

Chapter 1

Wars I Have Seen

Peter Nicholls

Early in 2003, Sam Hamill, poet and editor of Copper Canyon Press, was one of a number of writers invited by the President's wife Laura Bush to a symposium on "Poetry and the American Voice." Mrs Bush intended the gathering to discuss and celebrate the "American voices" of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Emily Dickinson. Hamill wasn't alone in the disgust he felt at the timing of this event so soon after the President's announced policy of "Shock and Awe" against Iraq. He quickly composed a letter to "Friends and Fellow Poets" in which he asked writers to register their opposition to the war by contributing a poem to his website. In the space of not more than a month, he had received 13,000 poems. From his huge electronic manuscript, Hamill quarried the contents of a condensed anthology, *Poets Against the War*, published later that year. As it happened, Hamill wasn't the only one to enlist poetry for this purpose; the same year saw the publication of Todd Swift's *100 Poets Against the War* of which its publisher, Salt, claims that it "holds the record for the fastest poetry anthology ever assembled and disseminated; first planned on January 20, 2003 and published in this form on March 3, 2003."

These two projects alone tell us a lot about the level of animus directed against Bush and his bellicose supporters, but they also raise some interesting questions about the means adopted to channel this feeling. Certainly, the response to Hamill's email circular is surprising for the sheer volume of contributions it produced, but at the same time *not* so surprising, perhaps, in its choice of poetry as the appropriate

vehicle of public dissent. For poetry, while increasingly a marginalized medium, is still popularly regarded as an appropriate, sometimes even a therapeutic, response to certain types of widely felt political outrage. And war has always seemed to occasion poetry as both its compensation and its negative reflection. Indeed, the respective languages of war and poetry have been bound together in interacting cycles of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, the poetic idiom presents itself as more accurate, more authentic, more expressive of those human values so systematically trampled on in war; on the other hand, it is poetry which has so regularly been ransacked for the memorable tropes of political demagoguery. This is the "High Diction" of which Paul Fussell speaks in his seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), and while there is little significant twentieth-century American poetry in the heroic mode after the World War I writings of Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer, we do find that American political rhetoric is increasingly dependent on the tropes of a phoney poetic sublime: Shock and Awe, the threat of "an attack/ that will unleash upon Iraq// levels of force that have never been/ imagined before, much less seen" (quoted in Geoff Brock's poem "Poetry & the American Voice" in Hamill 2003: 42), the promise of "unbelievable" force in the lead-up to the attack on Fallujah, and so on. Increasingly, US military operations have been given not the random names they had previously received, but names associating hyperbolic cosmic force with absolute rightness: Urgent Fury (Grenada), Just Cause (Panama), Desert Storm (the Gulf), Instant Thunder (the air operation in the Gulf), Infinite Justice (Afghanistan), and Enduring Freedom (the war on terror) (Sieminski 1995). These are, we might say, pseudo-performatives which cultivate the apocalyptic tone to conflate means and ends.

There is something at once risible and deadly in the use of such language. As a version of Orwellian "doublespeak," this deployment of words to project final desired outcomes – victory, conciliation – while at the same time hinting in its transitivity at the force needed to achieve them has created a mechanically rationalistic language in which American agency works apparently selflessly and with great scruple to achieve what is now called in a wonderfully circular phrase "preemptive defense." There is no attempt to conceal the serpentine movements of government "logic" here, for you are either inside this discourse or not, and the surgically drawn line that divides those sectors is almost childishly plain. In April 2003, for example, Bush visited wounded soldiers from the war in Iraq: "I reminded them and their families," he said, "that the war in Iraq is really about peace"

(Stauber and Rampton 2003). Only a little massaging was needed here – Bush’s tactful “reminder” to these damaged troops and his insidiously persuasive “really” – to elide the gap between war and peace. It is often said that in contrast to earlier statesmen it is not this President’s tabletalk that is prized but rather his many blunders and slips. At the same time, though, there is a growing realization that this use of “empty language,” as one commentator in *The Nation* recently called it, might reveal strategy rather than gullibility (Brooks 2003).

In reading such speeches, one is likely to experience a kind of linguistic claustrophobia. This is a discourse hermetically sealed; it has no outside and renders itself impervious to any kind of test. And if the verbal sleight of hand is more perceptible when it comes to telling us that war is “really” about peace, it seems increasingly the case that wartime discourse is “really” little different from peacetime discourse. War, it seems, is continuous and unrelenting, confirming Emmanuel Levinas’s proposition that “The peace of empires issued from war rests on war” (Levinas 1969: 22). In other words – and this seems to me a perception of particular relevance to the poets I shall discuss here – “the state and war are structurally inseparable.” It’s hardly a novel idea: Daniel Pick, whose phrase this is, traces it to Hegel for whom, he says, “The state is not the alternative to war, but the formation which could only be realized in war. It is in war that a state constitutes itself as subject” (Pick 1993: 234). Twentieth-century American fiction, of course, has been fascinated with variations on this axiom, projecting surreal fantasies of paranoia and conspiracy, and in some cases (Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*, for example) suggesting that the American state is actually at war with its own citizens. The poets’ approach to these questions has necessarily been different, though Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956) is there to remind us of a parallel vision of America as war zone, with those who were “burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion and the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality” (Ginsberg 1995: 129).

The great images of *Howl* are images of confinement and enclosure – “the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows . . . Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! Skeleton treasuries! Blind capitals! Demonic industries! Spectral nations! Invincible mad-houses! Granite cocks! Monstrous bombs!” (Ginsberg 1995: 131–2). Ginsberg’s “howl” is against not only these literal spaces of miserable confinement, but

against a closed language which can be broken open only by something as primitive and inchoate as a howl. And by closure here I mean exactly what Roland Barthes meant when he wrote of totalitarianism as a world in which:

definition, that is to say the separation between Good and Evil, becomes the sole content of all language, there are no more words without values attached to them, so that finally the function of writing is to cut out one stage of a process: there is no more lapse of time between naming and judging, and the closed character of language is perfected, since in the last analysis it is a value which is given as explanation of another value. (Barthes 1968: 24)

If we tend to associate developments in American poetry, from Modernism through the New American Poetry to Language Poetry, with the discovery of a variously conceived “open form,” then surely one way to understand the urgency of this is in relation to an evolving war-speak which has become, increasingly, a more continuously spoken state-speak. This circular rhetoric first came into its own during the Vietnam conflict. Describing it as a language “self-enclosed in finality,” poet Thomas Merton observed that “One of the most curious things about the war in Vietnam is that it is being fought to vindicate the assumptions upon which it is being fought” (Merton 1969: 113, 114–15). With a language that is also, as Jeffrey Walsh puts it, “heavy with nouns, bloated with abstractions, and swarmed over with polysyllables” (Walsh 1982: 216), we are likely to miss the simple moves by which opposites conjoin and responsibility is displaced.

When public language becomes openly deceptive and self-legitimizing it is inevitable that a gulf will open up between political rhetoric and an apparently more authentic literary language. Especially in time of war, “poetry” seems to offer itself as a medium which by its very nature occupies some sort of higher moral ground, gesturing toward the cultural values presently threatened by the forces of barbarism. The idea of poetry as a means by which we *see* things more clearly, in an ethical light, is closely linked to the conception of poetic language as a medium capable of freeing us from the tautological confinement of war-speak. If poetry allows us to penetrate the dense “fog of war,” to borrow the title of Errol Morris’s very pertinent movie, it is arguably because it makes available a particular type of thinking which counters that of war – poetic thinking, we might say, recalling Heidegger’s distinction between “essential” and “calculative”

modes. Of course, much of the poetry written about war never attains that level, remaining trapped in the same kind of binary logic as the war-speak it opposes. This is probably why irony has proved such an important resource to poets dealing with this kind of subject matter, for irony may at once invert a system of conventional values and seem to position the poet outside it. Certainly, in the small amount of poetry produced by American poets about World War I, irony was a dominant mode. One thinks, of course, of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", with its corrosive elegy to "a myriad" who died "For an old bitch gone in the teeth./ For a botched civilization" (Pound 1990: 188), and of E. E. Cummings' parody of war-speak:

"why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water. (Cummings 1968: 268)

Different types of venom are expressed here, but in each case irony seems the only effective response to the degraded language of the "liars in public places," as Pound calls them, whose rhetoric of phoney sublimity, leached from the classics, drives the innocent toward slaughter. Archibald MacLeish's fine poem "Memorial Rain," an elegy for his brother, similarly frames political rhetoric, weaving between the words of the US Ambassador to France and an evocation of the landscape in which the poet's brother is buried. We hear alternately the Ambassador and the poet:

– Dedicates to them
This earth their bones have hallowed, this last gift
A grateful country –

Under the dry grass stem
The words are blurred, are thickened, the words sift
Confused by the rasp of the wind, by the thin grating
Of ants under the grass, the minute shift
And tumble of dusty sand separating
From dusty sand. The roots of the grass strain,
Tighten, the earth is rigid, waits – he is waiting . . .

(MacLeish 1933: 135–6)

Each of these poems seeks in different ways to show the limits of political rhetoric and each speaks at a temporal distance from the war. In each, the writer is powerfully aware of the way that poetry and the rhetoric of war have shamefully consorted in the past, and the result is a kind of antipoetic mode, Pound forcing the elegant epigrammatic form of *Mauberley* to spit out contemptuously the “old men’s lies,” while Cummings mocks the pentameter (splitting “beaut-iful” across two lines, for example), and MacLeish evokes an uncompromisingly harsh antipastoral. A certain distance is necessary, it seems, if poetry is to be wrenched away from the state which customarily embraces it in time of war. And a certain distance is needed, too, if the war is to be clearly *seen* for what it is. Pound, for example, an expatriate and noncombatant, published *Cathay* in 1915, using the late Ernest Fenollosa’s notes to create poems like “Song of the Bowmen of Shu” and “Lament of the Frontier Guard,” poems which exhibit, as Hugh Kenner long ago remarked, “a sensibility responsive to torn Belgium and disrupted London” (Kenner 1971: 202). These are poems of distances and “desolate fields” (Pound 1990: 137), which powerfully evoke the loneliness and disorientation of war even as they take their models from a remote and ancient culture.

The poems of *Cathay* certainly remain, as Kenner says, “among the most durable of all poetic responses to World War I,” though Pound’s sweeping chronological detour would never again seem quite appropriate to the challenge of writing about war. Indeed, with World War II, it was the very question of distancing which became for many writers a primary concern. How and from where do we see a war? This is one of the conundrums posed by Gertrude Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen*, first published in 1945. It’s a title quite devoid of hyperbole: Stein was born in 1874, and her lifetime, as she reminds us, spanned the Spanish–American War, the Russo-Japanese War, the Boer War, the Chinese–Japanese War, the two Balkan wars, the Abyssinian War, the Spanish Civil War, as well as the two world wars (Stein 1945: 43, 64, 72). Enough wars, certainly, to give the observer some authority, though, as she says, “It is funny about wars, they ought to be different but they are not” (p. 11). Stein’s title neatly addresses itself to the problems attached to writing about war. *Wars I Have Seen* – it’s a point of view at once relative and self-emphasizing, at once involved and detached. Stein is as suspicious of the first person plural, the national “we,” as she is of what Malcolm Cowley had called the “spectatorial attitudes” of some of those who had written about World War I (Cowley 1934: 38). In Stein’s case, though, the “seeing” is

being done by someone apparently immersed in domestic routine – “Yesterday,” she says, “I went my usual twelve kilometres to get some bread and cake” (p. 137) – but someone who is also able to reflect on the ways in which the present war has “put an end an entire end to the nineteenth century” (p. 20). The faux-naïf simplicity of Stein’s style perfectly catches the unreality of wartime existence, with quirky observations undermining conventional wisdoms: so, for example, she tells us that America is “the oldest country in the world and the reason why was that she was the first country to enter into the twentieth century” (p. 257); and she ponders, too, “how nice it will be to have those happy days come back when vegetables grew not in the ground but in tins” (p. 39).

These playful inversions of logic are crucial to Stein’s way of seeing war. For if we have finally “killed” the nineteenth century, as she puts it (p. 16), that means that we are no longer tied to the obviousness of literary realism and can begin to understand that “life is not real it is not earnest, it is strange which is an entirely different matter” (p. 44). Stein draws a distinction between World War I, which, she says, belongs to the nineteenth century and has a “legendary” aspect, and World War II which is not “legendary” at all (p. 20; see also Rose 1993: 16–18). Her way of then projecting this as a parallel distinction between conventional literary realism and modernist “strangeness” might strike us initially as perverse. The point, though, is that Stein sees war by writing about it, which is very different from seeing war *and then* writing about it. It is not so much the local perceptions of wartime experience that matter – though these are acutely registered – but the way in which Stein’s language challenges at a minutely local level the logical machinations of war-speak. “Certainly,” she writes, “Certainly nobody no not anybody thinks that this war is a war to end war. No not anybody, no well no certainly nobody does think about it, they only think about this war ending, they cannot take on the future, no really not, certainly not as warless certainly not as a future. Better get through this war first” (p. 187). For all the emphatic repetition of “certainly,” the passage demonstrates, of course, that there is actually no certainty at all outside the purely propagandist talk of a “war to end all wars.” For war, Stein observes, has become structurally necessary, an effect of the nineteenth century’s ferocious commitment to “progress”:

... the North Pole was found and the South Pole was found, and the work of Christopher Columbus was over, and so the nineteenth

century which had undertaken to make science more important than anything by having finished the work of Christopher Columbus and reduced the world to a place where there was only that, forced the world into world wars to give everybody a new thing to do as discoveries being over science not being interesting because so limiting there was nothing to do to keep everybody from doing everything in the same way . . . (Stein 1945: 64–5).

This process, says Stein, has “made the world all one” (p. 64), a seamless totality which the idiosyncratic style of *Wars I Have Seen* sets out to challenge by offering linguistic and existential alternatives to the monolithic conformism of “everybody doing everything in the same way.” Accordingly, like Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*, Stein sees the local detail of war, not its supposedly grand design, and her customary fondness for “error” and “errancy” here directs her eye not to the politicians’ narrative of war, but to the confusions and blunders that characterized the actual “theater of war” (“‘theater’ is good,” remarked Pound in *The Pisan Cantos*, “There are those who did not want/ it to come to an end” – Pound 1986: 491).

War as theater, war as cinema in Paul Virilio’s more recent formulation: these analogies stress the spectacular nature of combat and its “perceptual logistics.” In American poetry, however – as the ambiguity that attaches to Stein’s notion of “seeing” might suggest – the connection between war and visibility is far from straightforward. In writing by World War II combatants it is less the exteriorization of war as theater than the self-estrangement of the individual actors that is the issue. The “growing derealization of military engagement,” as Virilio calls it (Virilio 1989: 1), becomes a key experience of this war through the development of aerial combat. The act of seeing, now technologically mediated, produces a new form of self-alienation. The speaker sees himself as other, most grotesquely in Randall Jarrell’s famous “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” where he has already died, his remains “washed out of the turret with a hose” (Shapiro 2003: 88). Less luridly, James Dickey in “The Firebombing” sees himself as another person, only partially recognizable:

some technical-minded stranger with my hands
Is sitting in a glass treasure-hole of blue light
Having potential fire under the undeodorized arms
Of his wings (Shapiro 2003: 153)

while William Stafford writes of dropping bombs

from five
miles high, the flower of smoke and fire
so far there is no sound. No cry
disturbs the calm through which we fly (Shapiro 2003: 95)

The bomber is “like a god,” as Lowell has it in one poem (Shapiro 2003: 119), but as William Meredith writes in “Love Letter From an Impossible Land,” “issues drop away/ Like jettisoned bombs, and all is personal fog” (Shapiro 2003: 137).

While James Mersmann has claimed in his *Out of the Vietnam Vortex* that “Resignation is the dominant temper of World War II poetry” (Mersmann 1974: 15), this seems far from the case in Harvey Shapiro’s excellent anthology from which I’ve quoted these examples. Indeed, the “geometries of distance,” to borrow Robert Duncan’s phrase from his “A Spring Memorandum: Fort Knox” (Shapiro 2003: 129), are often acutely explored in poems that try to grasp the unreality of deploying weapons, and the lack of articulation between self and machine. As Levinas puts it, the violence of war consists partly in making people “play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves” (Levinas 1969: 21). Such self-estrangement is there in Duncan’s poem as he recalls the “unreal clarity” of the target on a firing range – “death/ we see there painted as precisely as a medieval rose” – while Kenneth Koch writes:

As machines make ice
We made dead enemy soldiers, in
Dark jungle alleys, with weapons in our hand
That produced fire and kept going straight through
I was carrying one (Shapiro 2003: 213)

The stunned idiom that measures this estrangement is of a piece with the general sense of war not as a strategic operation but as confusion – Koch, for example, dedicates one poem “To Carelessness” (Shapiro 2003: 210), partly because the landmine he steps on was “badly wired,” but also because he values this evidence of human weakness in a world so governed by mechanistic thinking. Howard Nemerov writes in darker vein:

Remembering that war, I’d near believe
We didn’t need the enemy, with whom
Our dark encounters were confused and few
And quickly done, so many of our lot
Did for themselves in folly and misfortune. (Shapiro 2003: 141)

Poems such as these attempt to turn the logic of war back on itself – in Nemerov’s poem, for example, it is the rhetoric of collective unity, of “us” and “ours,” that progressively unravels. In “An Essay at War,” Duncan, with the Korean conflict in view, poses the question of unity in a different way:

The war is a mineral perfection, clear,
unambiguous evil within which
our delite, our life, is the flaw,
the contradiction? (Duncan 1968: 23)

The war is figured here as some kind of absolute totality, disrupted only by the “contradiction” that turns out to embody “All that we valued” (p. 11) (note the final question mark which disputes any alternative propositional closure). Duncan suggests that poetic language – our now apparently anachronistic “delite” – acquires authenticity from the act of speaking against the language of war and thereby exposes the necessary “flaw” in an otherwise impeccably circular logic. As for Stein, the “flaw” is produced not just by seeing war but by seeing it through writing, an optic which also, as the Language poets would later confirm, allows us to see the writing itself.

The assumptions at work here, shared in different ways by poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, George Oppen, and Louis Zukofsky, return us inevitably to the primary influence all four shared – Ezra Pound – who, when Duncan wrote these lines, was confined in St Elizabeth’s hospital, pending his eventual fitness to stand trial for treason. The “case” of Pound – one can hardly avoid that phrasing – is too well known to need lengthy exposition here, but in any consideration of American war poetry it is an inevitable point of reference. For it was Pound, *the* proponent of linguistic accuracy and clear-sightedness, who ultimately made the fatal mistake of dreaming of a sort of symbiotic relation between poetic language and the language of the state, a relation that might eradicate the necessary “flaw” of which Duncan spoke. Pound’s classic injunction to “Make It New” was progressively elided with the “continuous revolution” of Italian fascism, and *The Cantos* came to internalize both the Manichean thinking of conspiracy theory and the bellicose rhetoric of war-speak – both failings that Pound constantly attributed to the governments of Britain and the United States in his wrathful wartime broadcasts, but which reappeared with a terrible inevitability in his own rhetorical “war” against usury. (It was precisely this being “at war against war”

for which Duncan would later criticize Denise Levertov – see Perloff 1998: 211–12.) In this context it is hard not to remember the acutely judged moment in Pasolini’s film, *Saló or 120 Days of Sodom*, where the camera rises from a scene of blackshirt violence in a courtyard to an upper floor window from which issues the crackling radio voice of Pound, urging his auditors to an appreciation of Confucian order. It’s a moment difficult to forget, since it intersects so closely with the opening of *The Pisan Cantos*, which Pound audaciously revised to begin with a long lament for the death of Mussolini in which images from Confucius are prominent. With this note struck at the opening, the rest of the sequence intermittently registered Pound’s continuing ideological commitment to the “enormous dream” of the fascist state, and for all its lyric fineness showed the usual binaristic limits of war-speak (the twist here, of course, though few readers wanted to grasp it, was that the “barbarians” vilified in *The Pisan Cantos* were the Allies). So while the elegiac dimension of the sequence lamented the casualties of war – Pound was particularly disturbed by news of damage to the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini – and even while he was writing at the *end* of the war, the poem’s political investments meant that he could seek ethical certainty only through a continuing rhetoric of conflict. “Seeing” war here meant conflating totality with design, thereby achieving a kind of cognitive mastery fundamentally at odds with those moments of more minute vision in which Pound at Pisa famously attended to natural detail.

It is precisely the possibility of another kind of seeing that has galvanized the poets most influenced by Pound, a seeing which once again Levinas seems to signal when he declares that “ethics is an optics. But it is a ‘vision’ without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type” (Levinas 1969: 23). Different poets have explored this possibility in different ways. Duncan, for example, was drawn to the “unwarlike” side of Pound as romantic visionary, stressing as his predecessor’s most important insight the view that “All ages are contemporaneous” (Duncan 1995: 99), and that “the contemporary opens upon eternity in the interpenetration of times” (p. 124). In face of war – Duncan would write powerfully of the Vietnam conflict in the sequence called *Tribunals* – myth offers a means of establishing relationship, so that mythic contemporaneity becomes the ground for what he calls “the community of the poem” (p. 170), the poem as an expression of “the communality we have with all men, our interdependence everywhere in life” (Duncan 1963: 41).

George Oppen sought similarly to establish poetry as a medium of relationship rather than of hierarchy and authority. For him, as for Duncan, it was the spectacle of Pound's war-speak that had to be avoided at all cost. Several of Oppen's poems – for example, "Of Hours" and "The Speech at Soli" – confront that problem directly. In the first, Oppen remembers "Burying my dogtag with H/ For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace" (Oppen 2002: 218). He had been seriously wounded there in 1945 when, as he tersely reported in a letter, "88mm shell landed in a foxhole: Three of us were in that fox-hole" (Oppen 1990: 203). Of the three, only Oppen, his body pitted with shrapnel, would live to be haunted by the attack. The experience was for him, he later said, a definitive "ur-scene" (Oppen UCSD: 16, 17, 1) and it would figure as a commanding presence in his postwar writing. In "Of Hours," this traumatic memory is embedded in an address to Pound as the father-figure who failed to learn the lesson of his own famous line, "What thou lovest well remains" and who is finally seen walking home "Unteachable" (Oppen 2002: 217–19). In "The Speech at Soli," Pound is again reproached for the willed nature of his seeing, as Oppen reinfects Canto CXV's "I cannot make it cohere": "war in incoherent/ sunlight it will not/ cohere it will NOT" (Oppen 2002: 239). The war that Oppen himself had seen was supremely "incoherent" and is thus graspable in retrospect only in a language that renounces any authoritative point of view or totalizing vision, a language of "holes" and "pitfalls," as he describes it in "Of Hours."

In contrast to Pound's way of seeing war, then, Oppen's involves a moment of acknowledged blindness, a moment in which, as Levinas has it, we experience "the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it" (Levinas 1969: 27). Oppen's "ur-scene" thus never comes completely into view, blocked as it is by the trauma of injury and by the guilt he apparently felt for being unable to rescue another wounded man in the foxhole (McAleavey 1985: 309). So in the great serial poem, "Of Being Numerous," for which Oppen was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, various reminiscences of men and places in the war seem to be focused in some peculiarly oblique lines:

Under the soil
In the blind pressure
The lump,
Entity
Of substance
Changes also. (Oppen 2002: 176)

An earlier unpublished version of these lines renders them less enigmatic:

Under the sea, under the deep
Soil hidden
In the black
And heavy depths,
Lump, accretion,
Is one's brother. (Oppen UCSD: 16, 22, 22)

The poem as a whole is haunted by thoughts of death but here it is as if Oppen almost literally buries a dead comrade, removing mention of his "brother" and leaving the body as just an unrecognizable "lump" in the final version.

Such conflicted memories of World War II intersect with the poem's powerful stand against the Vietnam war:

It is the air of atrocity,
An event as ordinary
As a President.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance
In which people burn.

There is, he continues:

Insanity in high places,
If it is true we must do these things
We must cut our throats (Oppen 2002: 173)

The directness of these lines differs tellingly from the contorted passage about burial. In contrast to the madness of the Vietnam war in which, Oppen says, "the casual will/ Is atrocious" (p. 173), World War II remains cryptic, at once a so-called "good war" in which, as it happened, Oppen had chosen to fight, *and* the source of a trauma, personal and cultural, which now haunts the new conflict. At the time that he was completing "Of Being Numerous," Oppen remarked that "If we launch that 'general war in Asia,' I think I will have to give this up again" (Oppen UCSD: 16, 19, 12). He had already given up writing during the Depression and had not returned to it until the late 1950s. Now he found again that "I perhaps cannot write poetry in war time. I couldn't before, and perhaps cannot now. I become

ashamed, I become sick with shame" (UCSD: 16, 19, 12). Oppen's "sickness" is produced in part by a sense of deadly repetition, of the traumatic experience of Alsace occurring again, bringing back what he called the "guilt of that foxhole" (Oppen 1974: 5). While the Vietnam war can be "seen," as it were, in that terrible image of "A plume of smoke, visible at a distance/ In which people burn," World War II has a sort of belated force, continuing to deliver traumatic memories from a distance and refusing to come into the clear focus that might allow it to be forgotten.

This distinction, which is not, of course, meant to suggest a qualitative comparison of incomparable events, may speak to a more general sense of what Robert Bly calls "the sudden new change in the life of humanity" after World War II (quoted in Walsh 1982: 116). Among contemporary poets Charles Bernstein has expressed this view most systematically in an essay called "The Second War and Postmodern Memory," where he argues that "the psychological effects of the Second War are still largely repressed and that we are just beginning to come out of the shock enough to try to make sense of the experience" (Bernstein 1992: 193). While for Bernstein, born in 1950, the war seems "an historical event, something past and gone," the Holocaust, he says, "each year . . . seems nearer, more recent" (p. 194). And although Bernstein is weighing the effect of World War II on what is written after it, he is not, he insists, talking about "'war poetry' in the sense of poems about the war; they are notoriously scarce and beside the point I want to make here" (p. 200). When it comes to representation, he says, "Only the surface of the war can be pictured." A different poetics is needed if we are to grasp the deeper meanings of the Holocaust, for the Second War differs fundamentally from the First: in the Second War, says Bernstein, "the malaise is not locatable as the official event of the war, the battles; the whole of everyday life has lost its foundations" (p. 204). Oppen had already spoken (after Michael Heller) of the need "to save the commonplace" (Oppen 2002: 270) and in some of his late poems, such as "The Occurrences," with its talk of the "survivor," there are related but oblique intimations of the Holocaust. It is the obliquity that must be emphasized, for while, as Virilio says, military engagement is increasingly a visual spectacle, its attendant derealization makes it ever harder to "see" in an ethical sense.

For Bernstein, this might exemplify what he regards as a general shift from the New American Poetry onwards, a shift from what I've called "seeing" wars as actual events to a poetics that finds in acts of

linguistic precision and discrimination an ethical counter to what he terms “the grammar of control and the syntax of command” (Bernstein 1992: 202). War as a particular historical event recedes, even as the language in which its aims are articulated figures increasingly as an all-enclosing linguistic environment whose limits poetry must ceaselessly define. So in recent American poetry, Bernstein argues, we find a countervailing emphasis on “particularity, the detail rather than the overview, form understood as eccentric rather than systematic, process more than system, or if system then system that undermines any hegemonic role for itself” (p. 210). It’s not surprising that Gertrude Stein is often thought of as a progenitor of Language writing, since what Bernstein describes here could apply equally to her way of “seeing” wars. The difference is, perhaps, that for Bernstein the poet is no longer bound to write about wars directly, since the Enlightenment values so fatally discredited in the Second War – values associated with “patriarchy, authority, rationality, order, control” (p. 198) – are ever present to us in their degraded form and continue to “manipulate and dominate us” in “everyday” language (p. 202). Just as Stein’s “I” played serious games with the logic of normal ways of seeing war, so poetry is here proposed as a critical act that illuminates the political and social dimensions of language hitherto obscured by its assumed transparency. Recent American poetry thus draws on the insights of an earlier modernism, but, as Bernstein notes, in doing so it gives them what he calls “an entirely different psychic registration” (p. 205), interrogating the fetish of authority that characterizes some of their best-known expressions.

The terms of Bernstein’s essay help to point up an increasingly noticeable divergence between the different strands of war-writing in America. On the one hand, there is the huge body of poetry produced by Vietnam veterans (see Chattarji 2001). Many of these are poems of everyday horror, poems of wounding, guilt, and protest that, for the most part, derive their moral charge from their clear-sighted presentation of life and death and from the bitter irony with which they address the administration that had sent them there. These poems are frequently moving in their sensitivity to nuance and detail in a world more attuned to destruction and apocalyptic force. The best of them – by John Balaban and W. D. Erhart, for example – are also responsive to the landscape and ancient culture of the country (Balaban writes: “In Vietnam, poets brushed on printed silk/ those poems about clouds, mountains, and love./ But now their poems are cased in steel” – Erhart 1985: 17), and the tendency to journalistic description, too

much in evidence in many of the anthologies, is often curbed by pithy reflections on the soldiers' role. In "Relative thing," for example, Erhart writes;

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
You didn't know a thing about.

It didn't take us long to realize
The only land that we controlled
Was covered by the bottoms of our boots. (Erhart 1985: 95)

Many of these poems certainly strike home, though to read through the big anthologies of them is to be made strongly aware of their time-bound quality. The repetition is relentless and true to fact – burning bodies, mutilation, fear, and disillusion – but it tends to fix the historical events of Vietnam as a series of frozen images.

This perhaps explains why other, more clearly major poets have responded to the challenge not so much by writing *about* war as by somehow internalizing it within their work or even by not looking directly at it at all (Kenneth Koch remarked of one of his protest poems, that "the parts that were about the war actually kept sort of being rejected by the poem," quoted in Herd 2000: 124). In similar vein, one critic has said of Duncan's *Passages* sequence, "these are not anti-war poems, but war poems, studies in struggle" (Reid 1979: 169), and it is indeed the case that while Duncan names and excoriates the "betrayers of public trust," Lyndon Johnson chief among them, he does so in a highly charged context of Dantescan and mythological allusion that deliberately recalls Pound's "Hell Cantos." The "struggle" is waged in and with language, recapitulating a sort of primal contest of powers that, for Duncan, informs the practice of writing itself. As he remarks in the preface to *The Years as Catches*, "The War itself and the power of the State I dimly perceived were not only a power over me but also a power related to my own creative power but turnd [sic] to purposes of domination, exploitation and destruction" (quoted in Reid 1979: 169). For Duncan, this contest of powers is typically perceived in cosmic, almost Blakean terms, which designedly give less historical specificity to the ongoing war.

Few poets would deploy Duncan's inflated cosmic perspectives, but others would find ways of writing about the war without confronting its historical detail directly. For the noncombatant, Vietnam was of course the first real TV war; images of it were increasingly mediated

and experienced as remote and unreal. Louis Zukofsky's "A-18," for example, which can be read, as Bob Perelman puts it, "as voicing a sincere though distant opposition to the Vietnam War," regularly quotes from TV and the press (Perelman 1994: 205). The mediatedness of war now gives a new twist to the theatrical metaphor, making it ever harder to "see" war in any meaningful sense – pondering the unreality of infant death in Vietnam, Denise Levertov writes in "Advent 1966" that

because of this my strong sight,
my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given
that it might stir me into song,
is blurred. (Levertov 1970: 4)

For some poets, and Levertov is one, the task of poetry is to find, or perhaps in some sense to recover, a simple, undamaged language, the language, as she puts it in "Life at War," of

humans, men who can make;
whose language imagines *mercy*,
lovingkindness; we have believed one another
mirrored forms of a God we felt as good –
who do these acts, who convince ourselves
it is necessary; these acts are done
to our own flesh; burned human flesh
is smelling in Viet Nam as I write. (Levertov 1967: 230)

Charles Olson was fond of quoting Heraclitus's view that "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar" (Olson 1970: 25); Levertov's lines are perhaps more self-reflexive, proposing that a culture of war has forced us to live in a language in which we cannot recognize ourselves. In "Wichita Vortex Sutra," Allen Ginsberg thus observes mordantly that

The war is language,
language abused
for Advertisement,
language used
like magic for power on the planet:
Black magic language,
formulas for reality. . . . (Ginsberg 1995: 401)

Hence the push to what I earlier called “poetic thinking,” to a language freed from the closure of end-means logic and the finality of war-speak.

Not all poets, of course, have fought state power, as have Duncan and Ginsberg, with the counterpower of bardic eloquence. As Bernstein suggests, many have instead cultivated a particularity of vision as the basis for ethical discrimination and as a way of recovering a necessary sense of human scale in the face of war-speak’s phoney sublimities. Of the Language poets, some, like Bob Perelman and Bernstein himself, have found in humor a way of achieving that scale, forcing familiar rhetorics to implode in a sordid mass of cliché and hyperbole – “the stately violence of the State,” by which Perelman characterizes World War II, thus reveals itself as heartless farce, “a classic war,” he sums up, “punctuated by Hiroshima” (Perelman 1986: 45).

While Language poetry was fundamentally shaped in the rhetorical crucible of the Vietnam years, it often seems that it is World War II that still exerts a primary influence. For poets such as Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe, that war is forever associated with a rending of family ties. In the opening prose section of Howe’s *The Europe of Trusts*, for example, she recalls how her childhood was enmeshed with the events of the war and how her father, “a man of pure principles, quickly included violence in his principles, put on a soldier suit and disappeared with the others into the thick of the threat to the east called the West” (Howe 1990a: 10). More tentatively, Hejinian opens *My Life* with “A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as she stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple – though moments are no longer so colored” (Hejinian 1987: 7). These moments of departure and return inaugurate a history – Howe remembers a visit to Buffalo Zoo with her father before he enlisted, “a treasured memory of togetherness,” she says, but one also infected by a violence to come, as she watches “Three bears running around rocks as if to show how modern rationalism springs from barbarism” (Howe 1996: 3). For Howe – and this is the main motive behind all her writing – the past is an immediate force, it is what “never stops hurting” (Howe 1990a: 26), the inscription of a loss that can never be made good. As a result, the wars she has seen – and her work gives sight of many – abolish completely the objectivity normally associated with the contemplative gaze. As she puts it: “If to see is to *have* at a distance, I had so many dead Innocents distance was abolished. Substance broke loose from the domain of time and

obedient intention. I became part of the ruin. In the blank skies over Europe I was strife represented" (Howe 1990a: 12). With that breakdown of contemplative distance goes a parallel suspicion about the language of historical record. History, for Howe as for Walter Benjamin, is the story told by the victors, and her explorations of American violence have been premised on, as she says, "A recognition that there is another voice, an attempt to hear and speak it" (Howe 1990b: 192). That other voice lies at a far remove from the slick logics of political speech – it is a broken voice, "a stammering even," she says, "Interruption and hesitation used as a force." In recognizing this voice of the other, Howe seeks thus to derive an ethical language from the ruins of an authoritarian one.

Lyn Hejinian's aim in her recent work has been comparable, though where Howe has sought to keep her own poetic language at the threshold of meaning, shattering the historical record into a rubble of verbal bits and pieces, Hejinian seems to have moved in the opposite direction in works like the recent *A Border Comedy*, where the language is playful and apparently discursive, offering the poem as a kind of dialogic, social space. The concern here is not with war as such, though the calculated strangeness of Hejinian's poetic thinking, where fantasies freely masquerade as aphorisms, seems tacitly to invoke an absent "political" language against which it speaks. Not war, then, nor its tautological language of fixed terms, but a thinking which for Hejinian is once again prefigured in Stein's work, with its commitment to "beginning again and again" (Hejinian 2000a: 102). Stein, says, Hejinian, "invented a mode of iteration to indicate not recurrence but phenomenological *occurrence*, the perpetual coming into being through accumulated instances of the person that is" (Hejinian 2000a: 289). This "coming into being," as Hejinian calls it, is at once our coming into social being and the appearance of the poem which announces it as something new and unexpected. Hejinian's thinking here is much influenced by her reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* and particularly by a passage in that book where Arendt speaks of what she calls "the space of appearance" as "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate beings but make their appearance explicitly" (Arendt 1998: 198–9). In another recent work called *Happily*, Hejinian declares that "Logic tends to force similarities but that's not what we mean/ By 'sharing existence'" (Hejinian 2000b: 15). Poetic thinking undermines that logic, she would say, inasmuch as the open form of the poem allows thought to be grasped as something "happening"

rather than as something always already enclosed in its own doom-laden logic. That logic – the logic of war-speak – will no doubt be forever with us, but Hejinian’s work seeks out its limits, realizing in its deepest instincts that – in the words of Denise Levertov – “nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness, / the deep intelligence living at peace would have” (Levertov 1967: 230). In a warlike world, we continue to need that conditional tense that poetry at its best delivers.

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