence. Beside those moral and psychological considerations was the political aim to preserve Nazi Germany as a bulwark against Communism. Linked to that goal was a distinct indifference to the fate of those trapped in Nazi slave-labor and death camps—Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, political dissidents, and others. And beneath the political agenda existed an even more fundamental motive: fear. Lowell was legitimately afraid of dying or of being injured. Perhaps he was even more fearful that military discipline would precipitate the narcissistic and bipolar disorders he spent so much energy in the 1940s combating, ultimately unsuccessfully. The poems, like the Declaration, also reveal the grandiosity, exhibitionism, and self-certainty that

alternated with feelings of abjection, paralysis, and self-doubt throughout his adult life. Finally, these early poems, whatever their defects, prefigure Lowell's ultimate triumph in turning his psychic deficits into a struggle with language that would alter the course of twentieth-century poetry.

Lowell's poems about WWII in *Land of Unlikeness*— none of which he later chose to reprint— narrativize the war as a melodrama of beset Christianity. The protagonists are Christ, Mary, and their followers. The villain is generally America in its many incarnations: individuals like "Eisenhower" or "goggled pilots"; ironic abstractions like "Democracy" or "the State" (this last a Jarrellian touch); and analogues such as "Satan," "Cain," or "Caesar." A subsidiary negative character, appropriated from the discourse of Pound and Eliot, is "the Jew," who is described in one poem as "hog fatted." With the sole exception of "Cistercians in Germany," which criticizes the Nazi regime for persecuting the Cistercian order, all of the war poems vituperate the United States:

So, child, unclasp your fists,
And clap for Freedom and Democracy;
No matter, child, if the Ark Royal lists
Into the Sea;
Soon the Leviathan
Will spout American. ("Boston Nativity")

Yet for all of their anger at the American role in the war, these poems express little concern for human casualties. Even the diatribe "The Bomber" remains abstract:

Bomber like god
You nosed about the clouds
And warred on the stormy sod;
And your thunderbolts fast as light
Blitzed a wake of shrouds.

Unlike Jarrell's poems, Lowell's texts reveal no interest in the death of pilots, gunners, or concentration camp victims. Unlike Brooks' poems, they are oblivious to the fate of Negro heroes or ordinary chaps. Even the German dead are reduced to

metonymic "shrouds." Lowell frames the conflict as an impersonal myth, in which actual human beings play a negligible role. As Hugh Staples says, "the events taking place around him are merely reflections of the greater cosmic conflict. . . . Military disasters are rehearsals for the impending Day of Judgment" (*Robert Lowell* 26). The last poem of the volume, "Leviathan," constructs the Allied cause not simply as a betrayal of America but of Christ: "The Ship / Of State is asking Christ to walk on blood."

Land of Unlikeness was published in July 1944, while Lowell was still on probation after serving five months of a year's sentence for draft refusal. In succeeding years he began to complicate his world-view, though he periodically reverted to prophetic hysteria during attacks of mania. For example, in 1949 he led a McCarthyite witch-hunt against Elizabeth Ames, the administrator of the Yaddo writers' colony (Hamilton 143-48; Kazin 204-205; Mariani 177-78). In later manic episodes he obsessively read *Mein Kampf* and kept it under his pillow at night. (Hamilton 204, 209-12, 315, 356, 449, 465; Mariani 269, 329-30). But in his balanced moments, Lowell wrote thoughtfully about his own Jewish ancestor (*Life Studies* 11-12, 45), and he both "stood on" his draft refusal and mocked it as a "silly bombastic statement"—"a manic statement, / telling off the state and president" (Meyers 164; *Life Studies* 85). He now interpreted his Declaration as purely a protest against the bombing of civilians, downplaying its geopolitical concerns (Meyers 143, 164). By the late 1960s he was portraying the American and Soviet governments as similarly flawed though potentially salvageable, and he was opposing war, injustice, poverty, and genocide wherever he saw them (see Axelrod, *Robert Lowell* 176-83, 186-91, 196-202).

Two years after the publication of *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell published his first widely distributed volume, the highly acclaimed and Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). The poems about WWII in this book are far more complex than the ones in the earlier book. They show Lowell in the process of change, beginning to quarrel with himself rather than with others. "The Dead in Europe" and "The Exile's Return," for example, contemplate the war's effect on Europe. The former poem, a prayer of the dead, bespeaks the suffering of civilians killed in the war, almost as a complement to Jarrell's poems about American

pilots and gunners: "After the bombs unloaded, we fell down / Buried together . . ." (*Lord Weary's Castle* 68). The poem movingly expresses something new for Lowell: a palpable identification with victims of war. The latter poem depicts Germany's postwar rebirth with an attention to detail that is startling, given that Lowell had not yet visited Europe (*Lord Weary's Castle* 3). The openness and objectivity of "The Exile's Return" may reflect the influence of Jarrell, who helped to edit *Lord Weary's Castle*. In this poem a German refugee cautiously returns to his home town, now occupied by American armed forces:

. . . Fall

And winter, spring and summer, guns unlimber
And lumber down the narrow gabled street
Past your gray, sorry and ancestral house
Where the dynamited walnut tree
Shadows a squat, old, wind-torn gate and cows
The Yankee commandant. (3)

According to this verbal construction, the war has "dynamited" both the landscape and the "ancestral" way of life. The contrast between militarized present and lost past arises in the form of semantic and sonic play. The metonymic American guns "unlimber" (detach their wooden foreparts from their carriages) as they "lumber" (move as clumsily as stacked lumber) down the ancient "gabled" (timbered) streets. The "unseasoned" liberators now dominate all seasons. Yet these young Americans, described with almost affectionate mockery, bear no resemblance to the cold-hearted bomber pilots or imperial generals of Lowell's earlier work. Moreover, the poem does not report "the permanent destruction of Germany." Quite the contrary. The country is already confronting a future ambiguously composed of danger and hope: ". . . already lily-stands / Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough / Cathedral lifts its eye." The narrator concludes by warning the exile, and presumably all of the war's survivors, that "your life is in your hands."

"In the Cage," a sonnet, memorializes Lowell's wartime imprisonment (*Lord Weary's Castle* 53). Viewing the experience from the inside, the poem alludes to none of the high moral aims mentioned in Shapiro's "The Conscientious Objector" but rather

to labor, tedium, sexual frustration, fear, and dementia. The prisoner-subject observes his fellow inmates returning from underground work to the mess hall. Troped as desperate “canaries,” the jailbirds figuratively “beat their bars and scream.” Imprisonment has stripped away any innocent illusion they might still possess:

It is night
And it is vanity, and age
Blackens the heart of Adam. Fear,
The yellow chirper, beaks its cage.

The narrator here, unlike the self-assured “I” of *Land of Unlikeness*, conceives of himself as vain, sinful, and frightened. Revising the poem thirty years later, Lowell made the point even clearer: “I am night, I am vanity” (*History* 129). The textual subject of “In the Cage,” far from solving the moral and political dilemmas of his age, cannot even fathom or approve of himself.

Humility and complexity also pervade the longest and perhaps the greatest poem of the volume, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (*Lord Weary’s Castle* 8-14). This elegy mourns the death of Lowell’s cousin Warren Winslow, a naval officer killed at sea in January 1944.¹⁶ As Stephen Fender has explained, Winslow, a lieutenant on the U.S.S. *Turner*, died along with 137 other officers and enlisted men when a series of explosions rocked and sank the ship at the entrance to New York harbor (Fender 188). Because the disaster resulted from a “mishap on board” rather than enemy action (189), Lowell’s poem is freed from the necessity of assigning blame. Instead, it explores the consequences of violence, domination, and loss in human history. Reprising descriptive phrases by Thoreau and Melville, Section I vividly evokes the burial at sea of a sailor who is not literally Winslow (who died off New York rather than Rhode Island and whose body was not recovered) but who metonymically represents him—and all the war dead. The section begins:

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light

Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
 He grappled at the net
 With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs:
 The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
 Its open, staring eyes
 Were lustreless dead-lights
 Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
 Heavy with sand. We weight the body, close
 Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came. . . . (8)

The narrator here is himself a sailor, assigned to “our” fleet, which again evidences a significant shift in identification from Lowell’s earlier rhetoric. The brilliant yet reportorial language emphasizes the abrupt transition from life (suggested in such verbals as “grappled,” “coiled,” and “hurdling”) to death (evoked by noun phrases like “marble feet,” “lustreless dead-lights,” and “stranded hulk”). At the section’s conclusion, poetic language yields to the finality of military ritual:

. . . ask for no Orphean lute
 To pluck life back. The guns of the steeled fleet
 Recoil and then repeat
 The hoarse salute.

In succeeding sections, brief apostrophes to the dead “Sailor” trigger meditations on human aggression and aloneness, nature’s indifference, and God’s mysterious and dreadful silence. In Section II the textual subject asks, “Sailor, can you hear / The Pequod’s sea wings?” (9), explicitly connecting the Sailor’s fate to that of the doomed whalers in *Moby-Dick*. Section III begins, “All you recovered from Poseidon died / With you, my cousin” (10), a startlingly intimate address that foregrounds the narrator’s familial connection and his grief. In Sections V and VI the narrator evokes the Sailor as his double. In anaphoral lines, he projects onto the Sailor his own anguish about aggression, mutilation, and corruption (“*Sailor*, will your sword / *Whistle* and fall and sink into the fat?” [12]) and his own hopes for salvation (“*Sailor*, you were glad / And *whistled* Sion by that stream” [13]). Lowell has found a way to turn his conflicted relations with

himself and others into images of great sensuous and associative power.

In the poem's seventh and final section, the narrator locates himself in a graveyard, beside a cenotaph that may suggest Winslow's, and he meditates the unlikely possibility of redemption in a world recently at war. The poem ends in this way:

You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will. (14)

This eloquent but disturbing conclusion leaves the fate of humankind entirely unsettled. Lowell no longer writes like a poet who finds the world's problems easy to solve, nor like one who can divorce himself from what he observes. Confused and pained by the deaths of so many, the textual subject reviles the human drive to dominate and to kill, and he looks toward an uncertain future.

Like other Middle Generation poems written in the war's aftermath, "The Quaker Graveyard," with its rainbow sign, evokes a sense of having come through. But like Jarrell's "A Camp in the Prussian Forest" and Brooks' "Memorial to Ed Bland," it also puts into motion a counter-dynamic of absence and fear, an awareness of millions killed, a sense of having lost what can never be found again. ☪

Notes

1. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Rise B. Axelrod, Jeremiah B. Axelrod, Bernard Axelrod, Martha Brown, David Boxwell, Francis Carney, Mark Landis, Camille Roman, and Traise Yamamoto for various sorts of help and ideas, and Deckard Hodge for his excellent research assistance.

2. I believe that the term was invented by one of its members, John Berryman, in his review-essay, "From the Middle and Senior Generations" (1959). More recently, Bruce Bawer has employed it in *The*

Middle Generation (1986) and Thomas Travisano refers to it in *Exploring Lost Worlds* (1999).

3. The concept of the *polis* as a space of “exposure” or “appearance” derives from Hannah Arendt’s landmark study of public and private realms, *The Human Condition* (35, 50). The terms “introspection” and “domesticity” respectively derive from two studies of post-Middle Generation poetics, Alan Williamson’s *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* and my own *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Arendt argued that in the modern world the classically distinct worlds of politics and household “constantly flow into each other” (33).

4. It is also true that some of the Middle Generation poets wrote sparingly or not at all about the war. For example, Delmore Schwartz—privately opposed to a war he thought “obscene,” but publicly neutral—wrote nothing (see Atlas 202-203). John Berryman wrote a handful of poems, the most memorable being “The Moon and the Night and the Men,” which laments the Belgian surrender, and “Boston Common,” which uses the war’s “fiery night” as a backdrop for its contemplation of humanity and heroism (*Collected Poems* 36-37, 41-46). In his private discourse Berryman alternately supported and opposed the war. Like his friend Schwartz, he resented it as an intrusion on his career aspirations (Mariani, *Berryman* 125-26, 139-43; Atlas 148-50, 202-204, 228). It should be noted in this context that in the 1940s and 1950s many readers interested in poems about WWII consulted Oscar Williams’ anthology, *The War Poets* (1945), which included almost every poet who wrote a word about the war and more than a few who didn’t.

5. Because of space limitations, I must exclude other poets who properly belong in this discussion: for example, John Ciardi, a sergeant in the Air Force, who wrote such (anti)war poems as “Sea Burial,” “V-J Day,” and “The Health of Captains”; Muriel Rukeyser, who worked in the Graphics Division of the OWI and wrote “Letter to the Front”; and William Everson, a conscientious objector, who protested the war in “Eastward the Armies” and wrote of his alternative service in “Chronicle of Division.” Nevertheless, I believe that the five poets I have chosen to emphasize are the most notable Middle Generation (anti)war poets. My understanding of these poets—and of this field of study—is indebted to, though divergent from, two excellent earlier studies: Richard Fein’s dissertation on the WWII poetry of Ciardi, Jarrell, Shapiro, Eberhart, and Lowell (1960); and especially Susan Schweik’s germinal *A Gulf So Deeply Cut* (1991), which analyzes WWII poetry by American women, including Brooks and Bishop.

6. Jarrell’s poems have been gathered in *Collected Poems*. For biographical information about his war years see Pritchard’s lucid and informa-

tive literary biography and Jarrell's *Letters*. For critical commentary on the war poems see Ferguson, Flynn, Quinn, and Pritchard.

7. Theodor Adorno wrote "No poetry after Auschwitz." George Steiner has elaborated: "Because their language had served at Belsen, because words could be found for all those things and men were not struck dumb for using them, a number of German writers who had gone into exile or survived Nazism, despaired of their instrument. . . . But this sense of a death in language, of the failure of the word in the face of the inhuman, is by no means limited to German" (51; see also 53). Nevertheless, Steiner affirms the necessity of writing poems that "counter the general inclination to forget the death camps" (301).

8. Many, but not all, of Shapiro's poems have been gathered in *Collected Poems 1940-1978*. Although there is as yet no biography, the first volume of Shapiro's autobiography, entitled *The Younger Son*, includes information about his war years. For critical commentary on the poems see Flanzbaum and Reino. Flanzbaum acutely shows how Shapiro's ambivalence toward his Jewish identity in the 1940s left him unwilling or unable to write about the Holocaust—unlike Jarrell, who was not Jewish.

9. Most of Brooks' poems have been collected in *Blacks*. For biographical information consult Kent's helpful literary biography and Brooks' autobiographical *Report from Part One*. For critical commentary on the war poems see Kent, Gilbert and Gubar, Madhubuti, Melham, Mootry and Smith, Schweik, Shaw, and Wright.

10. In her illuminating study, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*, Susan Schweik faults sonnets five and six for privileging the soldier's "masculine" despair over the "feminine" pleasures of civilian life (132-34). This seems to me a provocative insight, but as Schweik herself observes, it is a female poet who has appropriated the male voice and perspective, a fact that ironizes any gender stereotyping the monologues may contain. For yet another perspective on this problem see Gilbert and Gubar 244-45.

11. In 1950 Bishop began a third antiwar poem, initially called "Desk at Night," but completed and published it during the Vietnam War as the now-celebrated "Twelve O'Clock News." Bishop's poems have been collected in *Complete Poems*. For biographical information see Millier's literary biography, Fountain and Brazeau's oral biography, Kalstone's group biography, letters in Bishop's *One Art*, autobiographical writings in her *Collected Prose*, interviews in Monteiro, and memoirs in Schwartz and Estess. Valuable commentary on Bishop's wartime poetry appears in Costello, Gilbert and Gubar, Goldensohn, Harrison, Lombardi, Millier, Schweik, Schwartz and Estess, and Travisano.

12. Schweik, partially conceding this point, counters with the helpful but (to my mind) inconclusive point that the poem's hidden narrative of lesbian love and estrangement, implied by the "we" of stanza one, associates the narrator herself with the rooster behaviors she describes. See Schweik 231-34.

13. The terms "victory culture" and "victory narrative" derive from Tom Engelhardt's *The End of Victory Culture*. My own involvement in the cathexis of the word "victory" is indicated by my middle name, "Victor," bestowed on me by my grandmother at my birth three weeks before D-Day. It is now no longer used, though vestigially present in the "v" of my first name.

14. There is as yet no complete collection of Lowell's poems, though Frank Bidart is assembling one. Of the two major biographies of Lowell, by Hamilton and Mariani, Mariani's is the more informative and even-handed. For additional biographical information see Lowell's *Collected Prose* and Meyers. Extended critical commentary on Lowell's early poetry appears in Axelrod (*Robert Lowell*), Bell, Cooper, Fein (*Robert Lowell*), Mazzaro (*Poetic Themes*), Perloff, Staples, Williamson (*Pity the Monsters*), and Yenser.

15. McCarthy's speech was delivered on Lincoln's Birthday in 1954. It similarly accused the Roosevelt-Truman Administrations and all Democrats of "an historic betrayal" (Rorty and Decter 84-85).

16. The classic studies of this poem's elegiac form are by Perloff (140-45), Ramazani (227-30), Staples (45-52), and above all Dubrow. The pioneering effort to situate the poem historically is by Fender. Among notable claims for the poem, see Gelpi, who calls it Lowell's "best poem" (61), and Hass, who praises its "originality and grandeur" (66).

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