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W. D. Ehrhart

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*"In Cases Like This, There Is No Need to Vote": Korean War Poetry in the Context of American Twentieth-Century War Poetry*¹

By W. D. EHRHART

THE KOREAN WAR is the least remembered and least acknowledged of all of America's wars. Even as it was being fought, ordinary Americans were aghast to find the country at war again so soon after World War II; they found it profoundly embarrassing to be put to rout twice in six months by what they perceived to be an Asian rabble in sneakers; and they did not understand a war in which total victory was not and could not be the goal. "America tolerated the Korean War while it was on," writes David Halberstam in *The Fifties*, "but could not wait to forget it once the war was over."² And once it was over, the Korean War all but vanished from the American landscape.

Just as the war has vanished, so too has its literature. Keith D. McFarland, in *The Korean War: An Annotated Bibliography*, lists thirty-three Korean War novels. Arne Axelsson, in *Restrained Response: American Novels of the Cold War and Korea*, identifies over forty Korean War novels. Colonel James R. Kerin, professor of English literature at the U. S. Military Academy, has found "some five dozen published novels" about the Korean War.³ And Philip K. Jason lists sixty-six stories by forty-two different authors on his internet web site "Short Fiction of the Korean War."⁴ Yet Paul Fussell is typical of most critics and scholars in arguing, as he does in his *Norton Book of Modern War*, that the Korean War "generated virtually no literature ... worth preserving for its own moral or artistic sake."⁵

Kerin counters with the observation that literary critics have failed "to locate and acknowledge quality where it exists," but when he considers the poetry of the Korean War, he too falls into the same trap as those he takes to task for failing to locate and acknowledge quality where it does exist. Responding to the prevailing assessment that the Korean War did not produce

1. The quote is from Korean War veteran Reg Saner's "They Said." See *War, Literature, and the Arts*, 9,2 (fall/winter 1997): 181.

2. Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 3.

3. Kerin, "The Korean War and American Memory," 179.

4. Jason, Philip K. "Short Fiction of the Korean War." Internet web site: http://www.illyria.com/kor_shortfic.html.

5. Fussell, *The Norton Book of Modern War*, 651.

much in the way of imaginative responses, Kerin replies, "Only in the realm of poetry does the charge of literary vacuity hold almost literally true." In his doctoral dissertation, "The Korean War and American Memory," he reserves less than two pages of commentary for Rolando Hinojosa's thirty-five-poem sequence *Korean Love Songs* and notes in passing Edith Lovejoy Pierce's "Heartbreak Ridge," but concludes:

Aside from Hinojosa's collection and Pierce's 13 lines, verse inspired by the Korean experience seems limited to the doggerel of contemporaneous figures writing for service journals or sincere but unpolished tributes written by veterans—all of which reside in obscurity.

Even the meager attention he gives to Hinojosa emerges from the shadow of his earlier lament for "the absence of any notable poetry" from the Korean War.⁶

Other scholars, critics, and editors (including Axelsson and McFarland) have done no better. In the preface to his 1994 study of Vietnam War poetry, *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans*, Vince Gotera mentions the Civil War, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, but not the Korean War. In the body of his text, he refers to poets Alan Seeger, Joyce Kilmer, and e.e. cummings from the Great War, and to John Ciardi, Richard Wilbur, Richard Eberhart, and Randall Jarrell from World War II, but does not name a single Korean War poet. Jeffrey Walsh, in *American War Literature: 1914 to Vietnam*, includes discussion of poets from the Great War, World War II, and the Vietnam War, but not from the Korean War. Subarno Chattarji's *Memories of a Lost War: A Study of American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War* includes a lengthy chapter on World War II poetry, but not one sentence about Korean War poetry.⁷ Neither Jon Stallworthy's *Oxford Book of War Poetry* nor Kenneth Baker's *Faber Book of War Poetry* include a single poem from the Korean War, though both include poems from World War II and the Vietnam War.

Carolyn Forché's *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* does include four poems by Etheridge Knight, whom Forché identifies as a Korean War veteran, but none of Knight's poems deals with the Korean War. Indeed, it turns out that while Knight did serve in the army during the early months of the Korean War, he never served in Korea nor was he wounded in combat (both of which he claimed), never getting closer to Asia than Ft. Knox, Kentucky.⁸ Meanwhile, Forché does not include any of the Korean War poets who actually are Korean War poets.

6. Kerin, 269, 179, 183-84, and 42.

7. Chattarji's otherwise excellent study was originally his doctoral dissertation at Wolfson College, Oxford University, 1999, and is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. Page numbers refer to the dissertation.

8. Copies of Knight's military records were obtained by Thomas C. Johnson, a graduate student at Butler University, and made available to the author on October 27, 1997. While the original records were partially damaged by fire, careful inspection of what remains makes it all but certain that Knight never served in Korea and was never wounded. He served from June 1947 to June 1949, then reenlisted in February 1950 and served until November 1950 when he was medically discharged for chondromalacia, a degenerative knee problem. He was awarded neither the Purple Heart Medal for wounds received in combat nor any of the Korean War service medals routinely given to anyone serving in Korea.

And there *are* Korean War poets, as well as poems about the Korean War by people who did not serve there. And if the body of Korean War poetry is relatively small (which it is)—and some of that is of questionable quality (which it is)—all of it is valuable as documentary history and cultural commentary. Moreover, Fussell's opinion notwithstanding, the best of it possesses both moral and artistic value.

Howard Fast (of *Spartacus* fame) wrote a short but powerful sequence of seven poems called "Korean Litany" that was published as part of his *Korean Lullaby* even before the war ended. Both Hayden Carruth and Thomas McGrath, World War II veterans and major American poets, wrote individual poems about the Korean War as early as the mid-1950s that both men continued to include in subsequent collections of their own for the rest of their lives. Carruth's "On a Certain Engagement South of Seoul" first appeared in *The Crow and the Heart* and subsequently appeared in *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth and Collected Shorter Poems*. McGrath's "Ode for the American Dead in Korea" first appeared in *Figures of the Double World* and subsequently was reprinted in *New & Selected Poems, The Movie at the End of the World*, and *Selected Poems 1938-1988*. (In the latter two books, which postdate the Vietnam War, McGrath changed the title to "Ode for the American Dead in Asia.")

In the early 1960s, Korean War veteran William Childress began publishing in the highly respected magazine *Poetry*, as well as in *Harper's*, and within a few years he would be joined on the pages of *Poetry* by fellow veteran Keith Wilson, whose long sequence of Korean War poems was published as *Graves Registry and Other Poems* in 1969 and reprinted in an expanded version as *Graves Registry* in 1992. Childress's own two books, *Burning the Years* and *Lobo*, each of which contains Korean War poems, came out in 1971 and 1972 respectively and were reprinted together in 1986 as *Burning the Years & Lobo: Poems 1962-1975*.

Meanwhile, the ubiquitous anthologist of the sixties and seventies, Walter Lowenfels, included one of former Marine William Wantling's Korean War poems in his 1967 *Where Is Vietnam?* Hinojosa's *Korean Love Songs* appeared in 1978 and was reprinted in a bilingual edition in Germany in 1991. Jan Barry and I included Reg Saner's "They Said" in our 1976 anthology *Demilitarized Zones*, Saner's "Re-Runs" appeared in his own 1989 *Red Letters*, and his "Flag Memoir" was published in *Ontario Review* (#34, 1991). In 1995 Paul Edwards edited *The Hermit Kingdom: Poems of the Korean War*. While the quality of the poems in the Edwards anthology is uneven, there are good poems by Korean War veterans James Magner Jr., Wantling, and Wilson, along with a number of poems by younger writers who still find the Korean War a source of creative energy, notable among them David Biespiel, John Jacob, and Patricia Monaghan.⁹

9. *War, Literature, and the Arts*, 9,2 (1997) contains most of the Korean War poems of Childress, Magner, Saner, and Wantling, many of Wilson's, and the entire text of Hinojosa's *Korean Love Songs*. A smaller selection, but also including McGrath's, "Ode for the American Dead in Korea," can be found in *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War*, W. D. Ehrhart and Philip K. Jason, editors. See also Paul Edwards's *The Hermit Kingdom*.

Nevertheless, most editors, critics, and scholars have persisted in believing, as Gotera asserts, that the Korean War has “not produced a significant body of poetry.”¹⁰ Because this belief is so widely held and so unquestioningly accepted, it has never been seriously examined. Evidence to the contrary either goes unnoticed or is routinely disregarded. Not until 1997 was there even so much as a single scholarly critical essay on Korean War poetry, and little has changed since then. Editors continue to publish anthologies, and critics continue to publish studies, that only reinforce the prevailing assumption, which is then passed on to the larger reading public.¹¹ The poetry of the Korean War, for the most part, is and always has been all but invisible on the American literary landscape, even that part of the landscape reserved for American war poetry.

What constitutes “a significant body of poetry,” of course, is debatable. If we look at the four major American wars of the twentieth century—the Great War, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War—the poetry of the Korean War comes out a distant third when comparing the number of poets or the number of poems resulting from each of these wars. The list of soldier-poets from World War II reads like a Who’s Who of mid-twentieth century poetry: Hayden Carruth, John Ciardi, James Dickey, Alan Dugan, Richard Eberhart, Anthony Hecht, Richard Hugo, Randall Jarrell, Lincoln Kirstein, Thomas McGrath, William Meredith, Howard Nemerov, Karl Shapiro, Louis Simpson, W. D. Snodgrass, and Richard Wilbur. Among those who did not serve in the military, but who wrote about the war are Robert Lowell and William Everson (Brother Antoninus), both of whom were conscientious objectors, Archibald Macleish, Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stephen Vincent Benet, and Vachel Lindsay.

Likewise, the number of poets to have come out of, or written about, the Vietnam War is extensive. A short list of soldier-poets includes Doug Anderson, John Balaban,¹² Jan Barry, R. L. Barth, D. F. Brown, Michael Casey, Horace Coleman, David Connolly, Bryan Alec Floyd, David Huddle,

10. Gotera, *Radical Visions*, 323.

11. That 1997 monograph is my own “Soldier-Poets of the Korean War,” published in *War, Literature, and the Arts*, 9,2 (1997). I have since written shorter essays on various aspects of Korean War poetry for *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, and Philip West and Suh Ji-moon’s *Remembering the “Forgotten War”: The Korean War through Art, Film, and Literature* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), and in 1999, Philip K. Jason and I coedited *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War*, which includes a critical and historical introduction, but to date no one other than myself has written about the poetry of the Korean War.

Over the years, the odd Korean War poem has appeared in the odd anthology, in addition to the few mentioned in the text: Harland Ristau’s “Korea” in Lowenfels’s 1964 *Poets of Today*, Childress’s “Korea Bound, 1952” in Edward and Sara Brewton’s 1968 *America Forever New*, Pierce’s “Heartbreak Ridge” in Robert Cromie’s 1968 *Where Steel Winds Blow*, McGrath’s “Ode for the American Dead in Korea” in Carruth’s *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*. But these are few and far between and have not led critics or other anthologists to investigate further. Unless one considers Carruth’s anthology to be “major,” no major anthology of general poetry or even of war poetry has ever included a single Korean War poem, certainly none of the sweeping and highly influential anthologies published by such houses as Norton and Oxford.

Even *The Hermit Kingdom* fails to include Carruth, Childress, Hinojosa, McGrath, or Saner and was in any case out of print less than two years after it was published, leaving—once again—no impression whatever on the American literary landscape.

12. Balaban was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War but chose to do his alternative service in Vietnam where he worked as a field representative for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children.

Yusef Komunyakaa, Gerald McCarthy, Walter McDonald, Marilyn McMahon, Basil Paquet, Dale Ritterbusch, and Bruce Weigl. Among the many others who wrote poems about the Vietnam War are Philip Appleman, Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, Samuel Hazo, Daniel Hoffman, June Jordan, Galway Kinnell, James Laughlin, Denise Levertov, Sharon Olds, Joel Oppenheimer, and David Ray.

On the other hand, the Great War, which cost the United States 80,000 dead¹³ (significantly more costly in American lives than either the Korean or Vietnam Wars), left far less poetry of any importance than did the Korean War. Mark Van Wienen, in his anthology *"I Have a Rendezvous with Death" and Other American Poems of the Great War*, includes over one hundred and twenty-five poems by one hundred different poets, and argues that these are only a small sampling of the "many hundreds, and then many thousands" of poems written between 1914 and 1920.¹⁴ The table of contents includes names such as Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, Amy Lowell, Edith Wharton, and Edgar Lee Masters, along with the likes of C. Arthur Coan, Ellen Winsor, Lola Ridge, and Arthur Brisbane, but the poems themselves support the contention of bibliographer James Hart that "although thousands of minor American authors felt moved to write about the First World War, none was transformed by the conflict into a true poet. More important writers, of course, composed a few war pieces, but none produced a major poem."¹⁵

Only seven of Van Wienen's poets served in the military or as civilian ambulance drivers,¹⁶ and only two of these—Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer—are names we recognize today, and both are, in Walsh's words, "curiously genteel and conservative writers who were seemingly unaffected by the new energies at work in American poetry at this time."¹⁷ Fussell argues that American writing about the Great War "tends to be spare and one-dimensional. The best-known American poem of the war, Alan Seeger's 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death,' operates without allusion [to any poetic tradition]. It is unresonant and inadequate for irony[.]"¹⁸

And yet a number of poems from the Great War survive: Alan Seeger's "The Aisne," "Champagne, 1914-1915," and "Rendezvous"; Kilmer's "Rouge Bouquet" and "The White Ships and the Red"; e.e. cummings's "i sing of Olaf glad and big"; John Peale Bishop's "In the Dordogne"; Archibald Macleish's "Memorial Rain"; and Malcolm Cowley's "Chateau de Soupri, 1917."

13. Kerin, 18.

14. Van Wienen, 2. The anthology is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. A manuscript copy was provided to the author by Van Wienen in February 2000. Page numbers refer to the manuscript copy.

15. Quoted in Van Wienen, 3.

16. Van Wienen also includes—inexplicably, given the anthology's title—the Canadian John McCrae. The status of one other poet, J. Eugene Chrisman, is unclear; his poem, "Poppies," suggests that he may be a veteran.

17. Walsh, *American War Literature*, 16.

18. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 158.

We remember Seeger and Kilmer, in spite of their deficiencies as poets, because they were immensely popular at the time (Kilmer had already published three books of poetry before he enlisted; Seeger's *Poems* was a national bestseller and remained in print through World War II), and because they died romantically in battle (Seeger with the French Foreign Legion; Kilmer leaving a wife and children), but perhaps most of all because we remember the war they fought in.¹⁹ And while cummings, Peale, Macleish, and Cowley have more to recommend themselves literarily than Seeger or Kilmer, it is doubtful that any of their Great War poems would have survived were the Great War as unacknowledged, unexamined, and unknown as the Korean War is.

That the poetry of the Korean War has been deemed insignificant and even nonexistent is as much a reflection of attitudes about (and ignorance of) the Korean War itself as it is a reflection on the poetry. Surely any number of Korean War poems possess as much or more moral and artistic value as any American poem of the Great War, and some of them can hold their own against much of the poetry from World War II and the Vietnam War. Still, trying to characterize and generalize about Korean War poetry, and assess just where and how it fits into the artistic and aesthetic progression of twentieth-century American war poetry, is not an easy exercise.

One can fairly safely say about American Great War poetry that it tends "to stress the heroism and sacrifice of the troops" and views "war as a purifying experience," as Walsh argues, adding that poets such as Seeger and Kilmer "deploy an aesthetic that is pre-modernist."²⁰ Edwards observes that it is a poetry "lacking in personal comment, and strangely removed from immediate experience."²¹ Not until cummings began to write about the Great War, Walsh writes, do we "encounter a modernist sensibility at work, demythologizing, taking war out of the laudatory tradition of verse, and enacting a complete break with past war writing in the United States."²²

The revolution in war poetry wrought by such British soldier-poets as Charles Hamilton Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, and Edmund Blunden did not reach across the Atlantic Ocean until the 1920s. Seeger was dead, for instance, before Sassoon even wrote "The Redeemer," of which Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Sassoon's biographer, says, "Here at last is War poetry based on actual experience."²³ Macleish, Cowley, and Bishop all wrote their most important Great War poems in the 1920s and 1930s. But by the beginning of World War II, the whole enterprise of English-language poetry had changed enormously—the result of such innovative and groundbreaking poets as cummings, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot,

19. Information about Seeger and Kilmer comes from Van Wienen, 1, and Walsh, 18 and 23.

20. Walsh, 12, 15, and 16.

21. Edwards, *The Hermit Kingdom*, xi.

22. Walsh, 26. One might argue that some of the poems in Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps*—"The Wound-Dresser," for instance—demythologize and "take war out of the laudatory tradition of verse," but this is not the venue for such a discussion. For the most part, Walsh's observation holds true.

23. Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 219.

Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams—and within that larger world, the apprehension of both war and war poetry had also changed. Those changes are readily apparent in the poetry to emerge from World War II.

"The Second World War," writes Kerin, "has come to be known for the most part by a single characterizing label: 'the good war' ... the last American war to be considered then, and remembered now, as a 'good war' in the consensus of the American people." At the same time, he notes that World War II poetry has "an edge lacking in the verse of American soldier-poets of World War I."²⁴ Chattarji takes Kerin's line of thought even farther. "American poets were not as triumphalist as the rest of their society," he observes. "While the political establishment projected World War II as the 'good war,' the poets ask for an honest reappraisal of the major military conflict of their time."²⁵

Consider, for instance, John Ciardi, who writes of his dead friend in "A Box Comes Home":

Once I saw Arthur dressed as the United States
Of America. Now I see the United States
Of America as Arthur in a flag-sealed domino.²⁶

It is hardly a triumphalist image, but if World War II was a good war, it certainly did Arthur no good. Nor did it do much good for Randall Jarrell's ball turret gunner who "woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters" and who was washed "out of the turret with a hose" when he died. It did no good for Van Wetering or Averill, "gone to early death" in Richard Eberhart's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment." Louis Simpson's master-sergeant, captain, and lieutenant all end up dead in "Carentan O Carentan." And Alan Dugan's foot soldier—"an accomplished murderer"—"smelled bad and was red-eyed with the miseries/of being scared while sleepless."

While American popular culture may remember the end of World War II as a sailor exuberantly kissing a nurse in Times Square amid tickertape and happy crowds, Howard Nemerov, in "Redeployment," remembers it this way:

They say the war is over. But water still
Comes bloody from the taps, and my pet cat
In his disorder vomits worms which crawl
Swiftly away. Maybe they leave the house.
These worms are white, and flecked with the cat's blood.

Even twenty years after the war's end, James Dickey, in "The Firebombing," is still haunted by the memory of himself as "some technical-minded stranger with my hands" preparing to drop "the fire developed to cling / To everything" on a town where "five thousand people are sleeping."

24. Kerin, 26, 35, and 29.

25. Chattarji, 46 and 71.

26. Stokesbury, 80. Subsequent references to and quotes from other World War II poems come from the same source, 60, 10, 127, 126, 88, and 110, respectively.

Walsh writes that “the diversity of [World War II] poetry, written by both civilians and combatants alike, resists facile summary or definition,” but argues that “the most typical Second World War poets wrote like John Ciardi, in an ironic and slightly self-mocking tone. The new war poets often wrote from a common standpoint of subversive irony.”²⁷ Fussell notes that the World War II poets “preferred to speak in wry understatement, glancing less at the center of a topic than at its edges, proceeding by hints and indirections rather than open straightforward declaration,” often relying on “the wry mock-elegy or mock-epitaph.” While he is highly critical of the poetry written by such noncombatants as Macleish, Sandburg, Millay, Benet, Lindsay, and a great many others who wrote “patriotic drivel” because they were “persuaded that the war effort required the laying aside of all normal standards of art and intellect,” he argues that the soldier-poets adopted “a general skepticism about the former languages of glory and sacrifice and patriotism.”²⁸

But while the World War II poets may wrestle with “the horrors and ambiguities of war,” as Chattarji says, or “regard the military conduct of the war with considerable skepticism,” as Walsh writes, or rage “against war in the abstract,” as Edwards suggests, or feel as if “it had all been gone through before” only a generation earlier, as Fussell contends, what one does not find in the poetry of World War II is any challenge to the need to fight this particular war.²⁹ It may have been ugly, it may have been brutal, it may have been butchery and mayhem and stupidity and madness, it may have exacted a hideous price on everyone engaged in it, but one need only consider the alternative to not fighting—Adolf Hitler and the Japanese Imperial General Staff—and the debate is over. No American poet of World War II has ever written, or ever said, “We should not have gone to war against Germany and Japan.” It was necessary. It was unavoidable.

Herein lies a major difference between the poetry of World War II and the poetry of the Vietnam War. “One quickly sees the anger expressed in the poetry of the Vietnam War,” writes Edwards. “This poetry is full of rage and despair which seems to arise from an utter disbelief in the events taking place.... [It is] lacking any respect for national interests.”³⁰ “Vietnam taught us our limitations and taught us that we had outlived the usefulness of our myths,” writes Dale Ritterbusch. “This is one of the primary lessons of Vietnam. And the poets insist on teaching us this lesson.”³¹ “Of all the writing to come out of the Vietnam War,” Philip Beidler writes, “Vietnam poetry remains a political genre.... [T]his is what [the Vietnam War poets] tell us.... We did not have the faintest notion of who we were and what it was, this awful, insanely misguided, yes—evil—thing we were doing.”³² John

27. Walsh, 152 and 154.

28. Introduction to Stokesbury, xxv and xxvi.; Fussell, *Wartime*, 175; and Stokesbury, xxv.

29. Chattarji, 46; Walsh, 154; Edwards, xii; Fussell, *Wartime*, 132.

30. Edwards, xii.

31. Ritterbusch, “Lessons Learned and Unlearned. In Slabey, *The United States and Viet Nam from War to Peace*, 143.

32. Beidler, “Situation Report: American Writing about the Vietnam War.” In Clymer, *The Vietnam War: Its History, Literature and Music*, 160 and 162.

Clark Pratt sees new themes in Vietnam War poetry, among them "the essential stupidity and causelessness of the war."³³

Just as Fussell criticizes the "patriotic drive!" of homefront poets in World War II, Lorrie Smith dismisses much of the homefront antiwar poetry of writers such as Levertov, Ginsberg, and Bly, writing that "many protest poems written during the war seem destined to fade from view." But she contends that the most effective poems of the Vietnam War are "invaluable for bringing home the war's horror and absurdity to complacent America" and attest to "the catastrophe of the Vietnam War."

Smith argues that "[W. D.] Ehrhart is guided by moral and political outrage," that John Balaban "helps counteract the invisibility of the Vietnamese in most American treatments of the war," that Bruce Weigl "shows the war's persistent nightmare presence in American culture," that D. F. Brown denies "comforting resolution, transcendence, or reconciliation," and that Lowell Jaeger (a conscientious objector who neither went to Vietnam nor served in the military) "reminds us that [the war's] legacy belongs to all Americans, that we cannot deny, forget, or refuse responsibility for it." Summing up, she concludes that, "having witnessed an unspeakably futile and vicious war, [Vietnam War poets] attest to the utter bankruptcy of myths celebrating the war's heroism and mystique."³⁴

Much of this assessment might seem to apply equally to World War II poetry. But while these poets may and do express moral outrage on occasion, political outrage—the idea that the government and the nation are wrong—is absent. Nor do the World War II poets suggest that either the American government or the American people were somehow responsible for World War II. While the World War II poets write about the lingering individual ghosts of their wartime experiences, they do not suggest that the nation itself continues to be haunted by their war.

Moreover, it is inconceivable that any World War II veteran would spell "America" with a "k" instead of a "c" as Charles Purcell does in "The Walk":

Take the war out of the T.V.s and put it in the complacent streets
Kick Amerika awake
Before it does in its sleep.³⁵

Or consider Jan Barry, who compares Americans in Vietnam to "13th-century Mongol armies" in "In the Footsteps of Genghis Khan."³⁶ Or David Connolly, who, in "To the Irish Americans Who Fought the Last War," writes of his service in Vietnam that "we became the hated Black and Tan, / and we shamed our ancestry."³⁷ Or Gustav Hasford (whose novel *The Short-timers* became the basis for Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*), who writes in "Bedtime Story":

33. Introduction to Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, x.

34. Smith, "After Our War," *Poetry Wales*, 25,1 (June 1989): 8, 9, and 10.

35. Barry et al., *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 107.

36. Ehrhart, *Carrying the Darkness*, 25.

37. Connolly, *Lost in America*, 39.

Sleep, America.
 Silence is a warm bed.
 * * *
 Bayonet teddy bear and snore.
 Bad dreams are something you ate.
 So sleep, you mother.³⁸

Of course, Vietnam War poetry “resists facile summary or definition,” to use Walsh’s words, every bit as much as does World War II poetry. And there are many affinities the two groups of poetry share; modern war is both transforming and degrading, and the particulars of any given war don’t make much difference to individual human beings down at the level of the firefight or the dogfight or the naval duel. What sets Vietnam War poetry apart is the unavoidable realization that all this suffering and death and destruction was for nothing. Just nothing. As Gerald McCarthy writes in “The Hooded Legion,” a poem about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C.:

There are no words here
 to witness why we fought,
 who sent us or what we hoped to gain.

 There is only the rain
 as it streaks the black stone,
 these memories of rain
 that come back to us—
 a hooded legion reflected in a wall.³⁹

Differences, too, exist in the form of the poems, the nuts and bolts of how the poetry is constructed. “The crucial thing to notice is the obvious devotion of [the World War II poets] to poetry and the enterprise of poetry,” says Gotera. “These artists pay devout attention to poetics (often to rhyme, meter, and inherited forms) in an attempt to extend the poetic corpus. In other words, they are cognizant and deliberate in writing fine *literature*. Vietnam-veteran poets would call these assumptions into question.”⁴⁰ The poetry of the Vietnam War, adds Edwards, “is personal, immediate, self-directed, and lacking much of the abstraction traditionally found in poetry.”⁴¹ “With only a few exceptions,” Pratt contends, Vietnam War poems “are essentially ‘non-literary’; that is, they require little explication; they come from no recognizable tradition; [and] they usually invent their own forms[.]”⁴²

To some extent, this is a function of continuing changes in post-World War II American poetry in general. But it is also the result—often willfully so—of choosing to reject the values of the World War II generation that sent the Vietnam generation off to war, including their literary values. “Nearly all the poems on the Vietnam War,” writes Smith, “struggle on some level—the-matically, formally, or stylistically—to break down conventional social

38. Ehrhart, *Carrying the Darkness*, 125.

39. Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, 96.

40. Gotera, 25.

41. Edwards, xii.

42. Introduction to Ehrhart, *Unaccustomed Mercy*, viii.

meanings rather than reflecting or accommodating them."⁴³

One really does have to be careful, of course, with generalizations, keeping in mind that there are always exceptions. Vietnam War poet R. L. Barth, for instance, writes almost entirely in closed forms, using both rhyme and meter, and David Huddle has written a fine sequence of sonnets about the Vietnam War. Not all of the poetry of nonveterans should be dismissed out of hand, either. Philip Appleman, Christopher Bursk, Michael Stephens, Frank Stewart, and a number of other writers—including Carruth and McGrath—have written excellent poems inspired by the Vietnam War. And while Fussell rightly blasts the "patriotic drivel" written by noncombatants during World War II, it is hard to find fault with Robinson Jeffers's "Pearl Harbor," or Winfield Townley Scott's "The U.S. Soldier with the Japanese Skull," or Weldon Kees's "June 1940."⁴⁴

Still, if generalizing about the poetry of either World War II or the Vietnam War is difficult because in each case the body of work is so large, even more difficulty arises from Korean War poetry because the body of work is, relatively, so small. While dozens of individual poems of varying quality were written by various poets, only a small number of poets (most importantly Childress, Fast, Hinojosa, Saner, Wantling, and Wilson) have written more than half a dozen poems about the Korean War, and only Hinojosa and Wilson have produced larger sequences based on the war.

Because most scholars and critics don't even acknowledge the existence of Korean War poetry, they of course make no attempt to generalize about it. Gotera, for instance, who writes that "a wide gap of poetic philosophy may yawn between the soldier-poets of World War I and World War II and those of Vietnam," never considers the possibility that this gap might be at least partially filled by the poetry of the Korean War, a poetry he has already concluded does not exist.⁴⁵ Only Edwards makes even a stab at characterizing Korean War poetry. "Caught like a shadow between World War II and Vietnam," he writes, "the Korean War was a very different war, and one which reflected a transition in war poetry." But instead of making any attempt to explain what he means by calling it transitional poetry, Edwards, not a literary scholar but a historian, turns to the war itself, saying that "it was the first of the non-patriotic wars, a war during which participants expanded to an art form the idea that 'getting it over' was more important than 'getting it done,'" which may be true but does nothing to explain or illuminate the poetry.⁴⁶

43. Smith, *Poetry Wales*, 25,1 (1989): 7.

44. Vietnam War poems by Barth, Huddle, Appleman, Bursk, Stephens, Stewart, Carruth, and McGrath can be found in Ehrhart's *Carrying the Darkness*. The poems of Jeffers, Scott, and Kees can be found in Stokesbury's *Articles of War*.

It is even difficult to generalize about American poetry of the Great War. While poets like Seeger and Kilmer persisted in offering a romanticized, stylized vision of war, Van Wienen (405) includes a poem by J. Eugene Chrisman, originally published in the May 14, 1921 issue of *Literary Digest*, that begins: "Poppies? / Not for me, buddy! / Buds o' Hell I'd call 'em," ending: "Then the Jerries cut loose ... Got old Slim—got him right! / Down in the poppies he goes—kickin'—clawin'! / Don't talk poppies to me ... If you'd seen old Slim—Boy, he died wallerin' in poppies! / Poppies—/Hell!"

45. Gotera, 4.

46. Edwards, xii.

It would seem logical that Korean War poetry should be a kind of transitional poetry serving to “fill the gap” between World War II poetry and Vietnam War poetry, and to some extent it does, sharing many of the themes of the poetry that come both before and after: fear, pain, guilt, loss, sadness, dislocation, isolation, transformation in the most negative sense, disgust with war in general. Rolando Hinojosa captures the bleakness of war with these lines from “New Battery Position”:

The earth reveals patches of green here and there,
But we'll soon fix that. What the gun crews don't trample,
The shells and supplies will.... It doesn't take long.⁴⁷

William Childress's sad recognition, in “Soldiers,” that “soldiers can't be soldiers and be human” is not limited to the Korean War.⁴⁸ And Darien Cobb's shocked surprise, in a poem called “News,” is surely universal:

I did not understand
about time and space,

Until pieces of an old tin roof
as big as the hands of
God demanded the space
where your chest had been.⁴⁹

In “Re-Runs,” Reg Saner grapples with almost every emotion in the list above:

Odd nights, a clay pit or two may waken him
still, alone inside a nameless grief holding
nothing: their faces, grass shrapnel—which some field
on the world's other side bothers with. Like seed,
the shapes that won't go away without tears.⁵⁰

Some of this Korean War poetry, however, also anticipates the explicit anger of the Vietnam War poets, especially the soldier-poets, not at (or not only at) war as a general phenomenon, but at this war in particular, and at those whom the poets hold responsible for it. In “The Eighth Army at the Chongchon,” Hinojosa makes fun of the rationale he and his comrades have been given for fighting in Korea:

Creating history (their very words)
by protecting the world from Communism. I suppose
One needs a pep talk now and then[.]

Childress is no more convinced of the cause than Hinojosa, writing in “Burning the Years”:

47. *War, Literature, and the Arts*, 114.

48. Ehrhart and Jason, *Retrieving Bones*, 163.

49. Edwards, 14.

50. Ehrhart and Jason, 182.

Goodbye to the slim youth
in paratrooper garb,
with boots like mirrors
and ribbons straight as his spine.
He knew all there was to know
about honor and duty.
But duty changes with each job,
and honor turns ashes soon enough.

The vehemence of the sarcasm in Saner's "They Said" is almost palpable, driving the poem through two previous stanzas to its harsh conclusion:

They said, "Democracy is at the crossroads everyone
will be given a gun and a map in cases like this
there is no need to vote." Our group scored quite
well getting each of its villages right except
one but was allowed to try again on a fresh village
we colored it black and then wore our brass
stars of unit citation almost all the way home.

The use of the word "almost" in the poem's final line leaves no doubt that Saner takes no pride in what he and his country have done in and to Korea. And Keith Wilson's critique of Wall Street is scathing in "December 1952." After describing how "stabbing / tracers hit a village, / the screams of women, children / men die," he concludes:

Casualties are statistics
for a rising New York Stock market—
its ticker tapes hail the darkeyed
survivors, and cash registers
click, all over the nation, these men
deceive themselves. War is for. The dead.⁵¹

Fast (who is not a Korean War veteran) explicitly indicts the government itself in "Gerald Cartwheel, Tankman":

The day my tank rolled through a village,
flattening those flimsy houses,
I saw a woman caught under a beam,
screaming as the tank rolled over—
on that day, I wrote my congressman,
my free and democratic right,
"Was I sent here to do this kind of thing,
or tell me why, or have I no right to know,
or do you know?"⁵²

Fast also seems to anticipate the racial tensions of Horace Coleman's "OK Corral East: Brothers in the Nam" when he has black soldier "Jamsie Anderson, Quartermasters" say: "Well, take my past and put it you know where, / all of it, cleaning toilets and shining shoes"—this after being told by

51. Ehrhart and Jason, 168, 166, 182, and 201, respectively.

52. Fast, "Korean Litany," *Korean Lullaby*, unpaginated.

white soldiers, "Black man's / got no business talking common sense." Just as John Balaban works to counter the invisibility of the Vietnamese, James Magner's "To a Chinaman, in a Hole, Long Ago" acknowledges the humanity of those faceless "Asian hordes" who swept out of the bitter Manchurian winter and died by the tens of thousands. Speaking to a Chinese soldier he has just killed, Magner wishes he could

bequeath my life to you
that you might fly the Yellow Sea
to your startled matron's arms

but sadly recognizes that

marbled you lie
—and I, somewhat alive—
this rock-white silent day
of our demagogue damnation.

Certainly Lowell Jaeger holds the American people no more accountable for the consequences of the Vietnam War than does Wilson for the Korean War. In "Commentary," for instance, Wilson writes:

deaths. lists of victims
in a language the uncle
back home couldn't read
if he saw it, whose enemies
are always faceless, numbers
in a paper blowing in the
Stateside wind.

How many bodies would
fill a room[?]
* * *

We have killed more.
The children's bodies alone
would suffice.

The women, their admittedly
brown faces frozen in the agony
of steel buried in their stomachs,
they too would be enough

but aren't, are
finally not piled high enough
the cost of war must be paid, bullets
made for firing, fired.

And one can hardly get more political than Childress, who writes in "For My First Son" that flamethrowers, trenchfoot, gangrene, and shrapnel are the

gifts of male birthdays,
wrapped in patriot slogans,
and sent by lying leaders.⁵³

53. See Coleman in *Carrying the Darkness*, 71; Fast, *Korean Lullaby*, unpaginated; Magner, *War, Literature, and the Arts* (WLA), 9.2 (1997); Wilson, WLA, 9.2 (1997): 230; and Childress, WLA, 9.2 (1997): 62. Balaban has published multiple books of poetry, most recently *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New & Selected Poems*. Jaeger's Vietnam War poems can be found in *War on War*.

In form, one can see movement away from what Gotera calls "attention to poetics" toward what Pratt calls "non-literary" poetry. While both Carruth's "On a Certain Engagement South of Seoul" (written in *terza rima*) and McGrath's "Ode for the American Dead in Korea" (a combination of rhymed and blank verse) are highly structured, and Paal Ramberg and Jerome Miller employ a variety of traditional forms (alongside a proselike free verse) in their 1950 collaboration *Hell's Music: A Verse Narrative of the Korean War*, most Korean War poetry is written in various styles of free verse from the prose-poetry of Reg Saner's "Flag Memoir" to the staccato lines of William Wantling's "Sure." Among the soldier-poets, only Childress attempts to use closed forms,⁵⁴ and then only in a few instances such as "Korea Bound, 1952," "The Soldiers," "Combat Iambic," and "The War Lesson."

This, too, however, may be as much a reflection of general trends in poetry as it is a result of deliberate artistic—and political—choices by the poets. None of the soldier-poets began writing poetry about the Korean War until the 1960s. Wilson says that his writing was heavily influenced by Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," which he did not read until 1960. Childress stayed in the army until 1959 and did not attend the Iowa Writers Workshop until 1966. Wantling only began to write poetry while taking a creative writing class at San Quentin Prison in the late 1950s.⁵⁵ By then, such new trends as the New York School, the Black Mountain Poets, and of course the Beats were helping to shape the course of American poetry.

Moreover, by the time Childress and Wilson were publishing the bulk of their Korean War poetry, Vietnam War poets like Balaban, Barry, and Basil Paquet had begun to write and publish. And though there is no evidence that Hinojosa was influenced by it, a significant body of Vietnam War poetry already existed by the time he began to write *Korean Love Songs* in 1976. Indeed, by the very nature of its being a novel-in-verse, in a number of ways *Korean Love Songs* may have as much in common with Peter Bowman's World War II novel-in-verse *Beach Red* or McAvoy Layne's Vietnam War novel-in-verse *How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam* as it does with the Korean War poems of any of the other authors in this study.

Finally, whatever parallels and foreshadowing one might manage to discern in Korean War poetry, one has to recognize that there is no direct line of connection from World War II poetry to Vietnam War poetry through Korean War poetry. While Vietnam War poets regularly display their debt to earlier wars and earlier generations of war poets—sometimes quite explicitly as in Balaban's "On a Photograph of Schoolchildren Wearing Gas Masks. Rheims. World War I" or Paquet's "Mourning the Death, by Hemorrhage, of a Child

54. The one exception to this generalization is William Wantling's "Korea 1953" (see Ehrhart and Jason, 186), which contains an intricate and intriguing sequence of internal rhymes; aside from this poem, however, Wantling wrote exclusively in free verse.

55. Wilson, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, v. 5, 348. Biographical information on Childress from *Contemporary Authors*, First Revision Series, v. 41-44, 137. Biographical information on Wantling from Kevin E. Jones, "Finding Jewels in the Awkward Mud: A Reconsideration of William Wantling and His Poetry," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Illinois State University, 1994.

from Honai"—in all the body of Vietnam War poetry there seems to be not one reference to the Korean War or its poets.⁵⁶ Because Korean War poetry, like the war itself, has been so thoroughly overlooked, dismissed, and ignored, it did not and could not serve as an influence on those poets who came after.

This is not, however, a reason to continue to overlook, dismiss, and ignore it. The fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War (1950-1953) has brought renewed attention to the war—some would argue it has brought real attention to the war for the first time. One can only hope that some small part of this attention might be directed toward the poetry. Back in 1985, I wrote in the introduction to *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*:

Time may play tricks with human memory. Scholars and politicians, journalists and generals may argue, write and re-write "the facts." But when a poem is written, it becomes a singular entity with an inextinguishable and unalterable life of its own. It is a true reflection of the feelings and perceptions it records, and as such, it is as valuable a document as any history ever written.⁵⁷

This is no less true for the poetry of the Korean War, which collectively deserves a better fate than it has thus far received.

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56. Balaban, *After Our War*, 70; Paquet in *Carrying the Darkness*, 225.

57. Ehrhart, *Carrying the Darkness*, xxvi.

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