

DANA GIOIA

The Unknown Soldier: The Poetry of John Allan Wyeth

I

John Allan Wyeth is the missing figure in the American literature of World War I—a soldier poet still worth reading. Little known in his own lifetime, he has been utterly forgotten by posterity. Even scholars and historians of the period don't recognize his name. Yet his work remains fresh and compelling eighty years after its publication. A graduate of Princeton and an acquaintance of Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wyeth is an elusive, even mysterious character. Much of his adult life remains obscure. He left a surprisingly small paper trail for a writer who lived for nearly nine decades. His literary legacy consists of a single volume, *This Man's Army: A War in Fifty-Odd Sonnets* (1928). An innovative sonnet sequence that combines traditional and Modernist techniques, the book provides a vivid and historically accurate account of an American soldier's experience in the Great War. Most sonnet sequences bog down under the weight of their own formal machinery. *This Man's Army* moves with such steady assurance of style and purpose that it never loses either narrative flow or lyric impulse. A unique and original book, *This Man's Army* deserves a small but meaningful place in American literary history.

John Allan Wyeth, Jr., was born in New York City on October 24, 1894, the third and last child of Florence Nightingale Sims and John Allan Wyeth, Sr. The poet's father was a noted surgeon with a remarkable career that deeply influenced his namesake. Born in Alabama in 1845, the elder Wyeth served in the Confederate cavalry during the Civil War. Having volunteered at seventeen, he joined John Hunt Morgan's Confederate Raiders and was involved in several famously dangerous engagements, including Morgan's "Christmas Raid" of 1862. Taken prisoner in 1863,

Wyeth was incarcerated at Camp Morton, Indiana, a brutal and undersupplied military prison, where thousands died and Wyeth himself suffered from measles, dysentery, pneumonia, typhoid, and malaria. When he finally reunited with his impoverished family in 1865, even his own mother did not recognize her ravaged son.

After taking a degree in medicine at the University of Louisville in 1869, Wyeth moved to New York for further study at Bellevue Hospital. In 1886 he married Florence Nightingale Sims, the daughter of Dr. James Marion Sims, a medical colleague, who had also come to New York from the South and had known Dr. Wyeth's father in Alabama. (A pioneer of women's medicine, Dr. Sims became so celebrated that he was once memorialized in a statue in New York's Bryant Park.) Wyeth became a successful surgeon and important anatomical expert, but dissatisfied with the lack of advanced medical studies available, he founded New York's first postgraduate school of medicine, the New York Polyclinic in 1882. (Until then only undergraduate programs were available in medicine.) Dr. Wyeth was a widely published author in both medicine and history. His articles appeared in *Harper's* and *Century*. He also wrote poetry. In 1914 he published a celebrated memoir, *With Sabre and Scalpel: The Autobiography of a Soldier and Surgeon*. Florence Sims Wyeth died in 1915. Three years later, the seventy-three-year-old Wyeth, still president of the Polyclinic Hospital, married the hospital's twenty-three-year-old dietician. He died in 1922 at the age of seventy-seven.

The young Wyeth grew up in a prosperous and cultivated household with a father who had distinguished himself as a soldier, author, poet, and surgeon. He attended the Lawrenceville School, a private preparatory academy in New Jersey, where he was president of the drama club and class poet. He published extensively in the *Lawrenceville Literary Magazine*. In 1908 a play by the thirteen-year-old author was produced as a charity benefit. In 1911 he entered Princeton University (from which his older brother had been graduated in the class of 1910.) At Princeton, Wyeth joined the Charter Club, one of the university's best "eating clubs." He studied mostly literature and languages, including Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and German. An average student, he was graduated in the middle of his class (67th out of

115) but impressed his professors with his extensive knowledge of literature and personal charm. He contributed to the *Nassau Literary Magazine* and was a member of the Class Ode Committee. He was graduated in 1915.

At first glance, Wyeth's Princeton career seems typical of a gentleman scholar of his generation, but scrutinizing his records alongside those of his classmates, one notices an unusual pattern. Wyeth never had a roommate at Princeton, an odd arrangement on the compulsively gregarious campus. He also joined no teams or clubs, beyond his dining arrangement. One of his literary acquaintances at Princeton was Edmund Wilson (B.A., 1916), a fellow member of the Charter Club. Wilson once remarked that Wyeth was "the only aesthete of the Class of 1915." The remark obviously described Wyeth's passionate interest in the arts on a campus not conspicuous for its cultural enthusiasms. He was well known by his classmates as a pianist and writer. But Wilson's coded term also suggested another way in which Wyeth differed from his classmates. He was almost certainly homosexual.

"Undecided about his future occupation," Wyeth taught high school French in Mesa, Arizona, for a year and then returned to Princeton for graduate study in Romance languages. By now his literary ambitions were clearer. He focused his energies on an academic career. Political events, however, intervened when the United States entered the Great War in 1917. Having completed his master's degree, Wyeth enlisted. On December 28, 1917, he entered the U.S. Army with the rank of a second lieutenant in the 33rd Division. His fluency in French secured him a position in the Interpreters Corps as part of the division headquarters staff. After training at Camp Logan in Houston, Texas, he transferred to Camp Upton in New York. On May 16, 1918, his division moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, where they boarded the USS *Mount Vernon* for France.

From this moment it is possible to follow Wyeth's wartime movements quite precisely because they form the substance of his sonnet sequence, *This Man's Army*. His poems are remarkably distinguished for specifically literary reasons, but they have the additional historical virtue of documentary exactitude. They chronicle the poet's journey through the war with a fidelity to circumstances more typical of nonfiction prose than lyric verse. Although no literary reader need note their accuracy, a military

historian can rely on each sonnet to render the time, place, situation, even the weather. Likewise a literary critic or biographer can use them to illuminate the poet's military career.

Wyeth's army duties as a member of the general staff would have depended on the wishes of his commanding officers and the changing circumstances of the 33rd Division as it traveled. His primary role was to serve as French interpreter, a necessary and important task for an English-speaking American Expeditionary Force crossing through France and Belgium. But he would also have performed other assignments, many depicted in the sonnets, such as delivering messages and maps to the front lines by foot, car, motorcycle, and horse. (Some horses were still used by the general staff—a vestige of the traditional cavalry regiments of earlier wars—though motorcycles and cars mostly took their place.) At one point the speaker in Wyeth's poems, an overtly autobiographical figure, does sentry duty. As a member of the general staff, Wyeth would have been billeted close to headquarters, often a local chateau, but as a junior officer, he seems to have lived in the more modest homes of nearby villages. These homes served as the settings for several poems.

Wyeth was discharged from the Army on October 23, 1919. He delayed his return to graduate school until the following year by claiming a "percentage of disability" to his obliging dean that required recuperation at his older brother's Palm Beach home. Wyeth returned to Princeton for the January term and then won a traveling fellowship to study for a year in Liège, Belgium, in pursuit of a doctorate. By 1923 he had finished his oral exams in French and German. At this point the academic paper trail stops until April 1926, when he applied to finish his doctoral studies, but his resolve proved short lived. In September, Wyeth wrote from Rapallo, Italy, that he wished to drop his academic studies. "I have always desired above all things to try my hand at literature," he confessed to his graduate adviser, adding that he believed "that whatever literary talent I might come to possess could be brought into play in response to a complete whole-hearted devotion to literary aims."

In his letter, Wyeth states that his literary ambition "centered on the fictional creative side," but his address in Rapallo provides a possible clue why poetry would soon become his medium. The Italian seaside city's most famous American resident was Ezra

Pound. Although there is no documentary evidence that Wyeth knew Pound (who moved from Paris to Rapallo in 1924), the English-speaking community was so small that it would have been unlikely for them to have missed one another. (Wyeth family members have confirmed the friendship.) It is impossible at this point to know what influence the older poet might have had on the wandering scholar, but one might reasonably speculate that Pound's example could have instigated or reinforced at least three significant decisions—Wyeth's break with academia for a literary career, his subsequent choice of poetry rather than fiction, and the selection of the Great War as the subject matter of his imaginative efforts.

The next two years in Wyeth's life remain a blank. Without any documentary evidence, a critic can only be silent or speculate. I will risk one crucial speculation. I believe that the poems in *This Man's Army* were not written until after Wyeth's arrival in Rapallo. The assumption seems likely for several reasons. First, there is no mention of the poems in any earlier document, not even his letter of withdrawal from graduate school. Second, in the same 1926 letter, Wyeth suggested that his literary ambitions focused on writing fiction. Third, the sonnets in *This Man's Army* are so stylistically unified that they seem unlikely to have been composed over many years. Likewise their strictly narrative organization makes it implausible that they were written individually without any plan for the overall structure. Fourth, the poems have assimilated certain stylistic aspects of Modernism, especially its use of mixed meters and disjunctive syntax, which had not fully emerged until the 1920s in the works of T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, and Ezra Pound, all prominent American émigrés. Finally, the poems have a clarity of perspective and an emotional detachment that reflect an older and more mature man. Although the sonnet sequence unfolds in discrete chronological sections like a diary or journal, the controlled tone and steady narrative pacing suggest a distance from the events. One assumes—and in the absence of documentary evidence this can remain only an assumption—that the young Wyeth kept a detailed journal during the war that later served as the basis of his book.

Whatever its creative genesis, *This Man's Army: A War in Fifty-Odd Sonnets* appeared in late 1928 from Harold Vinal, Ltd. of New York City. A slim handsome quarto with a cubist dust jacket, the

book bore a remarkably perceptive blurb by Morris William Croll of Princeton University. Labeled as “Extracts from a Critique,” Professor Croll’s comments still seem relevant and just:

The problem was to put the image of the war-landscape, human character, dialect, glimpses of its personal sentiment, all that a novel does—put it into the defined form of verse and so convert it into beauty or delight. . . . In *THIS MAN’S ARMY* it seems to me that the problem is solved. The limits of the sonnet-form are never transgressed. I mean, first, that the movement of the rhythm is always true sonnet-rhythm, and just as truly in apparently irregular passages, as the apparently regular ones; for the ear does actually hear the inevitable sonnet-beat even in passages imitating jazz-singing. And I mean, secondly, that the *drama* is always exactly moving towards its sonnet-completion and finality, however photographic the detail may seem to be.

This Man’s Army received generally strong but brief coverage, mostly in omnibus reviews of recent poetry. The *Boston Globe* praised the “happy collection” stating that “Mr. Wyeth has been able to catch the elusive something which differentiates the poetic observation from the commonplace one.” In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Charles Divine considered the sonnet sequence “a series of pictures distinguished by their vitality and their graphic and emotional qualities.” In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Edna Lou Walton awarded the volume only mild approbation remarking that it was “more about Mr. Wyeth than the war.” In *The New Republic*, “R.E.L.” tersely delivered a mixed verdict, writing that “Mr. Wyeth’s sonnets often achieve a sharp outline in one line, but the effect is dissipated by what follows.” The *Boston Transcript* provided the longest and most favorable review, praising the volume’s “dash and spirit” as well as its narrative structure:

In a slim volume of fifty sonnets Mr. Wyeth has caught the color and drabness of the World War as seen through the eyes of the American soldier. He takes his readers through the shot and shell of battles and to the still peaceful vales behind the lines. We eat corned willie and drink coffee in the mud-filled trenches of the ridge at Chipilly and open champagne bottles in the gay little cafes in Paris with the men on leave.

What particularly impressed the reviewers was Wyeth’s innovative use of the sonnet form. There had been a broad revival of the sonnet in the twenties—led mostly by female lyric poets such as

Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, and Elinor Wylie as well as numerous others whose names have largely been forgotten, such as Jean Starr Untermeyer, Gladys Oaks, and Elizabeth J. Coatsworth. These poets represented a contrarian impulse to Modernist experimentation. Although sometimes bold in their subject matter, they employed highly traditional prosody. The critics reviewing *This Man's Army* did not miss the pun on “odd” in the volume’s subtitle. Nearly every critic remarked on Wyeth’s novel employment of the form, including “rough dialogue,” jazz music, tags from old songs, slang, and foreign languages, to achieve what the *Boston Transcript* termed “a colloquial ease which is most interesting and also technically correct.”

Wyeth’s small Vinal edition must have sold reasonably well since it was reprinted ten months later in September 1929 by Longmans, Green & Company in a trade edition. The timing could hardly have been worse. One month later the stock market crashed, the Great Depression began, and the cultural zeitgeist changed radically. The dynamic features of American literature during the twenties—formal experimentation, cosmopolitan allegiances, iconoclastic perspective, irreverent satire—quickly shifted into the more earnest social and naturalist concerns of thirties literature. Wyeth vanished from the literary scene. A few years later one last brief notice of his book belatedly appeared in *Poetry* (December 1932). It offered a mere forty-three words of interestingly qualified praise:

A group of sonnets, strung with slang and soldiers’ *patois*, telling of the poet’s experiences in the war. They are scrupulously exact description with little comment, and they ring with a vivid reality. They are probably not poetry, but they are good stuff.

There now occurred a seemingly unanticipated change in Wyeth’s artistic interests. By the time the critical notice appeared in *Poetry*, the poet had decided to become a painter. In 1932 he began studying art with Duncan Grant, the Scottish painter and member of the Bloomsbury Group. He later worked for six years at the Académie Moderne in Paris under Jean Marchand, a French painter much admired by the Bloomsbury Group. Wyeth reportedly exhibited paintings in Paris during the 1930s, and he participated in three biennial Contemporary American Oil Painting group shows at Washington’s Corcoran Gallery in 1939,

1941, and 1943. (None of the three paintings he exhibited were sold.) In 1939 he joined the Frank Rehn Gallery in New York, and by 1941 he was living back in his native Manhattan. He also served in the U.S. Coast Guard in World War II.

Wyeth's Post-Impressionistic landscapes were not conspicuously successful in the marketplace. Often relying on financial help from his family, Wyeth lived an itinerant existence in Europe and America. He spent some years in Providence, Rhode Island. The Princeton alumni organization consistently failed to locate him and eventually dropped him from the 1915 class roll "by mutual consent." He may also have become a Roman Catholic. By 1979 he had moved to a family house in Skillman, New Jersey. He died on May 11, 1981, at the age of eighty-six and was buried at the Blawenburg Cemetery. "John Allan Wyeth, noted area artist" read the headline in the short *Trenton Times* obituary. None of the two Princeton obituaries (nor the brief paid death notice in the *New York Times*) mentions his poetry.

II

Wyeth's poetic career began and ended with *This Man's Army*. Everything before the book was juvenilia. There seems to have been no verse published afterward. (One hopes that a trunk of unpublished manuscripts will appear in some relative's attic.) His poetic oeuvre consists of a single volume—with neither prelude nor coda. Moreover, his work made no lasting impression. Hardly noticed even when new, his poetry soon drifted into utter oblivion. With the exception of a brief biographical and critical note I published a few years ago and the inclusion of three poems in the anthology, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004), I co-edited with David Mason and Meg Schoerke, Wyeth's work has never received critical or scholarly attention of any kind. His name and biography exist in no reference works. He is not mentioned in the many extensive critical works on the poetry of World War I—not even in the comprehensive studies by Paul Fussell, Jon Stallworthy, Patrick Quinn, or Mark Van Wienen. His work does not appear in any of the numerous anthologies of World War I poetry. Nor was he remembered or reprinted in anthologies of Princeton poets. His work, in fact, seems to have

been reprinted only once in an obscure 1945 collection compiled by Mary Lou McDonough titled *Poet Physicians*, where it was mistakenly attributed to Wyeth's father. A relentless researcher will discover nothing in the literary record except a few sentences in Edmund Wilson's journals and F. Scott Fitzgerald's letters.

I must confess that no scholarly enterprise of my own led to rediscovering Wyeth. I first read his work in 1994 when poet and military historian Bradley Omanson asked my opinion on *This Man's Army*, which he had uncovered while researching the history of the American Expeditionary Force's 33rd Division. (Having discovered the poet in McDonough's anthology, Omanson believed that the book had been written by the elder Wyeth.)

I often receive copies of little-known or neglected books sent by people soliciting my advocacy for what they believe are worthy causes. Most forgotten books, however, do not merit renewed critical attention. Initially skeptical, I read *This Man's Army* with growing interest and excitement. It was not only a fine book but a unique one in American poetry. I was also confident that Wyeth was already known to scholars of World War I poetry. Few literary areas have been so intensely studied. It seemed unlikely scholars would have missed such a conspicuously excellent volume. Here I was mistaken.

I was also sure that Omanson was mistaken about the identity of the author. *This Man's Army* was not an old man's work. The elder Wyeth must have had a son and namesake. Indeed a little research among public records revealed the existence of the younger Wyeth. Although there was no scholarly record of his literary career, there were legal documents and school records. I tracked down a few family members who answered some questions and eventually provided an obituary. (Until then I did not even have the date of the younger Wyeth's death—so slim was the documentary record.) There is obviously much more to be uncovered, but now at least there exists some context for *This Man's Army*, including some sense of who "this man" was.

III

World War I marked a decisive turning point in Western literature. The unprecedented scale of violence across Europe,

the role of technology and science in accelerating the destruction, and the impotence of Western governments to avoid or even curb the conflict shattered the traditional notions of progress and civilization. Although the Modernist movement emerged before the Great War, it was in the bitter aftermath that it became the central artistic impulse of the age. World War I also transformed the notion of war poetry from battle pieces and inspirational odes to grimly realistic accounts of modern mechanized warfare.

Modern British poetry began in the bitter disillusionment and horrific experience of the soldier poets who fought in France and Belgium. Faced with a mechanized mass brutality for which traditional poetry had neither adequate language nor imagery, they were forced—by violence, loss, and suffering—to reinvent the art. The noble Georgian sentiments of Rupert Brooke were traumatically transformed into the stark modern idioms of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, T. E. Hulme, David Jones, and Isaac Rosenberg. Many of the “War Poets” were killed in battle, including Owen, Hulme, Rosenberg, Brooke, and Edward Thomas, but not before they had created a substantial and influential body of work. This tradition, which also included survivors such as Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and Ivor Gurney, occupies a crucial place in the history of modern British literature. For the British, Modernism began in the trenches of the Western front.

By contrast, the American poetry of World War I has seemed either negligible or marginal. The work actually written by American soldier poets was mostly stiffly conventional—old language and attitudes dusted off to express a new situation. The two best known American soldier poets, Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer, both of whom were killed in action, brought a generalized and traditional approach that feels inadequate to the realities of modern mechanized warfare. In “Rouge Bouquet,” for instance, Kilmer describes the mass death and dismemberment caused by artillery bombardment as follows:

In a wood they call the Rouge Bouquet
There is a new-made grave today
Built by never a spade nor pick

Yet covered with earth ten metres thick.
 There lie many fighting men,
 Dead in their youthful prime,
 Never to laugh or love again
 Nor taste the Summertime.
 For Death came flying through the air
 And stopped his flight at the dugout stair
 Touched his prey and left them there,
 Clay to clay.

Kilmer is trying to describe a horrific event, but his language, imagery, tone, and perspective fail him at every turn. (The poem gets worse as it proceeds.) Ultimately, the poem feels vague and euphemistic.

Alan Seeger's best poems, such as "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," are more effective, but they also eschew contemporary language and experience for traditional romantic archetypes:

I have a rendezvous with Death
 At some disputed barricade,
 When Spring comes round with rustling shade
 And apple blossoms fill the air.

In diction, imagery, and tone Seeger's poem, however memorable, could have been written about any earlier American war. He succeeds by describing a traditional notion of personal bravery in war rather than expressing what troops were actually experiencing in World War I. By personifying death as an individual, he also obscures the central horrifying reality of modern, mass warfare—it is no longer an enterprise in which personal combat or individual bravery much matters. The tragic inadequacy of traditional military and poetic rhetoric in the face of mass, industrialized slaughter was the hard lesson that the soldier poets had to tell the general public. Facing this challenge represented the difficult triumph of the British "Trench poets." Avoiding it resulted in the failure of their American counterparts.

The best American poetry of World War I consists of a tiny canon written by noncombatants such as Ezra Pound and E. E.

Cummings, or by soldier poets, such as Archibald MacLeish or John Peale Bishop, who saw combat briefly but wrote only one or two poems about their experiences. (It was left to American novelists such as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos to explore the wartime experience in depth.) The paucity of American war poetry—excluding the reams of patriotic or elegiac popular verse written at home—is not surprising. The United States was involved in the war for less than two years, and actual combat by American troops lasted only a few months.

Seen in the context of American and British World War I literature, the importance and singularity of Wyeth's *This Man's Army* becomes clearer. It is the most ambitious, representative, and successful poetic venture by an American combatant in the Great War, and it is also probably the only volume that stands comparison with the work of the best British soldier poets. *This Man's Army* is not a masterpiece. Its documentary and autobiographical narrative line abruptly ends at a crucial moment where a fictional work would have moved decisively to its climax. Yet the book remains powerful, authentic, and perfectly accomplished within its own terms. It is also innovative and original in its relation both to American war poetry and the sonnet form. Its rediscovery not only expands but alters the canon of American literature from the Great War. Wyeth's presentation of the specifically American war experience—violent but less tragic and traumatic than the longer, more brutally destructive Allied experiences—also provides a useful comparison to British war poetry.

This Man's Army is essentially a narrative poem told in isolated lyric moments. The strategy of breaking a linear narrative into disjunctive poetic moments is a mainstream Modernist technique, exemplified in such influential verse sequences as Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" (1920). It is also a literary strategy that corresponds neatly to the older tradition of the European sonnet sequence, which characteristically tells a story through a series of heightened lyric moments. Wyeth's sequence, therefore, simultaneously fulfills the expectations of both a Modernist and a traditional poetic sequence—a tricky feat that adds to the book's enduring appeal.

What is particularly interesting about Wyeth's poetic treatment is that he brings such originality to both the lyric and the