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Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 The soldier poets of modern war had direct and brutal experience of the front line and their artistic works are thus connected with historical testimony or transformed into overflows of traumatised memories. Analyses of their collections abound and have been reinvigorated since the centenary of the First World War. Yet another series of articles on the war in poetry could, as a consequence, seem superfluous, but fewer studies have in fact been looking into the poetry of those who witnessed war as children or experienced it second-hand, through the stories of family members, through the transformation of their daily lives or, later, through history books or fiction or through the media—notably when they cover remembrance days, home or foreign conflicts.
- 2 Experts are still debating the consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder on war veterans, but since the 1990s, they have agreed on a series of symptoms such as depression, nightmares, and hallucinations, which may affect any person, including children, who is a victim of trauma,¹ a Greek term for an open wound. It is perhaps no wonder that war scenes, conflict and violence should break into and impinge—through thematic or structural devastation—on the poems of soldiers' wives or children, or in the texts of those who grew up during times of conflict and in their immediate aftermath. Poetry, on the other hand, can belligerently intrude into the relating of memories, breaking away from codes and forms, while asserting itself and attempting to survive in places where it may be least expected.
- 3 It is, however, difficult to assess the extent to which first, second or even third generations can be affected by events they have not been through and the way they can recapture their authenticity. "They fell from sea to earth, from grave to grave / and, griefless now, taught others how to grieve,"² Scottish poet Iain Crichton Smith wrote, leaving aside the jingoistic aspect of war to emphasise younger generation-centred human concerns. The double question of ethics and aesthetics is nevertheless posed as authors are caught between truth and imagination. Beyond more or less conscious or fabricated memories, beyond loyal remembrance, there is a desire to appropriate war for oneself or to exorcise it. There are then history infractions when poets try to romanticise or demonise the conflict, when they write about facts distorted by the

imagination of the children they were at the time, about events that have somehow catalysed a nation or about personal impressions induced by the testimonies of others. This Miranda issue probes into these questions, focusing particularly on the notions of traces—notably real or invented testimony, exposition, reminiscences, haunting memories—and intrusion, namely, unexpected irruption, uncanny presence or formal or thematic breaches. It underscores the similarities and differences in the reactions and what could be called the war poetics of authors from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the United States and the Caribbean who write about the Second World War, conflicts in South-East Asia, Jerusalem or Hispaniola, as well as the Troubles. The reflections collected here emanate from a poet, from translators and critics, and span from first to third generation, creating a *mise en abyme* which not only deeply questions the authors' writings but also the general interest in and reaction to war texts.

- 4 In a perfect balance between personal and academic reflections, critic and poet Roderick Watson discusses the “reverberation” of war in his own poetry and the way war affected the poets of his generation, notably through the comics children read and the games they played. He argues that war culture is part and parcel of modern British identity and national reconstruction, though events have different resonance in the different nations of the kingdom. As he reflects on the haunting shadows of the holocaust or the nuclear bombing of Japan, he expresses a “terrible sense of shame in the complicity of simply being human,” posing a deeply thought-provoking question: to what extent can war be turned into an identity-building myth, notably when it takes the “jolly guise of triumphalist popular culture”? He then analyses his own artistic response in the collection *True History on the Walls*, as a need for “poetic catharsis” to solve moral discomfort.
- 5 Images of the past returning is a theme Fanny Howe shares with Roderick Watson, though she has, in a way, found some symbiotic relation with the war visions distilled in *Lives of a Spirit*. Filiation and remembrance is what the female subject of her prose-poem discovers as she experiences a disruption of space and time and finds herself in a “non-space” “saturated with the presence-absence of the dead,” where “past and present constantly collide” and where she roams intermittently into a city Park and various cemeteries, including a war cemetery. Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd analyses not just the few specific references to war but the whole poem and shows the subject, constantly shifting from first to third person, is plunged into a spiritual meditation in which the figure of her late father is one of the key elements contributing to the spatio-temporal confusion. As shadowy presences from World War II gradually become both familiar and familial and as God's “forgotten name” is recurringly associated with nameless soldiers, confusion allows “opposites [to] meet and merge” and create new meanings to life.
- 6 While Fanny Howe's spirit eventually finds a harmonious place where she can take refuge, it seems poet-journalist James Fenton always finds himself “in the wrong place” and his mind and writings hover from the battle fields of South-East Asia to English gardens. Though these opposites may be reminiscent of the superimposition of war cemetery and city park, Sara Greaves argues that “the garden is a metaphor for the aesthetic or aestheticist strain in Fenton's poetry, and ‘war’ is the voice of witness, residual in times of peace.” Fenton's artistic response to his and other suffering men's trauma is a healing process through language (notably nonsensical language), she suggests, borrowing Anzieu's concept of “skin-ego” and originally adapting it,

preferring to use the term “skin-voice”. Her approach as a translator can be considered as a testimony of third-hand living of war insofar as she somehow had to endorse Fenton’s “skin-voice” in order to render his music in the French text owing to what she calls, with Henri Meschonnic, a “pellicular translation”.

- 7 Unlike Fenton’s “skin-voice”, language—or rather colonial language—is not a protecting cover for some West Indian authors who write about genocide or dictatorships and try to re-inhabit their history and find a trans-Caribbean identity. It may in fact serve as “an instrument of repression and death.” They will hence debunk, adapt or experiment with translation, resorting to multilingualism or simply to “non-translation”. Laëtitia Saint-Loubert defers to those authors on this point as she quotes them in French, Spanish, English and Creole to highlight the *poesis* of trauma in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 21st century novels which reflect on the Haitian massacre and the afro-phobic feelings that led to it and that are resurgent today. She argues that the inability to separate past from present results in what Gilron calls “syncopated temporality”, a notion that may echo Fanny Howe’s collision of past and present. Looking for the Word and an appropriate space is what Hispaniola-born authors share with Howe’s Spirit too. Laetitia Saint-Loubert defines translation as “snippets of Haitian *Kreyòl* and Spanish that re-create or ‘bring forth’ the original trauma” while also subverting and resisting it via a strange yet familiar topos where recovery may eventually take place, where history may be re-membered and identity renegotiated.
- 8 Bertrand Rouby and Fanny Quément, who both consider Northern Irish authors (Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney, respectively), and the Troubles, further develop the idea that the written space is a place where trauma and violence can be confronted. The two poets diverge, however, in their bellicosity, as Boland attempts to contain violence while Heaney turns writing into a sonic weapon. When it comes to dealing with “tension between domestic and public spaces”, though, the two poets share similar images, including the fighting couple, as highlighted by Bertrand Rouby, as well as opposition between nature and more prosaic objects or landscapes.
- 9 While these oppositions may be reminiscent of Fenton’s war versus garden or of Fanny Howe’s city park versus war cemetery, it is interesting to note that contrary to them, Eavan Boland’s gardens and fields, in times of war, evoke violence. They are therefore closer to Danticat’s paradoxical representation of nature with the river Massacre and parsley as poison, or to Roderick Watson’s memory of collecting cartridges on the coast of Aberdeen. They are, moreover, opposed to domestic objects and intimacy. After an overview of Irish poetry on the Ulster conflict, Bertrand Rouby analyses how Boland, with her systematic connection of “political conflict with all cases of violence against women,” genderises the Troubles. The kitchen hence becomes a place of refuge and women’s private garden and place of sustenance, in all senses of the terms. It is, however, violated by seeds of violence planted in the Irish soil, as well as the media, notably with the narratives of the conflict on the radio.
- 10 The radio and the news of World War II as it infiltrated into houses brought Seamus Heaney his first account of conflict and gave him a particular sensitivity to sounds, notably war sounds, as they break into familiar Irish landscapes or domestic places. This is where Fanny Quément starts from to study the poet’s auditory relations with the Troubles. For what Roderick Watson metaphorically calls “the horror and the fascination of these old echoes coming through to a later and younger generation, like

some fading radio transmission” become true sounds as a “background drone” of rolling Orangemen Lambegs and chopping British helicopters somewhat reenact—or prolong—a war, eavesdropped on in childhood. Heaney, however, redirects sonic weapons and listening devices and makes the most of the creativity of military instruments to launch into poetic counterattacks in order to mark and redefine territories and to retune the Irish voice with his own.

- 11 As “a sough o’ war [goes] through the land”³ and resonates in time and space, writing ultimately becomes an ideal mode of reflection. Not only does it enable testimonies to be expressed through full visions or simple glimpses of violence or through echoes of past horror and trauma, it also acts as Athena’s shield-mirror where spaces and times can be superimposed and in which conflicts can be observed, differed and diffracted, figured and disfigured, translated or redirected against themselves. The writing space hence offers both a healing territory and a time for creation and meditation on life, identity and also on one’s ambiguous fascination for war and its *imago*.

NOTES

1. See Shephard, Ben. *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.
 2. Crichton Smith, Iain. *Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1992. 16.
 3. Phrase borrowed from Charles Murray’s “A Sough o’ war”. In *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914-1945*. Ed. Roderick Watson and David Goldie. Glasgow: ASLS 43, 2014. 62.
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