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A Plague of Poets

POETS AGAINST THE WAR IS AN ESSENTIAL DOCUMENT in the history of one of the most cynical and corrupt conflicts of our time.¹ I am referring, naturally, to the Poetry Wars—that ruthless struggle for grants, awards, teaching jobs, book contracts, reading engagements, and, most of all, attention that rages incessantly on creative-writing-program battlefields from Honolulu to Halifax. The book was the brainchild of—and has given the career boost of a lifetime to—Sam Hamill, a previously rather obscure poet who, after being invited by the First Lady to a White House symposium on “Poetry and the American Voice” scheduled for February 12, 2003, recognized the invitation as a spectacular opportunity to improve his strategic position on the poetry scene. Not that he puts it quite this way himself: In his introduction, he says that after hearing from Mrs. Bush, he “asked a few fellow poet-friends to send me poems speaking ‘for the conscience of our country’” against the planned invasion of Iraq. Eleven thousand friends responded (and Mrs. Bush cancelled the event). The poems went up on Hamill’s website, www.poetsagainsthewar.org; some 175 of them are included in this book, which is intended “to represent our collective voice.” Never before, brags Hamill, “have so many poets spoken in a single chorus.” But should a poet *want* to be part of a “chorus”? The answer here is clearly in the affirmative: Peter Levitt, introducing his poem, underscores his solidarity with “my poetry brothers and sisters”; Stanley Kunitz addresses President Bush on behalf of “the poets”; and Julia Alvarez tells Mrs. Bush that “we [poets] bring you tidings of great joy— / not only peace but peace on earth”—thus equating herself and her “fellow poet-friends” (to coin a phrase) with the heavenly host.

Kunitz and Alvarez aren’t the only familiar names in Hamill’s stable; among the other notables on hand are Marvin Bell, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Creeley, Rita Dove, Marilyn Hacker, Galway Kinnell, W. D. Snodgrass, and Mark Doty. But Hamill plainly wants his anthology to have a democratic flavor, so there are plenty of folks here you never heard of—including several children, whose contributions are scarcely worse than those by many of the adults. Here’s a quick test. Read this poem: “Wet bodies of those who have fallen / Afghanistan blown to pieces! / Right on target—the men, the women, / the children, crying,

¹ *POETS AGAINST THE WAR*, ed. by Sam Hamill with Sally Anderson and others. Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books. \$12.95p.

mommy, mommy!" Now read this one: "I'm sorry that your mom was killed / When a missile struck your home / You were only three, and innocent / Your mother too was innocent." One of these works is by an eleven-year-old; the other is by a woman of thirty-five. Guess which is which. And while you're at it, ask yourself this: What does it mean to profess the inestimable value of the poet's role in society ("there are things learned from poetry," Hamill insists, "that can be learned no other way") and then to suggest that even an eleven-year-old can fill that role?

Not only this book's table of contents but its poems, too, are populated by children. Indeed, many of Hamill's contributors seem convinced they've done their job as antiwar poets just by typing the *word* "children." In a "statement of conscience," Canadian poet laureate George Bowering points out that "killing children is wrong." Connie Wanek writes: "You say don't worry about the children of Baghdad; they're not like our children. They / won't make a fuss." (Just curious: exactly *who* said this?) Needless to say, there's nothing here about the discovery of children's corpses in Saddam's mass graves or the liberation of children from Saddam's prisons. But then, if the American children in these poems are real children—usually the children of the poets themselves—the Iraqi children are merely tropes whose purpose is to alert us to the presence of that exquisite entity, The Poet's Conscience. And make no mistake, it's that Conscience, and not Iraq or its people, that's at the center of most of these poems. Tess Gallagher entitles her contribution "I Have Never Wanted to March"; Len Edgerly, in his poem, tells a friend, "I'm against the war, but not ready to wear a button," then changes his mind. This book is a riot of first-person singular pronouns; inconsequential autobiographical anecdotes abound (Hamill writes in his introduction of the poet's "obligation to assay the human condition from an intensely personal, often subjective perspective"). What few images there are of life in Saddam's Iraq, meanwhile, are idyllic and rich in atmosphere that feels derivative of *National Geographic* photos: "She rises in the glow of a red sun / to make strong coffee. . . . She sits / drinking slowly, beneath her lime tree" (Patricia Monogham, "The Woman of Bagdad").

Yes, there are a few poems here (by Alfred Corn and C. K. Williams, to name two) that not only aren't bad but even strike notes of decency, maturity, and humility. Yet most are uniform not only in their puerility of perspective but in their stale language and ideas (not to mention the distance they keep from any hint of meter or rhyme). One after another of Hamill's poets alludes piously to our "blue planet," scoffs at the term "collateral damage," and witlessly disparages George W. Bush (whom Geoff Brock dubs "our unelected king" and Willis Barnstone calls "our mindless caesar" and "subnormal emperor"). The idea that America is in any way preferable to Saddam's Iraq is repeatedly ridiculed: Ruth Stone refers to "the myth of democracy"; Marilyn Nelson asks, "Who are the Good Guys now? Who are the bad?"; for Matthew Shenoda, America

is “this place that has spit on everything I know to live”; William Irwin Thompson slams not only Bush but also FDR, Wilson, and Lincoln (“our first Imperial / Bismark [*sic*]”); and, last but not least, Fawzia Afzal-Khan, a “Pakistani-American scholar, professor, poet, memoirist, classical singer, actor, writer, mother of two” and author of *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* and *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, chimes in with a poem that begins: “Osama / Sam A / Uncle Sam.”

A staggering number of poems here follow a single trite formula, presenting the news of war as an unpleasant intrusion upon an (American) life lived in harmony with nature and characterized by a taken-for-granted feeling of safety and tranquility. Here, for example, is Virginia Adair’s “Casualty,” the book’s opening poem, in its entirety: “Fear arrived at my door / with the evening paper / Headlines of winter and war / It will be a long time to peace / And the green rains.” Adair’s poem is followed immediately by “Cranes in August,” in which Kim Addonizio describes her daughter making cranes out of paper while outside “gray doves” coo, and “Geese, October 2002,” in which Lucy Adkins, hearing geese flying above her “north to the nesting grounds,” reflects that while in Washington “our country’s leaders / are voting for war,” in Nebraska “the geese fly over / the old wisdom in their feathers.” This pattern is broken by poem #4 (Afzal-Khan’s “Osama” ode), but it is resumed in poem #5, wherein Kelli Russell Agodon describes her daughter picking up ants on the beach, trying “to help them / before the patterns of tides / reach their lives. . . . Here war is only newsprint.”

And that’s just the beginning of the A’s. Throughout these poems, the implicit argument is: *Why can’t the whole world be as peaceable as my little corner of it is?* The poets appear to believe that their serene lifestyles are somehow a reflection of their own wisdom and virtue; they seem to think they are in possession of some great yet elementary cosmic knowledge from which the rest of us can profit. What they evidently do not realize is that what they are celebrating in these poems is a security for which they have to thank (horrors) the U.S. military and a prosperity that they owe to (horrors again) American capitalism. Entirely absent from their facile scribblings, indeed, is any sign of awareness that this “blue planet” is a terribly dangerous place and that the affluence, safety, and liberty they enjoy, and that they write about with such vacuous self-congratulation, are not the natural, default state of humankind but are, rather, hard-won and terribly vulnerable achievements of civilization.

September 11 changed the world. But it seems not to have penetrated very deeply into the imaginations of many contemporary American poets, who, as this anthology amply demonstrates, continue to go through familiar motions, writing smug, trivial verses in which their principal goal is to proclaim their own sensitivity. This was never enough in the first place, and it is certainly not enough now. Confronted at last with a big theme, too many of our poets have only proven how feebly equipped they are to address questions of real substance and

complexity. This is not to suggest that anyone is necessarily wrong to oppose a given war or disapprove of a given president (of whom the present critic, for what it's worth, is no fan either). It is only to say that when civilization is in crisis, a serious poet owes it something more than glib, reflexive, one-dimensional posturing. It is to say that poets so transparently rich in self-regard might manage to muster a bit more respect for their art, their readers, and their civilization. And it is to say that an intelligent poetry of dissent ought to exhibit signs of independent thought, of mature moral reflection, of an understanding of the concept of social responsibility that extends somewhat beyond marching and button-wearing, of a solemn recognition that *this is bigger than me*. To turn from these rapid self-advertisements (in which the level of political thought and expression is on a par with that of your average boy band being asked in an interview on MTV Europe what they think of President Bush) to the war poems of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon or, say, Auden's "September 1, 1939"—the most famous line of which, "We must love one another or die," is actually misquoted in Hamill's book—is to leap across a chasm whose breadth shames not only most of the poets collected here but, alas, the entire flimsy house of cards that is contemporary American poetry.

When Hamill chose to respond as he did to Mrs. Bush's invitation, surely one of the figures uppermost in his mind was Robert Lowell, who made headlines in 1965 as the first of several writers publicly to turn down an invitation to a White House Arts Festival in protest against the war in Vietnam. But there is barely a whiff of Lowell's poetic legacy in *Poets Against the War*. On the contrary, to page through Lowell's newly published *Collected Poems* after having put down Hamill's anthology is to find oneself thinking that the two books hardly belong to the same genre.² For though Lowell's public behavior could be famously irrational (owing to his manic depression), his published poems are, miraculously, triumphs of sanity, imbued with a profound consciousness of the poet's responsibility to his art and society and with a stunningly rich sense of historical context. For one poet after another in Hamill's book, the history of war would appear to have begun and ended with the generally accepted cautionary lessons of Vietnam; compare this with Lowell, whose *Collected Poems* include informed references to the conquests of Alexander and Tamerlane, the Roman wars, Viking raids, the Franco-Moorish War, the Wars of the Roses, and the Napoleonic Wars, just to name a few.

When I first read Lowell (1917–1977) many years ago, what seemed all-important was his shift from the densely concentrated, fiercely metrical, and often obscure and impersonal early poems of *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) to the more lucid, conversational, autobiographical lyrics of *Life Studies* (1959) and after.

² COLLECTED POEMS, by Robert Lowell. Ed. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter with the editorial assistance of DeSales Harrison. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$45.00.

But read in sequence in the *Collected Poems*, his *oeuvre* seems surprisingly of a piece, consistent in its intensity, intelligence, and discipline. (As he put it in his poem “Night Sweat”: “one life, one writing!”) In comparison with an early poem like “The Soldier” (“In time of war you could not save your skin. / Where is that Ghibelline whom Dante met / On Purgatory’s doorstep, without kin / To set up chantries for his God-held debt?”)—which is, incidentally, a fresher expression of antiwar sentiment than anything in Hamill’s book—a *Life Studies* poem like “Memories of West Street and Lepke” may at first glance seem formless, but then one notices the pattern of slant rhymes and realizes that many of the lines approximate iambic pentameter:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston’s
“hardly passionate Marlborough Street,”
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a “young Republican.”

In “Lepke,” Lowell recalls his younger self, a Catholic convert whose refusal to fight in World War II landed him in New York’s West Street Jail. Among his fellow inmates was the notorious gangster Louis “Lepke” Buchalter, who had been sentenced to death for his activities as head of Murder Incorporated and whose “little segregated cell” was “full / of things forbidden the common man: / a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American / flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.” With its wartime setting and its elegant juxtaposition of images suggestive of faith and patriotism, corruption and injustice, execution and rebirth, “Lepke” might justly be regarded as an antiwar poem—though not in any way, perhaps, that some of the contributors to *Poets Against the War* would understand.

What an extraordinary, encyclopedic mind Lowell had! Today, when so much celebrated poetry is more or less mindless, the sheer learning on display in his *Collected Poems* can be exhilarating. (The endnotes alone, expertly prepared by Frank Bidart, read like an index to a history of Western civilization.) One is reminded at every turn that Lowell’s primary interest was never in sharing his story or venting his emotions or convincing readers of his own virtue or sensitivity; for him, aesthetic achievement was all. Though the shift in thematic focus reflected in A. Alvarez’s categorization of him, after *Life Studies*, as a member of the “confessional school” was quite real, the label misled; for Lowell, like his contemporaries Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman (all of whom also loosened up, to a degree, in their later poetry), never stopped being an artist, a conscious *maker*. Surpassingly cultivated, steeped in history (especially intellectual history and the history of

poetry), their minds swarming with the great literature of the ages, poets like Lowell, Schwartz, Jarrell, and Berryman brought resources to the creation of a poem that most of the contributors to *Poets Against the War* could not begin to fathom (and that many of them, doubtless, have been taught to regard as irrelevant, if not inimical, to the composition of worthwhile poetry, which, after all, need only be sincere to be good). To read such Lowell poems as “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” “Mr. Edwards and the Spider,” “Beyond the Alps,” “To Delmore Schwartz,” “Sailing Home from Rapallo,” “Skunk Hour,” “Night Sweat,” and “For the Union Dead” against the background of *Poets Against the War* is not to know whether to laugh or cry. Which is not to suggest that Lowell was the greatest of American poets—he may not even have been the best of his generation—but simply to observe that he revered his craft, was gifted with an original and restlessly probing mind, and worked with the dedication of a Leonardo or Michelangelo to develop his ample talent to the utmost.

Fortunately, though *Poets Against the War* may represent the feeble mainstream of the genre, it doesn’t tell quite the whole story of American poetry in our time. Also figuring in the picture are poets such as Joseph Harrison, whom Anthony Hecht, in an effusive introduction to Harrison’s first collection, *Someone Else’s Name*, compares to none other than John Donne.³ While this may be a bit overmuch, one can well understand Hecht’s enthusiasm for Harrison, who, as he observes, obviously “not only loves his art, but delights in it.” Harrison has formidable technical skills yet wears them lightly: “everywhere,” as Hecht puts it, “the poet is both at liberty and in control.” In poems like “As If,” a sequence of twenty-two sonnets of unrequited love in which self-pity is consistently leavened by self-mockery, Harrison manages to be funny even as he makes serious points—some of them, interestingly enough, about our own present topic, poetry in our time. For his beloved’s chosen partner is a poet, and not the kind that Harrison can easily respect, either:

I have no doubt
That his high ship of great verse, bound for you
(As self-regard puffs out its paper sails)
And contemporary readers, never fails
To meet today’s aesthetic (flat and “true”—
Too true to be good). I see why he’s your man
(His poems aren’t metaphors, and they don’t scan).

Many of Harrison’s subjects are off the beaten path (literally): in poems apparently inspired by offbeat news stories, he ponders a man who “flew a lawn chair attached to a helium balloon to a height of 16,000 feet” and a robot that was dropped down “into an active Ant-

³ SOMEONE ELSE’S NAME, by *Joseph Harrison*. Introduction by *Anthony Hecht*. Zoo Press. \$14.95p.

arctic volcano.” (Harrison knows that taking yourself too seriously is not the same thing as being a serious poet.) One poem wryly laments the tacky ways in which Robert Frost has been “pseudo-memorialized” on his old stamping grounds; another registers the irony in the fact that Robert Burns’s grave features “a temple, shining, sleek, / Palladian and pseudo-Greek, / To lord it over all the meek”—which is to say that Burns is buried

Under a silly monument
That contradicts what you most meant:
Your gift was never heaven-sent
 But of the earth,
Of labor to just make the rent,
 And death, and birth.

And no one laughed at vanity,
The face of what we want the crowd to see,
The lie of what we’d like to be,
 Louder than you.
But now, the unwitting honoree,
 What can you do?

Harrison contemplates a related theme, and strikes a decidedly darker note, in “View of Baltimore from Green Mountain Cemetery,” a seven-page-long *tour de force* that adheres to an elaborate stanza form with such perfect proficiency that the form all but disappears and one becomes utterly absorbed in the bleak but deeply gripping argument. Hecht’s judgment that this poem “belongs with the great elegies in the language” doesn’t seem wildly excessive. Indeed, if Harrison has a major flaw, it is that his poems go down so smoothly (he patently believes it’s *his* job to do the heavy lifting) that it’s easy to fail to appreciate the extent of his mastery.

Another poet who is simultaneously “at liberty and in control”—and who rejects the depressingly widespread philosophy that the mind is the enemy of the heart—is Timothy Murphy, whose Housman-haunted third book of poetry, *Very Far North*, also boasts an introduction by Anthony Hecht.⁴ After the dizzying encomia for Harrison, however, Hecht’s approbation here feels oddly meager and grudging; less eulogistic than descriptive, he informs us that “in this volume the reader will encounter excursions into Norse Mythology, Inuit legend, Sioux lore, Japanese art, Chinese, Anglo-Saxon, Greek and Latin sources.” The dearth of superlatives is bemusing, for Murphy is a very gifted poet who, like Harrison, specializes in short poems that are formal, but also comic, capricious, and charming:

⁴ VERY FAR NORTH, by *Timothy Murphy*. Introduction by *Anthony Hecht*. The Waywiser Press. Distributed by Dufours Editions. \$18.95.

I cannot quite abolish
the follies of my youth
or forge the English language
with the plangent ring of truth
Borges brings to Spanish,
so let me hush my anguish
with a whisper of vermouth.

This humility (why are so many of the best poets so modest and so many of the worst so full of themselves?) recurs elsewhere in Murphy's book: "I am no man of letters, / only a puppet on a string / dancing jerkily in my fetters / when I hear my betters sing."

Among the other admirable poems here is "The Making of an Artist," which is at once a perfect sonnet, a laugh-out-loud joke, and an anecdote that reads like a condensed version of a top-drawer Somerset Maugham story. In "Game Log," Murphy winds up a list of words designating groups of different animals—"a *charm* of finches, / a *rabble* of robins"—by coining a new and useful term: "a *plague* of poets." And then there's "Poet's Prayer":

When I die and go to hell,
as I most certainly shall
(being such an unbeliever)
good Lord, please deliver
my soul to that shady dell
where the pagan poets dwell.
And there, Lord, let me seek
masters of trope and rhyme—
the infernal and the sublime—
and toil until the end of time
to learn Latin and Greek.

Murphy, who is a North Dakota farmer (one of his poems quotes the advice he received in his youth from Robert Penn Warren: "Go home, boy. Buy a farm. / Sink your toes in that rich soil / and grow yourself some roots"), writes poems of farm life that are refreshingly free of pretentious, self-flattering bilge about being at one with all living creatures, the cycles of nature, etc. (The only thing worse than a bad poet writing about war is a bad poet writing about working on the land.) At times he achieves a simple dignity in lines that are firm in feeling but stripped of sentimentality: "At the prairie cemetery / where the river meets a road / and Murphys come to bury / love in the loam we've sowed / my brother lets me carry / the light end of the load."

Murphy is the subject of a friendly tribute that appears in Gerry Cambridge's new collection, *Madame Fifi's Farewell and Other Poems*.⁵

⁵ MADAME FIFI'S FAREWELL AND OTHER POEMS, by Gerry Cambridge. Luath Press Ltd. \$14.95p.

Cambridge, a Scotsman of Irish parentage who spent twenty-five years living “in a caravan [mobile home] in rural Ayrshire,” praises Murphy not only for having composed a poem (he doesn’t say which one) “taut and spare in word and line, / Clean-flowing,” but for knowing whereof he writes:

No art without such knowledge can
Matter a damn to thinking man
Whether in farm or caravan,
That is all one;
That knowledged edge is better than
Bland chirping on.

There is, assuredly, no “bland chirping on” in Cambridge’s book, which like Harrison’s and Murphy’s collections contains more than its fair share of poems that have something to say but that do so with a winsome, self-effacing wit and exhilarating formal dexterity. To be sure, in “A Whitmanian Reply,” Cambridge purposely crosses the border into “Song of Myself” territory, the better to chide Walt’s self-appointed acolytes for failing to recognize, and live up to, his real legacy:

O where are the modern free versers with a droplet of Whitman’s
rhythmical energy,
rhythm that’s the root of the universe, with metre its regular partner;
or of the orbic flex of his balls, singing the pæan testicular, jetting
his love-juice abundantly over the umbrella’d masses
detumescent and muttering curses?

Chopped prose, and I say—what is that?
Meanings obscurest to all but the most intimate friends—what are
they?
I say I have more in common with Whitman than any free-verser, in a
time of sonnets he wrote rhythmical free verse based on the prose
in the Bible,
in a time of free verse based not, alas, on Biblical prose I write
sonnets, quatrains, and some ballads. . . .
Amphibrach, dimeter, caesura and pæon, I lie and loaf at my ease
among the prosodic textbooks, all of which I ignore.

This is a formalist manifesto to make one stand and cheer. Nor is it Cambridge’s only piece of first-rate free verse. In “Tale of a Cat,” the poet, no cat lover, describes his initial resistance to the entreaties of a “leaf-frail, leaf-tremulous” feline that showed up one day at his home,

. . . scratching at the door, as a steel nib scratches a page,
Wanting only to be taken in and kept,

Saying, if not in words, I am life, I am life, accept, accept.
Fierce-fanged, curve-clawed, rasp-tongued happy life.

Touching but unsentimental, this poem provides yet more evidence that the best non-formal poetry is almost invariably produced by consummate formalists.

Like Timothy Murphy, Deborah Warren is a farmer (she raises heifers in Vermont), and most of the poems in her collection *The Size of Happiness* draw either on that experience or on Greek or Roman mythology (she is also a former Latin teacher), or both.⁶ One poem memorializes a javelin thrower who “had an ear for the javelin—perfect pitch”; another reflects on “how dumb the Trojans were” to accept that outsized equine offering from the Greeks: “It doesn’t take much horse-sense to deny / your stable to a thing like that.” The enjoyably clever Warren is clearly at home among Hercules, Poseidon, and Hera (not to mention Proust and Grieg); but she is also able to bang out, for example, a neat poem about e-mail that doesn’t seem out of place amidst the antiquities. With Harrison, Murphy, and Cambridge, she shares an apparently effortless ability to segue from silly puns to sober thought about Ultimate Questions, all the while keeping the pentameter in line. Perusing a memorial plaque in a Sicilian church for a priest who is heralded as a “shepherd of souls,” she reflects:

. . . *soul* is not a thing that satisfies,
not even in a church—not me, at least;
dumb in its woolliness, it’s too abstract.

What is one, then, aside from being flesh? Her answer: “More than what I’ve done, / I’d say I am the sum of what I know / and make my own by loving.” If birds serve frequently in *Poets Against the War* as emblems of peace, Warren (and this is true of Murphy, too) gives us birds that are actually observed behaving like *real birds*. Indeed, far from symbolizing concord, the crows in Warren’s “*Cause Célèbre*” make a racket:

The reason for the din?
Who knows? The thing that counts is being loud.
I do know this: If one voice does outweigh
another one, it’s always overridden
by the harsh opinions of the crowd.

Come to think of it, these lines might well have made a suitable epigraph for *Poets Against the War*.

⁶ THE SIZE OF HAPPINESS, by *Deborah Warren*. The Waywiser Press. Distributed by Dufours Editions. \$15.95p.