

NINE POEMS BY DALE RITTERBUSCH

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*When it's Late*

Sometimes, when it's late  
and the house is asleep  
except for me  
pacing from room to room,  
I walk to the backyard,  
look out across the ground  
lit only  
by a distant streetlamp.

I remember nights  
in some Asian bar  
drinking a few exotic beers  
that sweat quickly  
through the khaki's  
heavy starch:

We'd walk out late  
go back to the base  
sleep off as much  
of the war as we could.

When you were killed  
I drank for days,  
made love until I  
couldn't recall  
anything but the hot  
sun, the red dust  
rising.

Now, this late  
under the circling stars  
I see you walking  
in the shadows  
of these trees  
sheltering  
the backyard playthings  
of my daughter:  
you pick them up—  
they are your daughter's  
your son's  
you have a wife  
sleeping,  
dreaming through  
the rest of her life  
with you: It is  
this love I see  
lost in the shadows  
of this night, my mind turning back  
with the chill  
of late spring.

This is the loss, the love  
I bury each night in the shadows,  
turning a spadeful of war  
over and over, and always,  
in the vigilant spin of this earth  
digging it up before morning.

—from *Lessons Learned*

## *Shoulders*

*for CPT Paul Bowman, KIA VN, 1969*

Before you went  
we sat at the bar in the Officers' Club  
and drank and talked—you said the EOD  
course wasn't challenging enough, the war  
was going badly, many mistakes were being made.  
We talked of tactics till our minds wore out  
and then of women—not breasts or legs—not  
the common concerns of those lieutenants  
sitting over there eyeing that pretty waitress.  
We talked of shoulders  
and the smooth line that went down the eye  
the way that last farewell liqueur  
went down our throats. Then two week later  
you were dead—a letter said it all.  
I've hated mail the long years since.  
I still love a woman's shoulders—  
I watch them always, always;  
and some nights when I lie with my wife,  
I curl my hands around her shoulders and pull tight—  
and see your hands, your heart and lung all shot away,  
and somewhere, shoulders, shivering.

—from *Lessons Learned*

*The Right Thing to Do:  
Misocz, Ukraine, 1942*

Even the corpse has its own beauty.

—Emerson

She was beautiful  
And when all the others were told  
To strip  
At the uneven edge of an ugly cut in the ground,  
She pleaded, top button undone, throat open  
To the gray wind: others huddled covering the shame  
Of a common death, covering bodies unconcerned  
With their nakedness, more concerned with gray skies  
Blending to black on the horizon, gun barrel black,  
Although they couldn't have noticed.

It seemed right not to shoot her  
As firing began down at the other end:  
Surprisingly, screams were few,  
Cries stifled by more than wind.  
In war no corpse is beautiful.  
At home a natural death,  
A death of age, of a body worn out of its soul,  
Seems right, evenly just, and what is right  
Seems beautiful.

It seemed right not to shoot her  
As bodies fell into the gouged eye of earth,  
Seemed right to let this one  
Who in any other time  
Might have been...  
The young man didn't let himself think further—  
He told her to go on.

She walked away; her eyes thanked him; there was a prayer  
In her eyes as gunfire convulsed the air next to him,  
Leaving a high pitched whine, like that of a machine,  
Ringing in his ears.

The soldier watched her walk away,  
Watched her until all firing was done,  
All movement stopped except chains of clouds  
Tightening across the sky.

He shot her, aiming for the middle of her back,  
Left her where she fell, wind  
Whipping hair  
Across her beautiful face.

—from *Lessons Learned*

## *Night Vision*

If you stare too long at anything in the dark,  
You'll see whatever your imagination desires.

—Army training principle

She wants to talk about love,  
but I tell her to aim a little lower,  
off center, as if love were the target  
at night, and in the black  
evenness melting before her eyes,  
to look away, indirectly, to see  
what's out there more distinctly,  
then aim into the dark  
catching the form as it moves  
from the corner of her eye,  
out of range, out of sight as she fires,  
muzzle flash blinding her heart,  
barrel warm as the touch of my hand  
on her cheek, comfortable as the polished  
stock pressed into her shoulder.

—from *Far from the Temple of Heaven*

## *Combat Fatigue*

Newspaper news in the morning  
and no one has done anything  
over night, even on the other side  
of the world where it was day  
and a good one at that judging  
from the weather map. Strong coffee  
and I'm ready for anything—kids off  
to school, wife to the grocery,  
and I'm ready, not even nine o'clock  
and I could knock off any hardship,  
any evil, scourge any malevolent foe,  
but the sun burns brightly, the breeze  
sweet, languorous, not a quarrel  
to be found. I burn for rebellion,  
hate mail, a frivolous lawsuit,  
an auto accident out front,  
an adulterous wife—  
if only I could suspect an affair—  
a stolen hour here and there  
rapt in the glow of forbidden love,

but if I went to the store, there she'd be  
comparing prices in aisle three,  
a wifely look on her face, protecting  
the family budget. Even the neighbor  
waves a friendly hand as I stand  
on the back porch looking for evidence  
of any trespass, not even a rabbit  
has purloined a daisy, ravaged a radish;  
there is nothing out of place. I whack  
a few flies as the sun crawls overhead;  
my vigilance weakens: time  
to change the guard, curl up with the cat  
and take a long battle-weary nap  
to maintain my state of combat readiness  
when I wake, the enemy, even now,  
regrouping beyond the fence line.

—from *Far from the Temple of Heaven*



## *A Species of History*

Hours move cautiously  
crouching in shadows, hiding in doorways.  
One lie after another looks out from behind  
a yellowed curtain. All the map pins  
have sheltered underground. This is the end  
of time as we remembered; the earth  
wobbles to a still moment poised  
like a tropical bird in winter escaped  
and preening on a wire: it has no word  
for cold, the chill beneath its plumage.  
One man raises his hand to another  
and another, every sign, every symbol  
subject to translation: the translations  
always wrong. Friend and foe alike  
trust no one, not even themselves.

Every glance is furtive, every word  
cuts to the bone. We hunch our shoulders  
into our coats, walk a quiet measure  
through our time. The walls of the city  
blossom above our heads.  
We are all armed and dangerous.

—from *Far from the Temple of Heaven*

## *Dragon*

My daughter says *Stop it Dragon*  
as the creature breathes fire and smoke,  
hisses and growls, menacing  
a frightened young girl on T.V.

I turn the channel—there was no dragon  
in this children's tale when I read it—  
as if there weren't enough things to be afraid of

I'm still afraid.  
I can feel the change, the loss  
of direction and control.  
She wakes in the night, says *Stop it!*

I can't stop it: overhead the dragon,  
the child protector, carved  
from teak, painted red and gold, its wings  
tipped with flat-black green  
moves imperceptibly above her bed.

I say there are good dragons and  
bad dragons—most of them are good,  
a Zoroastrian or Manichaean division  
that convinces me only of the neat  
divisions we make of everything—  
one of many lies I tell daily to get by.

The daily lie—what falsehood, what  
idiot half-truth will I tell next  
as I explain the world?  
How can I say *Stop it!* to the next lie  
burning inside, breathing fire and smoke

Even in the year of the monkey,  
it is the year  
of the dragon.

—from *Far from the Temple of Heaven*

*Air Force Academy Orientation, July 2004*

Today in a class on ethics,  
the Colonel proposes the eternal  
question, *Do you engage the enemy  
knowing innocents will be killed?*

It is a simple exercise  
based on official memoranda  
from WW II, an either/or proposition,  
something we've seen  
a thousand times before.

So the response is predictable—  
*No*, says a woman who would  
always argue against killing, and *Yes*  
says the Major who believes the objective  
is worth the cost, collateral damage  
acceptable, within acceptable moral parameters.

I have no parameters, however, and refuse  
to play, remembering once and again  
the traditional argument played out in the dorm,  
proposed by the student who read Nietzsche  
for fun, *Who or what would you save, in a great  
conflagration, and you can save only one,  
a man or an extraordinary painting,*

*A work of genius, say, perhaps the Mona Lisa,  
a painting worth millions to the world,  
inscrutable smile notwithstanding?,  
and the skeptics ask, Is it a young man or old?  
implying an old man's life is worth little,  
having been already consumed by the flames  
of his youth, his chances at love, his error.*

And what if the painting were the ruins  
of De Chirico, a painting barely recognized  
outside the secular world of art, or a block diagram  
colored in by Mondrian, easily duplicated,  
like a coloring book, the rule being  
stay within the lines

Yet the lines of this argument extend  
past my years in the classroom,  
the smelter of reason where  
I've learned a logician's excitement  
dissipates in bipolar regions of the heart,  
years exploding like madness,  
a merciful ending neither desired nor deserved.

I can think of no one innocent, no one  
even in childhood—cruelty just part of the game:  
*teacher's pet; wuss'y boy; don't even think  
about it or I'll kill you, you dumb  
fuck*—innocent? a twelve year old  
discovering *Life's* pictorial history  
of the war, the book we grew up with,  
a soldier shot in the head,  
this one moment on the balcony  
of life and the next, blood pools  
from his brain—knowledge  
is ignorance, innocence is experience

Maybe, I say, I wouldn't save anyone:  
let all the color of the paint rise into the sky  
and return as a rainbow of ash the next day,  
another layer of earth  
to cover our earnest, unregrettable folly  
putting to rest our triumphant joy  
even as we live  
consumed  
by such fabled innocence.

## *The Torturer's Apprentice*

I have learned silence  
as a weapon,  
personal, the trigger  
of my command

It is, perhaps, all that I've learned  
and, still, I am not left alone;  
always some dirty faced  
beggar holds out his palm  
excoriating my refusal

*I have that right* I tell myself  
*I have that responsibility*

It is the responsibility of withdrawal,  
of cowardice, a retrograde movement  
filmed in shame as I turn  
the torturer's tables

I could retreat into love, solace,  
a fine Medoc, a Cohiba that costs  
a year's pay in some tropical,  
infested paradise

I should be dead by now  
hanged as a revolutionary conscience

I abhor God's love  
of misery yet embrace it  
as my last lover—

She strips so beautifully  
I lie with her in awe  
of such majestic power:  
the death of a thousand cuts  
is an art and those who tell me this  
believe it, a monk's holy creed

When I am spent, she dresses;  
blood and semen washed away—  
a tray of surgical instruments  
awaits the next seduction

I am as free as the torturer's apprentice,  
goodness and mercy expended, the tongue  
silenced, the devil's whore at my throat



JACKSON A. NIDAY, II

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*Democracy and Literature:  
A Conversation with  
Dale Ritterbusch*

**D**ALE RITTERBUSCH IS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH in the Department of Languages & Literatures at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. His poetry collection *Lessons Learned*, centered on the Vietnam War and its aftermath, won the 1996 Council for Wisconsin Writers' Posner Award, a prize given to a Wisconsin author for the finest book of poetry written the previous year. His second poetry collection *Far From the Temple of Heaven* was published in 2005 by Black Moss Press. His poetry has received a number of prizes and awards over the years and his work has been discussed in various articles, books, and conference presentations.

Professor Ritterbusch's creative work has appeared in such anthologies as *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*; *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems*; *From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*; *American War Poetry*; *Old Glory: American War Poems from the Revolutionary War to the War on Terrorism*; *Smaller than God*; *Body Language*; and *Line Drives: 100 Contemporary Baseball Poems*. Additionally, his poems have appeared in numerous periodicals, including *Viet Nam Generation Journal*; *The American Journal of Poetry*; *Elysian Fields Quarterly: The Baseball Review*; *South Boston Literary Gazette*; *Kennesaw Review*; *Rockhurst Review*; *Americas Review*; *Rattle*; *Aetblon: The Journal of Sport Literature*; *Windsor Review*; *Wisconsin Review*, and *War, Literature & the Arts*, where he is a contributing editor. The Wisconsin Arts Board awarded him an artist's fellowship for 1997.

Dale Ritterbusch served in the United States Army from April 1966 until August 1969. He left college, enlisted, and received a commission from the Infantry School at Fort Benning. He served initially as training officer before being assigned to the technical Escort Center at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland. His primary responsibility involved escorting hazardous munitions, primarily chemical weapons, from various arsenals to disposal sites. In addition, he served as an escort officer for classified shipments of weapons systems designed for use in Vietnam. As a liaison officer attached to JUSMAAG/MACTHAI he was responsible for coordinating shipments of aerial mines used for dispersal along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other infiltration routes. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and a fine arts degree from Bowling Green State University. During the academic year 2004-05, Ritterbusch served as Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy. He is currently at work on a book about the history of war poetry. This interview was conducted in 2006.

**WLA:** Dale, rather than easing in I'd like to jump headlong into our discussion. May we start with a far-reaching question? How has war poetry changed across the millennia?

**Ritterbusch:** The cultural history of western civilization provides evidence of a long and venerable tradition of writing about war. And further examination reveals that modern literature has been profoundly and directly changed by the literary response to perpetual war, but just as assuredly one finds that this literature has been, to a large extent, ignored by the academic world. One could attend virtually any major American university and not ever be able to study war literature, as a separate entity, a distinctive genre. And this myopic condition persists despite Dante's assertion that the proper subjects of poetry are love, war, and moral virtue. So, among a knowledgeable few this literature is important and compelling, but for others it is comfortably marginalized. As an example, many years ago I had as a colleague an exchange professor from Sweden; he had written a book on Wilfred Owen's poetry and yet no one else among the faculty in my department knew of this; he kept it quiet, in effect acknowledging our American academic prejudice. So why does the academic community refuse to recognize war literature as a legitimate area of study? At a time when we are trying to be as inclusive as possible in so many other respects, why is war literature excluded?

Ever since Homer, our literature has, with great frequency, engaged the nature of war, in effect reflecting on the human condition, our very nature as a species. There have been, of course, a number of periods of retrenchment, times when the literature is propagandistic or otherwise disingenuous as with Tennyson's poem of the Crimean War, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." That sort of poem, written from a distanced perspective, belongs in the annals of children's literature. It ignores the actual history of the charge, glorifying the expenditure, the waste, of lives in a foolish mistake. From a literary perspective the poem is of little consequence; from a psychological perspective it tells us the lengths we will go to in order to justify our ignominious actions, our need to make even our failures heroic.

**WLA:** So, generally speaking, there has been a trend toward achieving an authenticity—a realism—from war poets, but it sounds like that gritty realism has been masked by political and cultural forces. How did WWI affect war literature?

**Ritterbusch:** The literary response to WWI was transformative, but it would be irresponsible not to note that the American Civil War, perhaps the first real modern war, produced as well some remarkable literature, poetry by Melville and Whitman, for example. But that war did not consume the attention of the world, and therefore its literary influence was minimal. So it really isn't until WWI that we get this striking body of literature consistent with what started with Homer. Of course, WWI initially created a poetry that's largely consumed by a sentimental patriotism, much like that of Tennyson's. For example, Thomas Hardy's poems written in response to WWI are—unlike his novels—unpossessed of the gritty realism found there; his poems are distanced, physically and intellectually. The philosophic ideas are, I suppose, responsibly projected there, but the poetry is comparatively weak. I'm referring to such poems as "The Man He Killed" and "Channel Firing"; the Hardy poems then are a bit closer to "Light Brigade" than to *The Iliad*, Tennyson being the benchmark of disingenuousness, both in language and idea. Even those poets in the military relied on an ideology, a chauvinism, to write of their experience—poets like Rupert Brooke, John McCrae, and Alan Seeger. But as we know, after the Battle of the Somme, in July of 1916, everything changes. There are a number of things that are responsible for this new, authentic literature emerging.

One, of course, is that you have educated people in the military; no longer is the army comprised of traditional personnel; manpower requirements, because of attrition, were too great so the ranks were filled with men from entirely different social and economic backgrounds. They recorded the war directly from their experience, not filtered through a particular set of ideological lenses. The perspective from the trenches, the proximity, changed things. From that point we no longer have a distanced perspective. More than that we have a perceptual shift from looking skyward, noting the skylarks as a symbol of Georgian, pastoral rectitude; now the focus is on the rats in the slime of the trenches, gnawing on the decayed flesh of one's fellow, fallen combatants. Along with this perceptual shift is an awareness that the aesthetic needed to change as well. Combine these factors with the disturbing recognition that the public was being manipulated, lied to by the powers that be—politicians, priests and journalists—and you create an understanding that graphic or documentary realism is the best approach to an artistic recreation of the war's experience. And so we have a body of brilliant poetry created, poetry that effectively changed the course of literary history.

**WLA:** I would think writers could be either extremely excited or extremely frustrated in times when worldviews are undergoing complete transformations. Is there any evidence that the WWI poets were particularly exhilarated or distraught?

**Ritterbusch:** Oral histories record the curious anomaly of soldiers actually desiring to return to the front after a period of rest back home. Think about that for a moment. Because soldiers could not handle the response of the civilian population they actually desired to go back to the trenches. They'd rather face death than have to deal with the banality of the civilian mindset. Civilians simply would not in any responsible way grapple with the horrific trench experience—the experience that in large measure defines combat in WWI. What transpires is a shift in consciousness, a transformation, resulting from the revelatory understanding, experientially based, provided by the trench poets. A poem like Sassoon's "Blighters" would have been unthinkable in earlier wars; he actually postulates the idea of turning the guns on the people back home, people willfully ignorant of what was taking place on the Western Front.

**WLA:** You're saying they were just getting a start, correct? I mean, the civilians were still held captive by the illusions of political leaders and the media, weren't they?

**Ritterbusch:** Yes, the shift requires, perhaps, more time than we've had—witness current attitudes and manipulative explanations applied to our current war. But there is an extraordinary shift in literary consciousness that comes out of this. Within the confines of the university we've lost awareness of that shift. Today people teach "The Wasteland," which is the poem that defines the advent of modernism, outside the context of WWI. That is, from the standpoint of literary history, irresponsible. The revelatory nature of trench poetry involves a repudiation of the old lies and an embrace of a new understanding; in addition, there is a realization that arguments from authority are often invalid—hence a healthy skepticism is warranted.

**WLA:** Did trench poetry's influence extend beyond its immediate subject and audience?

**Ritterbusch:** The entire course of modern literature is changed by the trench poets. What you end up with is something that might be defined as anti-poetry. When Sassoon and Owen write their poems, they use a language that is essentially anti-poetic. What they do is imitate the harsh sounds of the battlefield. For example, there are ugly "gee" sounds and "uh" sounds. The shortened plosives and gutturals proliferate. These sounds, which poets would not employ if they were trying to write something lyrically beautiful, help create a realistic representation of war. Those poems, despite Sassoon's reliance on the traditional form of the lyric, are ultimately working against the artistic tradition—because of the language that's used, because of the images that are created. Sassoon's lines where he describes naked sodden buttocks as part of the landscape, Owen's lines in "Dulce," about the blood gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs—those are disturbing images, not the traditional images nor the traditional language of lyrical poetry. Sassoon undercuts the entire tradition by using a lyrical form but containing within it sentiments that are anti-lyrical, anti-poetic. The language, the imagery, the sentiments, the philosophy, the descriptions of the experience itself are very much counter to what people expect in poetry. In Western civilization we separate poetry from the other genres by expecting an elevated

language in our poetry. We expect it to deal with things that are, if you'll forgive the expression, pretty, in effect an aesthetic embellishment of life, like the painting over the sofa that matches the color of the carpet, the fabric of the couch, rather than a work of art that engages our fundamental life experiences. Trench poems don't conform to that aesthetic and their influence is either disavowed or ignored. The ethos changed, the language changed, and it became acceptable, on the part of poets who did not have the experience of WWI, to write about things that were previously impermissible.

**WLA:** Where do we place the blame for this sort of ignorance?

**Ritterbusch:** It is the responsibility of everyone, whatever educational curriculum that individual has endured, to make up for his deficiencies. Merely because a professor ignores the most significant elements of our cultural tradition does not mean that a student should not recognize blind spots and, ultimately, make up for them. The play *Wit* by Margaret Edsen, for example, has this situation where a literature professor has been diagnosed with a pernicious form of cancer. She's a Donne scholar. She's achieved a great deal of renown for her ability to penetrate the religious lyrics of John Donne. But, when a student comes up to her after class, and asks for an extension of the due date for his paper, she says, "Don't tell me, your grandmother died." And he says, "Yes, how did you know?" She, of course, has heard this before, but in this case, the student's grandmother actually has died. And she says, "Nevertheless, the paper's due when it's due." The lesson here is that one can be a Donne scholar without understanding anything of Donne. The character, the professor, knows the religious poetry, but the poetry of Donne that develops a great human empathetic understanding is beyond her. She would not know that John Donne had written this brilliant poem, "Burned Ship," a remarkable piece that should be a part of every English major's education. This is a war poem based on Donne's military experience, personal history unacknowledged or unknown by many students of literature; blind spots like this are common. This professor's knowledge of WWI poetry would go no further than "Dulce," in the same way that people today would not know anything of the literature that comes out of WWII, other than Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." College literature texts include only one poem from WWI, one poem from WWII, nothing from Vietnam, generally.

When you have literature that goes back a couple thousand years it's curious to realize that we don't want to recognize the strengths of that literature. It's not as if war is an aberration.

**WLA:** A lot of poetry books are sold today. If I go to a bookstore downtown and pick one of those books to teach my class, what should I tell my students when they ask how to tell a good poem from a bad poem?

**Ritterbusch:** Poetry is taught at the very earliest stages of one's educational career. Most often, what happens is that the initial interest in poetry engendered by schoolyard rhymes is dispelled by the academic experience because it's taught that this initial pleasure is not acceptable. Having that joy, that excitement, of reciting rhymes on the playground, is not serious enough for the educational establishment. Oddly enough, what they want instead is to provide pabulum to their students, material that is absolutely inoffensive.

**WLA:** Okay. Poetry should appeal to youthful, maybe I should say "primal," delight. What else distinguishes the good from the bad poem?

**Ritterbusch:** What you need is some material that is absolutely vital, material that has something to do with the experience of the person reading it. If the poetry does not engage the reader, if it is totally disconnected from anything in the known universe, it is not worth reading. If the poem does not insightfully engage some aspect of human experience, there is no reason for anyone to read it. It's easy to construct poems that are impenetrable. Anyone can do this. Somehow, "impenetrable" has become the hallmark of poetry, at least in certain quarters. And when that's not the case, the poetry represents some particular aestheticism. We would never consider "impenetrable" the cardinal element in any other art form. When you look at a painting you have a visceral response to it. You don't intellectualize it initially. If you do you're going about it the wrong way. The same is true of any musical performance. When you listen to rock or classical music, you respond without reasoned analysis; your response is sensory. And poetry should in some measure work the same way. When my daughter was young, I would read A. A. Milne's poem "Disobedience" to her. It was a favorite of mine and became a favorite of hers. So when she was given an assignment to memorize and recite a poem before her honors English class, she chose "Disobedience," but the teacher—simply

responding to the title—felt that this was a case where the student was not taking the assignment seriously and was being disrespectful. This poem is about a little boy, a very serious-minded little boy who cautions his mother: the poem begins with these lines: “James James / Morrison Morrison / Weatherby George Dupree / Took great / Care of his Mother, / Though he was only three.” Because he was responsible, he says to his mother, “Mother you must never go down to the end of the town, / if you don’t go down with me.” Of course, the mother violates this rule. She goes down to the end of the town where she’s never heard of again. The poem involves a simple reversal. The child is more responsible than the parent—a good lesson because adults are not always well behaved. Children should know that just because someone is older, that older person is not necessarily going to behave responsibly. The teacher responded to this poem by saying she believed that James James Morrison Morrison really wanted his mother to disappear. There’s no evidence whatsoever supporting that claim in the poem; the teacher was incapable of responding to a simple poem written for children. That would be probably the case with a vast majority of high school English teachers. In the end, the purpose of high school English is to make students dislike poetry. As far as developing some sort of apparatus that allows one to differentiate bad poetry from good poetry, we have to contend with various strong cultural prejudices. For example, in the United States, poetry and politics are not supposed to mix. If you have someone like the Nobel prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz saying that poetry is “the most expressive voice of freedom,” well, this is an idea that is absolutely foreign to our educational experience. We want poetry that is ornamentation. It’s a polite embroidery, and nothing else. We want poetry that is the equivalent of our statues in the park: a-general-on-a-horse. We would prefer that our poets not prick our consciences.

**WLA:** Okay, I think you’ve given us some criteria to help us cull bad poetry. Now, what about good poetry?

**Ritterbusch:** Simple. A poem is good if it reaches an audience. But a sophisticated audience. An audience that wants, in some measure to be, shall we say, enlightened by it. A bit of insight from fellow human beings whose experience resonates within them. If a poem does not reach the reader, it’s not doing what it’s supposed to do. We have before



us the great models of extraordinary world literature that engage an audience generation after generation. And we're all drawn to this because we have some basic recognition there that we are given an extraordinary experience. I mean that the reading of literature is experiential. It's not that we're engaged in some sort of vicarious sort of enterprise, but that we're actually having an experience in itself. There are studies showing that stimulation from music actually causes the brain to develop. What I'm suggesting with the experience of literature is something like that. Literature and poetry give people a core experience, which changes them in an organic way.

**WLA:** If we go into the classroom, and I have a degree in communication, not literature, what would you recommend for me to do this job well, if I'm going to try to teach something like "The Wasteland"?

**Ritterbusch:** First of all, what's required is an intelligence that is in some measure affected by particular works of poetry. If literature does not create some kind of resonance within yourself, if you don't respond to it with enthusiasm and excitement, how could you expect your students to respond? I conduct a creative writing program where I have all of these high school teachers coming on campus for a day. We have more than a hundred workshops for students and teachers to take part in. It is not easy to teach poetry to high-schoolers or college students for that matter. They are quite resistant to this part of the curriculum. I encourage teachers to group poems together by theme so students can look at a number of diverse perspectives on the same theme or subject. One can pull together a number of baseball poems. Or love poems. Or war poems. Any way one likes to collectively categorize things. Generally, students do respond well to poetry that deals with war; they have an understanding that literature dealing with this theme is important, perhaps because it touches on their family history or because it contains an immediacy, a version of the truth that is not found in their history texts. Once I read to a group of high school teachers this poem by Larry Rottman entitled "APO 96225," which deals with a young man who is writing home obliquely about his experience in Vietnam. He isn't giving all the details of his daily experience. The parents write back wanting to know what it's like. When he does tell them what it's like, the father writes back and says, "Please don't / write such depressing letters. You're upsetting / your mother." When I read this poem to

this group of high school teachers, a woman in the front row said, “I could get fired for teaching such a poem.” Rottman’s poem has no profanity. It doesn’t describe in any ghoulish detail the experiences that this young man is having in Vietnam. It’s just a distanced retelling that informs us that people really do not want to know. But, we have several things working here. One is the notion that people don’t want to know, that they are unwilling to learn. Second, they might as well be watching the Hollywood movies that come out of the Second World War where they’re almost bloodless and never is anyone psychologically damaged. And, weirdly enough, getting chastised for telling the truth is now as much a part of the American experience as apple pie or baseball.

**WLA:** Is there a chicken-and-egg question here? Do people not want to hear war poetry because they lack the constitution? Or do they lack the interest, the awareness, the ability to engage, because they have not been prepared for it because they were so protected.

**Ritterbusch:** I think both. I think people are very much formed by the prejudices that come into play. It’s easy with an all-voluntary military to escape any real understanding. Most Americans can remain untouched by war, engaged by such popular culture pursuits as who’s going to win the latest American Idol competition. Essentially the mainstream culture prevents us from seeing any of the effects of war. People are able to live very sheltered lives. If we look at literature as being something that is not supposed to disturb us or to make us sit up and take notice, then we have sold out literature. And if we consign ourselves to the role of being complicit with any argument from authority we deny our basic responsibilities in a democracy. Democracy and literature go hand in hand

**WLA:** What does the study of poetry add to a military career?

**Ritterbusch:** Apart from the obvious connections to war literature what we have with poetry is an emphasis on the human experience. What differentiates us from other species in large measure is our ability to tell stories, to recreate the events that make our lives memorable, meaningful, and without that we really don’t have much that separates us from other species. General Douglas MacArthur said the primary responsibility of the soldier was to protect the weak;

there was no higher responsibility. Literature inculcates such humane values. Because the military is engaged in creating history, the responsibility of those wearing a uniform would be to record their stories, their personal histories, presenting those lessons learned that can be passed on to subsequent generations. We are mythmakers, storytellers. Our stories make us human and literature reifies our experience and legitimizes what we do. Of what value is the study of literature? For someone in the military the answer is almost the same as it would be for anyone else. The answer is that it tells us something about our past, something about why we are here. It explains what we do, and why we do what we do. With literature, with art in general, you end up with an exposition of values. And it is these values that define us as human beings, individually and collectively. If you want to explore the moral parameters of certain military engagements, where are you going to go? And the answer is “To the literature—the diaries, novels, memoirs, and poetry.” When I talk about values in poetry and literature, what we’re really engaged in here is a form of moral discourse. For the most part, official histories do not engage in any form of moral discourse. They’re very much either above it, or oblivious to it, or, again, because of the big picture perspective, disinterested in it. Wars present a number of disparate moral problems. The one place you can get some contention with those problems is in the literature.

**WLA:** Does literature merely grant readers an understanding in terms of awareness, or does it provide a pragmatic understanding of moral problems—how to face them, what to do with them?

**Ritterbusch:** One of the great things about teaching war literature at the Air Force Academy is having cadets contend with this material for the first time. They respond in exactly the way I think writers would want an audience to respond. They are engaged with it because they recognize its importance. This literature has an immediate impact upon their understanding; cadets visibly winced when I read them some of the WWI poetry; we learn by having the stories of others placed before us, serving as a model, a means of measuring our own conduct.

**WLA:** You’ve given us a conundrum. On one hand, the institutions surrounding and perpetuating war are disingenuous; on the other,

literature allows its students a genuine engagement with truth. What does a cadet gain by embracing truth if the institutions are disingenuous?

**Ritterbusch:** Tough question. If they're having difficulty making sense of a certain experience, literature may help. For example, let's consider a moral conundrum. George Kennan's containment policy worked effectively for half a century. Then, we suddenly obliterate that political understanding. We decide that pre-emptive strikes are warranted, even mandated. What does this do to one's moral understanding? If one believes the military should be used primarily as a defensive organization, if one has to embrace a philosophy that one disagrees with, how is one going to handle that? The literature of war, especially that of the twentieth century, forces the reader to contend with ethical determinations of great consequence. Because there is a literary record of moral engagement, one can learn and apply the lesson to complex matters presented in subsequent situations. Could one know the Hugh Thompson story and not be affected by it or not consider the application of his moral authority to similar situations?

**WLA:** We started by asking about the quality of good poetry, and you told us some ways to recognize it. Let's look at the problem from another perspective. How do poems fail? You seem to be saying more than that poetry can fail. You seem to say that when poetry fails, it does something pernicious.

**Ritterbusch:** I am saying that actually. Yes. Ken Kesey said, in response to the failure of sixties activism that no one ever believed that there were that many stupid people in the world. In large measure he was right on that point. For the most part people seem not to have the capacity to critically examine primary issues before them. They've abdicated those responsibilities, handing them over to people in power to make those decisions for them, completely divorcing themselves from their democratic responsibility to grapple with these problems.

**WLA:** So bad poetry is an escape from one's responsibilities?

**Ritterbusch:** Absolutely.

**WLA:** Care to speculate on the future? What's going to happen now? What kind of literature are we going to get out of the experience of war in Afghanistan and Iraq—especially if the war continues for a long time, especially in light of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay?

**Ritterbusch:** Well. What's interesting about that is of course the moral arguments that have been tossed out. People are ignoring history or deliberately misreading it. They're dismissing the evidence of the Milgram experiment, the Stanford prison experiment, the military experiments where military personnel, asked to role play, abused one another. In one case, an MP playing the role of prisoner was beaten to the point where he lost brain function. When people were defending the behavior in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, I said that it violated the Geneva Accords, that it was going to be counterproductive. It had proven counterproductive in the past. Look at the PW experience in Hanoi. In Iraq we are seeing instances in which civilians, including coalition contractors, are taken prisoner. How can we expect that they will be treated humanely if the enemy has in front of them the abuses of Abu Ghraib? We are seeing intellectual defenses of torture, knowing that, in the past, we have hanged authorities for their abuses of prisoners. We executed approximately one thousand Japanese, in 1946 I believe, for such abuses. And now we're saying that we should not be held to a higher standard? You won't find these discussions in our newspapers, in our press briefings. You would perhaps find these in our poetry.

**WLA:** I have a question about your first book, *Lessons Learned*. I'd like to ask for an apologia from you for the book's opening quote from Macbeth: "Be this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it" (Malcolm, Macbeth IV.iii.228-229).

**Ritterbusch:** Yes! Self-explanatory.

**WLA:** Well, I suppose. But, we've got the whole context of Malcolm's quote in Macbeth's play. I guess what I want to pursue here is the nature of anger or rage and its role in your work. I think that there are variations, different kinds of anger, different kinds of rage. Of the many kinds, which did you have in mind?

**Ritterbusch:** We should think about this in terms of Siegfried Sassoon's belief that what he wanted to do was to disturb complacency. It was a very profound belief on his part. He does not want the story to be sanitized. He does not want the civilian world, the political world, to go on oblivious to what is transpiring on the Western front. With Sassoon and some of the other WWI poets there is an impetus to instruct. Anger, transformed into art, is a useful tool; if we are not angered by much of what takes place in the world, our avoidance of responsibility in Rwanda, Darfur, the Balkans, we are merely creating arguments in defense of the indefensible. The only responsible reply to such barbarism is to insist, in a rather enraged fashion, that it will not stand, that the injustice, the genocide, must stop, that we must intervene on moral, humanitarian grounds, even if our national interest is not at stake. Of course, there is a weird naïveté in that understanding—that it will be possible to prevent such barbarities from occurring in the future. That will never be the case. And this is consistent with what we have been talking about previously, the relegation of war literature to a position of secondary or tertiary importance. Consider Vonnegut's idea in *Slaughterhouse Five* that in writing an anti-war novel you might as well attempt to write an anti-glacier novel. You can't stop war or its horrific repercussions. But, the fact is that if we don't attempt to educate people on what these repercussions are, both on the individual combatant and society generally, it becomes easier and easier to perpetuate. Ernst Friedrich's photographic compendium, *War Against War*, contained pictures of men horribly mutilated in WWI; his intent was to reveal graphic evidence to persuade against the future conduct of wars. His argument was effectual, but limited. As is the case with our poetry, the argument fails, but that should not serve as justification for not continuing the dialectic.

**WLA:** Has that tendency to shelter people from the horrors changed over time?

**Ritterbusch:** It's changed more so now that we have tried to sanitize not just the telling of war but also war itself. We don't get the disturbing photographs. We don't get any of the documentary evidence. We just put silly yellow stickers on our cars and say, "Support our troops." Literature serves a darker function but a higher purpose. It really is to a certain extent a coercive instrument of education, attempting

to prick the conscience, so that there will be a few people who will say, "Look, this is not a conscionable thing to do." And they will not willingly again jump upon the proposition that war is the only course of action. The quote that I have there at the beginning of *Lessons Learned*, from Macbeth, is consistent with the propositions expressed by poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney, Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg and so forth. Remember, as well, the first word of the *Iliad* is translated as "Rage." Raging at injustice is a virtue, I would argue, though I'm sure "nice" people would argue for restraint even in the face of so-called "ethnic cleansing," a repellent term that really means or defines genocide.

**WLA:** You just pointed to a rather evil paradox, didn't you? This is the state of man, and yet we are obliged to try to oppose it. Is that an accurate paraphrase?

**Ritterbusch:** Yes. I know that there are a goodly number of poets, and other writers, who are consumed by a particular aesthetic orientation. Poets believe, largely, that they should not be dealing with disturbing issues. They should not be dealing with experiences designed to make the reader feel uncomfortable. That is not a prejudice that you find inculcated in the mind of great novelists. So, the idea is then that we use this elevated language, and we deal with an elevated subject matter, something entirely removed from real world issues. There are a number of contemporary poets who will absolutely divorce themselves from material that they know will possibly alienate or irritate an audience. But, it is an exercise in venality to separate oneself from the political world in such a way that these subjects are not approached.

**WLA:** I want to look at this rage and anger in terms of how in your own poetry you've mixed various dimensions of human sexuality with the horrors of war. Let's look at a few lines from "When It's Late":  
When you were killed/ I drank for days, / made love until I / couldn't  
recall / anything but the hot / sun, the red dust / rising.

**Ritterbusch:** Well, certainly making love is an act of affirmation. You're in some measure cheating death every time that you make love—this is an extraordinary physical experience, and death by definition is of course the extinction of any physical experience. But, additionally,

this poem has something to do with forgetting. If we forget, we're doing something that's largely irresponsible. Although at the same time, if we don't forget, we are condemned to living in the past. Bill Ehrhart addresses this question in a poem entitled "The Invasion of Grenada" which ends with the lines, "What I wanted / was an end to monuments." Similarly, Sassoon's poem "On Passing the New Menin Gate" ends with lines that are abhorrent to those who find nobility in useless slaughter: Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime / Rise and deride this sepulcher of crime. Both Ehrhart and Sassoon recognize the lubricious nature of such monuments, monuments to our ignorance and willful misinterpretations of history. If there's one mission that I have, it's the idea of not separating the poetry of the Vietnam War from the war poetry of the Second World War or the poetry of the Korean War. It is as duplicitous to separate the Vietnam War poetry from the poetries of the other wars as it is to separate war poetry from the mainstream of literature. The point here is that Sassoon rails against this monument. He regards it with disdain, even disgust. It is an offense against all that he has written. One would think that he would celebrate the construction of this monument, its memorialization of all those who lost their lives in that war, perhaps thinking that it would serve as warning or admonition or redress. But looking at the conventional, even venal, architecture of this sculpture, the lions and the incorporation of an old discredited, political ethos, Sassoon finds it to be evidence that no one has learned anything, and the daily ritual of closing the gates every evening reflects the inability of people to understand; they still romanticize the loss, and the monument itself is possessed of such naïve romanticism; it is, in effect, a monument designed to commemorate future wars. No wonder Sassoon was disgusted. By constructing this monument, by celebrating what does not deserve celebration, one is complicit in the perpetuation of such follies, ensuring that the same tragedy will be repeated. Our politics and our poetry require a more honest approach. Yet we can employ a more contemporary, American example: the film *Saving Private Ryan*, a film designed to satisfy both the left and the right by burying Vietnam and the resultant cultural transformation. The film attempts to eclipse the history of the Vietnam War by superimposing a reevaluation of WWII—the good war, the war that gave us the "greatest generation." Any Vietnam veteran should find that a bit offensive. As should any Korean War veteran.



**WLA:** Tell us about the father in “Dragon.” Here we have a father comforting a daughter with what I’d call a “responsible lie”—soothing away a nightmare with a distinction between good and bad dragons. How does this plight of parenthood factor into the conundrums we’ve been discussing? If I can make my question clearer, how does art help us in distinguishing those times that lies make the world bearable from those times when lies make the world more deplorable? And can you shed some light on the poem’s last stanza: Even in the year of the monkey, / it is the year / of the dragon?

**Ritterbusch:** If I had an answer to the first part of your question, I’d know more than all the worthies know. But, hypothetically, consider the rationalizations, the compromises, one makes to live one’s daily life. For instance, I remember a number of career officers who disagreed with our involvement in Vietnam. Conversations on this disagreement were visibly painful. I had a cadet in a rhetoric course who disagreed with military policy on homosexuality; although this was supposed to be a closed subject, the cadet argued against the policy with conviction. Maybe we construct lies to protect us from ourselves; certainly we prevaricate to protect those we are close to. Regarding the second part of your question: on ancient maps, there was that uncharted sea where it was said, “Here there be dragons,” a warning not to voyage to those places. On the Chinese zodiac, years are assigned to various animals—even in a year supposedly benign, there is the need to have a dragon protector, in this case to protect the child, my daughter. Yet still there are dragons out there that offer no protection—instead they are the bearers or instruments of evil.

**WLA:** I’d like for you to comment on a specific dimension of your work—how you combine sexuality and sensuality with themes of death and the macabre, and all of that with the beautiful and the sublime in your work. Let’s start with “When It’s Late,” the first poem in *Lessons Learned*.

**Ritterbusch:** That poem embraces life in the face of death—making love endlessly is both literally and metaphorically an affirmation of life. Making love, to a certain extent, mitigates the knowledge that we are not going to be here for any great length of time. The act assuages the fact of our mortality, is essentially an encomium, even a celebration, of the death of someone who matters, someone whose death impacts

you greatly. It works, perhaps, as a reification of that person's life. That's what we see in the poem "Shoulders."

**WLA:** Yes, "Shoulders" was another favorite of mine.

**Ritterbusch:** That poem conjoins the act of making love with the recollection of a friend killed in Vietnam. The fact of this man's death forces one to embrace life with even more fervor—loss creating demands on those who survived.

**WLA:** The nuances of how you capture it in this poem are worth noting. We could stop at all the other body parts that one might expect a young man or an older man in wars to stop at, but we go to the shoulders, they become—I don't know if "erotic" is the word or if it's "sensual."

**Ritterbusch:** Probably both. I think that in our sexual educations we focus on the obvious body parts. What that does is deny one's pleasure in the entire humanity of the person one is in love with—that person's entire being. Our response to the world, our engagement with it, is sensuous—first the sensory stimulation, then the abstract understanding resulting from that perceptual stimulation. Our knowledge is fundamentally based in our physical experience of the world, and no more intensely so than in the art of making love. So, what we do with our pornographic orientation towards sex in this culture is to denigrate our humanity. Consider Wallace Stevens' idea that "the greatest sin is not to live in a physical world." I mean, we are here, pretty much, as a physical presence in a very physical world. And when this ends, the physicality disappears. To a certain extent, then, making love is ultimately like creating art. In fact, making love is very much an artistic experience. Both are of the most extraordinary sensual involvement. If you go into an art museum, and you don't respond physically, sensually, sensuously to a painting by Miro, for example, or Chagall, or Renoir, or anyone else that you might appreciate, you're missing it. You don't want to intellectualize this. You don't want to reduce it to just its technique or its various parts. To answer your question more directly, the relationship between Eros and Art is symbiotic, one deeply embedded in the other (please forgive the bad pun), but the sensory response to literature, to painting, sculpture, and music is as acutely intense as our sexual experiences.

**WLA:** Well, “Shoulders” seems to encompass various kinds of love. Do we rely too heavily on the one word “love” in the English language? I guess we have a couple different words, but people tend to use “love” to encompass a range of sentiments and emotions that other languages do with different words. In “Shoulders,” we’ve got the physical presence of the women in the poem, but the love that’s the focus of the poem seems to be very much between the two soldiers—the love between the two men who are brothers in arms.

**Ritterbusch:** And also there’s a sharing of this understanding. I mean they both appreciate women for something other than do men generally.

**WLA:** Can you extract that intimacy that we’ve looked at in “When it’s Late” and “Shoulders,” and discuss it in combination with this horrible thing you focus on in the “The Right Thing to Do?”

**Ritterbusch:** This poem has to do with WWII history, and readers have asked me why this poem is in a book centered on Vietnam. The obvious point is that separating one war out from the history of wars is intellectually irresponsible. There are such obvious connections to be made between one war and the next. And besides, aren’t the politics of the Second World War somewhat responsible for our involvement in Vietnam?

**WLA:** So the WWII poems tell us something about Vietnam. Can you comment on this passage: She was beautiful and when all the others were told to strip at / the uneven edge of an ugly cut in the ground, she pleaded, top button undone. Just that little exposure-and yet it transcends into a thing of extreme sensuality. “... throat open / To the gray wind: others huddled, covering the shame / Of a common death, covering bodies unconcerned / With their nakedness, more concerned with the gray skies”. This persona we finally focus on, the young soldier, is transfixed, enthralled in the male gaze, isn’t he? Then without any apparent cause, a switch flips, and he kills her. Who is this guy?

**Ritterbusch:** It could be any soldier.

**WLA:** That was a big statement you just said in a very few words.

**Ritterbusch:** Various philosophers of armed conflict have stated that war is innately immoral, that any soldier who lets that get in the way can't function effectively. So, if you have this admission, that the moral compass is to a certain extent destroyed, why wouldn't such a heinous act transpire, and transpire with great frequency? In this case, you could abstract any one of a number of defenses of this conduct, or misconduct. You could look at certain repercussions that would pertain if the soldier didn't obey his order to kill. And this is apart from the consideration of whether or not the order given was lawful. What if his superiors saw him letting this woman escape? He would be subjected to any one of a number of sanctions or punishments. But that consideration is at the most mundane level, the basest of possible explanations. What the poem considers is the psychological transformation, the shift from behaving humanely in accord with elements that define us or differentiate us from some rough beast, and, as well, from our elemental sexual and aesthetic imperatives. We could construct a culture within which proper conduct would be unthinkable and the reverse would also be possible. The questions you might ask are, "Does the soldier willingly kill? Is he even aware of the psycho-sexual nature of this act? Does he do this knowing that it's not the right thing to do?" However, there is so much more involved in this than simple stimulus/response equations. Consider the many contemporary instances in which we are supposed to make moral determinations in immoral circumstances. Think of the genocide in Rwanda; the officer in command of UN forces was told not to intervene even when men under his command were being barbarously butchered.

**WLA:** Ah! Now I understand the poem's title. "The Right Thing to Do" is no easy thing to know.

**Ritterbusch:** Look, we're faced with such problems in ethics on almost a daily basis, witness the news of what's taking place in Iraq, the conduct of small unit operations, house-to-house searches for insurgents and weapons. The Rules of Engagement necessarily inform ethical and moral determinants. Various courts-martial related to Abu Ghraib, to individuals charged with committing crimes in Iraq, are essentially arguments involving the ethical conduct of war. And these arguments are crucial to understanding who we are. This is one reason I embrace literature; it provides a venue, depoliticized in

a sense, for moral discourse. If we consider the response of certain individuals to Hugh Thompson's conduct at My Lai we find many who thought him to be a traitor, not a man committed to an ethical philosophy of war. I suspect I go to church with people in attendance who believe Hugh Thompson was the antichrist. One of the great things about teaching at the United States Air Force Academy is that cadets, generally, respond well to considerations of these ethical conundrums. One can discuss various just war theories and not meet with the usual resistance found in so many of the general population, people who readily accept arguments from authority and reject critical inquiries involving the application of just war theory. And as another example, I can have intelligent, honest, fruitful discussions on the treatment of enemy combatants, considered in the context of Stanley Milgram's famous experiment. That should not be, an anomaly, an aberration, anywhere in our society, but even on most university campuses such dialectic is not the norm. The first time I was here at the Academy, I participated in a conference devoted to ethics, war, and poetry. The idea behind the conference was that literature reflects on the moral considerations related to the conduct of war. One individual, rather much like General Curtis LeMay, said that all war is "amoral," and that's your essential starting point. Once you've made the decision to go to war, there is no morality attached to your conduct any longer. Remember that General LeMay said that if we hadn't won the war he would have been tried for war crimes—that's revelatory in the sense that he has assigned an "amoral" determinant to the rules of engagement he established. But there were officers and cadets at the conference who objected to that determination, that assessment, the idea that war is intrinsically immoral. I, as well, disagreed citing the example of a US Army officer in Haiti who was court-martialed for his intervention when he saw a civilian being beaten by a Haitian police officer. His orders were not to intervene. Had I been there instead I would like to think I would have done exactly the same thing, regardless of the repercussions. What was immoral was the law that said you don't intervene in circumstances or situations like that. The core of our moral precepts comes into play. Those core principles are there for a reason—they are not to be violated. Most of the fine poetry that comes out of the Vietnam War is concerned with such issues. The histories, the first-person accounts of those responsible for policy are disingenuous and self-serving. Largely, when they are not downright

duplicitous or mendacious, they are arguments in defense of the indefensible. My collection, *Lessons Learned*, as is the case with other Vietnam poetry, is an attempt to counter the official placating disinformation presented as pabulum to the public. Those on top create defenses of their own misconduct, and subsequently we are often misled—again, forgive the pun.

**WLA:** People in high places don't like to hear that.

**Ritterbusch:** No, but in a democracy one has the responsibility to resist such thinking, to resist accommodation with errant policy. One has the responsibility of opposition. No one gets away entirely clean from this. The process is messy. And merely voicing disagreement is not enough. One cannot rely on the comfort of having voiced a contrary opinion. Because the voicing of that opposition has no impact, one ultimately has to share responsibility for the course of action taken. Merely because one is not powerful enough to persuade others to adopt a variant position is not a legitimate excuse.

**WLA:** Do the arts have any remedy for this malady?

**Ritterbusch:** I'm not sure there is a remedy. It is like the character in a Clifford Odets play who says, "We do the best we can," and another character says in response, "Not good enough." But certainly art, because it engages crucial, elemental concerns essential to our awareness, presents a path that may lead to a modicum of understanding. Yet just as assuredly poetry does not achieve the aims set by Shelley—poets are not the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Poetry has been relegated to a position of lesser importance—at least in our culture—perhaps at the level of comic books. In our time we have similarly placed war literature in a pop culture genre. And who are we to blame for that except, again, teachers, professors, historians, all those who disseminate pseudo-knowledge and who place themselves above all of this? Maybe you remember the anecdote about Count Dracula. Someone visits the Count in his castle complaining to him of the stench outside because there are all these bodies on pikes and the odor is unbearable. Acknowledging his complaint, the count, with a bit of black humor, says, "Well, since you are above all this, what we will do is put you on a stake, at a higher level." So Dracula procures a much longer stake and impales him on it, far above the

offal smell. I suspect that there are probably a goodly number of teachers, professors, monks, chaplains, and priests, who are above our debate—or like to think that they are.

**WLA:** So, where they could help with these sorts of political problems, you're saying that they're washing their hands of it?

**Ritterbusch:** Yes. They won't admit they bear some responsibility for the things that take place in our democracy. They are above the fray, in effect saying, "I'm in a higher place. I'm teaching literature." Not accounting or management or anything else like that. Maybe this is the old argument of form over content in a sense. Let's live on the ethereal plane for a while—the "morality of altitude" perhaps. But in our culture it is necessary to conjoin politics and poetry. Otherwise, both become relics and artifice. We pretend to be better than we are and poetry works against this pretense, to keep us honest, or at least a bit more mindful of our hypocrisy. Does not anyone find it curious that the architects of the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq, Robert McNamara and Paul Wolfowitz, were both, on the basis of their failed policies, promoted to head the World Bank? A poet looks for such hideous irony. As did Sassoon in a poem that exposes a silly hypocrisy, analogous to the Catholic prohibition against shedding blood—so burning at the stake was an acceptable punishment consistent with this prohibition. Sassoon writes in "Asking For It":  
God of the dear old Mastodon's morasses / Whose love pervaded pre-diluvial mud, / Grant us the power to prove, by poison gases, / The needlessness of shedding human blood. I hope you're offended or your sensibility has been pricked since that's the poem's intent. In a democracy you have no right not to be offended. We have a duty and a responsibility to tell things honestly. But one cannot expect that any literature that comes out of any war is going to prevent any future wars. Perhaps all literature can do, ultimately, is warn. So things really haven't changed that much since Wilfred Owen admonished us in "Dulce Et Decorum Est" to end the old lie.

**WLA:** But if war robs us of beauty, goodness, and truth, isn't it natural for people to avoid dealing with it?

**Ritterbusch:** We have made it entirely too easy to avoid our democratic responsibilities. As part of the social framework we have the

expectation that our rights guaranteed by the Constitution will be perpetuated, and we have the concomitant obligation to insure that this is the case. We need to exercise those rights, for example the right to free speech, even when the conversation makes others uncomfortable. Acquiescence, obedience to a failed or errant policy, is not an exercise in responsibility. Kowtowing to higher authority is a debasement of the democratic process. Previously I alluded to the irresponsibility of journalists and politicians, of poets and citizens (those once referred to as the “silent majority”) who avoided any discussion of the dramatic shift from a policy of containment to one of preemption. This is merely one example of our collective irresponsibility, and, as far as I know, the containment policy applied to Iraq was working—hence no need to change the policy. We are, then, all to blame for our failure to engage in responsible debate on this point, and we must accept our role in creating the fallout that has ensued. Additionally, there is this extraordinary disconnect, an instance of cognitive dissonance, where a person’s ideas are often inconsistent with that individual’s behavior; for example, certain people in positions of great power and authority who support our war aims but found so many ways not to serve in Vietnam. I find this objectionable and unconscionable; Mark Twain would have had a field day exposing their hypocrisy. Since our writers have not effectively dealt with this, perhaps we should dig up his DNA and clone him. But getting back to your point about being robbed of “beauty, goodness, and truth,” war literature, and the best poetry, generally, provides us with such “truths” and a particular “goodness,” I suppose, where the individual triumphs over the forces (internal and external) imposed upon him in the course of his personal experience with war. That may be hard to see, but who would you rather spend time with—someone, Sassoon for example, who has learned from his war experiences, has become a different person as a result of those experiences, or the naïve sentimentalist who writes some fanciful fabrication constructed of fairy dust. And the beauty you speak of may be there as well in our ability to sometimes transcend the ugliness of war. We instinctively know that poetry can do more than serve as an ornamental doily—think of our schoolyard response to “greasy, grimy gopher guts”; but that is not part of our polite curriculum in the classroom. We want politeness and pabulum, in effect to go on “gobbling our muffins and eggs” as the world explodes around us. And that’s immensely penurious. If we have the



understanding that the only purpose of poetry is to deal with love or nature or some similar theme, we're not according it much respect. We're just simply making it possible for people to go through their lives absolutely unaffected by the terrible consequences of those in positions of power and authority imposing their political will upon others. In effect we are perpetually creating circumstances that will yield the creation of another new Menin Gate. And maybe I'm just jealous, envious of those who can transcend real world politics and write on subjects that have little connection to anything on this planet, in effect creating imaginative forays into some ethereal realm. I'd like to be there, I really would, but I can't.

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