Sara Montin, *Contourner l’abîme, les poètes-combattants britanniques à l’épreuve de la Grande Guerre*

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RÉFÉRENCE


1 Sara Montin’s book *Contourner l’abîme, les poètes-combattants britanniques à l’épreuve de la Grande Guerre* is a handsome volume. Any reader interested in World War I or in poetry will want to procure it and enjoy the clear prose and precise description within its 511 pages. The book reads well, from start to finish, and this makes another high-quality volume for the series “Sillages Critiques” (Critical Trails) about Literatures in English which has existed since at least 1996, within the important “Mondes Anglophones” (Worlds in English) set of volumes published by Sorbonne Université Presses (a press that was among the first in France to publish critical studies about English Literatures, and their web page should surely do more to advertise that fact). I have been given the opportunity of writing this review in English, and since my own native language is American English, I will target a few remarks specifically to American readers, who may—or may not yet—be aware of the the multilingual readership of LISA ejournal.

2 This is the kind of critical study that can be written only well after the fact—one hundred years on. It is lesser-noticed perhaps, but undoubtedly at least as necessary an act of memory as the official Centenary Commemorations. Montin chose to reconsider what conditions were like for the war poets by asking what life was like in the trenches, and what books these poets had on hand during the war. How much of their day could be devoted to thinking about literature or literary composition? These concrete
considerations allowed the author to panache her knowledge integrating the poets as a
group into the first two parts of the book, as well as the various genres of their texts, in
an original manner. In fact the first chapters of the book, from the introduction
through the fifth chapter are organized in a way slightly reminiscent of George
Walter’s 2004 thematic anthology, *In Flanders Fields: Poetry of the First World War*
(reprinted as *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* in 2006). Walter grouped the
poems together by subjects such as “Your Country Needs You,” “Somewhere in
France,” “Action,” “Blighty,” and “Peace”; but unfortunately he did that without giving
the poems any dates—whether of composition or publication—which would enable
readers to see how representation of one theme or another might have evolved as the
war went unendingly on and on. Kenneth Baker’s anthology, *The Faber Book of War
Poetry* (1996) also organized poems thematically leading to original comparisons. To my
knowledge Montin’s is one of the rare critical studies to speak about so many of the war
poets together in such a way: it is a new approach that brings fresh perspectives to the
field. It builds on other recent studies, but adds this significant originality of structure.

3 This is the second major publication about British World War I poetry in French.
Montin’s book follows Roland Bouyssou’s thorough study *Les Poètes Combattants Anglais
de la Grande Guerre* (University Toulouse-Le Mirail Press, 1974), which devoted
individual chapters to Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Edmund
Blunden, and David Jones. Following examination of the authors in turn, he noted that
in the war poetry he examined, there was no “happy warrior” as in Wordsworth.
Rather, in the poetry written in or inspired by the poets’ struggle to exist in the
trenches, World War I poetry, for Bouyssou, made a break with preceding war poetry; it
ceased to glorify war. The hero-warrior myth was out—and real knowledge about the
disruption and devastation of war was in. David Jones’s war-epic poetry was published
so long after the conflict, that it is easy enough to surmise that at the time of
publication at least some of his war trauma had been worked through.

4 One might also compare Montin’s originality of structure to Tim Kendall’s *Modern
English War Poetry* (2006), which includes individual chapters for Thomas Hardy,
Rudyard Kipling, Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas with Charlotte Mew, Ivor Gurney, W.H.
Auden, Keith Douglas with Sidney Keys, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, and a concluding
chapter that is suspicious of opportunistic motivations that sometimes seem visible in
today’s anti-war poets: “It is partly the failure to notice difficulties in the artistic
exploitation of violence which makes the bulk of contemporary anti-war poetry seem
sentimental and morally dubious” (Kendall, 242).

5 Montin chose to focus on poets who fought in World War I, but only poems written or
published during the war period are given extended study, so David Jones is excluded.
Her corpus is composed of Richard Aldington, Edmund Blunden, Ford Madox Ford,
Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Sorley and Isaac
Rosenberg. Her choice leaves out some other poets present at the front who also wrote
quality war poetry through their experience as soldiers. Within that category is Sir
Herbert Read, whose first book of poetry was *Songs of Chaos* (1915). American war poets
of World War I are also omitted (as the title justifies), as are other men who wrote from
behind the lines, whether because refusing to enlist such as D.H. Lawrence, or too old to
do so, such as Wilfrid Gibson (who makes a brief appearance on page 101). Montin’s
corpus also excludes the numerous women who were concurrently writing poetry
about the war during 1914-1918, such as Jessie Pope who encouraged men to enlist with

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exacerbated patriotic poems or the more sensitive women’s voices who also give first-hand testimony of the battle, if only through their care of the wounded (such as Vera Brittain). This means there is (unfortunately) little or only slight mention of Edith Sitwell or Nancy Cunard, who registered the effects of war on the civilian population, through civilian anxiety, the mourning of loved ones, or the more direct war experience of being on the receiving end of bombings during air raids. In war time, the disruption caused to people’s lives and minds affects not only soldiers, but also civilians, so one may question why Montin so strictly limited her field of study—a century on a more complete vision of the poetry of World War I is surely needed. Yet, the volume demonstrates that Montin is in fact interested in the poets she has omitted.

The study, clearly delineated by the title itself to British poets of combat during 1914-18 is also based closely on her doctoral thesis (and everyone knows that the more limited the scope is for that exercise, the better things usually go).

The numerous quotations from poems and from prose have been competently translated by Montin from British into French throughout, and this ensures smooth reading for the targeted French reader. Translated passages are also given in English in footnotes, from standard reference editions, so specialists of the poets mentioned may easily trace references. Remarkable in this volume is the sheer range of coverage given to the chosen poets through their biographies and critical studies, as well as the other diverse literary genres they produced along with their poetry (essays, correspondence, memoirs, autobiographies). The book is multifaceted and will reward the reader’s investment.

The study is divided into three comprehensive sections which I translate as: 1) The poet faced with war: the genesis of war poetry (Le poète face à la guerre : genèse de la War Poetry); 2) The poetic subject in conflict (Le sujet poétique en conflit) ; and 3) Going beyond, imperfectly going, and coming back: the unfinished war poem (Montin seems to have used a neologism, and translating that third section’s title was tricky. In French it is: “Dépasser, imparfaire, revenir : Le war poem inachevé”). Within these umbrella groupings she addresses issues such as: the doubling found in the testimony of traumatic events, the way poetry responds to conflict through light verse, and the cultural and modernist fusion present in Richard Aldington’s haikus. One feature of war poetry that ties it all together is the notion that the very act of writing while making war was a high challenge, and also in itself, an act of resistance (a point also noted by Élise Brault-Dreux in her review of Montin for Cercles).

Montin’s introduction opens with a brief flashback to the distant past, where heroic warriors are victorious in unforgettable legendary battles, like those evoked in poetry such as the Iliad or in the Bible’s Psalms. Montin astutely notes that World War I poets were forced to confront the heroic myths of war to their experience in the trenches (12). The British War Poets are situated within the French context, among French war poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Vildrac, Georges Duhamel, André Salmon, René Daliz, Blaise Cendrars and Charles Péguy. And, speaking of Péguy—the long Péguy quotation on page 15 dates not from 1914, but from 1905; Péguy published “Notre patrie” in his Cahiers de la Quinzaine on October 22, 1905. It was a text he began writing on July 16, 1905, in response to what took place on the morning of June 6, 1905, when he understood that “a German invasion was imminent”—this was because of the Tangiers Crisis, as Eric Thiers has explained, which led the Minister of Foreign affairs, Théophile Delcassé, to resign, refusing to hold a meeting that the Germans had
requested. Péguy understood from June 6, 1905, that there was a serious German menace to France that could lead to "the possible end of liberty and progress." That was why he was preparing for war, and could not, from that point on, understand Jaurès’s pacifism. His preparation for war involved joining the reserves, which led to his own active combat and death at the age of 41.

And now it is time for an aside to American readers—World War I is still felt with great emotion in the UK, across the Commonwealth, and especially in France. Families recall how they were directly affected by the war and which family members went missing, and how that impacted several generations. As battles advanced across France, civilians were displaced, and property was requisitioned, sometimes damaged, or totally destroyed. Horses were requisitioned, and exponential numbers of horses also died in battle. Human relationships were deeply affected by the conflict where well over a million French soldiers lost their lives. Weddings did not happen, or were rushed into too quickly, and young fathers never saw the birth of their children. Women were raped. Widows chose not to remarry. Whole villages were lost to bombings and were not rebuilt. These scars of disruption, human and environmental degradation, like the after-effects of the American Civil War, left long shadows. The French countryside of the North and East is dotted with World War I memorials, and even large American military cemeteries. But there are also memorials to those who fought in World War I near the town hall of every village throughout France, and there is a large memorial near Auray, in Brittany, to honor the large proportion of the population in that region who were killed in battle. In farmland around Verdun, it is still common to find shreds of war equipment when ploughing fields, or in some places one might even dig up an unidentified soldier’s body (as it turns out, Péguy’s friend the novelist Alain-Fournier, who also died at the front in September 1914, was only found near Saint-Rémy-la-Calonne in May 1991). There is little way to understand what all of this feels like without visiting France and viewing such places as the fort in Verdun, its Peace Museum, le Centre Mondial de la Paix, the Verdun Memorial at Douamont, the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, the Thiepval Memorial, and the Musée de la Grande Guerre at Meaux (in addition, of course, to the American memorials such as the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery with 14,246 graves, the Montsec Memorial at Thiaucourt, the cemetery at St. Mhiel, the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery at Belleau Wood and the monument at Château-Thierry).

One of the values of this book lies in the fact that Sarah Montin is French, writing about World War I poetry from a country where many battles occurred. Another factor to keep in mind is that Montin is a woman writing about war poetry written by men who experienced combat. But she is writing about British poets, those who might have worried about receiving a white feather, signifying cowardice, from a young woman if they did not promptly volunteer to enlist in 1914. And here I must also express some gratitude to Gilles Couderc, whose singing of the 1912 British hit most associated with World War I for British soldiers, “It’s a Long Long Way to Tipperary” at the centenary commemorative conference of the Battle of the Somme at Université de Picardie Jules Verne in 2016 enlightened everyone’s comprehension of the sad hopefulness of British troops. During the first day of the Battle of the Somme, on July 1, 1916 some 57,470 British soldiers lost their lives.

Montin’s first chapter deals with the beginning of the notion of war poetry as a genre, coming into its own in English with the poetry from World War I. She astutely mentions...
prior poems of war that led to this, specifically the Napoleonic wars and those that followed, as expressed in the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, and Hardy. While this is cleverly developed and aptly demonstrated, it would have been relevant to mention poets of the American Civil War such as Walt Whitman, Hermann Melville and Stephen Crane—for they too were read by the British poets of the early twentieth century. Montin’s bibliography gives no indication about whether or not she may have consulted Jon Stallworthy’s anthology *The New Oxford Book of War Poetry* (1984, 2014). Stallworthy’s selection suggests further historical perspectives as well as class distinctions. In his introduction he notes that:

12 Most of the British poets we associate with the years 1914 and 1915 had a public-school education and this, more than any other factor, distinguishes them from those we associate with the later phases of the war. The early poems return again and again to the appallingly anachronistic concept of war as a game . . .

13 Also, regarding social class, since poetry and music do intersect, one might consult John Mullen’s *The Show Must Go On*: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War (2015; or 2012 in French; unfortunately not mentioned in Montin’s bibliography). War poets and war poetry as a genre came into being during the twentieth century, suggests Montin, but Stallworthy’s fine anthology would almost prove the contrary. What probably is true is that the general public became much more conscious of war poetry as a genre during the twentieth century, beginning with World War I, and the plethora of widely circulated anthologies of war poetry it produced, from 1914 on.

14 In French, and targeting French readers, Montin carefully contextualizes her work within the realm of current French scholarship of literature from World War I, with attention given to the main specialists: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Laurence Campa, Benjamin Gilles, Denis Labouret, Anne Mounic, Annette Wieviorka, (the French historian of both World Wars, Nicolas Beaupré, was not named, though his finesse with certain literary aspects would also merit attention). Then the notion of contextuality and occasional poetry is broached, with war viewed as a circumstance that the poet is living through, therefore leading to poetry of occasion, in essence, and in accord with a line from T.S. Eliot: “War is not a life: it is a situation” (qtd. 28). English and American specialists in the field are also well represented, so the introduction gives a broader inflection to what might perhaps at first seem a somewhat limited subject. Montin’s stated aim is to give an overview of the war poets so as to discern the poetics of writing about combat (39). While mention is made of Larkin’s interest in Owen in the introduction, not enough attention is focused on Dominic Hibberd’s ground-breaking work on Owen: he is as necessary to the study of Owen as Stallworthy. Also, at that point in the text there is no mention of Geoffrey Hill’s essays on Rosenberg and Gurney. But perhaps that is also because Hill’s critical writings on these two poets might be seen as similar to Jon Silkin’s criticism, toward which Montin expresses reticence due to his Marxist views (77). Hill has suggested that Gurney and Rosenberg saw war for what it really was and by clearly relating their lived experience. They denounced war’s inhumanity in their poetry—and he has devoted some of his poetic composition to their memory as well. Thus it is especially surprising to find Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings* (2008) cited in the bibliography with no mention whatsoever of Hill in Montin’s sixth chapter, devoted to Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney.

15 Nonetheless, Montin’s analysis of individual poems is rich throughout, with attention to fine details such as Owen’s use of accented syllables in /k/ in “Mental Cases” (138),
the strange use of a consecutive double parenthesis in a single line in Gurney’s “The
Man Was He Who Blinded His Eyes All” (218-19), and the vowel variations on /o/ in
Rosenberg’s “On Receiving News of the War” (272). Her discussion of Owen’s “A Strange
Meeting” draws on a critical range from John Middleton Murry to Barbara Hernstein
Smith (376-377). She notes that Rosenberg’s “Daughters of War” is necessarily
incomplete, even though the poet considered it a masterpiece (389).

16 The reviewer’s position is delicate: should slight typing errors even be mentioned? Are
they not as much the responsibility of the editor as of the author? There are actually
very few such errors in Contourner l’abîme (pages 72, 89, 463), and they tend to be in
footnotes, outside the main body of the text, yet, to insert Péguy once more, by his
standards, any error is unacceptable (though even he too occasionally slipped, as the
facsimile Centennaire Edition of the Cahiers de la Quinzaine published by the Imprimerie
Nationale has recently demonstrated).

17 In conclusion, this book said it was one thing (in its introduction), but in fact it is also
another. It also expands to accommodate many of the authors it says it does not
include, by making penetrating passing references to them, such that the range of the
volume is close to encyclopaedic while still remaining focused and pleasantly readable.
This book is an excellent introduction for anyone who wishes to begin reading or
studying World War I poetry. It is also a stimulating volume for confirmed scholars in
the field, since it offers a wide range of critical perspectives with quotations from the
likes of Giorgio Agamben, Raymond Bachelard, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot,
Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Butor, Roland Barthes, Antoine Compagnon, Gilles Deleuze,
Edmund Gosse, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul de Man, Jean-Michel
Maupoix, J. Hillis Miller, Dominique Rabaté, Christine Savinel, Jean Starobinski, Max
Weber, et al. In other words, whether the reader makes full acquiescence to Montin’s
positioning or not, this is a seminal text, and those who study war poetry or literary
modernism will want to procure the book. It would be worthwhile for Sarah Montin to
consider providing an English version, for readers who are not confident or fluent
enough in French.

NOTES

1. Éric Thiers, “Charles Péguy : la révélation du 6 juin 1905” Mil Neuf Cent 19 (2001/1)
43-52.

2. Listed here are only a portion of the British and American critics and anthologists of
World War I poetry cited by Montin: Fran Brearton, Cathy Caruth, Carol Ann Duffy, Paul
Fussell, Sandra Gilbert, Dominic Hibberd, Tim Kendall, Edna Longley, Kate McLoughlin,
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