“THE STEP OF IRON FEET”: FORMAL MOVEMENTS IN AMERICAN WORLD WAR II POETRY

by

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We have too frequently approached American World War II poetry with assumptions about modern poetry based on readings of the influential British Great War poets, failing to distinguish between WWI and WWII and between the British and American contexts. During the Second World War, the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki obliterated the line many WWI poems reinforced between the soldier’s battlefront and the civilian’s homefront, authorizing for the first time both civilian and soldier perspectives. Conditions on the American homefront—widespread isolationist and anti-Semitic attitudes, America’s late entry into the war, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese internment, and the African American “Double V Campaign” to fight fascism overseas and racism at home—were just some of the volatile conditions poets in the US grappled with during WWII. In their poems, war shapes and threatens the identities of civilians and soldiers, women and men, African Americans and Jews, and verse form itself becomes a weapon against war’s assault on identity.

Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Richard Wilbur mobilize and challenge the authority of traditional poetic forms to defend the self against social, political, and physical assaults. The objective, free-verse testimony form of

Reznikoff's long poem *Holocaust* (1975) registers his mistrust of lyric subjectivity and of the musical effects of traditional poetry. In Rukeyser's free-verse and traditional-verse forms, personal experiences and public history collide to create a unifying poetry during wartime. Brooks, like Rukeyser, posits poetry's ability to protect soldiers and civilians from war's threat to their identities. In Brooks's poems, however, only traditionally formal poems can withstand the war's destruction. Wilbur also employs conventional forms to control war's disorder. The individual speakers in his poems avoid becoming nameless war casualties by grounding themselves in military and literary history. Through a series of historically informed close readings, this dissertation illuminates a neglected period in the history of American poetry and argues that mid-century formalism challenges—not retreats from—twentieth-century atrocities.

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In loving memory of my grandparents George and Palmira Baresi

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CHAPTER I

FORMAL MOVEMENTS IN AMERICAN WORLD WAR II POETRY

Gwendolyn Brooks concludes "Gay Chaps at the Bar," her sonnet sequence about soldiers during World War II, with the portent of another approaching war: "The step / of iron feet again. And again wild" (75). The "iron feet" of the industrial war machine can be heard in the steps of soldiers parading to celebrate the end of WWII. The last poem's title, "the progress," puns bitterly on the military parade, the post-war optimism, and the inevitable "progress" into another war. This jarring image ends the sequence on a menacing note: the soldiers have been reduced to automatons, while another war slouches toward America with the precision of machinery and the wildness of a beast. Clearly, Brooks is not hopeful that the Second World War will, at last, be the war to end all wars; but she preserves her faith in poetic "feet" to control the march of war's iron feet. Thus, and almost inexplicably, "the step of iron feet" is also the movement of metered poems and the scaffolding of stanzaic structures that support her depiction of war. War cuts down the confident and suave "gay chaps" to battle-weary soldiers who have lost their faith in love, God, and country at the same time that the sonnet elevates and preserves them. As is well known, Brooks would later dismiss her sonnets and other traditional verse forms as outdated, and most modernist poets between the wars would have agreed with her. But at this moment, Brooks and other British and American poets wanted less to *make it new* than to keep it steady in the face of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the advent of the atomic age.

Many poets following WWII took up traditional verse forms, stepping into the poetical feet of the Great War trench poets. While civilian modernist poets sought freedom from past conventions through experimental forms during WWI, the soldier-poets tended to work in traditional forms, revising rather than rejecting those conventions and techniques. True, as David Perkins claims, "the English poets of the First World War began as Georgians, and their poetry gradually changed as they underwent the appalling conditions and experiences of combat in the trenches" (141-42). However, conventional forms feel the strain of war in Siegfried Sassoon's bitterly satiric ballads, Wilfred Owen's dissonant para-rhymes, and Edward Thomas's anti-pastoral elegies but do not entirely break from the past. Thus, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that defining features of WWI poetry included the "constant reaching out towards traditional significance" and the "attempt to make some sense of the war in relation to inherited tradition" (57). Traditional forms provided an intelligible context for the trench poets' reports about an almost incomprehensible war. Their poems attacked earlier depictions of the glory and heroism of battle. Whereas the civilian poets had the time, freedom, and safety to create experimental poetry outside the confines of the trenches, the soldier-poets needed a stable form for their volatile experiences of modern war and their incendiary anti-war arguments. Though their formalism would be eclipsed by post-WWI avant-garde poetics, it would prove useful again to both civilian and soldier poets during and after WWII. While we must not insist that Second World War poets model themselves on the Great War poets (as I discuss below), the overpowering events of the Second World War made these later poets, like their precursors, seek stability in traditional form.

In this complicated moment, Brooks, Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, and Richard Wilbur searched for poetic forms to respond to WWII. David Caplan's claim that form "obsesses twentieth- and twenty-first-century American poets, who compulsively frame historical and artistic challenges in formal terms" (9) is particularly evident in the case of these poets. Indeed, during WWII, American poets explored the relationship between war, American history, poetry, and American identity:

> [The poets] had to confront not only war (a business little known to Americans since the days of their own Civil War), but also their European past, the traditions of their fathers, and the history of their nationality in pre-American times. The American experience of the Second World War, besides being an introduction to horror, led to a questioning of identity and an examination of a cultural past. (Foss 8)

The questioning of identity, especially, of what it meant to be an American poet writing about the Second World War, was closely tied to poetic form. Should the structure of the poem reflect the disorder of contemporary wars by refusing the coherence of traditional forms and conventions? Or should "poets dealing with the rigid constraints imposed by historical calamity [be] drawn to the rigor of structured forms" and reject free verse's associations "with the delights of expansiveness, freedom, flight, or adventure" (Gubar 258)? Is this the moment for poets to avoid traditional forms and their associations with a European past and, instead, create new forms to establish an American tradition?

The war poems of Reznikoff, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Wilbur complicate, rather than answer, these questions; they defy common associations with traditional and free-verse forms. One such assumption is that free verse is an open and expansive form expressly suited to American democratic ideals and liberal political philosophies. In this view, traditional forms are outdated and even retrograde; in contemporary society, they can only voice conservative ideas or register oppressive social forces. In *Fictions of Form*

in American Poetry, Stephen Cushman investigates such narratives about form and argues that pitting traditional, closed forms against innovative, open ones "leads to platitudes about poets who use traditional forms to insulate themselves from historical experience and those who use experimental forms to plunge themselves into the midst of historical experience" (13). Such critical truisms characterize the criticism of Reznikoff, Rukeyser, Brooks, and particularly Wilbur; but, as we shall see, in the poems themselves, traditional forms enable the poets to confront, not evade, war. A history of American poems about the Second World War requires "the patience to trace the forms' shifting movements, as their political and their aesthetic uses accommodate new imperatives and contexts" (Caplan 11).

And yet, much of the criticism evaluates Second World War poems according to a single-minded criterion based on the British soldier poems from the Great War instead of recognizing the distinctions between the two wars and the changing attitudes about form. For instance, in his analysis of WWII poetry, R. N. Curry claims that "nearly all good poetry of the Second War sprang from the Siegfried Sassoon-Wilfred Owen line of succession" (7). Likewise, Oscar Williams argues that Owen's "own poems are as true a commentary upon World War II as upon the war in which he gave his own life" (3) in the introduction to his 1944 anthology *The War Poets*; he interprets WWII poetry through Owen's "poetry of pity" definition.[1] When judged against a model that privileges the first-hand soldier experience of war, celebrates male comradery, indicts those on the homefront, and condemns war as a meaningless waste of lives, American soldier and WWII poetry doesn't measure up. Rather than arguing that "from the First World War came a wealth of fine poetry and from the Second little of any merit" (Scannell 15), we

need to read the poetry of the Second World War more carefully and derive our evaluative criteria from its concerns and aims.

Americans entered WWI at a much later date and in far fewer numbers than the British and didn't experience direct attacks, like the Zeppelin raids on London, on their homefront. While the story of the First World War became a "powerful tragic myth" for the British, Americans saw it as "a national triumph, one episode in a saga of success" (Scannell 175). There were American soldier poets who wrote about the Great War but not to the same extent as British soldiers; by 1939 "in the literature of the United States there was no substantial tradition of poetry from the trenches" (172). Poets entering WWII were familiar with the work of the WWI poets warning of the unheroic and gruesome aspects of war, but they did not feel a similar need to question the glorified version of war from earlier poems. Instead, many recognized the moral necessity of WWII in contrast to the undefined purpose of the First World War; American soldier-poet Richard Wilbur articulates this, claiming that "my generation went into World War II in a more realistic and less crusading spirit, resolved to do what plainly had to be done; and so there was less damage to our expectations" ("Richard Wilbur" 10). The fight against Hitler and fascism "plainly had to be done."

In contrast to WWI poems that obsessively criticize the unfaithful women and military administrators at home who are safe from the fighting, the enemy in Second World War poems is not the civilians. WWII redefined the war zone to include civilians; now, both civilian and soldier were victims of the conflict. Fussell distinguishes WWII as a "total" war, unlike any previous conflict: "The Second World War, total and global as it was, killed worldwide more civilian men, women, and children than soldiers, sailors, and

airmen" (*Wartime* 132). The massive air raids during the Spanish Civil War leading up to WWII, the fire-bombing of Dresden, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki obliterated the World War I model that clearly demarcated the front-line trenches from the homefront and juxtaposed the soldier's experience of war with the civilian's lack of combat experience. Now, the soldier's first-person account of battle was no longer the only authorized perspective for war poetry. In WWII, far more civilian, particularly women, poets write about the conflict than during WWI. The Second World War expanded the definition of a war poet and war poetry.

For one thing, the involvement of American poets and writers in the Spanish Civil War prior to WWII connected Americans more directly to war and to civilian deaths than during WWI. In the 1930s, the American literary left and its insistence on the value of political poetry gained prominence. One of the most famous poems from that time is Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), which details the effects of the silica mining disaster in West Virginia on ordinary workers. Too, the struggle of the Spanish Republicans to defend their socially progressive government from the conservative Loyalists, supported by fascist dictators, took on strong symbolic significance for American leftist writers and sympathizers as an international battle for justice and humanity; "major American writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, and countless others experienced the Spanish Civil War as a defining moment in the struggle for international social justice in the modern period" (Kalaidjian 13). During the Spanish Civil War, roughly 2,800 Americans from different economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds volunteered to fight for the Republicans alongside other anti-fascists from fifty-two countries. The Abraham Lincoln Battalion, one of most

renowned American brigades during the war, was the first integrated American military force led by an African American officer. The Spanish Civil War united individuals from various countries toward one collective aim of social equality and political freedom, ignoring nationalist distinctions between individuals. As Cary Nelson argues, this situation required an intense commitment to democracy and produced a forceful poetic response:

> Spain demanded that a poet put everything at risk, wager everything on the poem that was yet to be written. Those who could not do that—and few could—in some ways failed. Others succeeded because they understood the special character of Spanish Civil War writing—its collective antifascist and international identity. It was a distinctive historical necessity that set the Spanish Civil War apart and made its poetry potentially different from other war poetry. (23)

The poetry of the Spanish Civil War written by Americans registers the hope for peace and the utter disappointment after the fall of the Republicans to Franco. The defeat of the Republicans foreshadowed the rise of the fascists and the outbreak of the Second World War. The memories of the war in Spain would continue to haunt poets during WWII, and poems about the Spanish Civil War often record the intense emotional involvement of their speakers with the cause, the country, and the other fighters. Edwin Rolfe's "First Love (Remembering Spain)" argues that the speaker's "first love" will always be Spain: "But my heart is forever captive of that other war / that taught me first the meaning of peace and of comradeship / and always I think of my friend who amid the apparition of bombs / saw on the lyric lake the single perfect swan" (168). Rolfe, raised by progressive Jewish parents, eventually joined the Communist Party, wrote for *The Daily Worker*, and volunteered with the Lincoln brigade in the spring of 1937. He returned to America from Spain in 1939 and was drafted for WWII in 1943. Rolfe wrote "First Love" while he was at a military training camp in Texas in the summer of 1943. His poem combines the

violence of war—"the apparition of bombs"—with pastoral lyricism—"on the lyric lake the single perfect swan," to register the intense loss and intense love inspired by the Spanish Civil War that would come to characterize much of his compatriots' WWII poetry. It is also significant that Rolfe employs traditional figures and poetic techniques to convey the severity of the war's threat to Spanish cultural traditions, a formal necessity his fellow poets would likewise feel.

While American supporters of the Spanish Republicans sought a common social bond that transcended nationality during the 1930s, isolationists on the homefront tried to keep America separate from the rest of the world. The popular image of WWII as a "shining legend of the Good War" in US history simplifies the complexity of the situation in America before, during, and after the war (Adams 429). Americans didn't immediately rush to the aid of their Allies. Instead, strong isolationist attitudes prevailed in the 1930s; many saw American involvement in WWI as a mistake and fought to prevent involvement in, what they saw as, another foreign war.[2] The attack on Pearl Harbor, though, invalidated the notion that America could remain apart from the threat of fascism.

Ironically, though, the country's reaction to the threat of fascism was itself fascistic. In response to the Japanese attack, Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 authorizing the evacuation of Japanese Americans and labeling them as "enemy aliens." From 1942 to 1944, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned, many of them American born, in various relocation centers and camps in the Southwestern and Western United States. The forced internment of Japanese Americans reflected the racist attitudes and xenophobia rampant in the US at that time, attitudes that

influenced the government's decision to limit Jewish immigration into the US during the war. African Americans also experienced heightened discrimination during and after the war. While US war propaganda urged national unity in the fight against fascist enemies, segregation was still widespread for civilians and those in the military. Many African Americans were restricted to positions where they couldn't fire weapons or to segregated units that were prevented from serving overseas.[3] The US government's refusal to ban segregation in the military during the war led the African American press to launch the "Double V Campaign": victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. African Americans on the homefront faced job discrimination and racial violence. Women also faced discrimination; while it is true that more women, particularly married women, joined the workforce during the war, many employers were still reluctant to hire them, and, when they were hired, they were usually paid less than their male counterparts. Women who joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and the Women's Army Corps (WAC) struggled with clashing public perceptions of military women as either prostitutes or lesbians.[4] In *No Man's Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that WWII actually signaled the end of the feminist dream for equality that was only temporarily realized during WWI; women in the Second World War "grew increasingly pessimistic about the war's impact on the relationship between sexes" (211).

However, many studies of WWII American poetry do not examine these distinctive national contexts. In general, two approaches prevail: broad, transatlantic surveys of twentieth-century war literature and highly specialized studies of particular types of World War II poetry, with few addressing a distinctly American body of work. At one end of the spectrum, Margot Norris's *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* and

Janis Stout's *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars* treat World War II poetry as a chapter in a larger survey of transatlantic twentieth-century war literature. Many of these general surveys, such as Lorrie Goldensohn's *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry*, still define war poetry as soldier poetry. At the other end of the critical spectrum, focused studies concentrate on non-traditional war poets. Susan Schweik discusses American women's war poetry in *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War*, Philip Metres analyzes the role of American civilian poets in the pacifist movements in *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941*, and Cary Nelson revives leftist political poetry in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory: 1910-1945*. Moreover, Holocaust poetry criticism is frequently absent from both the general surveys and the focused analyses, sequestered into its trauma studies. Harriet Parmet's *The Terror of Our Days: Four American Poets Respond to the Holocaust* and Susan Gubar's *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, treat poets, like Charles Reznikoff, who are rarely, if ever, included in other studies of American World War II poetry.

My critical methodology, a culturally situated formal approach, enables an analysis of American World War II poetry across race, gender, and political lines. Through a series of historically informed close readings, "Formal Movements in American WWII Poetry" illuminates a neglected period in the history of American poetry and argues that mid-century formalism challenges—rather than retreats from—twentieth-century atrocities. In her 2007 essay "What is New Formalism?" Marjorie Levinson identifies the renewed interest in formalism in literary studies. In particular, her

discussion of the aim of the "activist" formalist "to restore to today's reductive re-inscription of historical reading its original focus on form" (559) informs my approach to American WWII poetry. This renewed interest in form's social function requires testing assumptions about the limits of formalism and close reading, particularly formalism's relationship to historicism. Jane Gallop, renowned for her psychoanalytic and feminist work in the 1980s, today defends the practice of close reading and argues it is necessary to balance out the trend toward historicism in the discipline: "I would argue that the most valuable thing English ever had to offer was the very thing that made us a discipline, that transformed us from cultured gentlemen into a profession: close reading" (183). And it is no coincidence that the rise of close reading is linked to changes in American post-WWII culture: "New Criticism was, at least in the classroom, a great leveler of cultural capital and thus suited the moment, after World War II, when American universities for the first time greeted large numbers of students who were not from the traditional elite" (Gallop 184). New Criticism was the dominant literary critical method in the 1940s and 50s when Reznikoff, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Wilbur were writing about the war. Thus, a method of close reading that examines the intersections between history, poetic form, and politics can help produce "a distinctly poetic history—a history not simply of poetic forms but of their deployment for various purposes" (Blasing 14).

My first chapter analyzes the development of Reznikoff's testimony form Holocaust poetry that rejected the lyricism of traditional forms in favor of a stark, Objectivist poetry. In the 1930s, Reznikoff and other Jewish poets in America published poems influenced by Pound's Imagism under the name "Objectivists." From the beginning, the term was only loosely defined, and poets developed their own versions of

Objectivism. Reznikoff, originally trained as a lawyer, defined his method in legal terminology, comparing the poet to a witness and the poem to testimony. The WWI poems from his first volume *Rhythms* (1918) underscore the importance of music to his early lyric elegies in contrast to the blunt, impersonal testimonies in *Holocaust* (1975)—a ninety-page poem based on transcripts from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. In *Rhythms*, Reznikoff employs traditional forms and conventions ironically to convey war's unpoetic reality. The poems in *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down* (1941) and *Inscriptions: 1944-1956* (1959), however, begin to exhibit Reznikoff's mistrust of religious traditions, lyric subjectivity, and the musical effects of lyric poetry. The speakers in those poems seek refuge in the music generated from the incantatory repetitions of Jewish prayers at the same time they question the value of such forms when confronted with the Holocaust. In *Holocaust*, music and religion are implicated in the violence. Reznikoff created the poem by editing trial transcripts, removing most of the personal names and first-person utterances, and providing the testimonies without a poetic speaker's overt emotional response. This testimony form of *Holocaust* objectifies the individual voices of its human subjects, simultaneously recording the Nazis' dehumanization of the Jews in the camps and the horror of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Whereas Reznikoff emphasizes the dehumanizing objectification of Holocaust victims in his poem, Rukeyser combines her personal experience as a Jewish American woman poet with broader historical events in free verse and traditional forms to humanize the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Her poems combine forms and ideas often considered contradictory—the poetical and the political, free verse and conventional verse forms, innovation and tradition, public and private history, and war

and peace. This joining of opposites is part of Rukeyser's aim of creating a democratic poetry that seeks unity even in multiplicity. She positions herself in a line of earlier American war poets, especially Melville and Whitman, who argue for poetry's distinctive relevance to American history. Rukeyser's war poems cast the twentieth-century as a time of endless war and mass violence. But, in her poems from the forties and fifties, the end of war signals the beginning of peace and the renewal of hope. Peace and belief, prophesied by poets and women, balance out war in the cycle of history. The individual poems in "Letter to the Front" formally register both the devastation of current and past wars and the possibility of a peaceful future. She employs the historical and literary authority of traditional forms, like the *In Memoriam* stanza, the sestina, the sonnet, and the ballad, to validate the unconventional voices of women poets in her revision of the male soldier letter "from" the front poem. Rukeyser also achieves continuity between the individual "Letter to the Front" poems through repetition, and her use of traditional forms is in large part owing to her interest in the revisionary potential of repeating and modifying old forms in a new context. In contrast, while repetition in "Letter" signals a renewing cycle of war and peace, the repetitive forms in her later Vietnam-era poems trap her poetic speakers in a static century of world war. Rukeyser still seeks peace through poetry and song in those Vietnam poems; however, their prosy, fragmented, and anti-lyrical forms are crushed by the weight of endless war and the failure of lasting peace. Having lived through a century of wars, she eventually struggles to maintain hope in renewal and simultaneously in the renewing power of traditional poetic forms.

So too, Brooks experiments with both traditional and free verse forms in her effort to depict soldiers during WWII. While many critics argue that conventional forms

constrain Brooks's poetic voice, her WWII poems prove the opposite. It is war, not traditional prosody, that threatens to overpower and even obliterate the identities of the speakers in her poems. Unlike her free verse war poems, the traditionally formal poems are able to manage war's disorder and tyranny. They articulate and elevate the incoherent war experiences of their poetic speakers in culturally esteemed verse forms. Brooks's representation of the wartime suffering of the "Gay Chaps at the Bar" draws strength from the form and conventions of the sonnet and its associations with love and war. The different structures, perspectives, images, levels of diction, and allusions in the "Gay Chaps" sequence emphasize the variety of soldiers and their experiences in WWII. So unlike the subjects of Brooks's free-verse "Negro Hero" (1945) and "Memorial to Ed Bland" (1949) poems, the African American gay chaps can't be reduced to a generalized type by white racism that dehumanizes them or by African American valorization that tries to make them into a symbol for racial progress; the form prevents such reductions. So too, the ornate septets of "The Anniad" (1949) support the romantic fantasy world Annie Allen constructs to escape from the war's ugly reality. The fragmented, prose form of Brooks's only novel *Maud Martha* (1953), though, can't control the war and can't articulate Maud's experience of it. The novel treats the war obliquely; battle scenes fade in and out of the narrative and blur with lynchings, births, and even the weather. Though it contradicts our portrait of the black separatist Brooks, and even her vision of herself after her radicalization in 1967, Brooks undeniably needs traditional verse forms to write effectively about World War II.[5]

The traditional forms in Richard Wilbur's poems also protect their poetic speakers from the war's devastation. But unlike Brooks, who later repudiated traditional forms and

embraced free verse, Wilbur consistently has argued for the value of formal order and coherence to counteract the world's disorder. He likens the poet to a soldier and poetry to a weapon; the poet is constantly engaged in a battle with reality but must eventually recognize that direct combat is impossible. Instead, the most truthful way to approach reality is by acknowledging poetry's distance from it—and by emphasizing poetic artifice. Wilbur's attention to complex verse forms has exposed him to harsh criticism and led to a dismissal of his poetry as ahistorical, disinterested exercises in technique. Frequently, critics hold up Wilbur as an example of the problems with New Critical impersonality. However, in the war poems from *The Beautiful Changes* (1947) up through his most recent collection *Anterooms* (2010), the history of poetic form and the history of war are inextricably linked. In these poems, one speaker's experience of a particular war scene intersects with a collective memory of past wars and past war poems; an individual vision of war is defined by its relationship to a collective human history of violence and to earlier representations of violence in poetry and literature. War haunts Wilbur's poems, as it does Rukeyser's, at the same time it engenders a hopeful response and push for a creative force to oppose the war's destruction. For Wilbur, war is an undeniable part of history; it threatens to destroy the world's order and structure, and the formal order of poetry fights back against its destruction.

A formalist critical approach, which conceptualizes a body of poetry from inside the poems themselves rather than from external theories of the period or aesthetics, will recognize the rich formal diversity of the war poems by Wilbur, Brooks, Rukeyser, and Reznikoff. Such an approach is especially productive for studying these poets who, like their modernist forebears, responded to cultural crisis formally as well as thematically in

their work. These WWII poets have left a significant record of the complex relationship between poetic innovation and tradition: a free-verse testimony form, a combination of free-verse and traditional verse forms, and a reworking of traditional forms. The World War II poets built their own distinctive monument to their distinctive moment in the century of wars, and it is now time for us to read the record of their response to a second world war, to the Holocaust, and to the advent of the atomic age. My study investigates the forms they found for fighting these unprecedented assaults on their culture and their humanity.

Notes

[1] In the preface to a planned poetry volume, Owen writes: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity" (31).

[2] "A Gallup poll taken in 1935 found that fully 70 percent of respondents agreed that invention in the Great War had been a mistake" (O'Neill 10).

[3] "As late as the spring of 1943 only 79,000 out of a total of 504,000 Negro soldiers were overseas because commanders did not want black combat troops" (O'Neill 237).

[4] Leisa Meyer argues in her analysis of WAC during WWII that "the sexual stereotypes of servicewomen as 'camp followers' or 'mannish women,' prostitutes or lesbians, had a long history both in the construction of notions of femaleness in general and in the relationship of 'woman' to 'soldier' in particular" (581).

[5] See the Brooks chapter for a discussion of the development of her politics and poetry.

CHAPTER II

TESTIFYING AGAINST THE LYRIC IN CHARLES REZNIKOFF'S HOLOCAUST POETRY

The February 1931 issue of *Poetry*, edited by Louis Zukofsky and including the poems of Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Carl Rakosi, introduced Objectivist poetry. Zukofsky's prefatory essay "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff" characterized an Objectivist poetics exemplified by Reznikoff and indebted to the precise language and focus on visual observations from Pound's Imagism. In an interview, Reznikoff recognizes the importance of Pound's theories while also acknowledging the ambiguity of the Objectivist label: "We picked the name 'Objectivist' because we had all read *Poetry* of Chicago and we agreed completely with all that Pound was saying. We didn't really discuss the term itself; it seemed all right—pregnant. It could have meant any number of things" ("Charles Reznikoff" 196-97). The variety of the poetry in that 1931 issue registers the distinct approaches of the individual Objectivist poets, like Reznikoff, who "den[ied] the existence of a unifying ideology [and] had personal interpretations of 'objectivism' that gave shape to their poetry" (Dembo 155).

Reznikoff's own formulation of Objectivism confronts the relationship between objective historical facts and subjective emotions. To begin, Reznikoff frames the relationship between a poet's emotion and his poetry in legal terminology, reflecting his training as a lawyer:

> By the term "objectivist" I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject-matter and, if he writes in verse, by its music. Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get on the stand and say, "That man was negligent." That's a conclusion of fact. What you'd be compelled to say is how the man acted. [. . .] The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as a poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and testimony of a poet. ("Charles Reznikoff 194-95)

Paradoxically, perhaps Reznikoff's poet as witness "restricts" himself to factual testimony precisely to stir emotion; testimony poetry is "objective" not in its absence of emotion but in its indirect expression of the poet's feelings through the choice and arrangement of source material. Reznikoff's discussion here brings attention to an overlooked contradiction in Imagist practices between the poet's subjective emotions and the poem's claim to objectivity articulated by John Gage: "The imagist poet wished to communicate emotion. Emotional experience, which is stimulated in the poet by some occurrence in nature, when it is mediated by language and makes its way to the reader, is a reenactment one step removed" (3). So too, the poem, for Reznikoff, cannot reflect the poet's unmediated experience of reality or directly reproduce the emotions elicited by that experience in the reader. Instead, the poet consciously selects and arranges detailed observations to call forth indirectly an emotional response from the reader. Reznikoff argues that in order to affect the reader, the poem must be clear and precise: "the use of language means communication. If you write, you write to be understood, and if you're not understood, you've failed. I'm a great believer in clarity and I try to practice it; that's why I'm interested in precision in the use of words; which is a part of clarity. I think the only importance in writing is to convey meaning or emotion" (198). In this view,

emotional manifestation, achieved through precise and clear language, is poetry's most significant function.

It is telling that Reznikoff's analogy compares poetics to courtroom testimony, a use of language associated with justice. In addition, "as the witness metaphor reveals, one of the problems that Reznikoff is dealing with is the ethical dimension implicit in any act of perception" (Holsapple 128). For Reznikoff, an individual's act of seeing carries a moral responsibility; thus, Kathryn Shevelow can claim that "in Reznikoff's poetry we see the combination of objectivist poetics with one of the most profound moral sensibilities of any twentieth-century poet" (291). Reznikoff's speakers witness events from multiple perspectives; they are religious and secular witnesses to past and present violence. No wonder Paul Auster remarks that "Reznikoff is a poet of the eye" (152). His speakers are ethically bound to represent their visions, a responsibility that G. Matthew Jenkins defines as Reznikoff's Objectivist poetics of "obligation," particularly when they witness suffering and atrocity. The legal analogies of poetry as testimony and poet as witness are significant to Reznikoff's experiences as a lawyer and the formal development of his poetry, culminating in *Holocaust* (1975)—his ninety-page poem based on the individual testimonies of Jewish Holocaust survivors from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trial transcripts. For *Holocaust*, Reznikoff's edits the transcripts, removing most of the personal names and first-person utterances to register the testimonies without the poetic speaker's overt emotional response or identification. The legal approach and apparatus distance Reznikoff from the material and enable him to bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust, an event which Giorgio Agamben claims is "something that is impossible to bear witness to" (13). Reznikoff's testimony form objectifies its human

subjects and their individual voices, simultaneously recording the Nazis' dehumanization of the Jews in the camps and representing the horror of Nazis anti-Semitism.

The Holocaust was a central concern of Reznikoff's poetry from the 1940s up to his death in 1976; his attention to news, history, and law would shape his poetic approach to it. Reznikoff was initially drawn to journalism but gave it up when he discovered that "journalism is most interested in news, and in the second degree in writing—and I was only interested in writing, I wasn't at all interested in news" ("A Conversation" 113). He later considered pursing a Ph.D. in history at Columbia but finally decided on the law. And yet, his fascination with Jewish and early American history would persist in his poetry. He studied at New York University Law School from 1912 to 1915 and was admitted to the bar in 1916. After discovering that his interest in law was scholarly, he gave up private practice in 1917. He published his first poetry volume entitled *Rhythms* in 1918 and began contributing a wide range of prose and poetry to the *Menorah Journal*, an influential periodical for American Jewish intellectuals, in 1923.[1] Over the course of thirty years, Reznikoff published poetry, drama, and prose narratives in the *Menorah Journal* and eventually served as a contributing editor. Following a series of random jobs, he returned to his legal training in 1930 by working as a writer for the legal encyclopedia *Corpus Juris* at the American Law Book Company in Brooklyn. In 1933, Reznikoff published a long prose work, *Testimony*, based on the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century American court cases he had read for the *Corpus*. He converted a section of *Testimony* into verse and published it in his 1941 collection *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down*. In 1942, *The Jewish Frontier*, a labor Zionist magazine founded by Reznikoff's wife Marie Syrkin, printed "the first news account of the Holocaust in

America" (Fredman 31). In 1944, the Jewish Publication Society of America brought out Reznikoff's historical novel about the plight of Jews in medieval England titled *The Lionhearted*. Also in 1944, he published a poem recounting the Warsaw ghetto uprising, "A Compassionate People," in the spring issue of the *Menorah Journal*, an early version of the poem later included in his 1959 volume *Inscriptions:1944-1956*. He released the first poetry volume of *Testimony: The United States 1885-1890: Recitative* in 1965 followed by the second, *Testimony: The United States 1891-1900: Recitative*, in 1968. At the urging of Syrkin, Reznikoff applied his testimony technique to *Holocaust* (1975).[2]

Reznikoff attributes his process of condensing and glossing historical documents into verse to his legal training. In the autobiographical section "Early History of a Writer" from his 1969 collection *By the Well of Living and Seeing*, he claims his study of the law taught him how to judge his own poetry with a critical eye and pare it down to its essential elements:

> I saw that I could use the expensive machinery
> that had cost me four years of hard work at law
> and which I had thought useless for my writing:
> prying sentences open to look at the exact meaning;
> weighing words to choose only those that had meat for my purpose
> and throwing the rest away as empty shells.
> I, too, could scrutinize every word and phrase
> as if in a document or the opinion of a judge [. . .]
> leaving only the pithy, the necessary, the clear and plain. (329)[3]

"Machinery," "exact" meaning, and "weighing" describe precise and "clear" poetry. The metaphor of the poet "prying" sentences apart as if they were clam "shells" searching for the "plain" "meat" and discarding the rest echoes Pound's Imagist advice to poets, advocating "the direct treatment of the 'thing'" (199) by stripping poetry of unnecessary artifice and rhetoric. Reznikoff privileges "the plain sunlight of the cases, / the sharp

prose, / the forthright speech of the judges" of the law over "the dim lights, the colored phrases, the cloying music, / the hints of what the poets meant / and did not quite say" (325) from poets like the Symbolists. Conventional forms and techniques are empty shells that must be discarded. In "Obiter Dicta," a manuscript found among his papers after his death, Reznikoff lists the shortcomings of traditionally formal poetry and prose: "when I grew older [. . .] I grew tired of regular meters and stanzas; they had become a little stale; the smooth lines and the rhymes I used to read with pleasure now seemed affected, a false stress on words and syllable. And yet I found prose unsatisfactory, too: without the burst of song and the sudden dancing, without the intensity that I wanted" (*Poems* 371).[4] He equates the "pleasure" of conventional poetry, its "smooth," seamless technique, with deceit, implying that the truthful poetry should sound rough. For Reznikoff, free verse was the antidote to "stale" forms and tepid prose:

> The brand-new verse some American poets were beginning to write, Ezra Pound and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) for example, with sources in the French free verse other poets had been writing, as well as in the irregular rhythms of Walt Whitman, perhaps in the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible, and perhaps too in the rough rhythm of Anglo-Saxon verse, seemed to me, when I first read it, just right: not cut to patterns, however cleverly, not poured into ready molds, but words and phrases flowing as the thought; to be read just like common speech but for stopping at the end of each line—and this like a rest in music or a turn in a dance. (*Poems* 371)

Here, Reznikoff equates metrical poetry with static "molds" and artificial "patterns" and the "irregular," "rough" rhythms of free verse with authentic "common speech" and musicality. He agrees with Pound's advice "regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (Pound 199). Reznikoff associates the variable rhythm of free verse with an intense expression of feeling. Emotional intensity distinguishes poetry from prose; he argues "[prose] can be written admirably

without evoking any feeling, but poetry is inherently an expression of feeling" ("Charles Reznikoff" 196). His poems, like those of the American Imagist poets to whom he refers, mostly avoid regular meters and rhymes, poetic diction, end-stopped lines, and conventional forms.

And yet, the combination of Pound, Whitman, the King James Bible, and Anglo-Saxon verse registers a more complex relationship between Reznikoff's Objectivism and the free verse of the Imagists than is initially apparent. The short, unembellished free-verse lines typical of Imagism in poem "XXXII" from *Going To and Fro*—

> The leaves are solid
> in the gloom;
> the ledges of rock
> in this new world are
> unsubstantial. (193)

—appear to contrast with the fulsome rhetoric, expansive lists, and incantatory repetitions recalling Whitman in poem "1" from *Inscriptions*

> Out of the strong, sweetness;
> and out of the dead body of the lion of Judah,
> the prophecies and the psalms;
> out of the slaves in Egypt,
> out of the wandering tribesmen of the deserts
> and the peasants of Palestine. (219)

But, the formal contradictions in these two poems responding to WWII and the Holocaust demonstrate that, for Reznikoff, both short, Imagistic lines and long, rhythmic lines must be marshaled to articulate the effects of complex and extensive systems of violence. The multiple poetic forms in Reznikoff's poetry, beginning with *Rhythms* (1918) and ending with *Holocaust*, demonstrate that his rejection of traditional forms, figures, and lyric techniques in favor of a stark, free-verse Objectivist poetry was a much more gradual and complicated process than his autobiographical writings contend.

The formal features of *Holocaust*—including a distanced, third-person perspective, awkward syntax resulting from passive-voice constructions, sequential organization of impersonally numbered poems with blunt titles, harsh rhythms, extreme irony and understatement, and avoidance of figurative language, poetic diction, and rhyme—grew out of a long process of searching for an appropriate form to portray sympathetically the suffering of Holocaust survivors without aestheticizing their pain. This development begins with the five distinct sections of the 1941 *Going To and Fro*, through the early sections of the 1959 *Inscriptions: 1944-1956*, and culminates in *Holocaust*. Reznikoff's wartime and post-war poetry moves away from traditional forms, rhymes, and rhythms. In *Going* and *Inscriptions*, the speakers seek refuge in and draw strength from the music generated from the incantatory repetitions of Jewish prayers. But in *Holocaust*, music and religion are implicated in the violence of WWII; the Nazis punish rabbis by forcing them to sing religious songs while the S.S. guards torture and murder them, and the guards order the prisoners to play music to cover the sounds of the screams from the gas chambers. Thus, Reznikoff must abandon the lyric effects he employed in his earlier poems.

Reznikoff's World War I poems in his first volume *Rhythms* (1918) anticipate the shift away from lyric elegy toward blunt factual testimonies in *Holocaust*. The very title underscores the importance of music to Reznikoff's early poetics, in contrast to the condemnation of rhythm and music in his later work. In poem 13 "Romance," the speaker clings to traditional forms and genres, like the romance, even while asserting their disappearance:

> The troopers are riding, are riding by,
> the troopers are riding to kill and die
> that a clean flag may cleanly fly.
>
> They touch the dust in their homes no more,
> they are clean of the dirt of shop and store,
> and they ride out clean to war. (6)

The opening lines echo the refrain from Alfred Noyes's popular poem "The Highwayman": "The highwayman came riding— / Riding— riding—" (192). Reznikoff's troopers, like Noyes's highwayman, are riding towards their own death. The pat, monosyllabic end-rhymes—*by/die/fly* and *more/store/war*—reproduce the neat, "cleanliness" of the soldiers going to war. But, as Robert Franciosi argues, "the innocent rhythm in the opening lines and the use of 'clean' throughout the poem is an ironic attack on the illusion of clean war" (266), an illusion offered in Rupert Brooke's famous WWI sonnet "Peace" in which soldiers go off to war like "swimmers into cleanness leaping" (312). The ironic repetition of "clean" registers the impossibility of a tidy war for those who are "riding to kill and die." In Reznikoff's poem, "dust" and "dirt" are desirable; they connect the soldiers to their homes and their work. The neatness and order of the poem are deceptive like the false claim of a clean war. "Romance" voices the death of the romance, chivalry, and Victorian lyricism that influenced poets like Noyes in the early twentieth century; in WWI, these elements are "no more" (6). In a 1969 interview, Reznikoff claims that the Objectivists "were anti-Tennysonian. His kind of poetry didn't represent the world we knew [. . .] some of it was magnificent, but it wasn't *us*" ("Charles Reznikoff" 197). But, at the same time, in "Romance," Reznikoff nevertheless demonstrates the value of traditional formal techniques, employing them ironically to convey war's unpoetic reality. Here, we see the beginning of Reznikoff's movement

away from traditional forms and lyrical effects; his poem criticizes its own form but it does not completely reject it.

Like "Romance," the following poem "14," originally titled "On One Whom the Germans Shot," registers the devastating effects of war while critiquing its own traditional figures. The poem laments the death of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the young Vorticist sculptor killed in the First World War, with suspiciously pastoral imagery:

> How shall we mourn you who are killed and wasted,
> sure that you would not die with your work unended,
> as if the iron scythe in the grass stops for a flower? (6)

The subject is conventional: the young artist killed in his prime. While the poem assembles the traditional imagery of the pastoral mode (the scythe, the grass, and the flower), it also registers the effect of the mechanized warfare of WWI on that imagery. The poem designates the scythe, which is typically associated with the Grim Reaper, as an "iron" scythe, a machine of war, dispassionately cutting down the young soldier. The final question mark in poem "14" discloses Reznikoff's skepticism about the effectiveness of the scythe as war figure, and this suspicion of figures and metaphors intensifies in his Holocaust poetry. Moreover, Franciosi claims that the poem is strategically open ended: "'shall' implies a selection of possible responses, but Reznikoff seems to question whether one *can* find an adequate response by furnishing no answer within the poem" (265), a question at the heart of *Holocaust* as well. Although the poem questions the usefulness of pastoral imagery in an elegy commemorating a young artist killed in a modern war, it does not completely abandon its romance with lyric.[5] Its lines may not rhyme, but they are shaped into one stanza with each line containing five

stresses. “Romance” and “On One Whom” rely on traditional forms to critique earlier conventional depictions of death and war in poetry.

Even though the two *Rhythms* poems employ conventional features, devices he will reject in his later poems, the arrangement of the poems in the volume into an antilyrical, disjunctive poetic sequence is a formal structure that remained central to Reznikoff’s Objectivist approach to history in *Testimony* and *Holocaust*.[6] *Rhythms* contains nineteen numbered poems that vary in point of view, imagery, number of lines, and line length and are assembled in no discernible thematic order. This resistance to a chronological or thematic order paradoxically enriches each poem’s operation within the whole. Indeed, “in Reznikoff, the meaning of the poem is always twofold: both in the detail and in its sequence. That is, the detail works in counterpoint to its locus in a series to create the meaning of the poem” (Bernstein 217). Reznikoff’s sequences coincide with Rosenthal’s and Gall’s definition of “the modern poetic sequence” that doesn’t seek “to resolve a problem [or] conclude an action” (11) and “is not bound by thematic, philosophical, or formal conventions in the way that so many earlier so-called ‘sequences’ were” (16). Genevieve Cohen-Cheminet also argues that Reznikoff’s sequences are modern, claiming they represent “a foundational rejection of the poetic sequence inherited from the Romantics” (91), namely the “organically continuous sequence” (89), and characterizes Reznikoff’s arrangement of poems as “nomadic” (94). The term resonates with Bernstein’s discussion of walking as a model for the structure of Reznikoff’s volumes: “Resembling the long walks through the city he took every morning, Reznikoff’s poems move from site to site without destination, each site

inscribing an inhabitation, every dwelling temporary—contingent but sufficient" (218). The act of reading the sequence with no clear end point mimics wandering.

In Reznikoff's 1941 volume, *Going to and Fro and Walking Up and Down*, the poet continued experimenting with and expanding the disjunctive poetic sequence. *Going* consists of five large sections—"A Short History of Israel; Notes and Glosses," "Autobiography: New York," "Autobiography: Hollywood," "Testimony," and "Kaddish"; each section contains discrete poems ranging from a representation of the biblical exodus of Israelites recounted in extensive catalogues and incantatory repetitions, to short Objectivist portraits of contemporary city life and city dwellers, to a four-part testimony-form poem based on early American law reports, and ending with a Kaddish for Reznikoff's mother. The title underscores the connection between walking and reading.[7] Its allusion to the Book of Job suggests one particular walker, whose physical wandering facilitates his exploration of the question of suffering.[8] When Satan and the angels present themselves to God at the beginning of Job, God asks where Satan came from, and he replies "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it" (1:7).[9] God allows Satan to test the faith of Job, a man "perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (1:1), by destroying his possessions and his family. Job passes the test, and God blesses and rewards him. *Going*, like the Book of Job, confronts the question of how to understand the meaning of undeserved suffering, and both fail to provide a simple answer. Reznikoff's speakers in *Going* take on the position of lonely, wanderers "apart and alone" (184); they suffer and witness the anguish of others.

Poem "VIII" in the first section of *Going* tackles the problem of suffering by examining the efficacy of a metaphor comparing dead birds to the destruction of the Jews throughout history. The other poems in section one provide, as its title implies, "A Short History of Israel" that depicts the plight and exodus of the Jews. The meaning of the metaphor in poem "VIII" depends upon the other poems in the sequence. Like the two previous poems in *Rhythms*, this one questions the form that a poetic elegy should take. "VIII," similar to the earlier Gaudier-Brzeska elegy, does not provide an answer; it ends with a question:[10]

> A dead gull in the road,
> the body flattened
> and the wings spread—
> but not to fly out of the dust
> over the waves;
> and a robin dead beside a hedge,
> the little claws drawn up
> against the dusty bundle:
> has there been a purge of Jews
> among the birds? (181-82)

The speaker contrasts the "flattened" gull, its "wings spread," with the robin's claws "drawn up / against the dusty bundle." Even though the gull and robin are opposed in their positions, the *spread/dead* rhyme and the *dust/dusty* associations link them, as do the semicolon between the two descriptions and the repetition of "and." The poem's first eight lines would seem a prime example of Objectivism, heavily influenced by Imagism. The distanced speaker witnesses the details of two images and avoids commenting on their significance. However, the last two lines introduce an observant speaker searching for interpretive significance and asking how the history of the exodus of the Jews, a history related earlier in the sequence, influences the way he understands two dead birds

on a New York street. The syntactic structure draws together the two bird descriptions and the destruction of the Jews into the speaker's provocative question.

And yet, some critics, like Peter Quartermain read the concluding question as an overt assertion that ruins what came before by forcing a single interpretation at the end: "The final lines impose a reading, a significance, which is not inherent (or even apparently implicit) in the scene as presented [. . .] and in the long run the poem is unsatisfactory. It is as though Reznikoff has been going to and fro and walking up and down, looking for the meanings he wants, observing and then writing with predatory intent" (285). Here, Quartermain judges the poem according to Imagist standards derived from haiku, claiming it is a failure because it violates the supposed modernist principles of eschewing interpretative impulses. But the final lines distinguish Reznikoff's Objectivist method from haiku-inspired Imagism. Reznikoff, like the Imagists, acknowledges that he was influenced by the clarity and conciseness of Chinese and Japanese poetry, but he preferred non-traditional haikus. In an interview, he relates a story of a Japanese boy's criticism of the ending of one of his haiku-like poems in *By the Waters of Manhattan*:

> A Japanese boy came up to me once, [. . .] and asked me what the last line was doing there. He would have left it out. After reading a lot of haiku, I realized that's exactly the way they're written in Japan. Most of them seemed to be just a simple statement that is expected to suggest a particular mood or feeling. But if I had left the last line out, my whole meaning would have been lost. ("Charles Reznikoff" 198)

Reznikoff's justification of the final line can inform the ending of poem "VIII." Instead of weakening the images that came before, the poem's final two lines strengthen the emotional impact of those images by connecting the birds to the suffering depicted in the other poems in the sequence. Reznikoff's brand of Objectivism combines precision with

the indirect evocation of emotions. The ending simultaneously clarifies the relationship between the birds and the Jews by constructing a metaphor and undercuts that metaphor with a question, casting doubt on the very metaphor that it constructs.

Indeed, Randolph Chilton characterizes the simultaneous reliance on and suspicion of metaphor as a defining feature of Reznikoff's verse, claiming that he "goes so far as to suppress metaphorical complexity in his sparest verse" but "is clearly interested in conveying feelings by association; in fact, the details he selects for his poetry are significant precisely because of the emotional association he makes with them" (204). "VIII," like Reznikoff's two WWI *Rhythms* poems, draws on an earlier poetic tradition while it reveals the obsolescence of the very figures it derives from the past. The poem alludes to famous bird poems like Shelley's "Skylark" and Keats's "Nightingale," and the seagull imagery in particular evokes the birds in Old English elegies like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" where human-sounding gulls' cries stir up memories of the speaker's former life. In "VIII," the robin, usually associated with springtime and renewal, symbolizes death and destruction, recalling the ominous depictions of robins in Dickinson's poems "I dreaded that first Robin, so" and "How dare the robins sing." Reznikoff juxtaposes a scavenger with a song-bird and silences both. The speaker does not respond in poetry to birdsong; he can only meditate on the absence of song. These birds are not inspiring figures; they are grounded in the dust of the earth, dust that evokes the "purge" of the Jews. The poem's other formal features enhance the emotional impact of these figurative details. The three shortest lines in the poem, two beats each—"the bódy fláttened," "óver the wáves," and "amóng the bírds"—suggest the human lives cut short by the war. The choice of "body" humanizes the dead bird, and "Over the waves"

points the poem toward the violence occurring overseas in European battlefields and concentration camps. These devices and precise free-verse lines in "VIII" create an alternative antilyrical song in place of the silenced birds.

The quality of the song, however, changes throughout the individual poems and sections of *Going*. The fourth "Testimony" section reveals another side of Reznikoff's response to the Holocaust; it consists of four, numbered free-verse poems. The section title "Testimony" and its footnote—"based on cases in the law reports" (206)—frame the poems in legal terms, supporting Reznikoff's analogy between courtroom testimony and poetics and distinguishing these poems from others in *Going*. In 1933, Reznikoff initially published this same material, based on the law reports from early American history that he read for his work on the *Corpus Juris* encyclopedia, in the form of a long work in prose. However, he later converted sections of the prose into these free-verse poems. One possible influence on Reznikoff's decision to rework the prose into poetry was Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*. Reznikoff claims he and the other Objectivists were "moved by" it but that he didn't "care particularly for the way it was written, but the subject matter I found very, very interesting" (131). Indeed, the subject matter of both "Testimony" and the *Spoon River Anthology* is similar. Reznikoff shared Masters's interest in depicting the stories of ordinary people and marking the lives and deaths excluded from traditional historical accounts. "Testimony" recounts the physical and emotional hardships suffered by working-class Americans, while *Spoon River* voices the unheroic and everyday experiences of the deceased residents of a small Midwestern town. Both works confront the darker aspects of an American society governed by greed, hate, and violence.

The forms of the two works, however, differ significantly. Reznikoff created this testimony form for his wartime volume and continued to develop it for the next thirty years of his life. In fact, Fredman connects these early testimony works to Reznikoff's last major poem, claiming that "the American text of *Testimony* (in each of its several forms) forms a direct precursor to Reznikoff's last book of poems, *Holocaust*" (114). Reznikoff's first three "Testimony" poems clearly register the violent details of law reports in plain language from a third-person perspective, and they repeat significant words and phrases for emphasis. The individual poems function as discrete units, like law reports for distinct cases; they vary in terms of their number of lines, use of rhyme, meters, use of dialogue, and imagery. The title and footnote of "Testimony" formally connect the poems to legal documents. But, the title of Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* alludes to a historical and classical, rather than legal, source: J. W. Mackail's *Selected Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*. *Spoon River* consists of 244 short, free-verse poetic monologues spoken by the deceased inhabitants, real and imagined, in the fictitious town of Spoon River. The first-person speakers in the individual poems refer to one another, creating a sense of the town's human community missing from the discrete and detached third-person accounts in "Testimony." Although both works employ the colloquial language associated with their subjects, Masters mockingly invokes the elevated style of classical, epic poetry in the title of his mock-epic poem "The Spooniad" that concludes *Spoon River*. Masters also identifies another canonical source, namely Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as the model for organizing his poems in terms of hell, purgatory, and paradise. The short, free-verse colloquial poems from "Testimony" and the *Spoon River Anthology*

both memorialize the experiences of ordinary, individual American citizens, but to different ends.

"Testimony" links the outrage Reznikoff felt in response to World War II and the Holocaust to the cruelty of early industrial American society. The poems argue that ordinary Americans were not immune to suffering and that brutality occurred on American soil not just overseas on the European battlefields of WWI and WWII. The violence against everyday people at home detailed in "Testimony"—workers drowned in an icy river, a young girl scalped by a book binding machine, an immigrant family robbed and murdered by criminals in New York—indirectly critiques the American isolationist position prevalent at the time that sought to distance and protect the US from another war and from early reports of Nazi atrocities against Jews. Sylvia Rothchild underscores the connection between Reznikoff's American testimonies and his approach to the Holocaust thirty years later:

> Reznikoff, writing his Testimonies, caught previews of the violence and pain in other places and generations that show how far men can go. The poems created from the law reports of several states offer a record of human behavior different in scale but not in substance from the testimony Reznikoff took from the Nuremberg Military Tribunal Trials and the record of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. (292)

In "Testimony," Reznikoff casts the facts of American cases in poetry because he believes poetry can evoke sympathy toward the suffering of the Jews depicted in the volume. He explains these associative emotions in terms of an objective correlative: "*Testimony* may be explained by T. S. Eliot's 'objective correlative,' as I understand it. Something happens and it expresses something that you feel, not necessarily because of *those* facts, but because of entirely different facts that give you the same kind of feeling" ("Charles Reznikoff" 202). The decision to translate his earlier prose testimonies into

poetry registers his idea that the form of poetry itself is a more powerful medium to convey human emotions and elicit reactions to instances of inhuman behavior than prose.

The "Testimony" poems struggle to maintain the humanity and individuality of their subjects while simultaneously representing the inhuman forces that seek to objectify individuals as victims of an industrial machine. Poem "II" enacts this tension. The speaker introduces a child laborer: "Amelia was just fourteen and out of the orphan asylum; at her first job—in the bindery, and yes sir, yes ma'am, oh, so anxious to please. She stood at the table, her blonde hair hanging about her shoulders" (207). The poem opens with an intimate portrait of Amelia; it names her and offers details about her life. The long, winding lines suggest Amelia's long hair. But, at the same time, the speaker situates Amelia in an impersonal, mechanized environment, a place for counting and accounting. Her job in the bindery is "knocking up": "counting books and stacking them in piles to be taken away" (207). The lines assimilate Amelia into the counting; she is "fourteen" working at her "first" job at one of the "twenty wire-stitching machines" bending down to pick up the "three or four" books that fall under the table. She is thus part of the industrial machine by being part of the workforce, a fact that is gruesomely actualized with her violent, literal merging with the bindery machine:

> She felt her hair caught gently;
> put her hand up and felt the shaft going round and round
> and her hair caught on it, wound and winding around it,
> until the scalp was jerked from her head,
> and the blood was coming down all over her face and waist. (207)

The machine "gently" catches her hair just as the systematic r*ou*nd/w*ou*nd/ar*ound* assonance conveys the steady movement of the hair winding into the machine.

And yet, the "Testimony" section of *Going* does not end with this observation of Amelia's brutal incorporation into an industrial machine; it concludes, instead, with a fairy tale-like poem. The poem, akin to the two elegies from *Rhythms*, conveys a conflicting impulse to draw upon old traditions and forms while also registering their inadequacy. Testimony "IV" consists of frame story in which the first-person child speaker asks his mother to "Tell me a story" (210). The mother's story begins as a typical fairy tale with "Once upon a time" and ends with a moral: "if you try to harm others, / you may only harm yourself" (211). The mother recounts how a rich woman, while trying to poison a persistent beggar woman, nearly poisoned her own son. The poem ends, however, with its own moral directed back at the mother, most likely from the son's frame story perspective: "And, mother, if you are a beggar, sooner or later, / there is poison in your bread" (211). The fable at the end of "Testimony" influences the interpretation of the other poems in that section; indeed, Maeera Shreiber argues that the poem is "a retrospective commentary or midrash, an interpretative act directed toward the texts preceding it" (69), recalling the glossing function of the last two lines in Reznikoff's bird poem "VIII" from *Going*.[11] Shreiber classifies Reznikoff's poem as part of "a classic 'feminine genre" (70) with "a whole, coherent narrative" (70) in contrast to the preceding testimony fragments. Rather than reading the ending in terms of gender, though, one could also view the turn to the structure and moral clarity of fairy tales as the poet's ironic attempt to find meaning or comfort in a literary tradition of fables; "Testimony" ends with an invented fable not with poems based on actual law reports. The two morals, separated by a stanza break and voiced from two different perspectives, demonstrate the failure of that appeal to a simple, didactic form; neither moral is adequate to the violence

in the three previous testimonies. A problem with the notion of justice and a division between law and morality surface in these sections of "Testimony." The morals function as the closing remarks of a judge at the end of a trial. Their inadequacy perhaps contributes to Reznikoff's decision to omit any mention of judges, juries, adages, or sentences from his two later volumes of *Testimony* and *Holocaust*. No moral or fable is adequate to the Holocaust not even one delivered with irony.

The fifth and final section of *Going* takes up the mother/son relationship introduced in the fanciful tale and relocates in a religious context. "Kaddish" is a son's response to his mother's death: Reznikoff designates it as a tribute to "my mother" (212). The poem recasts the poison bread as fatal cancer. Instances of public and historical violence in "Testimony" lead the speaker to confront his private experience of witnessing his mother in her final days. Legal testimony becomes a religious memorial form. The title's footnote that the Kaddish is "a portion of the ritual of the synagogue recited by mourners" identifies the poem as the mourner's prayer, one of the five types of Kaddish, and indicates that Reznikoff's poem should be "recited" like a prayer. Yet "Kaddish" simultaneously emulates and critiques the religious authority and tradition its title evokes. Indeed, the poem is "an occasion for questioning as much as affirming normative practice and belief" (Shrieber 73). The eleven-poem sequence corresponds to the eleven months a son recites the prayer for his deceased parent.[12] The subtitle of poem "IX"—*Stele*—also draws upon the traditional practice of setting the gravestone one year after the death. The archaic quality of the word "stele," as opposed to headstone or grave, suggests old rituals and customs. The placement of the headstone "marks the end of the formal mourning period, as the bereaved prepares to rejoin the community from which he has been

partially estranged in the wake of his loss" (Shrieber 77). "Kaddish" signals this return to community by shifting from the first-person singular perspective in the earlier poems to a plural "we" (214) in poem "X" directly following *Stele*. However, while a typical mourner's Kaddish "represents a prayer of praise for and glorification of God as well as a supplication for the Eternal's rule and a plea for peace for all humanity [and] does not refer to the dead, mourning, or the afterlife" (Solomon 168), Reznikoff's poem focuses on his mother and avoids naming God. As Fredman claims, it is "in many ways a counter-Kaddish, consisting of an unsentimental description of her in her last days and in the period after her death" (26). In fact, the last poem "XI" seems to reject religious ceremonies and prayers altogether:

> I know you do not mind
> (if you mind at all)
> that I do not pray for you
> or burn a light
> on the day of your death:
> we do not need these trifles
> between us—
> prayers and words and lights. (214)

But, while the speaker includes words among these religious "trifles," the poem insists upon the importance of its words.

Reznikoff's next poetry volume, *Inscriptions: 1944-1956*, continues this complex investigation of the power of both religious and poetic words; its title underscores the Ten Commandments carved on stone tablets, also referred to as God's testimony to Moses, and their desecration over time.[13] Like *Going*, this volume examines religious laws and practices in precise Imagist poems and long, repetitive meditations arranged in a disjointed sequence in no obvious chronological or thematic order.[14] The competing refrains in the first *Inscriptions* poem register the conflict between doubting religious

laws and wanting to believe in them. Each of the first four stanzas begins by questioning where foundational religious laws and documents were written: "Where is that mountain of which we read in the Bible—Sinai—on which the Torah was given to Israel?," "Where was the Bible written?," and "Where was the Mishnah written?" (217). Sinai was, of course, where Moses received God's testimony, the basis for the Bible and the oral and written Torah.[15] The Mishnah is a collection of rabbinic legal statements subdivided into six orders and edited by Rabbi Judah in 200 CE. The book's purpose is to protect the laws of the Torah. "Mishnah" derives from the Hebrew word meaning repetition and instruction, and the poem itself teaches through repetition. Reznikoff's poem juxtaposes religious questions and the refrain "*Blessed are You, Lord, God of the Universe, / Who has kept Israel alive*" (217) at the end of each of the four stanzas. This refrain derives from the *shehecheyanu*, "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time," a blessing often recited to mark special occasions. The italics in *Inscriptions* "1" draw attention to the prayer lines and their repetition. The poem's speaker, however, only recites the blessing after detailing instances of torture committed against religious Jews:

> and the scholars and their disciples
> were hunted down and crucified
> or flayed alive
> or wrapped in a scroll of the Torah and burned to death.

Here the destruction of the human body corresponds with the violation of the Torah. There is a disjunction between just religious laws and the unjust secular orders given by "a nod of a drunken king" (217), a division also at the heart of Nazis laws and orders in *Holocaust*. The *shehecheyanu* refrain follows these violent depictions, registering "in the

same breath the bitterness and the gratitude of survivors" and "echoing the contradiction in a belief in" (Rothchild 290) a seemingly impotent God.

However, the following stanza compares the murder of Jews to the destruction of a tree whose fall brings about new life and thus portrays death as a part of life:

> As when a great tree, bright with blossoms and heavy with fruit,
> is cut down and its seeds are carried far
> by the winds of the sky and the waves of the streams and seas,
> and it grows again on distant slopes and shores
> in many places at once,
> still blossoming and bearing fruit a hundred and a thousandfold,
> so, at the destruction of the Temple
> and the murder of its priests, ten thousand synagogues
> took root and flourished. (218)

Uncharacteristic lyricism pushes the poetry forward: "though its tone is somber, this lyric's confidence in recovery is undeniable" (Omer-Sherman 147). The rising anapestic rhythm of "by˘ thĕ wínds ŏf thĕ śky aňd thĕ wáves ŏf thĕ śea" conveys the forward motion of the wind and water dispersing the seeds. The long poetic lines are dense, "bearing the fruit" of an abundance of words. The assonance in *tree/seeds/streams/seas* suggests an aural harmony in nature and in the process of death and rebirth. This stanza justifies the blessing refrain. The reference to "seeds" invokes the first order of the Mishnah, *Zera'im*, meaning seeds, connecting the destruction of the natural world to the violation of religious law. In addition, later in "Early History of a Writer," Reznikoff characterizes the ideal law he studied in law school as a growing tree "from which new branches were ever springing / as society became complicated / and the new rights of its individuals clear" (325). The tree imagery roots the Jewish people in history and celebrates their continued endurance, in contrast to their slavery, exile, and wandering.

But this optimism does not endure. The following seven lines depicting an escape from the Warsaw ghetto undercut the hopefulness of the tree stanza:

> One man
> escapes from the ghetto of Warsaw
> where thousands have been killed
> or led away in tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands,
> to die in concentration camps,
> to be put to death in trucks, in railway cars, in gullies of the woods,
> in gas chambers. (218-19)

Now, the "fruit a hundred and a thousandfold" becomes "thousands, hundreds of thousands" of murdered Jews, and the repetition of the "thousands" killed overshadows the "one man" escaping. The third-person speaker focuses on the details of how the victims in the concentration camps were killed, not on how the survivor escaped, detracting from the refrain that thanks God for preserving life. The passive-voice constructions emphasize the victims, not the Nazi perpetrators, while the repetitive prepositional syntax conveys the overpowering scope of the genocide occurring in the other unnamed concentration camps and ghettos. The specific references to gas chambers and camps distinguish this poem from *Going* and other more allusive poetry written at the time. Rothchild praises the poet for writing about the Holocaust in the 1940s and 50s when few others did: "Charles Reznikoff was one of the small number [of writers who took on the burden of empathy, the search for explanations and meanings] and also an exception among them. 'Inscriptions' (1944-1956) was written when Lionel Trilling was saying that there would be no poems and no stories, only silence" (293). Reznikoff's harsh depiction of the Warsaw uprising also distinguishes itself from the few Jewish Holocaust accounts written in the 1950s, one of the most well known being *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952). Lynn Rapaport argues that these works typically "decalamatized the

murders by emphasizing heroic imagery and downplaying Jewish suffering and persecution [and] privileged acts of physical resistance and rescue such as the Warsaw ghetto uprising" (191). *Inscriptions* does not downplay suffering or celebrate the heroism of the Jews fighting at Warsaw.

And yet, the poem doesn't end with a bleak depiction of one man's escape from Warsaw; it transforms the escaped prisoner into a symbol of Jewish survival:

> in his heart the word *Jew* burning
> as it burned once in Jeremiah [. . .]
> from that man
> shall spring again a people
> as the sands of the sea for number,
> as the stars of the sky
> *Blessed are You, God of the Universe,*
> *delighting in life* [. . .] (219)

The prayer refrain uncovers the desire to turn the escape of one individual from the genocide into hope for future survival. But the succession of grandiose metaphors suggests that the speaker is unsuccessfully grasping for an effective figure to counter the bald facts of concentration camps deaths to support his hope. The concrete words depicting the ghetto survivor give way to a metaphorical language, recalling the earlier natural metaphor. The speaker moves from a rooted tree image to water and sky metaphors, figures that subtly suggest he's losing ground. The references to burning and Jeremiah also undermine the speaker's optimistic turn. "Burning" recalls the religious scholars immolated in the blazing Torah. It also alludes to the etymological roots of the term "Holocaust" as a religious sacrifice completely consumed by fire: "'Holocaust' is the scholarly transcription of the Latin *holocaustum*, which in turn, is a translation of the Greek term *holocaustos* [. . .] which means 'completely burned'" (Agamben 28). In the book of Jeremiah, God enumerates the sins of the people of Jerusalem to the priest and

prophet: "they have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire *for* burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake *it*" (19:5). God orders Jeremiah to warn the people that He will punish them for their sins and that Jerusalem will become a "valley of slaughter" (19:6). Jeremiah, like Job, is a complicated figure, and Reznikoff's evocation of him confuses rather than clarifies the poem's conclusion. He witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile from the Promised Land, preached about the need to follow the Torah, and warned the people of Jerusalem that God would punish them for not doing so. In the narrative, Jeremiah "clearly struggles with God over the nature of his prophetic role and message [but, at the same time,] the book attempts to defend God's righteousness by arguing that the people themselves brought punishment upon themselves for failing to observe God's *torah*" (Sweeney 919).

Inscriptions "1," however, does not blame Jews for their suffering. The concluding stanza lists the sins committed against the Jews, not sins committed by them:

> Out of the strong, sweetness; [. . .]
> out of the ghettos of Spain and Portugal, Germany and Poland, [. . .]
> and out of the Jewish dead
> of Belgium and Holland, of Rumania, Hungary, and Bulgaria,
> of France and Italy and Yugoslavia,
> of Lithuania and Latvia, White Russia and Ukrainia,
> of Czechoslovakia and Austria,
> Poland and Germany,
> out of the greatly wronged
> a people teaching and doing justice [. . .]
> and out of those who met only with hate,
> a people of love, a compassionate people. (219)

The repetitive structure ("out of") creates an oppositional refrain that counters the blessing, and this final stanza is the only one without the italicized blessing. Thus, the poem doesn't end with praise for God but, with the speaker's loss of faith. The final lines catalogue suffering and commend the persistence of love in the Jewish people. However,

the proliferation of death sites is overwhelming, making it is difficult to assert, as Omer-Sherman does, that "the poem insists on the rise of healing power of scriptures" (146). While the speaker's appeal to prayers and blessings in the previous stanzas appear at first to support the claim that the "motive in the poem is consolatory" (Francoisi 247), the effect of the poem as a whole is not reassuring, particularly not in religious terms. Moreover, the incantatory form of the final stanza evokes "the litany of prepositional phrases from the opening section of Walt Whitman's 'Out of a Cradle Endlessly Rocking'" (Fredman 104). The speaker in "Out of a Cradle" famously listens to the mournful sounds of a maternal sea and a mockingbird's lament in order to create his own poetic song:

> Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
> Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle [. . .]
> From those beginning notes of sickness and love, there in the transparent mist,
> [. . .]
> I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter
> Taking all hints to use them—but swiftly leaping beyond them
> A reminiscence sing. (343-44)

Whitman's poem seeks to reconcile the "pains" of death with the "joys" of life in a turbulent natural environment, with winds that "Blow South, or winds blow North" (345), alluding to the American Civil War. The sea seductively whispers "Death, death, death, death, death" (351) to the speaker, which he concludes is "the word of the sweetest song, of all songs, / That strong and delicious word which, creeping, to my feet, / The sea whisper'd me" (351). Death's cycle is bittersweet; one must die to be reborn. Yet, in Reznikoff's poem, the accumulation of violence and suffering contradicts the claim that death is "sweet." The Holocaust deaths cannot be incorporated into a religious blessing or a bittersweet natural song at the end of "A Compassionate People."

The severe lack of emotion, the detachment, irony, and understatement in *Holocaust* represent a world devoid of love, compassion, and God. The poem's rhythms are not based on the healing powers of Jewish prayers or scriptures, and Syrkin laments the loss of this kind of music in *Holocaust*: "Remembering his moving 'Kaddish,' written in the thirties, and various later poems I hoped for a lyrical threnody. But Charles was committed to his system" (64). Syrkin characterizes Reznikoff's method, which he developed while working on his two volumes of *Testimony*, as self-regulating: "Only the records of the Nuremberg Trial and of the Eichmann Trial were to be his sources; nor would he allow himself any subjective outcry. Again the bare facts, as selected by him, would speak for themselves: there would be no tampering with the experience through imagery or heightened language" (64). But selecting the "bare facts" to "speak for themselves" while avoiding the "imagery or heightened language" of a "subjective outcry" precisely coincides with Reznikoff's concept of the poet as objective witness to the testimonies of others who evokes emotion only indirectly.

Some critics praise the poem's lack of an overtly emotional poetic persona. Weinfield identifies Reznikoff's "move away from lyric subjectivity, toward what we have come to refer to as 'Objectivism'" (227) as an important development in his poetry. Todd Carmody argues that Reznikoff's "unwillingness to step into the position of the survivor" (104) resists dangerous or ineffective "models that often call on us to identify with survivors in order to understand the Holocaust" (86). Francoisi claims that the poem exposes how "a reader can no more *experience* the actual Holocaust through reading the poem than Reznikoff could through studying legal testimonies" ("Detailing" 249). The poetic speakers in *Holocaust* cannot bridge the gap between survivor and spectator, and

this prevents the reader's empathetic identification with survivor testimonies. Rendered without sympathy, the victims' experiences are unabashedly horrific and "so nakedly shocking, so blatantly calculated [as] to make us feel that the Nazi persecution of the Jews can *never* be fictionalized or abstracted into 'literature'" (Stevenson 184). The poem's documentary quality serves Reznikoff's unwillingness to treat the Holocaust as merely source for art; rather, it means to preserve the legal and historical reality of the testimonies.

Other critics, though, consider Reznikoff's bare presentation and distance from the material as insensitivity toward the suffering of Holocaust victims.[16] For Shirley Kaufman, the poem is an artistic failure: "I do not believe the *Holocaust* works. Art is not life, and we cannot communicate horror by unrelieved horror. [. . .] I know of no works of poetry or fiction [. . .] that have successfully turned the Holocaust into art. And Reznikoff failed also" (55). Auster contends that Reznikoff's formal strategies are ineffective and even disingenuous: "The holocaust, which is precisely the unknowable, the unthinkable, requires a treatment *beyond the facts* in order for us to be able to understand it—assuming that such a thing is even possible. [The poem says] that the only way we can deal with these things is to remove them from their inherently emotional setting" (161). According to Auster, an effective representation of Holocaust testimonies must preserve their expressive context. Similarly, Robert Alter faults *Holocaust*'s dispassionate representation of survivor testimonies, claiming it contains a "numbing pointlessness in the constant repetition of savagery and murder without the slightest interpretative response on the part of the poet, without the slightest intimation of historical options beyond or after genocide" (50). While Sue Vice praises the poem's

form as "technically innovative" (14), like Auster and Alter, she doubts the morality of its detached poetic speaker, arguing that "the implied narrator's temporal and geographical distance from events gives him a 'masochistic' passivity" (14).

However, the abstraction of a poetic presence from *Holocaust* doesn't admit an unwillingness to engage with the material or insensitivity towards it; rather, it enables the poet to focus on the individual testimonies, records which themselves were controversial at the time. Rothchild claims that "historians were wary of survivor documentation [and] complained that survivors were prone to subjectivity, bitterness and partisanship and that they lack the authority to speak for the community" (294). Carmody argues that leaders employed the testimonies to advance political agendas: "Survivor testimony played a key role in Ben-Gurion's Zionist agenda. [. . .] survivor's emotional stories were used to rewrite the history of the Holocaust as the history of the Jewish people's 'collective victimization, suffering, resistance, resurrection (from the ashes of failed assimilation), and, finally redemption as a powerful nation-state'" (88). By suppressing his own emotional responses to the testimonies in his poem, Reznikoff hopes to facilitate a complex reaction in readers. In his last interview in 1976, Reznikoff defends his approach to the material: "You don't just throw up your hands and say 'Oh, how terrible!' You don't simply go and put out your own emotions. But if you stay faithful to the facts themselves—for they are the important part—if you present them as clearly as you can, then a response will surely follow" ("A Profile" 14). Reznikoff places the responsibility of the emotional response and interpretation on the reader, not, as many critics would wish, on the text of the poem itself.

Thus, *Holocaust* remains "faithful to the facts" in a different way from Reznikoff's earlier Objectivist verse. The poems in *Going* and *Inscriptions* explore the relationship between secular laws and testimonies and religious practices and prayers. While the poetic speakers doubt the power of the Kaddish and the *shehecheyanu* blessing, the poems draw strength from the repetitive and incantatory rhythms of those religious forms. In addition, even though the sources and text of *Testimony* are predominately secular, Reznikoff prefaces the first volume with a biblical quotation, "Let all bitterness, wrath, and anger, and clamor and railing be put away from you" (Ephesians IV: 31), juxtaposing a command for forgiveness with tenacious violence that makes the command seem impossible. The quotation suggests that one should adopt an attitude similar to that of patient Job. Reznikoff's title designation of *Testimony* as "recitative" also has a religious connotation. In "Obiter Dicta," he identifies this particular form with holy practices: "Incidentally, I read somewhere that among the ancient Greeks there was an intermediary between song and straight prose—I suppose a prose that is chanted. A good deal of the Bible is read like that in the Orthodox service in synagogue" (374). *Testimony* is recitative in a similar way to "Kaddish."

But *Holocaust* betrays no belief in the power of prayers or their recitation. Reznikoff does not subtitle the book "recitative." The poem is not preceded by a scriptural reference; its preface relentlessly establishes the factual and secular validity of its subject: "*All that follows is based on a United States government publication,* Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals, *and the records of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem*."[17] The poem enumerates the deportation, torture, and murder of Jews from the early 1930s to the 1943 rescue in Sweden. The International

Military Tribunal tried twenty-four high-ranking military and political leaders of Nazi Germany for crimes against humanity from November 14, 1945 to October 1, 1946. A United States Military Tribunal later prosecuted more than one hundred additional defendants from a broader spectrum of German society in a series of twelve trials from October 1946 through April 1949. Nazi S.S. Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem lasted 114 sessions from April 11 to August 14, 1961 and was broadcast worldwide. The Tribunal convicted Eichmann and executed him by hanging. Hannah Arendt published her well-known *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in response to the trial, arguing that "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (276); thus, the trial revealed, in her now-famous phrase, the "banality of evil" (292). Arendt's contention that the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Zionist motives confused the issues in the trial and that Jewish Councils played a collaborative role in the Holocaust sparked a backlash among Jewish intellectuals such as Syrkin, who "led the charge in the Jewish press" (Carmody 95) against Arendt. During the trial, Reznikoff worked as a typesetter at Syrkin's *Jewish Frontier*; in that position "he must have been exposed to the controversy brought about by the Eichmann Trial and brought to a head by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*" (97).

For *Holocaust* is the product of a poet deeply engaged with not just history but the assessments of historical events over time. The trial transcripts and survivor testimony served as the basis for Reznikoff's poem and contributed to the American understanding of the Holocaust in the 1960s and after. In particular, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi claims that Eichmann's televised trial was "a watershed in the American perception of the Holocaust,

as it provided near-personal contact with survivors and an unprecedented immersion into the facts for those who followed it through the public media" (35). Lynn Rapaport also argues that the trial was a "catalyst for awakening Holocaust consciousness" (193), and that it "introduced the term *Holocaust* to an American public" (194).[18] Published in 1975 more than ten years after the Eichmann trial and thirty years after the event itself, *Holocaust* immerses its readers in factual testimonies Reznikoff altered and transformed into free-verse poetry. But its overall organization and structure emphasize Reznikoff's position as a historian rather than as a poet. Indeed, Norman Finkelstein points to the complex genre of *Holocaust*, claiming that it "offers a radical challenge to the conventional category of poetry (or perhaps, of the aesthetic)" (31). Unlike Reznikoff's other poetry volumes, this one contains a "contents" page uniformly listing its twelve sections in Roman numerals as if they were chapters in a book, beginning with "Deportation" and ending with "Escapes." The chronological progression of the sections from "Deportation," to "Invasion," "Ghettos," "Gas Chambers and Gas Trucks" implies a mechanistic organization depicting the escalation of early Nazi policies forcing Jewish emigration in 1933 to the systematic extermination of the Jews and the Final Solution, unlike the disjunctive sequences in *Going* and *Inscriptions*. A section titled, "Author's Notes," follows the last poem, further adding to the historicity of the poem. The ordered contents page, author's notes, and preface identifying the sources indicate that what follows is not a book of poems containing italicized blessings or arranged to suggest a kaddish but rather a methodically organized historical account of a methodically organized atrocity.

And yet, however much *Holocaust* seems to be structured as a historical document, it must be recognized as a highly crafted work of art in which Reznikoff stages his own trial. Its twelve sections suggest the twelve trials under the US Tribunal. But the purpose of this poetic trial is not to judge or sentence the guilty. Gone is the legal apparatus in the original testimony records, judges, lawyers, juries, sentences, and verdicts, and in its place are the voices of the survivors. *Holocaust* tests the limits of poetic form to represent and respond to an event that many claim is unrepresentable and unspeakable. The volume is thus inevitably characterized by its contradictions. Indeed, it is "a problematic work at a technical—in the sense of aesthetic or formal—level" (Bernstein 238). The contents page creates an illusion of order and logic only to convey, paradoxically, a lack of order and logic. The individual poetic sequences are far from uniform: "Work Camps" consists of ten numbered sections, while "Research" and "Escapes" each contain only two. And "Escapes," the longest section of the volume, is ironically more about death than liberation. "Research" includes a poem from the perspective of German physicians justifying their torture of the Jews as scientific experimentation "for the good" (9) of the German people; while the "Entertainment" section details how S.S. officers tormented prisoners for their own enjoyment. The notes to those sections don't clarify the poetry with objective facts and figures, as notes in a typical historical document would; they complicate it with irony and understatement. For example, the note on the Warsaw ghetto section juxtaposes the deaths of "thousands of Jews" (90) in the uprising with "the burden on every S.S. man or German police officer during these actions to drive out the Jews from Warsaw." The final note, which concludes *Holocaust* as a whole, only condemns the Nazis through irony: "the spirit of the S.S. men

and the police officers, it was noted by one of their superiors, was 'extraordinarily good and praiseworthy from the first day to the very last.'" The sections may adopt the titles of the Nazi perspective, but the poetry reveals the deceptive nature of those labels. Taking the titles at face value may lead one to conclude that *Holocaust* logically and chronologically "proceeds from the beginning of this *saison d'enfer*, to its darkest moments, to the new beginning of a period of struggle, hope, and recovery" (Finkelstein 32). But the poem's final two lines—"about six thousand Danish Jews were rescued / and only a few hundred captured by the Germans" (88)—contradict such an optimistic reading. *Holocaust* ends with captures not escapes, and those few hundred captured undercut the hopefulness of the six thousand rescued, not to mention, the six million who, we know, didn't escape. It is indeed a bitter comment on the state of a world in which "a few hundred" lost lives constitutes good news. Imposing a redemption narrative adds a false logic—even an illogic—to *Holocaust*. While "Reznikoff's book concludes with the rescue of the Danish Jews, the overwhelming effect emanates from depictions of crimes of such senseless and extreme viciousness that one cannot conceive and does not find given an adequate motivation or punishment" (Gubar 153); the ending reveals "an incomplete and somewhat pitiful triumph" (Hindus 49) and, perhaps, even survivor's guilt. The poem does not attempt to explain why the Holocaust happened or how the atrocities committed should be punished; instead, it examines the operation of the Nazis' brutal and systematic practices. *Holocaust* insistently resists, not embodies, an impersonal poetics of order and productivity.

The poem connects the Nazis with organization, efficiency, and technology at the same time it exposes that the blind pursuit of these practices, often considered a mark of a

highly civilized culture, can result in the utter destruction of civilization. In the last interview before his death, Reznikoff speaks to this: "If you were to ask what was the most civilized country in Western Europe before the Holocaust, do you think many people would answer Germany? Then, to think that a country that had reached that level could permit something like that—it makes you very uncertain about any human life" ("A Profile" 14). Elie Wiesel contends that the Nazis "proved that knowledge without morality may be destructive, that science alone without ethical dimension may become an instrument of inhumanity" (17). The S.S. officers in *Holocaust* are constantly preoccupied with procedures and orderliness in service of horrific immorality. They reduce the prisoners to abstract numbers, force prisoners to place the bodies of murdered Jews "on the ground / in a pattern: / Jews and Poles / in groups of five" (17-18) and "behind trees that had been cut down / and set up in rows" (46), and take and separate the clothing, glasses, false teeth, jewelry, and hair of victims before they enter the gas chamber so that "nothing [is] lost or wasted!" (29). The excessive repetition of the Nazis "ordering" throughout the poem—"the S.S. men ordered the Jews off the wagon" and "then ordered them to take off their clothes" and "then they ordered the Jews to get on their knees" (7)—stresses the importance of organization and commands in relation to the work camps, death camps, and trains while pointing to the complete breakdown of a moral law and order. Hitler employed the law to exterminate, rather than protect, human beings, creating the situation in which "the law itself is at odds with justice" (Hindus 65). The Nuremberg and Eichmann Trials attempted to define legally "crimes against humanity" and to prosecute the defendants according to a new set of legal criteria. Arendt argues that the Eichmann Trial exposes "the inadequacy of the prevailing legal system

and of current juridical concepts to deal with the facts of administrative massacres organized by the state apparatus" (294).

Similarly, Reznikoff's *Holocaust* registers the failure of law and order in the event itself and its subsequent trials by constructing its own set of formal rules and then violating them. On the surface, *Holocaust* itself seems to approach its subject and sources in a distanced and systematic way, suggesting "the Nazi ideology and methods [that] imposed anonymity upon their victims as part of their program of genocide" (Shevelow 304). For the most part, the poem employs passive voice and a distanced third-person perspective, omits personal names, avoids metaphors and figurative language, and is unemotional, all characteristics conveying the S.S. officers' depersonalization of individual prisoners. However, sections of *Holocaust* flatly contradict those formal characteristics, and the poem doesn't blindly follow its own orders. The poems in which Reznikoff switches perspective, employs figurative language, or conveys subjective emotions stand out against the backdrop of formally flattened testimonies, thereby acknowledging the impossibility of a completely objective treatment of the Holocaust in his poem.

The first-person perspective, simile, and irony in "Research" register *Holocaust*'s concern with the loss of and construction of individual and collective identities. The first poem is from the Nazi doctors' point of view justifying their torture of the Jews:

We are the civilized—
Aryans;
and do not always kill those condemned to death
merely because they are Jews
as the less civilized might:
we use them to benefit science
like rats or mice:
to find out the limits of human endurance
at the highest altitudes
for the good of the German air force. [19] (9)

The ironic repetition of "civilized" registers the barbarism of the scientists. The *c*ivilized/*sc*ience alliteration connects human experimentation and study with this supposedly advanced society. The uncharacteristic use of "we" here conveys the danger of Fascism's extreme nationalism and insistence on a collective and homogenous Aryan identity. The composite "we" crushes the voice of the individual "I." Vice claims that "the only first-person utterance that remains in *Holocaust* is in the section entitled 'Research'" (11), and Carmody argues that "when the first-person 'I' does appear, it is always spoken by a Nazi" (91). But, neither of these claims is entirely accurate. There are instances of prisoners and S.S. guards asserting their individuality and speaking in the first person, as with the "slender young woman with black hair, [who] pointed to herself and said, 'I am twenty-three'" (24) and the S.S. man who "would say a kind word" (48) to the Jews and confesses, "I didn't know where I was being sent to. / I didn't know about this, / and when I found out I asked at once for a transfer" (48). The shifts in perspective register moments when individual voices break free from the constraints of the historical record and trial testimony.

"Research" sets up a strict division between us and them, but the poem's metaphor also confuses that distinction. The separation of the poetic line after "science" instead of after "mice" invites the question of who really is the rat in this comparison.

From the doctors' perspective, the scientists "use" the Jews as they would a lab rat or mouse. And yet, the line break implies that the experimenters are the rats. "For the good of the German air force," "for the good of the Germany navy," and "for the good of the German army" (9) sounds an empty refrain. There is nothing "good" about "Research." Instead, the poem, like "A Compassionate People," lists the graphic mutilation of the Jews in elaborate catalogues:

> wound them and force wooden shavings or ground glass
> into the wounds,
> or take out bones, muscles, and nerves,
> or burn their flesh—
> to study the burns caused by bombs—
> or put poison in their food
> or infect them with malaria, typhus, or other fevers—
> all for the good of the German army.
> *Heil Hitler!* (9)

The poem's first twenty lines are all part of one single sentence linked together by punctuation—commas, dashes, colons, and semicolons—and conjunctions—*and, for, or*—that magnifies the overpowering effect of all these experiments, as torture itself aims to amplify pain and test human limits. The repetition of "wound" and the *w*ound/*w*ooden/*w*ounds alliteration aurally "forces" sounds into the ear as doctors "force" wood and glass fragments into open lacerations. The "or" repetition registers the unending forms of torture occurring in the camp hospitals.

"Research I" expresses emotion indirectly; it attacks the Nazi ideology by adopting that detached voice and revealing the gross irony of its appeals to civilized society and scientific advancement. Whereas "A Compassionate People" argues that Jews emerge "out of" their destruction as a loving and empathetic people, in poem "I" torture and violence breed more hate. The poem doesn't end with a question, a blessing, or a

celebration of Jewish endurance; it concludes with an emphatic avowal to Nazism, conveyed by the use of italics and the exclamation mark. The italics here are disturbing: they suggest that Nazi devotion has replaced pious utterances and prayers. The poetic speakers invoke "*Heil Hitler!*" (31, 37) three additional times, all in cases when they feel the need rationalize their persecution of the Jews. The only other times Reznikoff uses italics are earlier in the poem for words associated with Jewish devotion, "the Zionist anthem, *Ha-tivah*" (7), meaning "hope," and the "pious sect of Jews called *Hasidim*" (12), translated as "loving kindness." In the world of the Holocaust, forceful orders replace the prayers devoted to a compassionate people. While the repetitive rhythms of prayers and blessings praising God and the Jewish people counterpoint the blunt depictions of violence in *Going* and *Inscriptions*, the Nazi system excludes the possibility of secular and sacred consoling words or music in *Holocaust*.

Instead, traditional Jewish words and music become a form of torture in *Holocaust*. In "Invasion," the S.S. men "ordered the Jews to get on their knees / and sing Hebrew songs" (7). They order a rabbi "to put on his prayer shawl / and sing and dance" (19) and tell the Jews "to sit down and start singing Jewish songs" (66). Those who don't sing are told they "would be shot" (66) or "are welcomed with beatings" (84). Soldiers entertain themselves by forcing Jews to sing and enjoy punishing the most religiously orthodox prisoners, particularly the Hasidic Jews. In "Ghettos," the poem's sound effects register the disjunction between the typically joyful acts of singing and dancing and the punishment:

> Among the men was an old man in the robe—and wearing the hat—of a pious sect of
> Jews called *Hasidim.*
> The Germans gave him a hen to hold
> and he was told to dance and sing;
> then he had to make believe that he was choking a German soldier
> and this was photographed. (12)

The uncharacteristic use of rhyme here—*old*/*hold/told*—places lyrical sounds in a disturbing, anti-lyrical environment. The alliteration of *h*at/*H*asidim/*h*im/ *h*en/*h*old/*h*e/*h*ad connects the helplessness of the strangled hen and the Jewish man. The excessive repetition of the h-sound suggests that the poem itself, like the man, is forced to sing. The last line, though, contains none of these self-conscious poetical effects. The final word shifts the focus from aural to visual, even documentary, imagery, perhaps in an attempt to reject the punishment of song. In another instance, the Nazis force Hasidic Jews to sing their prayers while they burn them alive, an event that the poem renders visually:

> They gathered some twenty Hasidic Jews from their homes,
> in the robes these wear,
> wearing their prayers shawls, too,
> and holding prayer books in their hands.
> They were led up a hill
> Here they were told to chant their prayers
> and raise their hands for help to God
> and, as they did so,
> the officers poured kerosene under them
> and set it on fire. (25)

Unlike "A Compassionate People," which chants the lines from particular blessings, or "Kaddish," which draws upon the structure of the traditional mourner's prayer, this poem can only repeat the word "prayer" three times, sounding the hollowness and ineffectiveness of prayers in this context. The poem's other repetitions—"their," "hands," "and"—create an incantatory chant of violence that mocks prayer. God does not save the Jews. A rare instance of rhyme, *their*/*wear/prayer*, conveys the disjunction between the

harmony of the sounds and the hostility of the Germans. In these *Holocaust* punishment scenes, an irrepressible impulse pushes the poetry to "sing" through rhyme, alliteration, and repetition. But, by doing so, the poem risks being implicated in the false aestheticizing of the witness accounts.

The suspicion of song and music in the poetry of *Holocaust* marks a shift in Reznikoff's poetics. In "Obiter Dicta," he identifies "three rules in writing prose or verse" (373). The second rule is that one should "write in rhythm, because that adds to the meaning, as well as the beauty, of speech" (373). Yet, the rhythms of *Holocaust* do not mimic the "beauty" of speech. They underscore the horrific actions the testimonies recount. Rhythm, song, and music in the world of the camps are only used to drown out the sounds of Jews being murdered:

> [the Jews] were thrown on piles of wood
> that had been sprinkled with gasoline
> and just burnt alive.
> But that their screams might not be too disturbing
> to those who worked
> an orchestra of Jews from the camp
> was set to playing loudly
> well-known German songs. (46)

In this passage, music cannot mask the violence; the other prisoners know why the officers order the orchestra to play. Irony and understatement register language's ability to cover and uncover simultaneously. The multiple and contradictory meanings of "just"—as merely, simply, morally justified, and deserved—disclose the potential violence of language. The unjust killings take place so often that the speaker claims it "just" happened. "Just" draws attention to and undercuts the brutality of the scene. In addition, the cacophony of "screams" giving voice to the suffering and the deflating understatement, "might not be too disturbing," occur in the same line.

Even more serious than its distrust of song, the poem doubts language. True, Reznikoff's earlier poems question the very metaphors they construct in *Rhythms, Going,* and *Inscriptions*. But those poems still suggest faith in language's ability to communicate clearly and concisely, which are Reznikoff's other two rules from "Obiter Dicta"—"first and above all to be clear, because communication is the purpose of writing (as of speaking); [. . .] and finally to be concise, because that adds to the beauty, as well as the effectiveness, of speech" (373). It is notable, then, that several sections of *Holocaust* are ambiguous and wordy. For example, the poem marks the Nazis' deceptive use of language with quotation marks: "the entertainment squad" (4), "Cloakroom" (28), "Valuables" (28), "hairdressers" (28), "To the baths" (28), "Lazarette" (38), and "road building" (59). These are euphemisms for Jews tortured for entertainment, rooms for their clothing, valuables, and hair removed from the bodies sent to the gas chambers, the building where doctors experiment on Jews, and hiding traces of mass graves sites. In some cases, surviving in the camps requires prisoners not only to decode these lies but even to lie convincingly themselves about their health, age, or occupation. In another instance of verbal deception, the trains on the way to the death camps and work camps pass through stations disguised to hide their real purpose:

> And the transports were arriving all the time;
> large transports daily—even twice a day.
> Flower beds were later set up around the platform to which the transports came;
> and there were signs with arrows reading "To the train" or "To Bialystock,"
> a city known for the number of Jews who lived—or rather had lived—there;
> so that those arriving would not know at first where they were:
> it looked like a kind of transit station, a railway junction. (39)

The Nazis use language, literally "signs," to disorient the Jews, and thus the signifying relationship between words and their source objects breaks down. Similes and metaphors

also obscure clarity and concision. The Nazis want the camp station to seem like an ordinary railway stop, but the poem seeks to avoid a metaphorical language endorsing the Nazi lies. The aside "or rather had lived" indicates the presence of a poetic speaker interpreting the scene and insisting that this is a death station, not an ordinary railway stop. The other prisoners inscribe the actual destination for the Jews in the concentration camps on notes: "the men who had been sent away had said that if they were sent to the woods / they would send those who were left behind a note [in the truck]— / and they did: / it was in Hebrew and all it read was: 'To death'" (75). The troubled simile and wordiness in the final line, "it looked like a kind of," registers the speaker's hesitancy to employ figurative language and difficulty in verbalizing the experience. The dashes signal qualifications to previous statements; the speaker defines and refines what he means by "all the time." The repetition of "transports" suggests the continuous arrival of the death and transport trains in the stations. The long poetic lines here contrast with the concise Imagistic poems often associated with Reznikoff the Objectivist. Carmody argues that these extended lines register "a proliferation that prevents anyone—reader narrator, or protagonist—from taking possession of the story completely. This ineloquence demonstrates how *Holocaust* actually complicates and even questions the epistemological project it seems to pursue" (105). The speakers in *Holocaust* fight to express themselves through a language that the Nazis employ to deceive them and even to obliterate their very existence. Indeed, the flowers planted in the station and the falsified signs serve as implied metaphors for the Nazi attempt to hide the extermination of the Jews.

Moreover, *Holocaust* marks a significant shift in Reznikoff's conception of metaphors. While in previous poems, Reznikoff reluctantly employs metaphors, fearing

that they might cloud the clarity and precision of his poetry, here he mobilizes that very obfuscating potential. In the early Gaudier-Brzeska elegy, the speaker compares the artist killed in battle to a flower cut down by a scythe; he searches for a way to mourn the destruction of artistic potential and beauty. The bird poem in *Going* suggests that the dead robin and seagull are metaphors for the destruction of the Jews while also questioning those figures' ability to represent human deaths. The speaker in *Inscriptions* compares the Jewish people to a fallen tree dispersing its seeds whose destruction promotes new life. But, at the same time, the poem juxtaposes this hopeful imagery with an catalogue of suffering. In "Early History of a Writer," Reznikoff claims that his study of the law helped him remove suggestive metaphors from his poetry; he compares the law to the "beautiful order" (325) of a thriving tree in which "nothing was without its reason" (325):

> I found it delightful
> to climb those green heights,
> to bathe in the clear waters of reason
> to use words for their daylight meaning
> and not as prisms
> playing with the rainbows of connotation. (325)

In this passage, the references to "green," "waters," and "daylight," convey nature's vitality and recall the fertilizing seeds in "A Compassionate People." The poem reflects the simple order and beauty of nature. In these earlier poems, the destruction of nature figures the destruction and persecution of humanity.

But, in the wake of the Holocaust, there are no "clear waters of reason," no "beautiful" natural, moral, or religious orders left to appeal to. Reznikoff's study of the legal documents of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials doesn't solidify his faith in a clear, precise, legal language that will cleanse his poetry of its metaphorical suggestions

and ambiguities. *Holocaust* undercuts its own appearance of order, and its only references to nature are decidedly unnatural. Any suggestion of growth or vitality in *Holocaust* is ironic. For instance, in addition to forcing prisoners to set up flowers beds around the gas chamber, the Nazis order Jews to dig up and burn bodies from earlier mass grave sites and then plant grass over them:

> One grave would remain open for new corpses
> coming all the time;
> a truck would bring the bodies, still warm,
> to be thrown into the grave—
> naked as Adam and Eve;
> Jewish men, many of them bearded, and Jewish women and children.
> The graves they had opened would be refilled with earth
> and they had to plant grass all over them;
> as for the dead—
> a thousand bodies would be put on a pyre;
> and there were two pyres of bodies burning all the time. (62)

The trucks "coming all the time" and the fires "burning all the time" underscore the massive scale of the destruction and recall the continuous movement of transports in the earlier poem. The religious metaphor is here only to suggest that religious allusions and narratives are casualties of the Holocaust along with the men, women, and children. The nakedness of Adam and Eve no longer represents the innocence of man at Creation; it now indicates victims in mass graves, dehumanized "corpses" and "bodies" stripped of clothing. The word "pyre" carries religious connotations, while also bringing to mind the horrific image of the Hasidic Jews set on fire while praying that concludes the "Massacres" section. The Nazis deprive their victims of any sort of funeral or burial rites, even a grave. Both the deceased and living prisoners lose their identities: the prisoners digging up the graves are depersonalized along with the corpses as "they." Wiesel argues that the Nazis sought to erase Jewish memory by destroying the mass graves: "First the

enemy killed the Jews and then he made them disappear in smoke, in ashes, so every Jew was killed twice. In every extermination center special squads of prisoners had to unearth multitudes of corpses and then burn them. Now he tries to kill them for the third time by depriving them of their past" (16). Reznikoff's poem resists such annihilation by reviving and recasting the witness accounts and also by alluding to an earlier poem concerned with the obliteration of memories of wartime. The reference to the grass planted "all over them" recalls Carl Sandburg's well-known WWI poem "Grass," in which the grass asserts "I am the grass; I cover all" (136). The grass grows over the human graves of major battle sites in history—"Austerlitz and Waterloo," "Gettysburg," and "Ypres and Verdun"—concealing gravesites and helping people forget about past wars and casualties. The grass repeats the refrain "Let me work," dispassionately characterizing the effacement of human history and human life as its day-to-day task. In contrast, *Holocaust* pushes the nature figure further than he did in *Rhythms*, *Going*, and *Inscriptions*. In these circumstances, even nature itself has no power in this situation; it is appropriated by the Nazis to facilitate their eradication of the Jews and the memory of these lives and deaths. The grass is just part of their unnatural and inhuman systems of violence.

Reznikoff's ninety-page poem fights against such extermination and against the silence that often surrounds traumatic experiences. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, Dori Laub claims that the Holocaust "*produced no witnesses*" (80): "the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling and, therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails" (79). Agata Preis-Smith interprets the typographical arrangement of *Holocaust* as a metaphor for such silence and the inability of its victims to tell their story; she argues that "despite the appearance of literal

documentation, Reznikoff does seem to arrive at the final metaphor in his poem" (248) and that "his basic instrument of metaphorization is contained not so much in the text proper as in the empty spaces and margins of silence in which he envelops his poem" (248). But, *Holocaust* is not silent. It voices the testimonies of its victims, documents in danger of being forgotten after the trials. The testimonies exist because the witnesses refused to remain silent about what they saw and experienced. Reznikoff, in turn, expresses his reaction to the trial documents through poetry. Wiesel argues that the voices of witness testimony constituted to an important new genre in the post-WWII literary imagination, articulating what was previously shrouded in silence: "But then there are the witnesses and there is their testimony. If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future" (9).

Holocaust, like Reznikoff's previous poems, concerns itself with the question of how to mourn human deaths. But, in the camps, religious songs and prayers cannot offer consolation or reassurance. Even Reznikoff's "system" of recasting the individual testimonies into passive voice, from a third-person perspective, omitting personal names, and avoiding figurative language collapses in *Holocaust*. The poem reveals the moral danger in objectifying human beings, as the Nazis dehumanized the Jews; as the Nuremberg and Eichmann Trials turned private, individual experiences into objects to be consumed by viewers and readers; and as historical accounts transform people into collections of impersonal facts. The correlation between Reznikoff's *Testimonies* and *Holocaust* is particularly important in terms of the American conceptions of WWII as "a

simple, shining legend of the Good War" (Adams 2) and "the greatest source for American self-congratulation [because] we defeated the Nazi monsters" (Bernstein 238). *Testimony* confronts the Holocaust by exposing the violence that can result when human beings are forced into an amoral or immoral system of rules, laws, and orders. If, as Susan Gubar claims, the Holocaust is now more than ever in danger of being forgotten as "individuals who personally survived the Shoah are dying out" (1) and its events continue "to recede further from view" (5), then Reznikoff's *Holocaust* stands out as a formally experimental work of art that engages with the complex history and historicity of the Holocaust and fights against forgetting by memorializing the voices of the witnesses.

Notes

[1] As Omer-Sherman argues, the journal was more than just a publication outlet for Reznikoff: it "was an intellectual and cultural movement created by Jewish humanists who sought to put the question of their Jewishness into a language fully commensurate with American intellectual life. Reznikoff saw the journal as the very embodiment of how the Jewish intellect, though homeless and restless, could find fulfillment in the American idiom" (169).

[2] Syrkin writes in "Charles: A Memoir," "while he was obdurately producing more *Testimony* I urged him to use the technique of law cases for another project—the Nazi extermination of European Jewry" (64).

[3] All citations to Reznikoff's poem's, except *Holocaust*, correspond to page numbers in *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff*. As Seamus Cooney notes in his edition, Reznikoff often omitted sequence and section titles and numbers in various editions of his works.

[4] Published earlier in verse form in the "Early History of a Writer" section of *By the Well of Living and Seeing* (*Poems* 327-28).

[5] The use of flower imagery to commemorate the death of a poet in Reznikoff's elegy is similar to that in traditional pastoral elegies, specifically Shelley's poem on the death of Keats, *Adonais*: "Thy extreme hope, the loveliest and the last, / The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew / Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste" (29).

[6] Critics agree that this is a defining feature, but they disagree in the terminology they use to characterize it. Hatlen emphasizes that Reznikoff writes in "groups," defined as "discrete units [that] seem to gesture toward one another" (150). Cohen-Cheminet argues the structure consists of a "poetical discourse rhythmically chained in Discrete Series" (87), distinguishing between a sequence whose order is already known by the poet and a series whose form is generated through the process of writing.

[7] It suggests one particular method of midrash, which is a rabbinic interpretative method, known as halakhah. Translated literally as "walking," halakhah analyzes and comments on the meaning of Jewish laws in rabbinic literature.

[8] In a letter dated March 17, 1941 to Henry Hurwitz, the editor of the *Menorah Journal*, Reznikoff identifies the source of the title as "Lowenthal's quotation from *Job*" (*Selected Letters* 296), referring to Marvin Lowenthal, a contributing editor of the *Menorah Journal*.

[9] In a 1974 interview with Reinhold Schiffer, Reznikoff claims: "Well, the King James version I delight in, and I dislike the modern. [. . .] I think the King James version is excellent" (122); consequently, all biblical quotations are from Reznikoff's preferred King James version.

[10] Reznikoff published an earlier version of this section in the Winter 1940 issue of *The Menorah Journal* under the same title, "A Short History of Israel," composed of seven numbered poems.

[11] The term "midrash" derives from the Hebrew word for "inquire" and refers to the act of interpreting and. The "Great Midrash" is rabbinic commentary on biblical texts containing the five books of the Torah, the Five Scrolls, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes.

[12] As Leon Wieseltier explains, the length of time is significant: "the obligation of the kaddish lasts eleven months and not twelve months precisely because the rabbis chose to disassociate the deceased from the rabbinical pronouncement that the wicked receive their punishment in twelve months after they die" (134).

[13] Although Reznikoff printed the entire volume *Inscriptions* in 1959, he originally published the first poem in the Spring 1945 issue of *The Menorah Journal* under the title "A Compassionate People" written "for the thirtieth year of *The Menorah Journal*." Ranen Omer-Sherman argues for significance of the earlier publication date, claiming "this lyric appeared as American Jewry was receiving the darkest reports about the fate of European Jews" (130). In fact, in that issue of the journal, an article exposing

the "thousands of Jews already dead in the gas chambers" (Mendelsohn 9) follows "A Compassionate People."

[14] Cohen-Cheminet claims that this "discontinuity is further corroborated by the visible typographical choices (the use of different characters, italic, bold, dashes, Roman and Arabic numerals)" (91) in the volume.

[15] "And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written in the finger of God" (Exodus 32:18).

[16] Critics often invoke Theodore Adorno's frequently quoted claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34) in their analyses of *Holocaust*. But some fail to take into account that Adorno's essay concentrates on the impossibility of writing a particular kind of simple restorative poetry after the Holocaust. German Fascists failed to recognize the need for culture and its artistic creations to be critical of themselves; they celebrated an uncritical appreciation of art. The artist, in Adorno's view, must recognize the dialectic between culture and barbarism. High cultural Enlightenment values of progressive and secular reason can lead to barbarism, as in the case of the German Fascists. After Auschwitz, art must recognize its own barbaric potential.

[17] A similar note follows the table of contents in *Testimony* and precedes the Ephesians quotation: "Note: All that follows is based on law reports of the several states. The names of all persons are fictitious and those of villages and towns have been changed. C. R."

[18] Rapaport cites a dispatch written by American journalist Paul Jacobs during the Eichmann trials as the introduction of "the term *Holocaust* to the American public" (194) and claims that "it would take until the late 1960s before Elie Wiesel and countless others popularized the term to mean the suffering and genocide of European Jewry."

[19] Reznikoff refers, of course, to the contemptuous association between Jews and rodents put forth in Nazi propaganda like the anti-Semitic film "The Eternal Jew" (1940), created at the urging of the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, which juxtaposed images of rats in cellars with Jews emigrating from Palestine. Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* responds to this racist stereotype.

CHAPTER III

"*WHERE FORM TENDS*" IN MURIEL RUKEYSER'S WAR POEMS

Throughout her career, Muriel Rukeyser published works in a variety of forms—poems, prose, translations, biographies, and scripts for films and musicals—on a wide range of topics, most famously the silicosis tragedy at Gauley Bridge in "The Book of the Dead" (1938) but also on the Spanish Civil War and WWII in "Letter to the Front" (1944), politician Wendell Willkie in *One Life* (1957), women's liberation in "The Poem as Mask" (1968), and the imprisonment of South Korean poet Kim Chi Ha in "The Gates" (1976). However, criticism of Rukeyser's work typically disregards this variety. She is most often characterized either as a young, left wing, experimental modernist poet based on her two poetry volumes from the 1930s—*Theory of Flight* (1935) and *U.S. 1* (1938)—or as forerunner poet and mentor to second-wave feminist poets in her poems from the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, Robert Schulman stresses the "nonlinear and avant-garde" (184) quality of "The Book of the Dead" from *U.S. 1* to argue that Rukeyser "has assimilated, subverted, and turned to her own politically radical uses the modernist techniques of poems like Eliot's *The Waste Land*" (182). So too, Raphael Allison ranks "The Book of the Dead" as one of "the canonical works of 1930s modernism" that solidified her reputation "as a proletarian, leftist, Marxist" (1). Kim Whitehead, on the other hand, claims Rukeyser as "*the* central prototype of the contemporary feminist poet" (14) in the sixties and seventies, and Florence Howe adopts the line "No more masks" from Rukeyser's "The Poem as Mask" as both the title for her anthology of twentieth-century women's poetry and a rallying cry for female authors.

Such approaches to Rukeyser's work often simplify or completely ignore her poems about the Spanish Civil War and WWII from the 1940s and 1950s; these poems do not fit into the narrative of the "golden girl" of thirties socialism or "mother Muriel" of seventies feminism (Bergman 553). During that war and post-war period, she "was severely battered by the left and right, and her literary reputation declined." After she won the Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first volume of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, at the age of twenty-one, her experimental poetry and leftist politics were embraced by reviewers. Her criticism of the damaging effects of American corporate capitalism on everyday workers in "The Book of the Dead" was also well-received because it reflected the political attitudes popular in literary circles at the time. But when Rukeyser published her pro-war, pro-American poem "Wake Island" in 1942, she lost her status as the golden girl of the literary left. The poem ignited a series of *ad hominem* attacks in the left-wing *Partisan Review*; the reviewers characterized the poem as shameless war propaganda and accused Rukeyser of betraying her earlier radical politics from "The Book of the Dead." "Wake Island" portrays the defense of the Pacific Island by a US garrison of marines and volunteers against the Japanese's fifteen-day air bombing raid; it commends American democracy, echoing FDR's focus on fascism's threat to America's great four freedoms—of speech, of worship, from fear, and from want. "Wake Island," with its "exuberant tone, its high rhetoric, its repetitive noun and verb phrases," was, certainly, "a public poem meant to encourage Americans to regard Wake Island within the larger context of the war against Fascism" (Brock 256).

But rather than drumming up support for the war, the poem stirred up attacks on Rukeyser's character. A review entitled "Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl" in the

Fall 1943 issue of *Partisan Review*, signed with the initials R.S.P. and later revealed to be the journal's editors (William Phillips, Philip Rahv, and Delmore Schwartz), started the "Rukeyser Imbroglio," as it was later dubbed. The editors condemned "Wake Island" as shameless propaganda and Rukeyser as a fair-weather friend to leftist causes: "Sooner than one can say iambic pentameter, Miss Rukeyser [. . .] produced *Wake Island* a poster-poem in which she wrapped herself in Old Glory, sang the Star Spangled Banner" (472). They parodied Rukeyser's invocation of FDR's four freedoms, claiming that she "will launch a new version of the 4 freedoms: FREE VERSE, FREE LOVE, FREE LUNCH, FREE-FOR-ALL" (473). In a response to the review published in the Winter 1944 issue of the journal, Rebecca Pitts defended Rukeyser and criticized the review's "incredible vulgarity" (125). And, later in the Spring 1944 issue, F. O. Matthiessen reproached the *Partisan* editors for making "unjustifiable charges about her character" (217).

But many critics followed the *Partisan* reviewers lead, portraying Rukeyser as the "Poster Girl" for propaganda poetry. In a review of her volume *The Green Wave* (1948), Randall Jarrell likens Rukeyser to a pin-up girl: "One feels about most of her poems as one feels about the girl on last year's calendar" (148). He attributes her weakest poems to her work with Archibald MacLeish at the Graphics Division of the Office of War Information (OWI), a major propaganda program launched by the federal government in 1942 to encourage American support for the war: "Miss Rukeyser's worst and most commonplace lines [. . .] are all rhetorical sublimations of the horrible advertising-agency idealism of Corwin or Fast or MacLeish or the National Association of Manufacturers, of sermons and radio programs and editorials and speeches: what our ignorant forbears called *cant*" (150).[1] But this assessment ignores a key difference between the idealism

Rukeyser shared with MacLeish in her early days at OWI about using war posters to generate thoughtful debates about America's role in the war and her disappointment when advertising men took over OWI and created posters to sell the war to Americans.

Initially, Rukeyser had believed that the war poster's combination of striking images and direct words could communicate the meaning of the war as a fight against fascist forces threatening democratic ideals at home and abroad to a mass audience. In an article in *The New Republic* entitled "Words and Images," she hailed the arrival of the war poster form: "A new expressive form is before us. This form is the basic form of the war poster. And when we see the fierce and vivid and constructive image—a face of war—before us, we have, too, a point of conflict if we are not yet agreed on the issues of war" (140-41). But Rukeyser had resigned from OWI later in May of 1943 when she felt that the advertisers brought in to run the organization were just producing shallow war advertisements not expressive war posters:

> The advertising men made it clear that there were two ways of looking at ideas in a war against fascism. Those of us who were working on the project believed ideas were to be fought for; the advertising men believed they were to be sold. [. . .] The advertising men won, with those who decided that this was not a war against fascism, that it was a war to be won, and the meaning worked out afterward. (*The Life of Poetry* 137)

Unlike the advertising men who sought to convince the public to buy into the war like they would purchase a tube of toothpaste, Rukeyser wanted the posters to draw Americans into a discussion about the issues surrounding WWII.[2]

In "Wake Island," Rukeyser attempts but fails to create an effective and complex war poster poem. The poem's short, direct lines like "We know the world is one; we name it Freedom" (203) invoke slogans on posters portraying fascism's threat to democracy, and the poem repeatedly calls upon the world to "look" at the battle scenes

on Wake Island as one would gaze upon a poster.[3] "Wake Island" offers an overly simplified vision of an unquestioning public unified in their hate against a single, dehumanized enemy, precisely the "us" versus "them" attitude Rukeyser railed against in her prose writings of the time: "we stand with fight to save / our hope, our discovery, our unappeasable rage / against the enemy cutting us apart" (203). Nevertheless, Rukeyser's more nuanced ways of representing war in her later poems would develop out of her early experiments in "Wake Island." But, rather than reading the poem as a starting point in this process, critics define Rukeyser by "Wake Island." For many years, her reputation as a calendar girl writing war propaganda overshadowed the range and complexity of her later war poems.[4]

Moreover, the combination of personal and political elements in her poetry made Rukeyser unpopular with the New Critics who dominated literary scholarship during the forties and fifties. In the sixties and seventies, though, feminist critics reexamined her earlier work and questioned those earlier assessments. The renewed interest in her poetry continued after her death in 1980 as critics, like Cary Nelson, sought to recover the political aspects of the history of modern American poetry by "revis[ing] our notion of the social function of poetry, an effort grounded in a series of rereadings of marginalized and forgotten poets—particularly women, blacks, and writers on the left" (*Repression* xi). Recently, then, scholars have returned to "Wake Island" and other poems from that period, claiming them as productive developments in Rukeyser's theories about poetry, politics, and form. David Bergman argues that "Wake Island" and her other poems from the 1940s helped Rukeyser cultivate her signature "aesthetic principles and practices that interweave, interlock, and interlace the interior and exterior, male and female, *them* and

us, popular culture and elite culture, positioning these categories not as opposites held in dualistic tension, but as episodes in a rhythm that binds them all into a dance" (554). Allison contends that Rukeyser's OWI work inspired her experimentation with a pragmatic, ekphrastic poetry; he argues that "Ajanta" from her 1944 collection the *Beast in View* reflected "the kind of pluralism she felt defined the American war effort and that contradicted the uniform, dominating ideologies of fascism and totalitarianism" (3) and pushed her to realize "that literary form carried implicit political content relevant to the threat of fascism" (6). Unlike the totalizing form of Hilter's rhetoric, Rukeyser's varied forms embodied democratic pluralism and pragmatism.[5]

War is a constant, but not uniform, threat in Rukeyser's poetry. "War haunts Rukeyser's work" (Wolosky 217) from the 1930s up through the 1970s. And, indeed, in "Poem" (1968), Rukeyser defines her life by the wars of the twentieth century (WWI, Spanish Civil War, WWII, and Vietnam): "I lived in the first century of world wars" (430). In Oscar Williams's 1945 anthology *The War Poets*, she also claims war as the first subject of her writing: "For myself, war has been in my writing since I began" (25). Yet she opposes war's destructive elements and seeks, instead, the creative potential of peace: "Peace, it seems to me, is not the lack of fighting. I want an end to false armistice. Peace, I think, is the force that works for creation and freedom, that fights war. I want that" (25-26). Poetry assembles the positive powers of creation, freedom, and peace to fight war; it is, paradoxically, an agent of peace during wartime. Thus, she can introduce a collection of her lectures during WWII, *The Life of Poetry*, with an anecdote about her forced departure from Spain shortly after the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936. A fellow refugee asked her as they were sailing away from Spain, "And poetry—among all

this—where is there a place for poetry?" (3). Rukeyser's poems try to answer this question by demanding a place for poetry in a time of war and violence.

Indeed, Rukeyser dedicated her life to social protest and activist poetry. She was born in 1913, the only daughter of wealthy Jewish parents in New York City. Her privileged upbringing made her acutely aware of "the terrible, murderous differences between the ways people lived," particularly during the Great Depression ("The Education" 221). She briefly attended Vassar College from 1930 to 1932, began publishing her poems in *Poetry*, and worked as an editor for the *Student Review*, a magazine operated by the Communist-led National Student League. She left Vassar when she was nineteen and traveled to Decatur, Alabama to cover the Scottsboro trial for the International Labor Defense organization, where the police arrested her for fraternizing with African Americans.[6] This formative, eye-opening experience showed her "the other side of the scene: slow cruising cars, deputies, arrest, the brutality to the men and all the Negroes, the politeness to me, the accusations, the chase out of town" ("Rukeyser" 1210). Still, on the more familiar side of the scene, she published her first volume of poetry *Theory of Flight* (1935), which won the Yale Younger Poets Series award and established her reputation, as Kenneth Burke wrote in his review of the volume in the *New Masses*, as an ally to the Communists and the literary Left.[7] In early 1936, she visited Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, to investigate Union Carbide's cover-up of a silica mining disaster, the material for her most well-known poem "The Book of the Dead" printed in her following volume *U.S. 1* (1938). Later in 1936, Rukeyser went to Spain to cover the People's Olympiad, an alternative anti-fascist Olympics, for *Life and Letters Today* but was evacuated because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. That war figured

prominently in her poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, namely in "Mediterranean" (1938), "Correspondences" (1939), and "Letter to the Front" (1944), and resurfaced in her poems about WWII and Vietnam.

The defeat of the Spanish Republicans and the growing threat of fascist forces prompted Rukeyser's lectures at Vassar in the 1940s about poetry's value during wartime, lectures later collected into *The Life of Poetry*. In 1943, she worked for the Graphics Division of the Office of War Information supervised by MacLeish but resigned less than a year later when the advertisers started replacing artists and poets. In the summer of 1943, Rukeyser organized *Words at War*, an exhibit including some of her OWI posters, at the New York Public Library. A weekly reading and discussion series followed the display with appearances by Rukeyser, W. H. Auden, Langston Hughes, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. The display and lecture series demonstrated Rukeyser's commitment to the public value of poetry in wartime. Thirty years later, she was still combining her activism with her poetry during the Vietnam War. In 1972, Rukeyser went to Hanoi with Denise Levertov on an unofficial peace mission. When she returned to Washington DC, the police arrested her for marching against the Vietnam War. In 1975, she was elected president of P.E.N, the literary and human rights organization, and traveled to South Korea to protest the incarceration of the poet Kim Chi Ha.

Rukeyser strongly believed that poetry was an agent of peace and creation that countered war's divisive and destructive effects. In an autobiographical statement for Stanley Kunitz's *Twentieth Century Authors* in 1942, she compares her responsibility to respond to the Spanish Civil War and WWII with that of the Imagists during WWI: "The

uproot of the 1914 war produced imagism, answering chaos with the life of colors and flowers and islands and matchless heads, in their bare existence. We have another wave of such years now, witnesses to whose chaos are facts such as Spain and Gauley Bridge and Scottsboro and the creativeness of certain lives and the gifts of certain poems and gestures" (1211).[8] Here, as in her poems, Rukeyser links military combat abroad with political, economic, and racial conflict in America; "Rukeyser saw, in addition to war against foreign states as military enemies, the home-front [. . .] war against those who deserved justice and possibilities of life, but who experienced instead the crushing exclusions and relegations of a business world oriented toward the gains of owners" (Gibbons 102).[9] Rukeyser's formal representations of war beginning in her first volume of poetry up through her poems protesting the Vietnam War in the 1970s constantly change as her poetry attempts to "answer to chaos" she witnessed in a war-filled century and appeal to an American audience who doubts the value of poetry.

Rukeyser begins *The Life of Poetry* by recognizing that poetry "has no acknowledged place in American life today" (8) even as she asserts that "today," during WWII, is when Americans need it the most. In times of great violence, poetry speaks truths about the human experience:

> There are great gashes in our world that we love with so much pain. [. . .] Much has been taken away from us; but now we need to look for the relating forces. The forces, that is, that love to make and perceive relationships and cause them to grow [. . .]. I speak, then, of a poetry which tends *where form tends, where meanings tend*. This will be a poetry which is concerned with the crisis of our spirit, with the music and the images and these meanings. It will also be a poetry of meeting-places, where the false barriers go down. (20)

War cuts "great gashes" in the world, while poetry, like love, heals those wounds by creating and fostering relationships. Poetry "tends" society; it cares for humanity. It is

also constantly growing; it "tends" in a direction unifying form and meaning. Poetry opens up creative possibilities by relating form, music, images, and meaning. But creating a unifying American poetry is all the more difficult in a utilitarian society that views poetry as useless:

> Everywhere we are told that our human resources are all *to be used*, that our civilization itself means the uses of everything it has—the inventions, the histories, every scrap of fact. But there is one *kind* of knowledge—infinitely precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between the generations in any way it may be: never to be used. And that is poetry. It seems to me that we cut ourselves off, that we impoverish ourselves, just here. I think that we are ruling out one source of power, one that is precisely what we need. (7)

Rukeyser recognizes the contradiction in the country's utilitarianism; we are taught to exploit "our human resources," at the same time we learn to disregard poetry. From a utilitarian perspective, "everything" is a commodity "to be used" for material gain—everything except poetry, that is. Rukeyser shrewdly reorients the cultural "uselessness" of poetry by turning America's neglect of this rich human resource into proof of its value. Poetry is the one thing in a commodity culture "never to be used"; instead of using poetry like petroleum or water, we must pass this "precious, time-resistant" resource "between the generations." "Never to be used" comes to mean "never to be used up, depleted," in her formulation. Poetry is the untapped source of power required to confront war. According to Rukeyser, "the great devastating activity in life as we know it is to shred all the unities one knows [. . .] not only wars but the thing that wars are images of, the tearing apart of life," and the relating forces of poetry, Rukeyser's in particular, work against that tendency ("Craft Interview" 171). Her war poems combine forms and ideas often considered contradictory—the poetical and the political, free verse and conventional verse forms, innovation and tradition, public and private history, the word

and the image, and science and art. Temporal boundaries between individual wars also break down in prophetic poems like "Letter to the Front" and reflective poems like "Endless," in which the speaker laments "all the fallen / the broken and their children born and unborn / of the endless war" (445). Rukeyser's war poems cast the twentieth-century as a time of endless war, of mass violence so relentless that experiences of WWI, the Spanish Civil War, WWII, and the Vietnam War cannot be contained or distinguished.

Rukeyser develops the non-utilitarian use value of poetry by invoking Herman Melville's definition of the poem as "usable truth."[10] Indeed, Rukeyser connects Melville's "experience of war to that of the present generation's, noting the inseparability of art, war, and American cultural history" (Gander 773). She first invoked Melville in a 1941 *Poetry* article entitled "The Usable Truth," published before Pearl Harbor and during the contentious public debate about whether the US should enter WWII: "We can remember all our pride now, all our truth—in Melville's phrase, 'the usable truth.' We in America breathe the air of possibility. Our obligation is at this point to hold fast, with all the faith and imagination we have, to possibility, and to whatever tradition we find there is behind our liberty and our communication" (208). Poetry mobilizes truth as a weapon against war's "efficiency, [and] machines of fright" (207); it is "capable of facing the tragic, the complex, the fantastic" (207), and so we must "draw on the lessons of an American ancestry, distilled in its poetry" (Gander 763).

The "Supplement" to Melville's Civil War volume *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* had voiced his concern about how his poetry would be used and what lessons one should learn from it. He worried his poems would divide the country even further and

prevent the very unification between the Union and the Confederacy he hoped for: "Looking over the battle-pieces in the foregoing collection, I have been tempted to withdraw or modify some of them, fearful lest in presenting, though but dramatically and by way of a poetic record, the passions and epithets of civil war, I might be contributing to a bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end" (263). Melville concluded the "Supplement" with the hope, echoed by Rukeyser a century later, that poetry about the tragedies of American history can instruct future generations to protect their humanity: "Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity; and may fulfillment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity" (272). In Melville, Rukeyser sees a convergence of contradictions: a poet concerned with representing the divisive "terror and pity" of human behavior who also hopes that poetry can unite people and heal old wounds. In *The Life of Poetry*, she praises the way "oppositions turn to music" (67) in Melville's poetry. Like Melville, she believes poetry can register the horrors of war and promote peace at the same time she fears that poetry can be misused.

If Melville's poetry clarifies the usefulness of representing terror, Whitman's poetry demonstrates the usefulness of recording something quite different to Rukeyser: "If we are free, we are free to choose a tradition, and we find in the past as well as the present our poets of outrage—like Melville—and our poets of possibility—like Whitman" (*Life* x). Melville and Whitman address America's search for a national identity from dissimilar, but not antithetical, perspectives. Melville's poetry confronts "the problem of evil" (67), while Whitman's explores the "*problem* of the good" (72).

For Rukeyser, Whitman's poetry is a meeting place of elements often considered incongruous: male and female, body and soul, physical desire and spiritual love, and community and the individual. Divided post-Civil War America needed Whitman's democratic poetry that emphasized similarities not differences: "Whitman's fight for reconciliation [during the war of the States] was the essential process of democracy: to remake and acknowledge the relationships, to find the truth and power in diversity, among antagonists" (*Life* 78). Like Whitman, Rukeyser finds herself "among antagonists," among those with an adamantly utilitarian attitude that dismisses poetry as useless. She connects the questioning of American identity after the Civil War to the uncertainty of America's role in WWII. Whitman's poetry is essentially a "struggle for identity" (73), personal as well as national identity, a struggle her poetry also takes up. Rukeyser "believed that the paradoxical conjunction of unity and diversity gained through tense, shifting interrelationships is a particularly American, and democratic, concern," characteristics she recognized in Whitman's inclusive poetics (Schoerke "Forever Broken" 30).

Furthermore, Rukeyser claims that even the form of Whitman's poetry reflects the identification of an individual human body with his or her environment:

> Out of his own body, and its relation to itself and the sea, he drew his basic rhythms. [They are the rhythms] of the relation of our breathing to our heartbeat, and these measured against an ideal of water at the shore, not beginning nor ending, but endlessly drawing in, making forever its forms of massing and falling among the breakers, seething in the white recessions of its surf, never finishing, always making a meeting-place. (*Life* 77-78)

The rhythm of Whitman's poetry evolves continuously, like a wave crashing on and withdrawing from the shore, to suggest the movement of the poet's breath and heart. Here, Rukeyser employs rhythms and words ("out of" and "endlessly") from Whitman's

own poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" to describe his poetics. In "Out of the Cradle," the repetitious sounds of the waves and the mockingbird's song evoke both sad and joyful memories in the poet-speaker and push him to create his own song incorporating his conflicted response:

> Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
> Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle, [. . .]
> From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
> From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I heard, [. . .]
> I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
> Taking all kinds to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
> A reminiscence sing. (343-44)

In a divisive, post-Civil War environment with winds that "Blow South, or winds blow North" (345), the poet "unites" "all" the painful and joyful "memories" to create a new song that goes "beyond" the original songs; this speaker is Rukeyser's model for the WWII poet in *The Life of Poetry*, a model she seeks to emulate. In the preface to her 1978 *Collected Poems*, much like Whitman, she celebrates "the experience itself—a trust in the rhythms of experience" (v), the rhythms of the human body.[11]

While her "rhythms of experience" motto and praise of Whitman's organic free-verse lines might suggest a bias against conventional forms, her indebtedness to Melville and his molding of new experiences of mechanized war in traditional forms implies the contrary. In fact, Rukeyser does not distinguish between old and new, artificial and organic, or closed and open forms: "People have said that we contemporary poets are writing without form. I was brought up with forms and care very much about them. I care very much about the form in which the poems of the Bible are written, its parallelism that allows one to make one's own synthesis [. . .]. But the idea that form has to be the forms of the past is nonsense" (229). Instead, she argues that form naturally generates more

forms and facilitates communication: “In order to give something to somebody there must be the form to shape the experience [. . .]. All forms of art come to us in their own ways and allow us to make more forms, and to make this exchange” (“The Education of a Poet” 229). Form provides the structure needed for the poet to “exchange” ideas with a reader; form is part of a triangular communication system with the poet, the poem, and the reader at each node.

The poems in Rukeyser’s 1939 volume *A Turning Wind* (1939) criticize how contemporary artists and poets employ various forms to represent and communicate their experience of war to a viewer or reader. In that volume, she includes a quotation from Kenneth Burke’s *Attitudes Toward History* that argues against an apolitical “art for art’s sake” model: “the primary purpose here being simply to indicate that, whatever ‘free play’ there may be in esthetic enterprise, it is held down by the gravitational pull of historical necessities” (164). Artists are not completely free to experiment or “play” in any form they choose; they must acknowledge the historical weight of their creations. In *Attitudes,* a book M. L. Rosenthal argues “is indeed the best guide to the perspectives of the period” (205), Burke examines how “each of the great poetic forms stresses its own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time” (34). He characterizes poetry as a weapon, arguing that “the poetic forms are symbolic structures designed to equip us for confronting given historical or personal situations” (57). One such poetic category Burke defines is the didactic, including “propaganda, rhetoric, and ‘applied art,’” which aims to “*coach* the imagination in obedience to critical postulates” (75). The didactic poet “must draw upon all his resources (sincerity thus being both a technical and moral necessity).”

Like Burke's *Attitudes*, Rukeyser's aptly titled poem "Third Elegy: The Fear of Form" from *A Turning Wind* examines the political meanings of poetry, particularly didactic poetry. Rukeyser attempts to draw upon all her artistic resources, but she is not able in "Third Elegy" to create an effective poetry of teaching to counter the manipulative forms of fascist art. Her poem links the fear of war and fascism to the fear of didactic art forms that transform viewers into passive consumers only interested in the latest fad, not in analyzing the artwork's meaning:

> Tyranny of method! the outrageous smile
> seals the museums, pours a mob skidding
> up to the formal staircase, stopped, mouths open.
> And do they stare? They do.
> At what? A sunset? (304) [12]

Here, she criticizes not only the unthinking "mob" but also the dictatorial "method" that produces shallow art and displays it in a well-constructed museum with a "formal staircase." This process controls the people, "sealing" and "pouring" them into a space, treating them like things not human beings. The speaker enumerates the features of this art:

> Blackness, obscurity, bravado were the three colors;
> wit-play, movement, and wartime the three moments;
> formal groups, fire, facility, the three hounds. (304)

The tercets in this "Third Elegy" contain three categories composed of three parts, representing the "formal groups" they describe while also suggesting the Third Reich. The poem quickly shifts to a scene in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War as a "car full of Communists put out hands and guns, / blew 1-2-3 on the horn." Unlike the fascists, the Communists are associated with new and vital forms of resistance stressing, "New combinations" (304) and "New methods" (305). But as the poem continues, these

new forms breed more not less violence and destruction. Picasso's *Guernica*, depicting the German destruction of the Basque town and its civilians in support of the fascist Spanish Loyalists under General Franco in a new Cubist style, only paves the way for swastikas, ghettos, and concentration camps:

> Picasso like an ass Picasso like a dragon Picasso like a
> romantic movement
> and immediately after, stations of swastikas
> Prague and a thousand boys swing circles clean
> girls by the thousand curve their arms together
> geometries of wire
> the barbed, starred
> Heil. (305-06)

Picasso's abstract depiction of bodies contorted in agony in his anti-war painting incites more violence, rendering Picasso not just a dupe or "ass" but also a destructive monster; swastikas follow "immediately after" his painting. The barbed wire "geometries" enclose the young "starred" Jewish boys and girls in a system of mass destruction and violence represented by the "stations of swastikas," suggesting the trains passing through stations on the way to the death camps. The speaker fears that artistic patterns, geometries, and figures can facilitate mass bombing raids, ghettos, and concentrations camps. The poem's final lines return to the open-mouthed masses from the beginning, who now stare at a different picture:

> And do they stare? They do.
> Our needs, our violences.
> At what? Contortion of body and spirit.
> To fuse it straight. (307)

"Contortion of body and spirit" recalls Picasso's *Guernica*. The speaker seeks to unify, to "fuse," the body and spirit back into a whole, sensitive person, and to straighten the contorted representation of human suffering in Picasso's painting. But "fusing" it straight

suggests the need for another kind of violence. The speaker connects "our needs" to "our violences," implying both that violence is a human need and that our human needs are distorted by violence. It is unclear if the speaker is endorsing an alternative form to modernist art or poetry and, if so, what that form might consist of.

Rather than illustrating poetry's ability to convey truth during a confusing time, thereby lessening the fear of poetry, "Third Elegy" adds to that confusion and fear. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser argues that the disjunctive forms in many contemporary poems, and even in contemporary works of art like *Guernica*, increase the fear of poetry and the other arts: "one characteristic of modern poetry is that arrangement of parts which strikes many people as being violent or obscure" (18). Ironically, this passage accurately describes the abrupt shifts in perspective, tone, and imagery from one stanza to the next in Rukeyser's "Elegy." The speaker's anger, expressed through a mass of short, exclamatory lines and unanswered questions, obstructs sense. In a review of the elegies, Ruth Lechlitner characterizes this one as "nebulous, complex, confusingly expressed" and argues that it "would be more effective if freed from certain unfortunate mannerisms in composition: an unrelieved bombardment of fragmentary phrases and half sentences, sometimes packed with abstractions, sometimes overburdened with physical imagery; an indiscriminate scrambling of tenses, and inexactness of pronominal references" (10). David Daiches agrees that the elegies are "accomplished yet not always wholly satisfactory poems" (8), and John Peale Bishop claims that "Rukeyser's poetry proceeds from the intelligence [but] is itself unintelligible" (314). The poem's obscurity nullifies its ability to be an effective war poem, as defined by Rukeyser herself; "that Rukeyser's readers should be troubled by problems of communication is ironic, for, fundamental to

the poet's philosophy, and in sharp contrast to the aestheticism of much of the poetry of the forties and fifties, Rukeyser has always believed that poetry is the most effective mode of communication between people" (Terris 118). Rukeyser wants to tap the value of obscurity in conveying complexity while, at the same time, to compose a poetry that expresses war experiences and emotions unambiguously. Indeed, in a 1968 interview, she recognizes both the value and the danger of obscurity:

> Auden said once that living poets have been criticized with that dirty word obscure. He said there *are* difficulties here. He said you'll know them if you've tried to share one experience with one person. It's not only one's own experience with one person. It's not only one's own experience that is material here but the deep place where the nature of understanding can be shared. It seems to me that one goes fuzzy, one goes what is called obscure if one lives, for this a curious nervousness in the face of poetry, the actual fear of poetry. ("Muriel Rukeyser" 126)

"Third Elegy" fails to articulate the political associations of artistic forms; instead, the poem goes fuzzy.

In contrast to the obscure form of "Third Elegy" from the early days of the war, the ten poems of "Letter to the Front," from Rukeyser's 1944 collection the *Beast in View*, argue clearly for poetry as an agent of peace and belief during WWII. Lechlitner praises the lucidity of the sequence, claiming that when the poet "turns to factual elements or experiences common to the majority of men and women today [. . .] she becomes positive, clear and coherent. She does this in 'Letter'" (4). That coherence is achieved, in part, by Rukeyser's reaching back into literary history and drawing inspiration from the past; in "Letter," the poet follows her own advice to rally "all the equipment of tradition and invention" to respond to the present (*Life* 26). In fact, the title of Rukeyser's volume containing "Letter" alludes to lines from John Dryden's "The Secular Mask" (1700) celebrating a new start after an era of war:

All, all of a piece throughout
Thy chase had a beast in view;
Thy wars brought nothing about;
Thy lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an old age is out,
And time to begin a new. (857)

The chorus unites these lines, originally spoken by individual characters (Chronos, Momus, and Janus), into a final song. Chronos complains about carrying around the weight of the Earth during "bad times" filled with "crimes"; he fondly recalls earlier, joyous times when life was light and harmonious. Now war and faithlessness dominate—"all, all of a piece throughout." Momus laughs at humanity's pitiful state and chides Diana, Mars, and Venus for their failures to improve it. Diana's hunt was unfair because it already had the prey in sight. Mars ruled over meaningless wars that "brought nothing about," and Venus's lovers were all unfaithful. Consequently, Janus is thankful that this "old age is out" and a new time is beginning. The combined perspectives of the different characters—the gods of time, laughter, and beginnings or transitions—who look back at a turbulent past and forward to the hopeful future provide a model for Rukeyser's reflective and prophetic approach to the war in "Letter to the Front."

Rukeyser combines traditional forms associated with grief, love, and war, like the *In Memoriam* stanza, the sestina, the sonnet, and the ballad, with free verse to shape the experiences of women and poets on the multiple fronts of the Spanish Civil War and WWII. Although the sequence includes a variety of forms, its repetition of words, phrases, and images establishes a singular, unified "Letter to the Front." Several critics at the time, though, attacked the formal variety of "Letter" and other poems in the *Beast in View* volume. Oscar Williams, for instance, claimed that Rukeyser's poems were just poorly executed exercises in poetic technique: "her book is a collection of forms which

she has essayed to use in her assiduous search for techniques: lyric, sonnet, elegy, etc. These rhythmic shapes she uses much like plants being tested by the foot of an elephant about to cross a chasm" (534).[13] F. W. Dupee also mocks Rukeyser's poetic techniques and form: "The more essential materials of language, rhythm, and image are out of the stockroom. And what is on view here, I am afraid, is not a live beast but a dead pigeon: the corpse of 'modern poetry' all prettily laid out with its wombs, flames, pillars, prisms, black roses, and webs of time beside it" (662).[14]

But rather than conveying the death of "modern poetry," or poetry in general, "Letter" argues for the continued vitality of poetry and the relevance of both traditional and free-verse forms in registering twentieth-century wars. Poetry is no corpse; instead it promotes a healthy society "in which peace is not lack of war, but a drive toward unity" (*Life* 211). In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser characterizes the incorporation of different elements into a whole in terms of "health": "[Health] arrives when freedom is a moving goal, when we go beyond the forms to an organic structure which we can in conscience claim and use. Then the multiplicities sing, each with its own voice. [. . .] And multiplicity is available to all [. . .]. Suffering and joy are fused in growth; and growth is universal" (211). By referring to the "health" of poetic form, Rukeyser, following Whitman, connects the human body to poetic structure. In contrast to her other war poems, like "Wake Island" and "Third Elegy," in "Letter to the Front" the multiple forms and voices articulating both suffering and joy "fuse" into a universal letter; here the poem succeeds in "fusing it straight." The repeated language of transformation and growth in the individual poems bespeaks the "organic" quality of Rukeyser's "Letter." Moreover, the interplay of multiple speakers "singing" in their own "voices" suggests a chorus, like

the chorus from Dryden's masque, rather than an individual writing a letter to or from the front.

Although this is a letter "to the front," which front or which battle is strategically unclear. The multiple battlefronts and homefronts of WWII and the Spanish Civil War merge. The combination of the combatant and civilian, particularly female civilian, perspective reflects a new type of war and war poetry in which the lines between the war zone and the protected home space are permeable. Indeed, Rukeyser's letter "to the front" validates the female and poet perspective, unlike more traditional "letter to the front" poems—Karl Shapiro's WWII *V-Letter* or Owen's WWI "The Letter." The poem as a soldier's letter home reinforced "the primacy of the eyewitness soldier as subject and speaker of the modern war poem" (Schweik 143); it also valued the "direct experience of combat, and [. . .] of the masculine voice" over the indirect experience and feminine voice (Stout 139).

Instead, the first poem in the "Letter" sequence juxtaposes the female, poet perspective with the male soldier's view of war: "Women and poets see the truth arrive. / Then it is acted out, / The lives are lost, and all the newsboys shout" (239). These lines situate both women and poets, "figures usually regarded as marginal in war systems" (Schweik 149), as central to understanding war's meaning. Here "truth" is not the property of the fighting men. On the contrary, direct physical participation in the war actually precludes soldiers from grasping the significance of the conflict: "All the strong agonized men / Wear the hard clothes of war, / Try to remember what they are fighting for" (239). To fight in war, the men must be "strong" and wear "hard" clothes, concealing the emotional sensitivities that would allow them to "see" as women and poets can see.

But concealment causes agony and confusion. In contrast to the stoic soldiers on the front, women and poets take strength from grief: "But in dark weeping helpless moments of peace / Women and poets believe and resist forever: The blind inventor finds the underground river" (239). The apparently "helpless moments" are not really helpless; they fortify women and poets to persevere "forever." Indeed, Rukeyser links emotions to meaning in *The Life of Poetry*: "[The policy of the governments of English-speaking countries] was to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. [. . .] One of the invitations of poetry is to come to the emotional meanings at every moment" (20-21). Women and poets, like the inventor, discover an untapped source of power, figured as an "underground river," hidden from the outwardly strong but inwardly tormented men.

The following poem takes up and expands on that river image. The moments of peace women and poets experienced in the first poem are now articulated in water imagery associated with life and transformation: "Even during war, moments of delicate peace / Arrive; ceaseless the water ripples, love / Speaks through the river in its human voices." Peace "arrives" here like the truth of war "arrives" in poem 1. The fluid poetry with its repetition of sounds (*heal/real, power/flower*), alliteration (*s*uddenly/seems/*s*ilver), and repetition of words and phrases ("remember and remember") suggests ripples in a pool of water. The poem taps the power of the underground river and speaks, through its sound effects and enjambed lines, in its form. The connection between water and poetic form here recalls Rukeyser's allusive description of Whitman's organic form and rhythms in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which are "measured against the ideal of water at the shore, not beginning nor

ending, but endlessly drawing in [. . .] seething in the white recessions of its surf" (*Life* 78). The process of creating poetic forms is a fluid one, without a clear "beginning" or "ending," that accepts "endless" war and endless transformation. Rukeyser's work during WWII on the scientist Willard Gibbs also fueled her interest in the transformative power of language and poetic form: "the reason I think that I came to do Gibbs was that I needed a language of transformation. I needed a language of a changing phase for the poem. And I needed a language that was not static, that did not see life as a series of points, but more as a language of water" ("Craft Interview" 170). Rukeyser positions Gibbs, along with Melville and Whitman, as one of "the masters of the nineteenth century [who] faced the difficulties of re-affirming freedom" (*Willard Gibbs* 351) after the American Civil War. Gibbs the scientist and Rukeyser the poet both seek to uncover complex truths about the natural and human worlds: "Truth is, according to Gibbs [. . .] an agreement of components. In a poem, these components are, not the words or images, but the relations between the words and images" (*Life* 167). The constantly changing relationships among words and images create the truth of poetry. The poem is not a static, well-wrought urn; it is a dynamic system; meanings flow between the poet, the poem, and the reader.

Rukeyser's references to "the underground river" and poetry as a river which "speaks" in a human voice must also connect the poem to Auden's famous lines from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valleys of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper; it flows south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth. (246)

Despite the many misreadings of these lines that followed, Auden cautiously asserts poetry's real-world power. "Poetry makes nothing happen" does not mean that it is useless or can only exist when divorced from life and politics. Instead, poetry repeatedly "survives" and thrives; it vigorously "flows" through towns filled with "grief" and belief. Poetry is a mouth articulating what is "happening" at a particular moment. Auden wrote his elegy on the death of a great poet from a previous generation around the beginning of WWII, an event that disproved modernism's faith in poetry's ability to prevent another war. On the eve of WWII, Auden cannot justify such faith. Consequently, he first suggests that poetry can't effect world change but then subtly distinguishes between "making nothing happen" and being "a way of happening." Rukeyser's allusion to Auden in "Letter" first appears to contradict her insistence on the use value of poetry in *The Life of Poetry* and her other wartime articles, but in those works she also is ambivalent about how exactly poetry interacts with society. In "The Education of a Poet," Rukeyser, much like Auden, doubts poetry's world-saving ability and then qualifies this, granting poetry an important communicative function in society: "I don't believe that poetry can save the world. I do believe [in] the forces in our wish to share something of our experience by turning it into something and giving it to somebody: that is poetry. That is some kind of saving thing, and as far as my life is concerned, poetry has saved me again and again" (227-28). Poetry makes nothing happen, but it is a happening; poetry can't "save the world," but it is a "kind of saving thing." In "Letter," the grief of women and poets over their war losses fuels their desire to believe in peace; by registering the depth of that grief, the poem argues for the necessity of peace. Poetry survives in Rukeyser's "Letter"

by repeatedly testifying to what is happening in Spain, on the European battlefronts of the Second World War, and at home in America.

Repetitions—of words such as "peace" and "belief" and images, like rivers and the white ship—demonstrate poetry's ability to articulate continually the possibility of peace even during war. Rukeyser claims that the structure created through repetition reinforces the poem's meaning: "I use [repetition] as other poets use rhyme. It's a time-binding thing, a physical binding, a musical binding [. . .]. But in a poem I care very much about the physical reinforcement, the structure in recurrence" (163). The repetitive structures in "Letter" remember past wars and experiences and connect them to the present situation. The white ship image, introduced at the end of poem 2, ties the speaker's disappointment in the Spanish Civil War to her trepidation about WWII: "I have seen a ship lying upon the water / Rise like a great bird, like a lifted promise" (240). In poem 5, the ship returns, reminding the speaker of the earlier failed attempt at peace in Spain: "I saw a white ship rise as peace was made / In Spain, the first peace the world would not keep" (242). The hope for peace in Spain, symbolized by the delicate white ship, haunts the speaker's visions of WWII throughout "Letter." In poem 4 "Sestina," poems 5, 6, and 8, images of Spain merge with those of WWII. The speaker in poem 6, remembers visiting Spain at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and thinking of home, similar to the WWII "soldiers of distances" (242) waiting for their "home thoughts from home" (242), for letters to the front. The speaker claims that now, while the soldiers fight, those at home "must go in poetry and hope / Moving into the future that no one can escape. / Peace will in time arrive, but war defined our years." Eventually, peace, like truth, will "arrive," and the women and poets at home must believe in that arrival like

Saint Bernadette at Lourdes: "that young saint at the spring who bent / Her face over dry earth the vision told her flowed," who saw the truth arrive before everyone else and found "life flowing from the heart of man" (243). Poem 10, the final poem in the sequence, announces that now "surely it is time for the true grace of women" speaking "With pure throats and cries of blessing, the clearest / Fountains of mercy and continual love" (246). The end of the sequence promises a new time in which belief and peace flow from the mouths of women and poets: "Beginning with signs of belief, offered in time of war, / As I now send you, for a beginning, praise" (247).

Rukeyser employs the historical and literary authority of numerous traditional forms to validate the unconventional voices of women poets in her revision of the letter to the front poem. The allusion to Tennyson's famous elegiac form in poem 3 intensifies the overwhelming sorrow experienced by those on the homefront. Written to commemorate the sudden death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam, *In Memoriam* (1850) follows in the tradition of well-known elegies like Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*. The poem traces the development of the speaker's philosophical reflections about life, death, God, and nature in a long series composed of individual lyric poems. The *In Memoriam* stanza (four lines of iambic tetrameter rhyming *abba*) has come to signal a poetry of mourning:

> I sometimes hold it half a sin
> To put in words the grief I feel;
> For words, like Nature, half reveal
> And half conceal the Soul within. (41)

The *sin*/*within* envelope rhyme suggests the protective powers of poetic form while the *reveal*/*conceal* rhyme simultaneously argues that poetic language can both articulate and

obscure the speaker's sorrow. Even so, the speaker hopes that writing poetry in such an ordered form can quiet his grieving heart and mind:

> But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
> A use in measured language lies;
> The sad mechanic exercise,
> Like dull narcotics, numbing pain. (41)

But if the poem's "mechanic exercise" anesthetizes emotions, the resolutions of the rhymes nevertheless provide a sonic pleasure that simultaneously expresses emotion.

And it is no coincidence that Rukeyser alludes to a work that seeks comfort in poetry while also doubting poetry's ability to convey sorrow. Thus in poem 3, Rukeyser modifies Tennyson's stanza to increase the deadening effects of form. Like *In Memoriam*, poem 3 contains quatrains with mostly four stresses per line and employs envelope rhymes. But Rukeyser replaces Tennyson's inner rhymes with identical rhymes. The "dead rhyme" flattens the music of the full rhymes in Tennyson's elegy; this and other repetitive sounds dominate the lines as sorrow overtakes the speaker:

> They called us to a change of heart
> But it was not enough.
> Not half enough, not half enough
> For all their bargaining and their art.
>
> After the change of heart there comes
> The savage waste of battlefield;
> The flame of that wild battlefield
> Rushes in fire through our rooms. (240)

The "call" for women and poets to change by renouncing their hope in peace sounds hollow cast in such lines; the identical rhymes and repetitions of these "artful" calls are not strong enough to alter the "heart." The "battlefield" repetition suggests that combat resolves nothing and leads only to more fighting, recalling Dryden's masque where "thy wars brought nothing about." In addition to repeated words and phrases, other repetitive

sound effects heighten the poem's emotional impact. The *w*aste/*w*ild/*w*ar/*w*ay alliteration frames one reaction to combat while the *c*omes/*c*are/*c*ontinually repetition suggests an alternative to passive hopelessness. The assonance of p*ea*ce/b*e*l*ief*/id*ea*s/b*e*gins paradoxically ties faith in peace to understanding the war's truth:

> To know a war begins the day
> Ideas of peace are bargained for
> Surrender and death are bargained for—
> Peace and belief must fight their way. (240)

With such techniques, Rukeyser "goes beyond rhyme," repeating sounds to reinforce the poem's sense in even deeper ways: "People ask me why I don't rhyme, and I find it impossible to answer. Because I rhyme, and go beyond rhyme. The return once is not enough for me. I will carry a phrase through. Or a sound, that may not be at the end of the lines, but I try to carry any sound that is important in the poem so that it comes back many times" ("Craft Interview" 162). Indeed, the "Letter" sequence consistently returns to the sounds of "peace" and "belief."

Like the form of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, which conveys both the numbing and awakening of the speaker's emotions, the form of Rukeyser's poem voices war's deadening effects while still arguing for the vital growth of peace and belief:

> Begin the day we change and so
> Open the spirit to the world.
> Wars of the spirit in the world
> Make us continually know
> We fight continually to grow. (240)

That a quatrain poem concludes with a five-line stanza enacts the very process of growth it speaks of; the last stanza exceeds all the previous ones. The aural continuity of *know*/*grow* and the repetition of "know" in the last three stanzas further suggests growth from the same set of roots. And yet the same rhyme also registers that one must change in

order to understand war. The imagery of growth in the midst of death in Rukeyser's "Letter" poem alludes to the Old Yew in section two from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Tennyson's speaker laments that while the tree will endure apparently unchanged, the body of his beloved friend decays beneath it; the tree's "roots are wrapt about the bones" (39). As the speaker observes the tree's "stubborn hardihood" (40), his anger toward it changes into a desire to emulate it: "I seem to fail from out my blood / And grow incorporate into thee." The speaker wishes to "grow" to become like the stolid tree, refusing to bend under sorrow's weight. The growth in Rukeyser's poem is in the opposite direction: away from an unfeeling, static model of endurance toward a fluid and transformative conception of belief. Rukeyser adopts Tennyson's form and language of growth and grief but inflects them with her own theories about organic form during WWII.

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser characterizes poetic form as a living structure, crediting biologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thomas and his major work, *On Growth and Form*:

> The form of a poem is much more organic, closer to other organic form, than has been supposed. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson [. . .] says that organic form is, mathematically, a function of time. There is, in the growth of a tree, the story of those years which saw the rings being made: between those wooden ripples rings, we can read the wetness or dryness of the years before the charts were kept. [. . .] There are many kinds of growth: the inorganic shell or horn presents its past and present in the spiral; the crocus grows through minute pulsations. (*Life* 171)

The poetic form should reflect the time when the poem was written, as tree rings record the history of a tree. Thompson's book is itself an artifact of history, more specifically of an imagination searching for signs of life in a time of war. In his prefatory note, Thompson argues that this work gave him comfort in 1917 during WWI, when the book

was first published, and in 1942, when he completed the second edition: “I wrote this book in wartime, and its revision has employed me during another war. It gave me solace and occupation, when service was debarred me by my years” (i). Rukeyser, in her turn, finds solace and occupation in the contemplation of form during a time of great destruction and devastation.

Like Thompson, Rukeyser frames her work in relation to past and present wars. Poem 4, “Sestina” formalizes such movement, in this case, between the Spanish Civil War and WWII. “Sestina” is the only titled poem in the “Letter” sequence, brandishing its form and recalling other famous sestinas. In “Sestina,” as in poem 3, the repetition of sounds, words, and phrases registers both stasis and growth. This complicated verse form, originally employed by the troubadours in the twelfth century, consists of six stanzas of six lines each followed by a three-line envoy, or “send-off,” concluding the poem. The same six end words occur in each stanza but in different orders. Poets in Italy (like Dante and Petrarch), Spain, and Portugal experimented with the French form. Sir Philip Sidney and Algernon Swinburne cultivated sestinas in English. In the twentieth century, Pound’s “Sestina Altaforte” (1909) stands out as one of the most famous post-Renaissance examples of the form. Since Pound, particularly after the 1930s, “the sestina has enjoyed a popularity unrivaled during any other period in Anglo-American literary history” (Caplan 20). Great Depression-era sestinas about hunger and poverty, like Auden’s “Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys” and Louis Zukofsky’s “Mantis,” signaled a shift in the sestina’s subject matter away from a lover’s complaint and toward contemporary social and political issues.

Rukeyser's "Sestina" follows Auden's and Zukofsky's poems by registering the constant threat of war in the twentieth century. Based on the poet's experiences in Spain, "Sestina" casts that Civil War as an omen of the fighting to come in WWII. On the day Rukeyser arrived in Spain to cover the anti-fascist Olympics for *Life and Letters Today*, the fighting began and was so intense for the following five days that the Catalonian government ordered all non-military foreigners to leave. Otto Boch, a German athlete Rukeyser had met and fallen in love with there, enlisted in support of the Republicans and was eventually killed in battle. Along with five hundred other foreign nationals, Rukeyser was forced to evacuate to France in a small boat. This experience would profoundly influence Rukeyser, and Louise Kertesz argues that "her writing since that time is in large part a record of her evolving vision of what the struggle begun in Spain has meant to civilization in our time and what it has meant in her personal life" (121).

The sestina form is well suited to addressing the shifting public and personal emotions surrounding the Spanish Civil War. In the tradition of troubadour poetry, Rukeyser's poem frames the experience of love in terms of pain and suffering:

> The train stood naked in flowery midnight changing
> All complex marvelous hope to war, and keeping
> Among us only the main wish, and the soldiers.
> We loved each other, believed in the war; this country
> Meant to us the arrival of the fighting
> At home; we began to know what we were fearing. (241)

At first, the speaker and the others traveling to Spain possessed a "complex marvelous hope" that Republicans could successfully defend their socially progressive, coalition government against the conservative Nationalists. The Republicans might well have defeated the Nationalists but for the League of Nation ban on selling weapons to the Republicans (which prevented Western democratic countries from supporting them) and

Hilter's and Mussolini's violation of the ban in support of the Nationalists. Franco's troops conquered the Republican strongholds in Catalonia in the early days of 1939, with Madrid and Valencia falling soon after. Franco declared victory over the Republicans later on April 1, 1939. The early days of the Civil War engendered powerful emotions of "love" for the country and its people and "belief" in the democratic cause against the fascist forces; the conflict was a "defining moment in the struggle for international social justice in the modern period" (Kalaidjian 13).

At the same time, though, the speaker of Rukeyser's poem sees the conflict as a harbinger of "the fighting at home" and the increasing power of fascism under Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, which contributed to the outbreak of WWII; love and belief change into fear. In fact, the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War had strong symbolic significance for the coming struggle against fascism in WWII: "Perhaps no other conflict in this century has combined the drama, the historical importance, and the ethical clarity, of the struggle between democracy and fascism. Spain was its first major phase. The 1936-39 Spanish Civil War was, in effect, the opening battle of World War II [. . .] the struggle had immense ideological importance across the world" (Nelson *The Wounded* ix). The repetition of sestina end words (keeping, fearing, fighting, changing) in varying order in each stanza reflects the speaker's changing ideas about both wars. The repetition of "soldiers" and "country" links the fighting men in Spain to those on the battlefronts of WWII. As in the previous poem, the speaker in "Sestina" struggles between hoping for peace and being paralyzed by fear. The envoy of "Sestina" compresses its six key terms to articulate such conflicting emotions:

This first day of fighting showed us all men as soldiers.
It offered one wish for keeping. Hope. Deep fearing.
Our changing spirits awake in the soul's country. (242)

"Hope," the "one wish for keeping" in the early days of fighting, is linked to "deep fearing" in the same line but decisively separated from it by punctuation and white space. As the male soldiers fight with their bodies in one country, the "spirits" of the women and poets fight in the "soul's" territory.

In "Sestina," as in poem 1 and 3, the women and poets fight an emotional battle for peace and belief while the men are engaged in physical combat. "Sestina" registers violence in terms of division and separation, not in specific visual images of death: "As continents broke apart, we saw our fearing / Reflect our nations' fears; we act as changing / Cities at home would act, with one wish, fighting / This threat or falling under it" (241). War destroys unities; it breaks apart nations, separating them along ideological lines, as the poem itself breaks up the poetic line with commas and semicolons. Rukeyser's representation of war and violence is completely at odds with that in Pound's famous "Sestina: Altaforte" (1909). The speaker in Pound's poem, the twelfth-century nobleman Betran de Born condemned in Dante's *Inferno* to carry his own severed head, glorifies the blood and violence of masculine combat and berates feminine peace:

The man who fears war and squats opposing
My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson
But is fit only to rot in womanish peace
Far from where worth's won and the swords clash
For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;
Yea, I fill all the air with my music. (8-9)

A man's desire to avoid the battle's "blood of crimson" and retreat into a "womanish peace" weakens and emasculates him. Valuable and worthwhile actions only take place on the battlefield where "the swords clash." De Born rejoices in killing "sluts," both

women and peace personified as a woman, and delights in singing of his misogynist exploits to the world. de Born's song and Pound's poem obliterate the possibility for peace: "And let the music of the swords make them crimson! / Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash! / Hell blot black for always the thought of 'Peace!'" (9). The archaic diction (stour) and alliterative lines (*w*ar/*w*ords/*w*omanish/*w*orth's/*w*on, *f*ear/*f*ar/*f*it/*f*or) recall harsh Anglo-Saxon verse and its epic glorification of male warriors and combat. The poem's "music" "rejoices" in war's cacophonous sounds and sights, the "clash" and "crimson," which "oppose" "peace"; it is meant to entertain a bored nobleman while he sits in a serene place wishing for war. In contrast, the song in Rukeyser's "Sestina" celebrates, not berates women, and eschews violent visions of combat in favor of a hope for peace. Her "Sestina" is not a form of entertainment; it conveys the deep sense of responsibility Rukeyser felt toward using poetry to represent truthfully the events of the Spanish Civil War and WWII. She begins *The Life of Poetry* by recounting the scene she describes in "Sestina," emphasizing its importance to poetry's social and political implications: "[The Spanish Republican fighters] had seen how, as foreigners, we were deprived; how we were kept from, and wanted, above all things one: our responsibility [. . .] 'Now you have your responsibility,' the voice said, deep, prophetic, direct, 'go home: tell your peoples what you have seen.' We had seen a beginning. Much more would come" (2).

Moreover, Rukeyser's discussion of poetry as testimony in *The Life of Poetry* underscores the poet's responsibility to shape her experience into a form that she can communicate to the reader:

> [Poetry] is confession as a means to understanding, as testimony to the truths of experience as they become form and ourselves. [. . .] this is the poem; in which the poet, intellectually giving form to emotional and imaginative experience, with the music and history of a lifetime behind the work, offers a total response. And the witness receives the work, and offers a total response, in a most human communication. (212)

Rukeyser characterizes the reader as a "witness" precisely because of the word's "overtone of responsibility" (175). References to responsibility and testimony also imply a religious dimension to Rukeyser's poetics. Indeed, her "conception of poetry [. . .] is profoundly ethical, imbued with a sense of responsibility barely distinguishable from that which one might associate with a religious vocation" (Herzog 35). Rukeyser's "concept of writing as testimony is traditional in relation to Judaic theological, ethical, and political thought" (Lowney 39). The well-known poem 7 in "Letter" explicitly relates faith in Judaism and faith in poetry:

> To be a Jew in the twentieth century
> Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
> Wishing to be invisible, you choose
> Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
> Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
> Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
> Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God
> Reduced to a hostage among hostages.
>
> The gift is torment. Not alone the still
> Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.
> That may come also. But the accepting wish,
> The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee
> For every human freedom, suffering to be free,
> Daring to live for the impossible. (243)[15]

Jews, like the women and poets earlier, are called upon because of their spiritual and emotional responsiveness to war. In the tradition of the Petrarchan sonnet, the poem portrays the speaker's emotional highs and lows as an internal war.[16] But this battle to accept or reject Jewish identity must be waged in the midst of the Nazi's Final Solution, a

plan to annihilate that identity. The focused, logical structure of the sonnet intensifies the dilemma. The octave introduces the problem: whether one will accept being Jewish and what the implications of doing so are. Jewish heritage is a "gift"; choosing to "accept" it means accepting "full life" and will thus include "full agonies." Refusing to accept is also a choice, but one that leads to emotional and spiritual death. "Stone" recalls the description of the "strong" fighting men wearing the "hard" clothes of war from the first poem, where war exacts a spiritual death that prevents the soldiers from escaping the endless cycle of destruction. Here, rejecting one's Jewish heritage requires a stone insanity that demolishes peace and belief. "Choosing" bitterly ironizes the Jews as the Chosen People: Rukeyser stresses "the active work of Judaism [by] reworking a traditional rhetoric of election: Jews are the people who must choose to be the chosen people" (Schweik 170). Such a choice carries immense responsibility and weight; note the repetition of "full."

In the context of WWII, the sonnet's agony is not only emotional: it is also physical. The speaker exists in an "evening deep in labyrinthine blood / Of those who resist, fail, and resist" (243) and imagines "the still Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh." The poem endorses an embodied spirituality possessed by women and poets that preserves the connection between the human mind and body even in wartime: for Rukeyser, "spiritual life is not a mode of disembodiment, transcending history and the body. To be spiritual is to be visible, within this world of history, of action and struggle" (Wolosky 219). The sonnet argues that even though accepting a Jewish identity can lead to physical torment, this suffering is noble and necessary "for every human freedom, suffering to be free, / Daring to live for the impossible." The poem itself is one form of

resistance; it expresses an "impossible" hope in faith and peace during WWII and the Holocaust. The *free/guarantee* rhyme in the final stanza echoes and stabilizes the earlier c*entury/insanity/agonies* slant rhyme, quietly suggesting that the acceptance of Jewish identity can move the century from agony to freedom.

In the final lines, the speaker accepts her Jewish heritage and "the whole and fertile spirit as guarantee" (243). In a 1944 interview for the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, Rukeyser employs similar terminology to argue that her Jewish heritage "guaranteed" and protected her spirit from destructive wartime forces: "To me, the value of my Jewish heritage, in life and in writing, is its value as a guarantee. Once one's responsibility as a Jew is really assumed, one is guaranteed, not only against fascism, but against many kinds of temptation to close the spirit. It is a strong force in oneself against many kinds of hardness which may arrive in the war" (9). Responsibility to Jewish heritage entails a "commitment to history and community extending beyond individual self-interest and protections" (Wolosky 216). Similarly, Rukeyser argues that poets have a responsibility to history and to society and that poetry can also be a "strong force" that opens up the spirit and resists the hardness of war. The "Letter" poems continually warn against the danger of closing the spirit and choosing "the stone insanity" during wartime like the agonized soldiers wearing the "hard clothes of war." While it is true that seeing war through the eyes of women and poets can be an emotionally tormenting and draining experience, the war poems from their perspective can also function as powerful anti-war declarations promoting peace.

The insistent claim in "Letter" that women have a distinct capacity for hope reaches its culmination in the penultimate poem. In poem 9, the joy of creating life and

being a mother is transformed to a deep sorrow over losing children in the endless battles of the twentieth century. Here, Rukeyser relies on the cultural meanings of the ballad to commemorate the suffering of women in wartime. Like a traditional ballad, Rukeyser's poem preserves the experiences of the oppressed, those ignored in elevated literary forms and in history, and portrays them as heroic.[17] Her ballad recounts the lives of ordinary women in plain language as they grieve for their sons killed in battle. The ballad's roots in song and orality serve the depiction of a sorrowful chorus of women. Rukeyser studied music when she was young, and her theories about poetry emphasize the connection between sound and sense.[18] In *The Life of Poetry*, she argues that "the truth of a poem is its form and its content, its music and its meaning are the same" (55) and praises just this relationship in Melville's poetry: "oppositions turn to music." She defines the music of poetry as "the interplay of the sound of words, the length of sequences, the keeping and breaking of rhythms, and the repetition and variation of syllables unrhymed and rhymed. It also involves the play of ideas and images" (33).

But the opening lines of poem 9 also anticipate the narrative heritage of the ballad in non-ballad stanzas in order to consider various ways of reporting on the war:

> Among all the waste there are the intense stories
> And tellers of stories. One saw a peasant die.
> One guarded a soldier through disease. And one
> Saw all the women look at each other in hope.
> And came back, saying "All things must be known." (244-45)

The "tellers of stories," the authors and poets, witness death and "disease" as well as "hope" in war; they are responsible for telling those at home the whole story. When the poets and tellers return, though, suspicious investigators with "voices of scissors and grinders asking their questions" (245) and "voices of clawhammers and spikes clinking"

assault them. The interrogating voices, likened to the sounds of destructive, metal objects "scissors," "grinders," "clawhammers," and "spikes," try to silence the stories about the war. After the attempt fails, the poem moves into a ballad form as the speaker listens to "an Old Biddy" "singing of the lives of women" (245):

> Rain and tomorrow more
> They say there will be rain
> They lean together and tell
> The sorrow of the loin.
>
> Telling each other, saying
> "But can you understand?"
> They recount separate sorrows.
> Throat. Forehead. Hand. (245-46)

Falling rain naturalizes the tears of women, recalling their "deep weeping helpless moments of peace" (239) in the first poem. The women are united, "together," by their "sorrow of the loin," the death of their children in war. The s*ay/sorrow/saying/ separate/s*orrows alliteration ties the "separate" griefs of individual women into one song. Their loins, once a source of strength and fertility, now belong to aging and childless mothers and old biddies. The *lean/loin* near-rhyme suggests a contrast between thinness and ample fertility. Women's' acceptance of the "whole and fertile spirit" referenced in poem 7 takes on a darker meaning here as increased fertility and more offspring also mean more children for the war to maim and murder.

The enumeration of body parts—"loins," "throat," "forehead," and "hand"—points simultaneously to the vulnerability of the mother's bodies, their children's bodies, and bodies wounded in war. Here, the sorrowful ballad of everyday women losing their children in war employs an inventory technique associated with the elevated sonnet form, namely the blazon. If sonneteers typically employed the blazon to praise and eroticize the

female body, Rukeyser's poem registers the war's destruction of bodies: war wounds mothers at home and their sons on the battlefront. The women "have not any rest. / Sad dreams of the belly, of the lip / Of the deep warm breast" (246). The "belly," "lip," and "breast," once associated with pleasure and fertility, now embody the mothers' grief. Schweik argues that this ballad section is "a kind of antipoem [that] images women's bodies not as sources of strength but as places of risk, causes of enfeeblement, and dangers to poetry" and, consequently, that "this short lyric provides a melancholy corrective to the sequence's confident assertions of female force" (161). But how can lyric effects and the ballad tradition constitute an "antipoem"? Rukeyser's ballad is evidence of the efficacy of poetry not its negation: the poem doesn't equate the vulnerability of women's bodies with weakness; war may wound their bodies but it does not silence their poetry. This is precisely why the sensitivity of the female body contrasts with the hard bodies of fighting men. "Letter to the Front" is a new kind of war poem that extolls the power of women and poets to feel and articulate the horrors of war and the need for peace. Both women's bodies and spirits bear war's wounds, but Rukeyser's poetic song of women makes meaning of their physical suffering:

> All sorrows have their place in flesh,
> All flesh will with its sorrow die—
> All but the patch of sunlight over,
> Over the sorrowful sunlit eye. (246)

The repetition of "all" recalls the speaker's insistence at the beginning of the poem that "all things must be known" (245), all the complicated and conflicting experiences of war. Moreover, Rukeyser's repetitive lines evoke the language of Ecclesiastes: "All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (3:20). The physical body, the flesh, eventually dies. But this death is part of a renewing cycle: "To every *thing there* is

a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:2). The references to "sunlight," to the dawn of a new day, reinforce the promise of rebirth and the cycles of nature. History is also cyclical. The "Letter" poems represent history as "a time of love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace" (3:8) and argue that now is the time for peace.

Thus, the "Letter" sequence ends on a hopeful note when the end of war marks a new beginning of peace: "Beginning with signs of belief, offered in time of war, / As I now send you, for a beginning, praise" (247). Poem 10 takes up the sunlight imagery from the ballad to announce the "day's beginning" and "the future shining" (246) in contrast to the "dark weeping helpless moments" (239) women and poets experienced during the war in the first letter poem. The speaker's explicit reference to sending the letter "now" underscores the epistolary structure of the sequence, signals its conclusion, and creates a gesture of connection and unity ("I now send you") after a time of great division. The conclusion of "Letter" also fulfills the call from Dryden, prefacing the *Beast in View*, for a "time to begin a new." The various allusions to past poems, poets, and poetic forms in "Letter" create a cyclical notion of history in which past, present, and future are always connected.

Rukeyser also achieves continuity between the various poems in the sequence through repetition, and her interest in traditional forms is part of that interest in the complex effects of repetition. Poem 3 employs and modifies the *In Memoriam* stanza to register both the deadening effects of grief and despair over war in identical rhymes and the hopeful possibility for change and growth that emerges out of that painful experience. Women and poets "know" war by feeling its sorrowful effects on their spirits and bodies;

these experiences push them to "grow" and become part of that cycle of death and rebirth, war and peace, and despair and hope. The repetitive form of Rukeyser's "Sestina," like that in poem 3, traces these patterns; it enacts the failure of peace in the Spanish Civil War and the resulting repetition of violence in WWII. The end words repeated in each stanza haunt the poem as the memories of Spain haunt the speaker. At the beginning of Spanish Civil War, the speaker has faith that the soldiers, including her beloved Otto, were fighting to establish a lasting peace; but this hope transforms into fear and dread after fascist forces defeat the Spanish Republicans. Poem 7, the sonnet, casts the speaker's Jewish identity as an internal war between love, obligation, and fear. During the Holocaust, Jewish heritage is both a gift and a torment that can cause "torture, isolation; or torture" and lead one to "resist, fail, and resist" (243). In poem 9, the gift of children becomes a torment to mothers who lose those children in war. The singing of the physical and emotional suffering of women and mothers in ballad form intensifies their grief while also pushing them to move past their grief. The repetition at the end of Rukeyser's ballad promises not monotonous sorrow or endless war but the transition into a hopeful time of peace and renewal, signaled by the rising sun.

Unfortunately, though, WWII was not followed by a period of extended peace. The Cold War, the Korean War, Vietnam and other wars continued to mark the twentieth century as a time of endless war. The poetic forms in her Vietnam-era volume *The Speed of Darkness* (1968) could not support the hopeful attitude expressed in the repetitive forms and songs from "Letter to the Front" Even the volume's title describes the overwhelming darkness of war's assault. "Poem" (1968) reflects on this attack. It is an *ars poetica*: the individual poet-speaker witnesses war and the madness it creates, fights

her isolation by writing, draws strength from her poetry, recognizes her connection to the rest of humanity, dreams of peace, and hopes that her wish will be fulfilled. But in contrast to "Letter to the Front," "Poem" doesn't end optimistically. Instead, the final line echoes its decidedly bleak opening: "I lived in the first century of world wars" (430). The use of the past tense "lived" argues that the twentieth century is a time to survive, to have "lived" through, rather than a time to be living in. After surviving the century, the speaker looks back on her life, and the poem condenses an entire century into a single day, beginning with the morning and ending in the evening:

> Most mornings I would be more or less insane,
> The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
> The news would pour out of various devices
> Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.
> I would call my friends on other devices;
> They would be more or less mad for similar reasons. (430)

Truth does not "arrive" for this speaker as it does for the women and poets in "Letter"; the news arrives, filled with crass stories. Information and images of Vietnam, "pour out of various devices," radios and particularly television sets, interrupted by commercials. As is well-known, technological advances made Vietnam "a TV war fought in living rooms and barrooms across America" (True 95). The inhuman machines spitting out monotonous and inane war news, represented in the poem's identical "devices" rhyme, surround the speaker and threaten to deaden her reaction to the fighting. And yet, the speaker can't escape from the technology and must use it to call her friends.

However, she can still take up her writing tools: "Slowly I would get to pen and paper, / Make my poems for others unseen and unborn." The act of reaching for pen and paper is arduous and slow, clearly not high tech; poems must actively be "made" not transmitted or aired. While she writes, hope seems to return, the sun rises, and morning

becomes day. Now poetry helps her connect with others: “In the day, I would be reminded of those men and women / Brave, setting up signals across vast distances, / Considering a nameless way of living, of almost unimagined values.” Here again, though, “signals” from machines characterize communication. The only way to escape from this careless commercial reality is to retreat into her dreams. Night comes “as the lights darkened,” and the speaker envisions cooperation and peace:

> We would try to imagine them, try to find each other.
> To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
> Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each other,
> Ourselves with ourselves. We would try by any means
> To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves,
> To let go the means, to wake. (430)

The repetition of “try” betrays that the vision of peace will not be realized. “Would try to imagine” registers the speaker’s and poet’s uncertainty about achieving those goals, not only while asleep but, more importantly, while awake. Peace must be “constructed” like a bombed-out building in a war-ravaged city. The speaker hopes that poetry can heal internal conflicts (“ourselves with ourselves”) and divisiveness between people (“ourselves with each other”). The plural “we” promises the reconciliation that the speaker calls for. But the dream doesn’t become reality; the speaker wakes up in the final stanza, echoing her initial bleak assertion: “I lived in the first century of these wars.” The repetition undercuts the hope for peace; it “enclose[s] all of the poem’s activity inside a historical cycle of violence and war. All of the attempts to construct peace—networking, writing poems, and personal reconstruction—are circumscribed by war” (Sychterz). Repetition in this Vietnam poem is the monotonous form of endless war, not a figure for renewal that would bring peace. Here, suffering leads to more suffering not a release from grief, and peace can only exist in the speaker’s dreams.

This is a far cry from the pro-war slogans in her poster poem "Wake Island" or the angry and fearful declarations against disjunctive forms in her obscure "Third Elegy: Fear of Form." And although the *In Memoriam* stanzas and the ballad section of poem 9 shape and intensify the grief of women and poets during war; the haunting, repetitive structure of "Sestina" interprets the Spanish Civil War as an omen of WWII and of endless fighting; and the sonnet frames the internal and external battles about Jewish heritage during the Holocaust; the lyricism of these forms fuels the speakers' hope that repetition can also lead to a positive transformation. In "Letter," traditional and free-verse forms demonstrate the value of repeating and revising conventional poetic forms to fashion a contemporary twentieth-century American response to conflict from a usable past. Rukeyser connects her hope for peace and unity with that of Melville and Whitman to extend an American tradition of formally fluid war poetry that confronts both the griefs and joys of living through war. During and after Vietnam, Rukeyser still sought peace through poetry and song. But the largely free-verse form of those later poems could not support her hope; prosy, fragmented, anti-lyrical, they are flattened by the crushing weight of "all the fallen / the broken and their children born and unborn / of the endless war" ("Endless" 445).

Notes

[1] In October of 1941, FDR placed MacLeish at the head of the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF). Martin Dies, the chairman of the House of Un-American Activities Committee, was deeply suspicious of MacLeish because he "had chosen for the staff of OFF mainly individuals fingered as intellectual communist sympathizers" (Perreault 146). Such hostility led MacLeish in 1942 to push for a unified, interdepartmental committee, and on June 17, 1942 FDR created the Office of War Information, appointing MacLeish as assistant director and Elmer Davis as director.

[2] An OWI memorandum from April 20th 1943 written by Rukeyser expresses her frustration during that time: "In expanding the field of posters, it must be remembered that to speak of the war in terms that do not differ in any way from the terms of a toothpaste ad is to offend the groups in our country that have already shown themselves to be vitally concerned with the war" (qtd. in Perreault 158).

[3] All quotations of Rukeyser's poems are cited by page number from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (2005).

[4] The fact that Rukeyser chose to omit "Wake Island" from her 1978 *Collected Poems*, which she edited herself, suggests that she recognized the danger of the poem's negative reception and sought to distance the poem from her other work.

[5] In "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (1939) Kenneth Burke discusses Hitler's dangerously persuasive use of language in *Mein Kampf* as a "well of Nazi magic; crude magic, but effective" (192) at producing a "'unified' kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one's position more 'efficient,' more thoroughly itself. This is the kind of criticism at which Hitler was adept" (211). Burke compares Hitler's facility with language to that of a poet: "therefore, we note how two sets of equations were built up, with Hitler combining or coalescing *ideas* the way a poet combines or coalesces *images*" (206).

[6] In the first set of trials during April 1937 in Decatur, nine African American teenage boys were unjustly convicted of raping two white women and eight were sentenced to death on July 10th; the judge declared a mistrial for the youngest thirteen year old boy because the jurors could not agree on whether to execute him. The International Labor Defense organization played a major role in publicizing the injustice in Decatur and in rallying support for the Scottsboro defendants. After the initial sentences were appealed, the individual cases dragged out in state and federal courts for the next seven years. During that time, one defendant was shot by prisoner officials after a supposed escape attempt. By the end of the trials, four defendants were freed, and four were convicted again.

[7] Burke writes: "In having such a writer on their side, Communists have a most worthy ally" (26).

[8] Articles in the leftist press at the time of the trial also connected the injustice of the Scottsboro case to the Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism. For example, in the February 1936 issue of the *New Masses*, reporter Michael Gold states: "Just as the Drefus case in France exposed to the world that French militism was morally corrupt, so does this Scottsboro case now advertise in letters of fire to the world that over twelve million dark-skinned Americans live under a bloody dictatorship as evil as Hilter's or Mussolini's" (13)

[9] As an example of this, in "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser characterizes Union Carbide's deliberate decision not to warn the miners of the dangers of the silica dust or to take the proper safety precautions as a "war" and the tunnels as another "theatre of war": "What word must never be said? / Dead, and these men fight off our dying, / cough in the theatres of the war" (107).

[10] In a letter written to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville writes: "there is a certain tragic phrase of humanity which, in our opinion, was never more powerfully embodied than by Hawthorne. We mean the tragedies of human thought in its own unbiased, native, and profounder workings. We think that into no recorded mind has the intense feeling of the usable truth ever entered more deeply than into this man's. By usable truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of a man who fears them not" (qtd. in *Life* 27).

[11] The speaker in Rukeyser's Vietnam-era poem "The Overthrow of One O'Clock at Night" (1968) similarly proclaims: "Trust in experience. And in the rhythms. / The deep rhythms of your experience" (420).

[12] The first through fifth elegies were first published in *A Turning Wind* (1939). The sixth through ninth were printed in the *Beast in View* (1944). All nine elegies, in addition to a tenth elegy, were later printed together in *Elegies* (1949).

[13] These types of sexist attacks that avoid analyzing her poetry by focusing instead on her physical body, also found in Jarrell's review of her work, represent a large portion of Rukeyser criticism.

[14] Another common feature of Rukeyser criticism shown in these two reviews is the use of offensive animal analogies and images. In his review of the *Beast in View*, F. C. Flint likens the poet to a serpent, suggesting Eve's dangerous power of tempting and corrupting men: "She most conscientiously convolutes her imagery coil within coil [. . .]. Miss Rukeyser remains curiously anonymous and her coils entangle and trip us up" (4).

[15] This sonnet is one of Rukeyser's most frequently anthologized poems, and it was also included in the Jewish Prayer Book.

[16] For a detailed discussion of the history of the sonnet, see the "Gay Chaps" section of the Gwendolyn Brooks chapter.

[17] Another example of this is Langston Hughes's use of the ballad form in his Spanish Civil War poem "Letter from Spain" (1937) to criticize the racism on both the democratic and fascist sides. The speaker, an African American soldier, sends a letter home recounting his capture of a Moor forced to fight for the fascists. The speaker identifies with his prisoner, arguing that the Western democracies refuse to help the Republicans for the same racist reason Hitler supported the Nationalists.

[18] Clive Bush also argues that "Rukeyser's early training in music cannot be over-estimated in considering her work as a poet" (428).

CHAPTER IV

FORM AND IDENTITY IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S WORLD WAR II POEMS

In her autobiography *Report from Part One*, Gwendolyn Brooks identifies the 1967 Fisk University Writer's conference where she was introduced to the aesthetics and politics of the Black Arts movement as a turning point in her ideas about poetic form. Her exposure to the radical political movement led her to dismiss her pre-1967 sonnets, ballads, and other metrical and rhymed verse, particularly from the 1940s and 1950s, as "white writing" (177) and embrace free verse as the more appropriate form for African American poetry. Members of the Black Arts movement also repudiated her pre-1967 verse claiming, as did Don L. Lee in his preface to *Report from Part One*, that traditional forms constrained her artistic voice: "at times the force of [Brooks's] poetic song is strained in iambic pentameter, European sonnets, and English ballads [. . .]. Her definitions of the world as represented in the early poetry are often limited to accommodating her work and her person to definitions that were imposed on her from the outside" (14). Lee characterizes Brooks as a passive poet "constrained" and "limited" by European forms and meters. Other critics have framed an antagonistic relationship between the form and content of her poetry. Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that "what one seems to have is white style and black content—two warring ideas in one dark body" (22).[1] However assuming these (or any) poems are limited by Anglo-European forms has become a cliché of Brooks criticism that overlooks how those traditional forms enable rather than constrain Brooks's writing. In her war poems in particular, verse form allows her to represent the soldiers' loss of identity in World War II and post-WWII American

society. The value of these traditional forms for Brooks is evident not only in the sonnets and septets that so ably depict WWII but also, by way of contrast, in the free-verse poems that do not succeed in their attempts as war poems. In fact, it is the war, not the traditional prosody, that threatens to overpower and even obliterate the identities of the poems' speakers.

The very generic diversity of Brooks's World War II writings, which include the free-verse portrait poem "Negro Hero," the sonnets of "Gay Chaps at the Bar," the free-verse elegy "Memorial for Ed Bland, the septets of "The Anniad," the sonnet-like poems in "Appendix to the Anniad," and the novel *Maud Martha,* suggests her ongoing struggle to find effective forms for writing about the Second World War. And the value she found in traditional poetic form is acutely apparent when we set her World War II poetry alongside her autobiographical and prose writings about the war. For the most part, the war is absent in her first autobiography, *Report from Part One,* which covers the period from her birth up to the early 1970s. It contains only a few references to her friendship with African American poet Ed Bland, who was killed in the war in 1945. *Maud Martha*, Brooks's 1953 novel, treats the war obliquely as an uncontrolled and incomprehensible force that fades in and out of the narrative and blurs with lynchings, births, and even the weather. These prose works only indirectly respond to the conflict, whereas the poems confront it directly. But a marked distinction also exists between Brooks's free verse and traditional verse poems. The war constrains the soldiers and civilians in her poetic landscapes; it is a formidable power that controls but cannot be controlled by them. The traditionally formal poems are able to manage war's disorder and tyranny. They articulate and elevate the incoherent war experiences of their poetic speakers in culturally esteemed

verse forms even as they prevent the war from completely obliterating their individuality. In the "Gay Chaps" sequence, "The Anniad," and "the sonnet-ballad," Brooks draws upon the authority and tradition of the sonnet's love-as-war metaphor and the logic of the blazon, the mock-epic's elevated language and invocations, and the epic's connection between love and war to portray the heroic and unheroic aspects of American society during and after the Second World War.[2] Her free-verse poems, on the other hand, lack the grounding and authority of those conventions and, as a result, they spiral out into vague generalities about war, bravery, and racism.

For instance, "Negro Hero," Brooks's earliest WWII poem, creates a hazy sketch of a generalized character type rather than a clear representation of its subject. Unlike the other portrait poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*, whose titles specifically identify their subjects like "Matthew Cole" or "Hattie Scott," this poem generalizes its subject as a "Negro Hero," unwilling to do more than (as the epigraph cautions) "suggest Dorie Miller" (48).[3] The epigraph implies that "Negro Hero" will both rely on and reshape the well-known story of Miller's actions during WWII. Miller was an African American messman on the USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor. On December 7, 1941, he defied segregationist laws that restricted him to positions where he couldn't use a weapon by firing the guns on deck and shooting down four attacking Japanese planes while the ship was sinking. Initially, the Navy denied Miller public recognition; he received the Navy Cross only after the African American press protested. He was killed in action serving as a third-class mess attendant on the aircraft carrier *Liscome Bay* on November 24, 1943.

Miller's menial status was typical of the segregated military practices at the time, which often barred African Americans from formal combat training and relegated them to

non-combatant roles. Even though the Selective Service and Training Act passed in September 16, 1940 included two clauses aimed at limiting racial discrimination in the selection and training of men, the act did not ban segregation of the troops and gave the War Department the final authority about accepting African Americans. While Roosevelt's 1941 Executive Order 8802 benefited civilians on the homefront by prohibiting hiring discrimination in the nation's defense industries, it didn't outlaw segregation in the military.[4] The US government's refusal to ban troop segregation galvanized the black press, who launched the "Double V" campaign in 1942: victory against fascism and racism. Miller became a symbol of the Double V movement and, ironically, for the US military's crusade to promote patriotism among African Americans. The Office of War Information reproduced Miller's likeness on propaganda posters with the caption "above and beyond the call of duty."

The title and its epigraph reflect these conflicted receptions of Miller's story during the 1940s and express the media's transformation of him into a symbolic "Negro Hero" who only "suggests" a real person. Brooks's first-person, free-verse poem begins with the speaker attempting to refute the media's representation of him as symbol of positive race relations during the war, as "a gem" (48) in both the "Caucasian dailies / As well as the Negro weeklies." It ends, however, without establishing a clear alternative to the media portrayals. Instead, as the poem progresses, the speaker seems to endorse the clichés he initially seeks to avoid. Sarcasm and anger shape the speaker's opening words. The speaker rewrites his story of combating the Japanese as a fight against white men: "(They are not concerned that it was hardly The Enemy my fight was against / But them)." For the Negro hero, the only way to communicate with whites is through physical

violence: “I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them.” He is an outsider to a white American society governed by “their” segregationist laws.

But, at the same time, the speaker offers that society’s wartime platitudes about heroism that support his poster image as a patriotic “Negro Hero,” destined to fight in the war. He recognizes his actions as part and parcel of his boyish fantasies about combat: “Of course I was rolled on wheels of my boy itch to get at the gun. / [. . .] Of course I was a child / And my first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding black air dying and demon noise / Made me wild” (48-49). He confesses, using clichés consistent with his depiction in the press, that he does love white democracy even though it wounds him: “Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady / With her knife lying cold, straight, in the softness of her sweet-flowing sleeve” (49). The speaker loses himself in stock stories of war and heroism. As a result, it’s difficult to ascertain when he is ironizing these narratives and when he is endorsing them. This confusion seems to be both his and the poem’s.

The uncertainty amplifies when the free-verse poem steps into meter and rhyme, marking a shift in perspective from the Miller-like speaker to a racist Southern white man:

> (In a southern city a white man said
> Indeed, I’d rather be dead;
> Indeed, I’d rather be shot in the head
> Or ridden to waste on the back of a flood
> Than saved by the drop of a black man’s blood). (49)

This five-line stanza with its pat, monosyllabic rhymes (*said/dead/head* and *flood/blood*) appears to answer the speaker’s questions from the previous stanza, “Am I clean enough to kill for them, do they wish me to kill / For them,” with an emphatic “no.” The stanza solidifies the white racist view antagonizing the speaker, thereby justifying the speaker’s

anger and rage that even his heroic defense of his shipmates fails to challenge their racist beliefs. And yet, as verse transitions back into free verse in the final stanza, the speaker struggles with whether or not saving his white shipmates "was a good job" (50) that "helped to save them, them and a part of their democracy." The speaker distances himself from "their democracy" and sees American society as white, undemocratic, and racist. But, at the same time, he claims that the preservation of racist ideas in an American democratic society is only a "possible horror," rather than a certainty. The final lines suggest, as George E. Kent claims, that the speaker believes "it was worthwhile to help save even part of democracy, though it does not live up yet to its creed, and to do a good job" (71). But, the preceding lines contradict that final assertion by registering the power and the impossibility of changing the white racist perception in lock-step meter and rhyme. The long, free-verse lines and transitions in and out of regular meter intensify rather than alleviate the speaker's confusion. "Negro Hero" doesn't successfully rewrite the flawed media representations of Dorie Miller.

In contrast, the sonnets of "Gay Chaps at the Bar" support and shape the individual voices of their poetic speakers. While the "Negro Hero" speaker loses himself in the confusion and doubt engendered by the contradictions of American democracy exposed by his war experience, the formal properties of the sonnet help preserve and articulate the voices of the individual gay chaps soldiers. In *Part One*, Brooks explains her decision to write "a sonnet series in off-rhymes, because I felt it was an off-rhyme situation" (156). The off-rhyme situation the sequence confronts is the war's assault on the soldiers' core beliefs about heroism, love, religion, death, segregation, and patriotism, ideas that define their identities. The violence of combat threatens to dehumanize the men

into casualty statistics, eliciting, in response, a desire to preserve their humanity. Brooks draws upon the sonnet's well established history of exploring the relationship between love and war. Her use of this culturally respected verse form helps her to elevate the experiences of the African American soldiers. Repeated words, motifs, and thematic concerns link the separate poems in "Gay Chaps," while variations in diction, point of view, rhyme scheme, meter, and stanzaic structure distinguish the individual sonnets. Brooks employs the Petrarchan sonnet, the Shakespearean sonnet, and a combination of both. The poems mobilize the variation, ambiguity, and wordplay long associated with sonnets to register the individual voices of these men and prevent them from being silenced by war.

And yet, critics have unaccountably regarded Brooks's "Gay Chaps" sonnets as oppressive forms that she, as a female African American poet, employs ironically to critique the sexism and racism of American society during the Second World War. One such critic, Stacy Carson Hubbard, identifies the double masculine heritage of Brooks's sonnets—the European love sonnet and the Harlem Renaissance protest sonnet—to argue that "Brooks uses the image of a box or coffin as a figure for the sonnet itself, calling attention to the power of poetic rites to define, legitimize, or exclude" (60). Susan Schweik, like Hubbard, claims that the masculine sonnet "bars" and excludes the female perspective. She contends that Brooks uses the form to "repudiate as well as duplicate the conventions of the modern masculine soldier poem" (125). Maria Mootry interprets Brooks's sonnet as a figure for political and racial oppression, claiming that the "iron feet" (75) image in the last poem suggests that "the tyranny of poetic practice match[es] the tyranny of politics" (85). Jennifer James also links the form to racial oppression,

arguing Brooks disfigures the sonnet to represent the black male soldier's body that has been disabled by war: "Brooks's disability politics have given rise to a disability poetics" (240). However, the very features that James reads as disfiguring the sonnet, such as the off-rhymes, are, in fact, conventional sonnet practices and variations.

In the "Gay Chaps" sonnets, Brooks explores the productive, not disabling, relationship between poetic form and identity during wartime. The sequence is not politically conservative, integrationist "white writing," as even Brooks herself later claims, nor is it an ironic critique of the gendering of the sonnet. Indeed Karen Jackson Ford argues that "when she set about writing sonnets in the forties and fifties, Brooks recognized the form as simultaneously American, African American, Anglo-European, traditional, and modern. It was precisely to put the contradictions of these categories into dialogue that she employed the sonnet in, for instance, 'Gay Chaps at the Bar'" (355-56). Brooks's 1969 claim that "I still think there are things colloquial and contemporary that can be done with the sonnet form" (*Part One* 157) attests to the form's ongoing importance to her prosody. In *Part One*, she explains the colloquial and contemporary source for "Gay Chaps": "I wrote it because of a letter I got from a soldier who included that phrase in what he was telling me; and then I said there are other things to say about what's going on at the front and all, and I'll write more poems, some of them based on the stuff of letters that I was getting from several soldiers" (156). All of the poems in the sequence are from the soldiers' perspective or the third-person perspective confronting the "things" and "stuff"—the soldiers' experiences—happening "on at the front and all"—on the battlefield and the homefront.[5] Brooks designates the sequence as a "souvenir for Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks and every other soldier" (64); the poems

commemorate the day-to-day experiences of common soldiers during the Second World War. Employing the sonnet sequence for this subject enables Brooks to explore the connection between love and war. But, whereas war is a metaphor for the experience of love in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the loss of love becomes a metaphor for the trauma of war in Brooks's "Gay Chaps."

War cuts down the gay chaps to weary and disillusioned participants in a cycle of violence at the same time the sonnet elevates the soldiers by rendering their combat experiences in a culturally esteemed verse form. The epigraph for "gay chaps at the bar," the first sonnet, repeats the sequence's title, reinforcing the irony of calling the soldiers "gay chaps," a phrase Brooks takes from her friend William Couch: "guys I knew in the States, young officers, [who] return from the front crying and trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York . . ." (64). In *Part One*, Brooks describes Couch as "the Adonis of 'my' day, [who was] much admired by many, many women—sophisticatedly merry, brilliant then as now, and, as the men admitted bitterly, *suave*" (192). Her sequence investigates how World War II causes suave young men like Couch to return from war "crying and trembling." The sequence juxtaposes the boyish optimism of the pre-war gay chaps with the cynicism of battle-weary soldiers, while exploring the sustaining and damaging aspects of romantic, brotherly, religious, and patriotic love.

Brooks's representation of the wartime suffering of the "gay chaps" draws strength from the sonnet. She relies on the conventions of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet to explore the war's emotional effect on soldiers. Like more traditional sonnets, the "Gay Chaps" poems are fourteen lines written mainly in iambic pentameter, but Brooks strategically varies their rhyme scheme, structure, and imagery.

Petrarchan sonnets are typically composed of an octave (*abbaabba*) and sestet (*cde*) rhyme pattern. The octave develops an idea or problem which leads to a volta, or turn of thought in the first line of the sestet. The sestet then resolves or varies the idea from the octave. The form derives from the love sonnets of Dante to Beatrice and Petrarch to Laura. Petrarch's sonnets are also marked by his use of the blazon, an inventory of physical features, to praise Laura's beauty. In contrast, Shakespearean sonnets are composed of three quatrains and a couplet rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg* and are notable for their compression, intensity, and sudden changes in imagery, syntax, and tone. Here, the speaker praises a young man and a dark mistress, adapting the Petrarchan sonnet's praise of a distant lady motif. Shakespeare's sonnets juxtapose the transience of time with the permanence of love and poetry. In America, the Harlem Renaissance poets of the 1920s and 1930s, most famously Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, employed the sonnet ironically to protest against racial injustice and hatred. They mobilized the sonnet in their actual war against racism, instead of utilizing it to portray the war-like experience of romantic love.[6] Brooks combines the European and African American traditions of the love sonnet and the protest sonnet in "Gay Chaps." Hubbard draws such a parallel, claiming that "both the love sonnet and the political sonnet—the one with its object of seduction and the other of persuasion—rely on conventions of address which assert the power of poetry to bring about action" (49). In "Gay Chaps," Brooks tests the strength of the sonnet against the war. The soldier-speakers try to maintain control over the disorder of war and to preserve their sense of self under its assault. "Gay Chaps" foregrounds the tension between the speaker's desire for order and the war's drive toward disorder; indeed, the sequence begins with "order" (64) and ends with "wild[ness]" (75).

The first poem introduces a crisis in language caused by the war and initiates the move from order to disorder; it foreshadows the problem of representation that the rest of the poems confront, for language is the first casualty of war. The logical structure of the Petrarchan sonnet creates the contrast between the gay chaps before and during the war; the octave sets up the pre-war situation with confident young men ordering drinks at a bar and seducing women. The gay chaps "knew how to order. Just the dash / Necessary" (64). The repetition of the past tense "knew" in the octave conveys loss. Before the men went to war, they had control over language, even over "white speech." Their language facility enabled them to woo women, the conventional subjects of the Petrarchan sonnet. Here, the poem itself, like a pre-war gay chap, registers its power over language through puns. The multiple meanings of "bar," "order," and "dash," convey the levity of ordering drinks at a bar with a dash of this or that and also the seriousness of using language to exclude, hence the significance of the reference to white speech. However, the situation changes; the sestet's traditional turn marks the soldiers' loss of power: "But, nothing ever taught us to be islands / And smart, athletic language for this hour / Was not in the curriculum." War forces them to go back to school and to learn a new "curriculum" in which they learn isolation.[7] By taking away their control over language, the war also strips the soldiers of their shared humanity. The language they learned at the bar to seduce women cannot shoot down the roaring airplanes: "We brought / No brass fortissimo, among our talents, To holler down the lions in this air." The incongruous figure of terrestrial lions in the sky reflects the war's disorder and confusion. Lions equate a pre-war boyish innocence of the gay chaps sitting at a bar with children playing with toys. But lions are also associated with the dangers of uncontrolled wildness. War

displaces the childish innocence of the gay chaps and plunges them into a disordered environment.

The language of the poem, however, doesn't lose its power in war; instead, the war forces language to new extremes. Ann Folwell Stanford claims that in "gay chaps" "the absence of power in language becomes a metaphor for the powerlessness of the soldiers in battle" ("Dialectics" 204), but the very strangeness of the lions in the air figure gives it power. The "gay chaps" speaker claims that the soldiers can never learn how "chat with death" (64) and "holler down the lions." But, ironically, the poem succeeds where the speaker claims to fail. The poem does "chat" with death and performs the linguistic athleticism that the soldiers cannot. For example, the pun on "stout" acknowledges the inadequate lesson learned from drinking ale in a playful, yet effective way. Although the speaker laments his loss of dexterity with language, the poem demonstrates the opposite by employing puns, a combination of formal and colloquial diction, complex figures of speech, and various aural effects in the near and eye rhymes. The sonnet can't save the gay chaps from war, but it can restore some of their lost power by articulating their war experiences.

The third poem in the sequence, "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" registers a soldier's wish to preserve his individual emotions from war. In order to be a soldier and kill on the battlefield, the speaker must put away his emotions and desensitize himself to the violence and inhumanity of war. Yet, by repressing those emotions, the speaker risks losing them permanently. However, in the poem, the sonnet's end-stopped lines underscored by the language of sanctuary and containment function as a protective space that enables the soldier to reclaim those emotions after the war. The first-person

speaker fears the war will eradicate his capacity to feel: "I hold my honey and I store my bread / In little jars and cabinets of my will. I label clearly, and each latch and lid / I bid, Be firm till I return from hell" (66). The present tense and repetitive structure of "I hold," "I store," "I label," and "I bid" convey the control that the speaker hopes for, while the end-stopped lines sound as sure as the speaker's storing his "honey" and "bread" in "jars" and "cabinets." The language of containers—"jars," "cabinets," "latch," "lid," "store," "keep," "manage"—reinforces the formal enclosure. Domestic imagery associated with containment distances the speaker from the war's "hell" and "devil days" that will follow. He preserves his honey and bread in canning jars, taking refuge in the comforts of home. The language associated with food connects this poem to "gay chaps"; the war denies both speakers the pre-war reassurance of food and drink, a solace associated with the women at the bar in "gay chaps" and the domestic space in "my dreams." The sonnet's legendary containment protects not imprisons its subject, recalling the discovery in Wordsworth's famous sonnet "Nuns Fret Not" that "In truth the prison unto which we doom / Ourselves no prison is: and hence for me, / In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground" (286). The danger of war lies outside, not inside, the sonnet's space.

Brooks's "my dreams" pits the war's destruction and dehumanizing of the soldier against his protective compartmentalizing of emotions, a defensive posture enabled by the sonnet. Here, the poet employs the blazon ironically to register war's effect on the speaker's body. Instead of a lover giving an inventory of his beloved's beauty and praising the redness of her lips, the blueness of her eyes, or the grace of her arms, this speaker details the way war, not love, will reduce him to "eyes" (66), "legs," and

"heart." The switch from the earlier end-stopped lines to the enjambed lines—"when the devil days of my hurt / Drag out their last dregs and I resume / On such legs as are left me, in such heart / As I can manage" (66)—signals the perilous shift from the pre-war to the post-war environment. On the battlefield, war takes over; the speaker's emotions are no longer amenable to discreet poetic lines. The poem replaces the active structure and self-control of "I bid," "I store," "I hold" with a passive construction in which the speaker only walks away from war on the legs that "are left" to him. War is in control, and he will have to accept whatever—"such legs" and "such heart"—it chooses for him. And yet, in spite of the threat of war, the poem still ends with the hope of "love." The speaker imagines returning home after the war and wishing that "My taste will not have turned insensitive / To honey and bread old purity could love." The repetition of "honey" and "bread" in the first and last lines of the sonnet encloses the poem in comforting images.

Two poems later, "piano after war" moves forward in time to confront what happens to the "my dreams" soldier when he attempts to open those jars containing his emotions. Like "my dreams," "piano after war" is concerned with the war's numbing effect on the soldier's body and mind. The poem thrives in the realm of the senses, particularly sound. The speaker listens to the piano music and imagines the screams of his dead comrades, while the poem creates its parallel music through alliteration and rhymes. The first-person speaker who has returned from war hopes that the beauty of the piano music will free the feelings he kept locked up in battle. However, he discovers instead that the music awakens old memories of combat that threaten to confine, rather than release, him. Formal similarities between this poem and "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" place the two poems in dialogue with each other. The rhymes in

both follow the Shakespearean sonnet pattern. They each have a first-person soldier-speaker who depicts his emotions in imagery of food and enclosure. The speaker of "piano after war" is in a "room" (68) on a "snug" evening watching a woman with "ringed" fingers and hoping that his "old hungers / Will break their coffins." In the first and second quatrains, his emotions seem to have been confined, like the speaker's in "my dreams," but now he is ready to free them. The pun on the "keys" of the piano acting as keys that unlock the coffin or room holding his emotions also registers the sonnet's power to confine and release its subject. Brooks's repetition of "room" evokes the well-known "sonnets pretty rooms" (88) of John Donne's "Canonization," which puns on the Italian meaning of stanza as "room" and draws attention to the sonnet stanza itself as a figure for enclosure. And yet, the enclosure here, even while hinting at the possibility of death, is overwhelmingly comforting, contradicting Lesley Wheeler's claim that "enclosure, in early Brooks, signifies a negative confinement" (97). In the first two quatrains, the snugness of a room "warmed" (68) and "persuasively suffuse[d]" with music creates a safe atmosphere that the speaker hopes will "rejuvenate" his pre-war self. The warmth of the room, the piano player's "pink" fingers, and the music revive his senses. Although many of the "Gay Chaps" sonnets are in loose iambic pentameter, the meter of the second quatrain is decidedly regular, sounding the untroubled euphony of that "room." The speaker compares the music "warily" to a "golden rose / That sometimes after sunset warms the west / [and] Will warm that room." The *w*arily/*w*arms/*w*est alliteration increases the euphony of the depiction, distancing it from the harsh coldness of death.

The golden rose image also contributes to the dreamlike quality of "piano after war" and links the poem to "my dreams"; both speakers seek out a space to preserve love, beauty, and music in wartime. The future tense employed in "piano after war" for events that "shall" or "will" happen creates an elusive quality and indicates that such euphonious poetry may only be a dream. The poem recognizes this dream despite the speaker's conclusion that the cries of his fallen friends drown out the music: "But suddenly, across my climbing fever / Of proud delight—a multiplying cry. A cry of bitter dead men who will never / Attend a gentle maker of musical joy" (68). The "gentle" female musician causes a pleasurable "fever" for the speaker that death attempts to freeze in the final couplet: "Then my thawed eye will go again to ice / And stone will shove the softness from my face." The poem appears to end with a repudiation of the "softness" of the music and warmth of the room and thus may seem to support Schweik's argument that the male soldier rejects the female piano player who "tempts soldiers and civilians to ignore history, to forget the truth about military conflict, to dally in the realm of trivial detail" (133). However, the speaker doesn't reject the female musician or dismiss her artistic creation as trivial; he liltingly calls her a "géntlĕ mákĕr ŏf músĭcăl jóy" while the fallen comrades are flatly "bítter déad mén," pitting her creative powers against the war's destruction. The speaker clearly savors the music and is reluctant to leave its protective space. In fact, rather than exposing the superficiality of lyricism, this poem sounds the value of creating a space where such lyricism can be preserved. The fallen comrades, not the female musician, are the greatest danger to the speaker. They threaten to freeze his senses and prevent him from enjoying any experience removed from war. The conflict between what the speaker professes and how the poem registers his experience links

"piano after war" to "gay chaps." The "piano after war" soldier contends that the screams of the dead will mute his senses, but he does so by employing sensual, tactile words, like "thawed," "ice," "stone," and "softness," that register his continued ability to feel.

The following sonnet, "mentors," continues where "piano after war" ends; the speaker professes his devotion to his dead comrades and attempts to renounce the sensuous experiences of music, food, romance, and nature. "Brooks [would] not permit 'mentors' and 'piano after war' to be quoted separately" (Melhem 46), insisting on the connection between the two poems. In addition, the beginning of "mentors"—"For I am rightful fellow of their band / My best allegiances are to the dead" (69)"—rhetorically and thematically connects the two poems. "For" continues the argument that "stone will shove the softness from my face, *for* I am a rightful fellow of their [the dead's] band," and "band" recasts the previous sonnet's musical imagery. In "mentors," a band of soldiers replaces a group of musicians, opposing the musical connotations of "band" from "piano after war." There is no untroubled music for the speaker to retreat into since the dead are here the band. The speaker endeavors to escape from them by retreating into nature: "Among spring flowers, under summer trees, / By chilling autumn waters, in the frosts / Of supercilious winter." However, his description of nature recalls the setting sun and the golden rose of the second quatrain of "piano after war," and the coldness of death foreshadowed at the end of "piano after war" creeps into the landscape of "mentors" with "chilling," "frosts," and "winter." Eventually the voices of the dead in "mentors," like those in "piano after war," call the speaker away from the world of the living: "And at that cry, at that remotest whisper, / I'll stop my casual business." The speaker's "casual business" includes being at a "banquet," "ball," and dancing with a woman "who may be

fragrant as the flower she wears." The connection between the woman dance partner and the smell of the flower echoes the music and rose imagery in "piano after war." The woman in "mentors" promises the renewing power of spring flowers. Yet, the poem ends with the speaker leaving her and joining his fellows; he makes "gallant bows and dim excuses, then quit[s] / Light for the midnight that is mine and theirs" (69).

These poems demonstrate that an individual soldier's identity is defined by his relationship to his fellow soldiers and his participation in their "band." But, after the war ends when the individual is no longer a soldier and many of his friends have been killed in battle, he must redefine himself as a civilian. The sonnet sequence registers this tension by shifting back and forth from the first-person plural to the first-personal singular. Here, even though the speaker of "mentors" asserts his devotion to the troops, the poem's diction and rhymes suggest his ambivalence. He dismisses the sensuous activities of eating, listening to music, dancing, and smelling perfume as the "casual" business of everyday life but also claims that he is "reluctant" (69) to let go of his dance partner, revealing an attachment to the living similar to the "piano after war" speaker's relationship to the musician. The "mentors" speaker hesitates to ally himself with the departed, referring to the band as "their" band, rather than "our" band. Here, the speaker of "mentors" tries to convince himself of his devotion to his mentors and fix them in his memory; note the repetition of "the dead" in the first quatrain: "My best allegiances are to the dead. / I swear to keep the dead upon my mind." References to ceremonies and oath taking—"allegiances" and "swear"—and formal diction—"distain," "overglad," and "gallant bows"—belie the speaker's profession that he and his dead mentors are a close-knit group. He has ready platitudes for what a good soldier should do; he should always

remember his fallen friends and preserve that brotherly love at all costs. But, elements within the poem challenge that simple advice. The rare perfect rhyme between "wears" and "theirs" suggests, instead, that the fragrance the woman wears does not have to be separate from the darkness of the dead mentors. The poem refuses to renounce completely life's beauty and implies that the speaker can maintain a connection between both worlds.

Like "piano after war" and "my dreams," the next poem, "the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men," employs a language of enclosure to protect the soldier's identity from the war. The implied connection between the sonnet and the coffins in "the white troops" seems to contradict the form's positive associations in the previous poem. And yet, there is an important paradox here. War's dehumanization of the dead soldiers into the "contents" (70) of coffins on the battlefield forces the white soldiers to question their racist beliefs. The violence of war exposes the absurd violence of racism. The sequence plunges into the fighting and the racism experienced by African American soldiers only after sympathetically portraying their pre-war and post-war fears of becoming killing machines, bereft of language, emotion, or personality. "Gay Chaps" humanizes and memorializes the soldiers before it portrays war's and racism's degrading effects directly. The title's "Negroes" versus "men" distinction registers the racist attitudes at the time, particularly within the military, that considered African American soldiers not as individuals but as a general type:

> The black soldier was generally considered in terms of group behavior. The category of "Negro" was thought to be scientifically meaningful, and individuals making up this 'natural grouping' could be analyzed and their behavior predicted. Although black men had enlisted or were recruited from all regions of the United States, and came into the service with a variety of backgrounds and social classes, the army tried to understand them only as a single cohesive entity. Military archives abound with studies, reports, articles, and memoranda that discuss the "black soldier" as a distinct racial category with predictable actions and behaviors. (Morehouse 133)

Attitudes like these contributed to the segregation of the US Military during the war, even in the face of the 1940 Selective Service and Training Act and Roosevelt's 1941 Executive Order 8802. Polls at the time indicated that the majority of people were against integrating the armed forces: "When the army asked thirteen thousand soldiers whether 'white and Negro soldiers should be in separate outfits,' only 36 percent of black respondents, and 12 percent of white respondents, answered that blacks and whites should be in the same units (10).

The white troops in Brooks's poem are supposed to segregate the dead; to "order" the bodies, by obeying "orders" designating different types of coffins for the white and black soldiers. But, the casualties are so disfigured that the white troops can't distinguish one body from another, let alone one race. At the beginning of the poem, though, the white troops attempt to follow their racist orders: "They had supposed their formula was fixed" (70). Before witnessing the dismembered remains of the soldiers, the white troops assumed that racial categories and thus segregation were "fixed," not only securely in place but also right. The speaker characterizes racism as an impersonal, even pseudo-scientific "formula" that treats African Americans as objects with "congenital iniquities" and requires "A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze" from whites.[8] But, the white soldiers can't maintain that "hooded gaze," an allusion to the hoods worn by members of

the Klu Klux Klan, when they are forced to bury the dead on the battlefield. The inability to distinguish visually between the white and African American body parts defies "fixed" racist formulas and leaves the white troops "perplexed." This confusion reaches its climax in the sestet. Before the war, the white soldiers' defined their attitudes according to the same racist formula they were supposed to follow when burying the dead soldiers: "Such as boxed / Their feelings properly, complete to tags." Racism is like a coffin that "boxes" the white soldiers' feelings. But, they discover that there is no way to maintain a segregationist order in the real coffins: they "would often find the contents had been scrambled. / Or even switched" (70).

The variations in the poem's structure reflect the permeability of these supposedly fixed orders and boundaries, and the logical structure of the Petrarchan sonnet strengthens the poem's argument against segregation. The octave's language stresses the significance of the "orders" (70), "formulas," and "instructions" that the white troops are supposed to follow. The sestet's characteristic turn marks a fundamental shift in the white soldiers' perspectives; the war confuses the racist organizing effects of segregation, laid out in the octave. The shift from the octave's rhetoric of order to the sestet's rhetoric of disorder —"scrambled" and "switched"—betrays the breakdown of racial boundaries in the white soldiers, a breakdown revealed when they revise their formula to "a box for dark men and a box for Other." The white men become the Other, while the African American soldiers don't just look "like" men as the poem's title claims; they are men. The "dárk mén" spondee emphatically grants this humanity. The poem voices what the white troops cannot: in war there are only men, not dark men and light men. Paradoxically, only when the white soldiers recognize that war dehumanizes all soldiers

equally and does not discriminate that can they, indirectly, begin to see the common humanity of the fallen men and the absurdity of reducing their comrades further into categories of white and black. But, as the ending indicates, the speaker is unable to articulate a clear rationale against segregation. Instead, he offers a faulty justification for integration. The white soldiers wait to see if God or nature will react to the supposed taboo of integrating coffins, but nothing happens: "Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled. / And there was nothing startling in the weather" (70). The absence of a natural or divine reaction justifies integration by negation. The allusion here to the ending of Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" reinforces the irony of an appeal to a spiritual authority in the secular world of the battlefield where such an authority does not exist. After Browning's speaker murders Porphyria in a deranged attempt to preserve their love forever, he defends the crime by observing, "And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred / And yet God has not said a word!" (124). God doesn't condemn the depravity of the speaker in "Porphyria's Lover"; likewise, God and nature don't react to the brutality on the battlefield that reduces men to parts, segregationist orders that categorize African Americans as less than human, or to the justified violation of segregated burial practices. This ending undermines the soldiers' faith, a move that intensifies in the following sonnets.

The eleventh sonnet in the sequence "love note II: flags" examines a soldier's patriotic identity through the form of a love letter addressed to the American flag. By personifying the flag as an unfaithful woman, Brooks's "love note" evokes the traditional love-letter poem and the contemporary V-Letter. In this Shakespearean sonnet, "love is a game of strategy, a war of wits, wills, and words" (Hubbard 49), reflecting the

connections between love and war typical of courtly love sonnets. Here, Brooks frames the soldier's relationship to his country as a playful encounter with a teasing woman who simultaneously pains and pleasures him. But, Brooks's modernization of the love letter poem registers the effects of World War II on soldiers and the problem of communicating with those at home. Poems like Karl Shapiro's "V-Letter," Muriel Rukeyser's "Letter to the Front," and Brooks's "Gay Chaps" sequence, which is itself based on soldiers' letters, demonstrate that "the epistolary war poem became a kind of fad in the early forties" (Schweik 86). The popularity of the genre echoed the increasing role of mail and letters both to and from the battlefront that was encouraged by "the mail and morale motif [that made] it clear that letter writing was extraordinarily crucial to a nation on the move and in great turmoil" (Litoff 22). The US Postal Service created Victory Mail, or V-Mail, in 1942 to ensure that soldiers would receive morale-boosting mail from home. V-Mail consisted of specially designed 8 ½-by-11 inch forms with space for 700 typewritten words that were then microfilmed and enlarged in order to reduce the bulk weight of mail traveling overseas. Some complained about the impersonality of V-letters: "the letters seemed short and, according to one combat veteran, left the reader feeling incomplete, 'like a postcard'" (Litoff 23). But, the government launched an extensive advertising campaign geared towards women, advising them to "keep him posted: make it short, make it cheerful" (qtd. in Litoff and Smith 123). Keeping it short and cheerful meant concealing and omitting the harsh realities of families at home, particularly loneliness and infidelities, from the soldiers.[9] This type of communication reinforced the separation between civilians and soldiers, contributing to the gay chaps as "islands" comparison from the first sonnet. Brooks's letter poem is in stark contrast to the formulaic,

mechanized V-letter. Written by a male soldier to a personified and feminized flag, rather than to a person, this love letter isn't cheerful or reassuring; it discloses the physical and psychological effects of war on its speaker.

The first lines of "love note II" express the soldier-speaker's ambivalent patriotism in familiar terms of endearment: "Still, it is dear defiance now to carry / Fair flags of you above my indignation / Top, with a pretty glory and a merry / Softness" (74).The combination of "dear" with "defiance" invokes the age-old connection between love and war; love is like a war game between the speaker and the flag. The soldier conflates the language of love and war in his praise of the lady's "pretty glory," while also suggesting the flag as "Old Glory." However, the metaphorical relationship between love and war is literalized when the speaker playfully pulls the lady-flag from her lofty position and relocates her in a combat zone: "I pull you down my foxhole. Do you mind? / You burn in bits of saucy color then." Here, war ceases to be merely a familiar simile for love. We are no longer on a metaphorical battlefield; we are in the soldier's "foxhole." While the diction—"passion," "burn[ing]," and "saucy"—implies a sexual encounter between the speaker and the woman-as-flag figure, burning "in bits" pushes the sexual connotations toward a violent image of the beloved on fire. The speaker holds the remnants of the flag in a decidedly post-coital embrace, "Against my power crumpled and wan." The lively tone and heat imagery of these first eight lines recall pre-war "gay chaps" seducing women at the bar in the first sonnet. The "love notes: II" speaker is in control of his object, demonstrated by the "I pull" and "I let" language. He teases and tempts her, and ultimately consummates the relationship, revealing that he, like the "gay chaps," knows "beautifully how to give to women / The summer spread, the tropics, of

our love" (64). The consummation, though, isn't warm like the summer sun or a tropical locale; it's destructive and violent, taking on the qualities of the war's "pained volleys" (74) outside the foxhole.

The poem transforms an act of love into an act of war. The encounter disfigures the flag, weakens the speaker, and sends "love notes: II" into a spiral of sentimental clichés aimed at restoring the beloved woman: "You, and the yellow pert exuberance / Of dandelion days, unmocking sun; / The blowing of clear wind in your gay hair" (74). Here, the language of nature—"dandelion days," "unmocking sun," and "clear wind"—replaces the language of war—"flags," "glory," "foxhole," and "volleys." The soldier tries to escape from the constant threat of war's violence by praising his lady with a catalogue of decidedly serene and pleasant similes celebrating her changefulness: "Love changeful in you (like a music, or / Like a sweet mournfulness, or like a dance, / Or like the tender struggle of a fan)." The similes distinguish the beloved from the poem's earlier images of the American flag waving and burning above a battlefield. The retreat, however, is ultimately unsuccessful. In the sestet, the soldier and the poem itself are similarly "crumpled and wan"; "love notes: II" loses its power to represent clearly the individual soldier's perspective on combat and the indignity of a country he loves sending its young men to die in such a brutal way. The move away from "my" indignation, passion, and foxhole, to celebrating the beloved "you" registers the speaker's loss of identity. The empty, stock metaphors at the end of "love notes: II" recall the stilted language and clichés of "mentors." Both speakers lose faith in pre-war conceptions of brotherly and patriotic love. The "Gay Chaps" sonnets register the drastic transformation of the cocky pre-war gay chaps into disillusioned post-war veterans. Consequently, when the soldier-

speakers revert back to pre-war generalizations about love, those professions sound hollow.

The final sonnet, "the progress," proposes that the "gay chaps" have progressed from the first to the last sonnet but asks how to define that progress. The title evokes both the soldiers' military parade (a progress) and their post-war experiences (their progress). James claims that the title is ironic: the soldiers "must rely on the display of nationalism to keep them[selves] steadied" (247). Indeed, the poem does begin with the soldiers' performance of patriotism: "And still we wear our uniforms, follow / The cracked cry of the bugles" (75). Even after experiencing the traumatic loss and uncertainty of war, the soldiers "still" act patriotically. The double meaning of "still," as continuance and stasis, and its repetition in the poem—"still we wear," "still we applaud," and "still we remark"—indicate that even though the soldiers are physically marching forward, their situation hasn't improved. The return to the "we" perspective from the first "gay chaps at the bar" sonnet might seem to promise a return to home, peace, and selfhood. But the echo of the opening sonnet is rather assimilated to a vicious cycle of violence: the only progress one can make is forward into another war. Temporal distinctions between wars collapse as the living soldiers repeat the same actions that the dead performed when alive; they "sing, / Salute the flag" like the now-deceased veterans "who too saluted, sang" in the past. The gay chaps "progress" only in the sense that they realize their part in the cycle: "But inward grows a soberness, an awe, / A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold." To be a part of the progress of war is to identify yourself with those nameless individuals who died before you and those who will die after; to lose your sense of individuality and become a hollow man.

The echo of "again" in the poem's final two lines—"The step of iron feet again. And again wild" (75)—anticipates the inevitable reappearance of war. The footsteps of the soldiers' marching in a parade commemorating the end of one war are indistinguishable from the footsteps of soldiers marching into future wars. Here, war's ominous sounds on the battlefield bleed into the homefront parade; the homefront is no sanctuary. The soldiers' earlier attempts to find a refuge outside of war by storing their emotions away, losing themselves in visions of peace time, and using the tropes of love poetry to retreat temporarily down a poetic foxhole now seem futile. War's "iron feet" indicate the dehumanization of the soldiers as they become part of the regulated machinery of war.[10] The uniforms, the parades, the salutes are all part of this ordered military machine. However, the speaker's command to "Listen, listen," the white space in the final line, and the sequence's last word ("wild") indicate war's terrifying and incomprehensible disorder. While the poem is mainly written in iambic pentameter, the trochaic rhythm of that very command to "Lísten, lísten" to the iron feet varies the iambic pentameter, arguing against Mootry's claim that the poem's regular metrical feet act like iron shackles that reflect "the tyranny of poetic practice" (85). In addition, the hole in the final line suggests that combat threatens to hollow out both the soldiers and the sonnet and leave them with a gaping wound. The war causes the soldiers to question and reevaluate their beliefs, leading to feelings of existential emptiness.

But, the uniform, circular structure of war and history does not, as some critics have suggested, necessarily correspond to a uniformity of poetic form in Brooks's sonnet sequence. Schweik reads the soldiers' uniforms in "the progress" as figures for "the 'uniform' structure of the sonnets in the series" (138). But the formal variations and

innovations in this sonnet and the others in the sequence argue against identifying their structure with the homogenizing goals of racism and sexism. The individual poems and their speakers are not, in fact, indistinguishable from one another. Brooks emphasizes the variety of soldiers by altering the diction, imagery, point of view, and meter of the sonnets and by employing the Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and a combination of both forms. While the soldiers in "the progress" fail to escape from war's unending cycle, the "Gay Chaps" sequence succeeds in representing the devastating effects of endless war on the individuals. The form registers variations against an overarching structure depicting the paradoxical experiences of the African American soldiers before, during, and after WWII. War elicits both love and hate from them. Its dehumanization of the black and white troops exposes the absurdity of racist ideas and practices on and off the battlefield. The different structures, perspectives, images, levels of diction, allusions in the "Gay Chaps" sonnets enable Brooks to memorialize the war dead and honor the survivors by elevating their experiences without generalizing or sentimentalizing them. This is how Brooks represented WWII in poetry in 1945.

In her next volume, *Annie Allen* (1949), Brooks continued experimenting with free-verse and traditional verse forms to represent the effects of WWII on individuals. The three sections of *Annie Allen*—"Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," "The Anniad," and "The Womanhood"—trace an ordinary African American woman's development in a combination of sonnets, ballads, septets, and free-verse poems. The septets of "The Anniad" allude to epic and mock-epic traditions while marking Annie Allen's transition from a girl to a woman as the Second World War destroys her romantic illusions about herself and her strained relationship with her veteran husband, referred to

only as tan man. Like "Gay Chaps," "The Anniad" explores the relationship between love and war and draws upon the authority of traditional love poetry. The poems about Annie, however, are preceded by a free-verse elegy entitled "Memorial to Ed Bland," thus underscoring the importance of war to the whole volume. "Memorial," like Brooks's earlier free verse "Negro Hero," tries to resist vague generalities about heroism and war but cannot do so. The poem is an elegy for Brooks's friend, Edward Bland, who was killed in Germany in 1945. Bland, like Brooks, participated in Inez Cunningham Stark's poetry workshop for African Americans at the South Side Community Center in Chicago. In *Report from Part One*, Brooks credits Bland and his brother with "patiently help[ing] teach Henry [her husband] and me to *think*" (12). One such subject Bland stressed was the role of the African American poet in wartime, which he addressed in the last essay published before his death, "Racial Bias and Negro Poetry." In that 1944 essay, Bland identifies causes for "the dissatisfaction one feels about Negro verse" (333). He claimed that racially biased white readers fail to recognize African Americans as human beings and, consequently, misread or misunderstand Negro poetry. Even though protesting against racism was vital to Bland, he also hoped that writing could create a common bond between the races. He cited Claude McKay's sonnet, "If We Must Die," as an example of a "highly communicable" (330) poem that bridges the gap between whites and African Americans by associating "[the Negro] with approved forms of heroism" (331). Bland concludes his essay on an optimistic note about the war's equalizing potential:

> It is to be hoped that the present war will create an environment more favorable to the humanistic goals, and in doing so mark another advance in the elimination of the two factors which I have attempted to point out as thus far operating disastrously on Negro poetry: not only the white bias due to which its appreciation has remained partial, but also the self-conscious "race" values which impair and delimit the vision of the artist. (333)

Nor was Bland alone in this optimistic attitude toward the war. In the forward to a collection of letters written by African American soldiers, Benjamin Quarles claims that other African Americans shared Bland's hope: "[African Americans] of World War II believed that their contribution as arms bearers and homefront workers, along with the spirit of the times, would ameliorate their lot and that changes favorable to their group would result from the war [. . .]. The blacks of World War II were hopeful that this time the sequel would be different, the promised land no mirage" (xiv). This hope, as we know, was not realized and African American soldiers "who had bravely fought for their country for two years in the jungles of the Pacific returned home to face second-class citizenship in a society that was still segregated" (Morehouse 190). Brooks's 1949 "Memorial" reflects the failure of the war to bring about Bland's hope for racial equality and a more humanistic American society than before the war. In the poem, war kills heroic optimism and curiosity; it alienates, rather than unites, people from one another. The poem criticizes myths of precocious boys destined to become brave soldiers but offers no alternatives. It objectifies Bland instead of humanizing him.

The poem's title specifically identifies "Ed Bland" as an individual and as the subject of the elegy. But the ellipses, the omission of the subject, and the telegram-quality of the epigraph, ". . . killed in Germany March 20, 1945; / volunteered for special dangerous mission . . . wanted to see action. . ." (79) transform Bland into another nameless casualty whose life can be reduced to a few short lines. The speaker introduces Bland as a naturally inquisitive child: "He grew up being curious / And thinking things are various / Nothing was merely deleterious / Or spurious" (79). The *curious/spurious* rhyme implies the falsity of this optimistic picture of a soldier-to-be. "Memorial"

abandons its rhyming form in the following stanza but continues to emphasize Bland's curiosity, referring to his "popping-eyed surprise," "queer wonderful expression," and "twirling awe," imagery that comes disturbingly close to racist caricatures of African Americans as wide-eyed simpletons. The poem doesn't identify the source of his curiosity; it only repeats that he was curious about vague "things" and avoids mentioning the war and his death.

"Memorial" concludes with a smug indictment of all civilians who incorrectly assume that they can understand what Bland's war experience. The speaker separates himself from the civilians by identifying them as "they": "Yes. / People would see this awe and say they saw / Also what he saw. They could never guess / What they should think" (79). The speaker in "Memorial" generalizes about everyone's reaction to this curious boy. Like the *curious/spurious* rhyme, the *awe/saw* pairing indicates the inadequacy of an elegy to Bland that reduces his life to a simple narrative that anyone can comprehend. "Memorial," like "Negro Hero," identifies a problem with public perceptions of soldiers and war heroes. The speaker faults people for craving uncomplicated stories about the war: "People like definite decisions, / Tidy answers, all the little ravelings / Snipped off, the lint removed" (79-80). "Memorial" suggests that they categorize what they don't understand in order to avoid dealing with it: "Calling what they can't clutch insanity / Or saintliness" (80). Extreme irrationality and extreme goodness can be equally incomprehensible and, hence, a way to justify evading the war. The poem doesn't sustain its elegiac focus on Bland and, instead, concentrates on these "people" in the final two stanzas, This shift in focus recalls the perspective change in "Negro Hero" from the Miller-like speaker to the Southern white racist; the free-verse

forms in both poems have difficulty controlling and focusing the voice of their poetic speakers, in contrast to the "Gay Chaps" sonnets that maintain a consistent perspective in each individual poem.

Unlike "Gay Chaps," "Memorial" pits soldiers ("us") against civilians ("them"). "Gay Chaps" invites the sympathy of civilian outsiders, while "Memorial" implies that such sympathy is disingenuous. "Memorial" constructs an unbridgeable gap between soldiers like Bland who have actually seen war and civilians who cannot possibly imagine it, contradicting Bland's hope that art could connect people. The very fact that the poem is an elegy renders this lack of communication between the mourners and their subject problematic. While "Gay Chaps" draws its strength from the formal conventions of sonnets and the sonnet sequence, "Memorial" rejects the conventions of traditional elegies, and, consequently, has difficulty explaining why or how its subject should be elegized. There is no movement from lament, to praise, to consolation. The poem appears to begin by praising Bland's curiosity, but this is just false praise from ignorant outsiders. The "people" in the poem never actually mourn Bland's death; they "hop happily among their roughs" (80), refusing to confront the war's reality. "Memorial" is suspicious of those who hide behind their perfect rhymes and simple adventure narratives about war. But the poem goes to the opposite extreme of that order with its variations in line and stanza lengths, rhymes, and meter, rendering a confusing and incomplete portrayal of its subject. Unlike the sonnets of "Gay Chaps," the form of "Memorial" unravels under the pressure of the war.

Whereas Brooks avoids traditional forms and conventions in "Memorial," she returns to them in her portrayal of Annie Allen's life before, during, and after WWII in

the fittingly titled poem "The Anniad." The return to traditional form connects "The Anniad" to "Gay Chaps." The "Gay Chaps" sequence honors the ordeals of ordinary soldiers in World War II, implicitly arguing for the sonnet's continued relevance as a form of remembrance. In "The Anniad," Brooks applies and transforms epic and mock-epic traditions to depict post-World War II American society. The elevated form enhances the incongruity between Annie's romantic illusions and the ugly, unromantic world that she strains to beautify. Annie is quite like the soldier in "love note II: flags" who tries to withdraw into love poetry, more particularly courtly love poetry. "The Anniad" recalls an idyllic past that can't be recovered. Nevertheless, Annie voices her insecurities about herself and her strained relationship with her veteran husband, tan man, in the language and figures of a fantasy romance populated with heroic knights and beautiful ladies. She, like the gay chaps at the bar, draws strength from formal conventions; they help Annie articulate her painful experience of the war in a protective poetic space. Both the gay chaps and Annie survive the war, and Brooks's traditional forms are a crucial part of their endurance; their voices are not lost in the confusing and disorienting sounds of war, as they are in "Negro Hero" and "Ed Bland."

However, Brooks resists such a serious reading of "The Anniad." In a 1969 interview, she downplays the significance of the title's epic origin: "Well, the girl's name was Annie, and it was my little pompous pleasure to raise her to a height that she probably did not have. I thought of the *Iliad* and said, I'll call this 'The Anniad'" (*Part One* 158). Speaking after her conversion to the Black Arts movement, Brooks dismisses Annie as one of her integrationist-period creations. In another interview, the poet equates traditional poetic technique with superficiality, claiming that "the 'Anniad' is just an

exercise, just an exercise" (*Conversations* 96). In *Report from Part Two*, Brooks disowns her Anniad stanza: "that is not 'MY' form: It's EUROPEAN" (96-97). Critics have followed her lead and interpreted the form as an ironic critique of white society at best. Claudia Tate identifies "The Anniad" as "a mock-heroic satire" (149) that embodies "Brooks's indirect expression of anger [and] ridicules the destructive forces in the life of a young black woman as well as those in the lives of most women" (149-50). Hortense Spillers argues that the poem is "perhaps one of the liveliest demonstrations of the uses to which irony can be put" (226). Recalling Shaw's critique of the battle between black content and white form, A. Yemisi Jimoh claims that in "The Anniad" "both the content and the form strain against being silenced, in this poetic struggle against double consciousness. The form strains to contain the content which it must convey, as Brooks often subtly voices her sexual, gender, and racial topics [in] her form—the mock-epic" (167-68). But, these formal assessments of "The Anniad" as only satiric, though they are fueled by Brooks's own statements, overlook the sympathetic portrayal of Annie and the serious relationship between "The Anniad" and the tradition of epic war poetry.

In mock-epic or mock-heroic poems, perhaps most famously in Alexander Pope's "Rape of the Lock," combining elevated language and trivial subject matter produces a comedic effect. Mock-epics employ and satirize the invocations, dedications, celestial interventions, and similes of epic poetry. Indeed, "The Anniad" does begin with a reference to the gods: "Think of sweet and chocolate, / Left to folly or to fate, / Whom the higher gods forgot, / Whom the lower gods berate" (99). However, the tone here is somber not satiric: the gods don't care about Annie. Also, even though the subject matter of "The Anniad" may be humbler than that in traditional epics, it is not trivial. The title's

allusion to both *The Aeneid* and *The Iliad* ties the poem to a western tradition of poetry about love and war, a history also relevant in "Gay Chaps." Indeed, as Susan Stewart argues, "'The Anniad' owes as much to the serious social criticisms of the mock epic tradition as it owes to high epic tradition" (312). But most of all, the fact of WWII makes it difficult to read "The Anniad" only as a mock-epic parody. Unlike the characters who engage in a metaphorical battle of the sexes in Pope's "Rape of the Lock," both Annie and tan man, like the soldiers in "Gay Chaps," must confront the repercussions of violent combat; "'The Anniad' bows to the epic as it encompasses both a world war and the war between Annie and her husband, or Annie's fantasies and reality" (Wheeler 98). The poem's forty-three septets in variable rhyme and meter register Annie's strategy for taming the war by recasting tan man's departure and return from it as part of a quest from a romance. In *Report from Part One*, Brooks ambivalently disavows any significance to the septets: "I like the number seven. That is probably not the reason; I can't remember exactly, but I imagine I finished one stanza, then decided that the rest of them would be just like that" (158). However, the use of septets, a form first employed by the troubadours, in a poem about a girl entranced by the "Fairy-sweet of old guitars" (99) who is "watching for [her] paladin" hardly seems a coincidence.

Both "Gay Chaps" and "The Anniad" observe that war simultaneously encourages and shatters romantic illusions. Even before the war comes, Annie is a "thaumaturgic lass" (100), entranced by the magic of courtly love and chivalric romance. She remakes her domineering tan man into a "paladin" (99) and transforms the "lowly room" (101) he rents into a "chapel [. . .] where she genuflects to love"; romance is Annie's religion. And yet, even at the beginning, Annie seems to recognize her way of seeing as illusory,

particularly when "looking in her looking-glass / At the unembroidered brown; / Printing bastard roses there; / Then emotionally aware / Of the black and boisterous hair, / Taming all that anger down" (100). Annie can never outwardly communicate to tan man her rage; but the poem enables her to employ it to construct her fantasy world. She learns how to "tame" her emotions and protect her fantasies from reality. When the war comes, it pushes Annie into her dreams, distancing her from tan man's physical and psychological breakdown. War in "The Anniad," like in "Gay Chaps," is an uncontrollable and controlling force. It is unruly and foreign: "Doomer, though, crescendo-comes / Prophesying hecatombs / Surrealist and cynical / Garrulous and guttural" (101-102). Instead of Annie taming or tan man "master[ing]" (100), war is the "doomer" controlling their fate. Now, mass sacrifice replaces genuflections to love, and guttural sounds drown out sweet melodies. The cacophony of war as "garrulous and guttural" anticipates its destruction of language, as we saw in "Gay Chaps." Indeed, war "Spits upon the silver leaves" (101), referring both to Annie's illusions and to the poem's own "silver rime" (105). In the context of the perfect rhymes in most of poem, the off-rhyme of "crescendo-comes" (101) and "hecatombs" voices the war's dissonance. War is Annie's antagonist; while she tries to elevate her situation, the war "Denigrates the dainty eves / [that her] Dear dexterity achieves" (102). But after the initial disruption of her pre-war life, Annie incorporates the war into her heroic plan, imagining that tan man will return to her: "Skirmishes can do. / Then he will come back to you." While Annie experiences moments when "the culprit magics fade" (107) and "when the desert terrifies," overall she denies the barrenness of reality. The poem's insistently lyrical form withstands the war's disruption, and Annie survives by drawing strength from its conventions. In the

final image of "The Anniad," Annie cherishes her romanticized memories: she is "Fingering faint violet. / Hugging old and Sunday sun. / Kissing in her kitchenette / The minuets of memory" (109). The reference to minuets, the music accompanying a highly stylized and stately dance for two performed at court, in combination with the euphonious alliteration—*f*ingering/*f*aint, *S*unday/*s*un, *k*issing/*k*itchenette, and *m*inuets/*m*emory—locates Annie back in her pre-war, illusory romantic world.

Tan man, like Annie, suffers from delusions about his wartime experience. For him, war is a paradoxical force that controls him but also gives him more freedom. Indeed, many WWII African American soldiers "stationed in Europe talked about the feelings of freedom they experienced there. They commented how the local people recognized them as Americans or 'Yankees' first, rather than seeing them primarily by color" (Morehouse 201). In "The Anniad" and "the white troops had their order but the Negroes looked like men" war challenges previous racist conceptions of identity, allowing for an increased sense of liberation, at the same time it breaks down the soldiers' faith in everything—God, country, morality, and love—leaving them disillusioned and lost. For tan man, war "Names him. Tames him. Takes him off, / Throws to columns row on row" (102). The short, controlled phrases here mimic military training orders. No longer taming Annie, he is now the direct object of the unnamed force of the war. The military strips him of his pre-war civilian identity and recreates him as a soldier. When tan man returns from the war to "the white and greater chess" (103) of segregated civilian life, he loses the control associated with his soldier identity: "With his helmet's final doff / Soldier lifts his power off. / Soldier bare and chilly then / Wants his power back again / No confection languider / Before quick-feast quick-famish Men /

Than the candy crowns-that-were." According to the poem, however, tan man's power was always just an illusion, a "candy crown," like Annie's bastard roses. Tan man is now a helpless child, "bare" and "chilly," who can be appeased with candy. He is as lost in illusions as Annie, but his dreams appear less fantastic than hers because they concern war, heroism, and masculinity. The poem's multi-dimensional characterization of tan man as Annie's paladin, her domineering husband, a child-like war invalid, and a rapacious philanderer reflects the war's complex effect tan man. War gives him an "overseas disease" (107). He returns to Annie shell-shocked, "hearing still such eerie stutter" (102), and ill with tuberculosis, "a green / Moist sweet breath for mezzanine" (103). He compensates for his physical and psychological impotence by having affairs with wild women, like the "maple banshee" (104) and the "mad bacchanalian lass," who are the opposite of tame Annie. Tan man's infidelity suggests that he is trying to persuade himself that war has really made a man of him. But rather than increasing his strength and masculinity, the war reduces him into a thing. The impersonal depiction of his death registers his transformation from a pre-war individual "he" to a post-war casualty "that": "That is dolesome and is dying" (108). Melhem claims "that" "signals the dying lover (husband) as reduced to object, unworthy of personal pronouns at this point because of his moral and physical decay" (101). Indeed, tan man's sickness and infidelity render him unworthy. But war also hastens his downward spiral. War gives him a new self and the illusion of freedom, and then takes them away, leaving him shell-shocked and impotent.

Annie and tan man, like the gay chaps, are victims of war. Stanford draws just this parallel, even claiming that Annie is a combatant: "Annie takes on the figuration of a soldier as she fights to avoid, and then finally faces, the terrifying desert of her grief over

the literal desert(ion) of tan man and the death of her elaborately constructed dream of romance" ("An Epic" 294). However, Annie's fight against the war's destruction and her search for solace in poetry, not her fight against her romantic dream, connects her to the soldiers in "Gay Chaps." After tan man returns, Annie looks for comfort in nature's "silver rime" (105), linking rime, a protecting ice coating on plants, to the poem's rhyme that "chills her nicely" and helps her survive by taming all her anger down. Like the speaker in "my dreams," who preserves his emotions from the war in the sonnet's defensive rooms and cabinets, Annie attempts to protect herself in the poem's "silver rime." But, the attempt is not completely successful. Annie's relationship with tan man debilitates her; she begins "ripe and rompabout, / All her harvest buttoned in" (99) but ends up "tweaked and twenty-four" (209) with her "Soft aesthetic looted, lean." Annie's "looted" aesthetic recalls the gay chaps' experience of a deepening "hollow" (75) in the final sonnet, "the progress." The war loots the gay chaps' beliefs about heroism, love, equality, country, and religion, stripping them of their pre-war innocence and leaving them with a gaping emptiness. And yet, even though the gay chaps have lost their patriotic faith in their duties as soldiers, they still put on the appearance of being good soldiers. They are trapped in the cycle of war. Annie is likewise caught in her own series of delusions; she ends up "derelict and dim and done" (109) but still "fancying [. . .] / What was never and is not" (99). Although Annie's and the gay chaps' struggles may look hopeless, the poems render them heroic. Brooks combats the demeaning experience of war with the elevating properties of the sonnet to memorialize the experiences of common soldiers in "Gay Chaps." Likewise, the ornate septets in "The Anniad" enhance Annie's romantic fantasy world and raise her common experience to epic proportions, not

to mock her but to recognize Annie's difficult struggle, a struggle not written about in traditional epics.

And yet, while "The Anniad" endorses the lyricism of traditional forms, the three distinct poems in the "Appendix to The Anniad: leaves from a loose-leaf war diary" raise new questions about the efficacy of poetic convention. The title and subtitle establish a decidedly unpoetic form in contrast to the epic proper of "The Anniad"; but, the "Appendix" moves toward and ends with a sonnet. Here, as in "Gay Chaps," the sonnet remains crucial to Brooks's exploration of WWII. "Appendix" brings to mind supplementary materials relegated to the back of book not lines of carefully crafted poetry. "Leaves from a loose-leaf" diary emphasizes the fragmentary quality of the poems in opposition to the epic completeness of "The Anniad." Brooks's "war diary" begins with a poem impersonally titled "('thousands killed in action')" (110) in a distanced, second-person perspective, rather than with an emotional first-person account typical of a diary. The first thirteen-line poem—with its short lines, sharp stanza breaks into a septet, tercet, and two couplets, variable meter, and complex rhyme scheme—appears like individual poems hastily thrown together from separate "loose" pages. The second one-stanza, nine-line poem steps into more regular iambic pentameter lines than the first poem and employs elevated love diction and the blazon typical of sonnets. The third poem, "the sonnet-ballad," is, at last, a sonnet.[11] In "the sonnet-ballad," the speaker pines for her absent lover using figures from love poetry. Thus, as the "Appendix" poems move toward a more conventional form than the loose-leaf war diary, they seem more and more able to confront the war head-on. The speaker of the first poem can only allude to the "untranslatable ice," but the speaker of the final "sonnet-ballad" addresses "the

war" (112) directly. Here the sonnet enhances the emotional appeal of the speaker's lament over the loss of her lover in war by shaping her voice in familiar figures of romance and love poetry and drawing upon the tradition of combining love and war poetry. Here again, the sonnet is curiously able to represent the experiences of African Americans in wartime more clearly and effectively than free verse can.

The first poem, however, begins with a bluntly dispassionate epigraph suggesting a clipping from a newspaper headline or a telegram: "('thousands—killed in action')." This prefatory material evokes the uncertain identity of the "Negro Hero," who only "suggests" a real person, and the unsuccessful attempt to elegize Ed Bland as a more than a depersonalized telegram account in "Memorial." The second-person "you" perspective contributes to the poem's impersonality and enables the speaker to distance herself from her own experience. Also, "you" functions in a similar way to the "people" in "Memorial to Ed Bland" who avoid dealing with the horrors of war by retreating into facile stories about glory and heroism. The speakers in both poems imply that there is a correct way to mourn the war dead, but they are unclear what that correct way would be. The "Appendix" speaker claims, "you need the untranslatable ice to watch" (110), and then repeats herself four lines later, "You need the untranslatable ice to watch, / The purple and black to smell," indicating that the image is significant if not accessible. But the poem doesn't actually define the "untranslatable ice"; it merely restates the words over and over again. The identical "watch" rhymes and the echoes of "vague" and "vagueness" trap the first "Appendix" poem in a circle of evasions. Melhem interprets the ice as "the repression necessary to bear what cannot be shared" (69), while Stanford claims you need "not so much to watch the horrors of war, as one might first suppose, but

to feel what is expected" ("An Epic" 297). Yet, the repeated phrase is followed by a comma and then by imagery of "purple and black," which puts the image of bruises or wounds in apposition to the untranslatable ice, indicating that the ice is death, the "thousands killed in action."

However, the speaker's claim, in the second stanza, that one must confront death head-on, "before your horror can be sweet. / Or proper. Before your grief is other than discreet" (110), contradicts the first stanza. The sweet and proper references recall Owen's indictment of Horace's false glorification of war in "Dulce Et Decorum Est": "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori" (55). Yet, Brooks's speaker, who earlier tried to "watch" the untranslatable ice and "smell" its "healthy energy of decay" (110), should seek the opposite of "sweet and "proper" grief. In the last two stanzas, though, the poem suggests how to manage grief correctly. "Appendix to The Anniad" begins by appealing to the senses, implying the need to watch and smell death before grieving, but later adopts a cold, "intellectual damn" that distances the speaker from death. The individual stanzas contradict one another, rendering the war's ice remote and vague and the speaker's emotions muddled. Both "Gay Chaps" and "The Anniad" register the war's disruption of language while simultaneously resisting that loss by drawing strength from the conventions of traditional forms and genres. While the gay chaps' pre-war language of seduction is useless in war's linguistic wilderness, and Annie can't express her anger to tan man, the poems can still articulate these experiences. In contrast, the war, in this first poem, remains undefined and incomprehensible. Its "loose"

form isn't able to cast the unruliness of war with the precision of the sonnets and the Anniad stanzas.

The second poem, however, approaches the war dead from a more personal perspective than the first; it begins to melt the war's incomprehensible ice. Here, the first-person speaker identifies with her departed lover, sounding a plural "we" (111) instead of an accusatory "you." The poem juxtaposes the present with the future and the bodily with the spiritual, claiming that the promise of being reunited with her lover in the afterlife cannot make up for his present absence: "The Certainty we two shall meet by God / In a wide Parlor, underneath a Light / Of lights, come Sometime, is no ointment now." The "certainty" of an afterlife implies consolation missing from the first poem. However, the second poem also insists that this certainty isn't enough for the speaker. She craves the warmth of life, not an icy, distanced attitude: "We want nights / Of vague adventure, lips lax wet and warm, / Bees in the stomach, sweat across the brow. Now." The repetition of "now" expresses an urgent desire to live in the present moment. Even though the speaker claims she wants "vague" adventure, pointing back towards the first poem's "vague hushes" and "evasions," the imagery she employs to characterize that experience is precise: the sweat on the brow, the wet lips, the fluttering stomach. Imagery associating physical desire with heat and the intense longing of unfulfilled expectations connects this poem to Petrarchan sonnets and distances it from the impersonal war reporting in the first poem's title. While the speaker of the first poem claims that one can find closure through grief, can be "well" (110) and "weary," this speaker can't reconcile herself to grief. Resembling more traditional sonnets, the poem's blazon praises parts of the physical body, such as the "lips" (111), "stomach," and "brow" to register the intensity of the

speaker's loss of her lover. In addition, the references to a warm, parlor here recall the cozy, music-filled room from the "piano after war" sonnet. This is not quite a sonnet, though. Its iambic pentameter is more sonnet-like than the first poem's varied meter, but it is shorter than a traditional sonnet and lacks a conventional rhyme scheme. This is a transitional poem between the first fragmented poem that struggles for a form and the last full sonnet. The speaker returns to the figures of romance and love poetry from "The Anniad," retreating from the first poem's icy distance.

The third poem, "the sonnet-ballad," more than the previous two, resumes the perspective and situation from the end of "The Anniad." Akin to Annie, this poem's first-person speaker is left "lamenting" (112) the death of her lover in war; she employs romantic myths to assuage her grief. Here, as in "Gay Chaps," Brooks turns to the sonnet to register love and loss in wartime. The "Appendix" sequence does not sustain the first poem's fragmentary and unpoetic loose-leaf, diary form. The poem's ballad-like refrain "Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?" that begins and ends this sonnet implies that the speaker may never be able to find happiness after the war. The speaker resembles Annie by idealizing her "sweet love" as a strong, gallant man who "went walking grandly out that door." But the war cuts down that strength by taking his "tallness" away and making him "stammer." Death is a "coquettish" woman whom her lover "would have to court"; by courting death, he "would have to be untrue." Similar to the teasing woman-as-flag figure in "love note II: flags," coquettish death in "the sonnet-ballad" is both quite conventionally beautiful and deadly. Her "impudent and strange / Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort) / Can make a hard man hesitate—and change." "Possessive arms" evoke a woman's seductive embrace and the deadly weapons of war, straining the love-

as-war metaphor. The arms image also registers the war's domineering confinement of the soldiers in contrast to the speaker's protective love for her fallen soldier, her "heart-cup" sheltered in the poem's repeating, ballad refrain.

The speaker compares her soldier going off to war to a knight courting a flirt: war kills the soldier as the temptress destroys the knight. Yet, the poem juxtaposes her neat romance story with the war's disordering effects. The speaker claims that death-as-woman figure possesses "beauty (of a sort)" (112); but, the parentheses qualify death's beauty, registering the difference between beauty in this war sonnet and beauty in a sonnet that employs war as a figure for love. At the dash between "hesitate" "and change," the poem itself, like the speaker's beloved, wavers when confronted with death. Only after pausing can the poem continue with "and change," a euphemism for death. Even though "the sonnet-ballad" portrays the speaker's retreat into images from romantic myths as problematic, it cannot completely reject those myths. In the end, the "sonnet-ballad" speaker still clings to her fantasies, similar to Annie cherishing her "minuets of memory" and the "love notes II" speaker idealizing his beloved in a parenthetical catalogue of stereotypical images. The war disrupts the metaphors of traditional love poetry, the structures of tradition—the sonnets and ballad forms—provide enough support to prevent this final "Appendix" poem from crumbling under the force of war. The sonnets and septets in *Annie Allen* are not mere integrationist exercises that focus solely on "the mysteries and magic of technique" (*Part One* 158-59), as Brooks will later claim. Rather, they are "colloquial and contemporary" (157) engagements with WWII.

After *Annie Allen*, Brooks continued experimenting with form, publishing her only novel, *Maud Martha*, in 1953. The book originated as a series of twenty-five poems

written in 1944 about the life of an African American family entitled *American Family Brown*. *Maud Martha* preserves the poetic vignette quality of its source; it has thirty-four short chapters that revolve around a central character. In a 1969 interview, Brooks characterized it as a poetic novel: "about its being poetic in parts, I suppose that could hardly be avoided, if it is a thing to be avoided, because even in writing prose I find myself weighing the possibilities of every word just as I do in a poem" (*Conversations* 49). Barbara Christian cites specific lyrical techniques such as "the pacing of words through her adroit use of juxtaposition, the alternation of short and long units, the creation of emphasis through alliteration and imagery, the selection of specific sounds to evoke a certain quality" (248) in the novel, formally connecting it to Brooks's verse and free-verse poems. *Maud Martha* recalls Brooks's earlier free-verse WWII poems, in particular, in its examination of the relationship between actual individuals and poetical or fictional representations of them. Brooks bases "Negro Hero" on the real-life Dorie Miller, elegizes a fellow poet in "Memorial to Ed Bland," and acknowledges *Maud Martha* as "an autobiographical novel" (*Part One* 190) in which "much in the 'story' was taken out of my own life, and twisted, highlighted or dulled, dressed up or down" (191). The novel "suggests" Brooks in a similar way that "Negro Hero" "suggests" Dorie Miller. The narrator shares Maud's consciousness but still refers to her in the third person as "she."

Maud Martha traces an ordinary, African American woman's life—Maud's family, her dreams, her courtship, her marriage, the birth of her first child, and the return of her brother from the war. Plain Maud Martha identifies with the "everydayness" (144) of common dandelions. Brooks later denigrated the book as "a lovely little novel about a

lovely little person" (114), But, the unruly and incongruous images of death and war in *Maud Martha* contradict Brooks's claim that this is merely a lovely little novel. The book, like the poems, feels the weight of war, but its formal strategies for representing the war share more in common with Brooks's earlier free-verse WWII poems than with "The Anniad" or "Gay Chaps." Unlike those poems, *Maud Martha* can't incorporate or make sense of the war in its narrative. The novel's fragmentary structure, like the first "loose-leaf" war diary poem, can't support the war's disabling pressure, and it succumbs to confusion and contradictions. The prose structures, similar to the free-verse forms of "Negro Hero" and "Memorial," do not protect Maud's individuality from the war's threat.

The confused portrait of Maud Martha also results from the combination of different types of war and their various effects on Maud in the novel, as indicated in the final chapter title "back from the wars." Shaw claims that the last chapter "provides a fitting final comment on the various kinds of war that rage among people" ("The War" 269), including WWII, the war for racial equality, and the war against white standards of beauty. The novel tries to reduce the war to another little thing that Maud obliquely experiences through impressions and fragments, but war proves too big and too unmanageable. Whereas the forms and conventions of the sonnets and the Anniad stanzas preserve the voices of their individual subjects and speakers against the war's disorder while avoiding clichés about love, heroism, or combat, the prose structure of *Maud Martha* can't represent clearly the effects of the war on its characters. World War II mixes together with other wars. The various chapter titles, like "low yellow" and "if you're light and have long hair," convey Maud's battle against beauty standards that prize

lightness and reject her dark skin and her hair with "its apparent untamableness" (179). Her struggle to define her own identity is part of a larger battle for racial equality, connecting her with the "Negro Hero" speaker. Throughout the course of the novel, Maud seeks to discover and then protect her everyday self from hostile outside forces that threaten to transform her into a symbol: "She did not want fame. She did not want to be a 'star.' To create—a role, a poem, a picture, music, a rapture in stone: great. But not for her. What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha" (164). But, by the end of the novel, it is not really clear who "good" Maud Martha is, as it was not clear who the subjects of "Negro Hero" and "Memorial to Ed Bland" were.

Maud's homefront wars converge with the soldiers' battlefront conflicts in the chapter "brotherly love" in which "Maud Martha was fighting a chicken" (293). The war-time meat scarcity forces Maud clean and cut up her chicken. Maud must "fight" and be "brave" (294) by engaging in this "stomach-curving" butchering. The scene takes on a darker tone when Maud imagines "if the chicken were a man!—cold man with no head or feet and with all the little feath—er, hairs to be pulled, and the intestines loosened and beginning to ooze out" (294-95). Here, language enacts the physical violence. The dash rips apart the word 'feather' while Maud chops up the chicken. Maud has trouble thinking about the butchering of men, and the "er" is both a stutter over the wrong word—"feather"—and a stutter—"er" or "ah"—in finding the right word for the situation. The punctuation also signals a problem with the metaphor comparing butchering a chicken to killing a man in war. While there is an attempt at humor in the scene with the claim that "if chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them, see them loving their children, finishing the evening meal,

arranging jealousy" (295), the association between chickens and cowardice in war cancels out the levity. Cowardly soldiers are butchered in war. Melhem claims that chickens are "Brooks's recurrent image of the sacrificial victim" (93). Yet, at the end of the chapter, Maud represses these disturbing thoughts about the nature of "brotherly love" during wartime and continues with her life as usual: "When the animal was ready for the oven Maud Martha smacked her lips at the thought of her meal" (295).[12]

But, the war returns in the final chapter and revives the images of butchery: ". . . They 'marched,' they battled behind her brain—the men who had drunk beer with the best of them, the men with two arms off and two legs off, the men with the parts of faces. Then her guts divided, then her eyes swam under frank mist" (320-21). The reference to Maud's "guts dividing" recalls the butchering of the chicken and evokes an uneasy relationship between her and the disfigured soldiers. Even though the narrative attempts to combine Maud's war against racism at home with WWII abroad, it conveys her anxiety about such a comparison as she identifies herself more closely with the cowardly chicken than the brave soldier. These images occur after "There was Peace, and her brother Harry was back from the wars, and well" (319).[13] The marching soldiers who "had drunk beer" and whom war had reduced to individual "parts" recall the "gay chaps at the bar" and the mixing up of body parts in "the white troops." Maud tries to incorporate the soldiers'' ghosts into her normal routine by going on to read the paper, only to be reminded of the other wars: "And the Negro press (on whose front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly Beauty, pale and pompadoured) carried the stories of the latest of the Georgia and Mississippi lynchings . . ." (321). The disfigured soldiers march into the narrative with ellipses and the references to lynched bodies end

with ellipses, suggesting that the novel can't incorporate these two wars—WWII and the race war—into its narrative. WWII remains a haunting presence that Maud cannot ever confront, and it's not clear how the war functions in the novel. She finally dismisses it along with the petty activities of life: "And, in the meantime, while people did live they would be grand, would be glorious and brave, would have nimble hearts that would beat and beat. They would even get up to nonsense, through wars, through divorce, through evictions and jiltings and taxes" (321-22). *Maud Martha* doesn't explain war or articulate the characters' reactions to it; like the first poem in "The Appendix to The Anniad," it leaves the war untranslated.

Although Brooks planned a sequel to *Maud Martha,* she never completed it or wrote another novel.[14] After *Maud Martha,* she stopped writing not only about WWII but about war in general. It wasn't for the lack of a personal involvement, as the picture of her son in *Report from Part One* with the caption "back from the wars" (10)—oddly echoing *Maud Martha*'s final chapter—attests. Brooks's son, Henry Blakely Jr., served as a marine for eighteen months in Vietnam, yet there is no poem dedicated to him or about the Vietnam War. Brooks's decision to stop writing about war coincides with her 1967 political conversion and subsequent repudiation of traditional forms. And yet, there is an important affinity between her WWII poems and her sonnets and septets. This relationship is not, as many critics claim, defined by Brooks's ironic use of masculine Anglo-European structures to critique misogyny and racism. The sonnets and septets enclose their subjects to protect them, not to imprison, repress, or silence them. The African American soldiers in "Gay Chaps" can't be reduced by a white racist framework that views them as an abstract and unified group of "Negroes," nor are they poster boys

for African American and white integrationist agendas that want to transform them into simplistic symbols for racial progress and equality. The shifts in tone, diction, perspective, and sonnet form in Brooks's sequence enable her to represent the diverse voices and experiences of African American soldiers before, during, and after WWII. Annie and tan man, like the gay chaps, struggle to maintain their sense of self in the face of war. The authority of traditional romances and love poetry in "The Anniad" helps Annie in her struggle; Annie draws strength from the very conventional romantic roles, poems, and music that Maud distances herself from. In the "Appendix" poems, the transition from an unconventional and fragmentary diary form to a sonnet employing figures of love poetry enables the speaker to articulate her sense of loss resulting from the war. While the first "Appendix" poem reduces the war causalities to impersonal statistics that the speaker seems incapable of mourning as human beings, "the sonnet-ballad" conveys the human cost of the war. Brooks's war poems in traditional forms are able to fight against the war's threat to human identity by drawing upon the established authority and tradition of verse forms to shape these threatened voices, elevating and preserving them despite the war's "wild" (75) assault.

Notes

[1] Baker's critique alludes to W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the double-conscious in the first chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*: "One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5).

[2] Indeed, Arthur P. Davis characterizes her as a poet of the unheroic: "We twentieth century men, she seems to be saying, lack bigness; we are little creatures contended with little things and little moments. But she understands and sympathizes with our littleness" (114).

[3] All quotations of Brooks's poems are from *Blacks* (1994).

[4] Segregation wasn't officially outlawed in the military until President Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1946, and the implementation of the policy took even longer: "despite the Presidential edict, the army did not fully integrate its troops until well into the mid-1950s" (Morehouse 214).

[5] Ten of the sonnets are in the first-person perspective of the soldiers. The fourth sonnet, "looking," employs the second-person perspective to convey the separation between the soldier-speaker and his mother ("you") as he goes off to war. The distanced, third-person perspective of "the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men" enhances the poem's depiction of war's dehumanization of the soldiers on the battlefield.

[6] In *Report from Part One*, Brooks recalls her early exposure to the Harlem Renaissance: "I read *Caroling Dusk*, which introduced me to a good many writers of our race I'd never heard of before. I read Langston Hughes's 'Weary Blues,' for example, and got very excited about what he was doing. I realized that writing about the ordinary aspects of black life was important" (170).

[7] This idea contradicts Donne's well-known claim that "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main" (*Selected Prose* 100), registering the extent of the war's disruption of pre-war ideas about human identity.

[8] James identifies some of the racist conceptions about these "congenital iniquities" common in 1944 when the sonnet sequence was published, claiming: "white soldiers circulated the preposterous myth that black soldiers had tails [as] an explanation for why these men could not be aviators. More notoriously, the War department insisted that black blood donations not be given to white soldiers in spite of the American Medical Association's and the Red Cross's protestations that theories of 'tainted' black blood had no basis in science" (236).

[9] The *Ladies Home Journal* advised depressed wives to "take your tears to a stirring movie where you can really let yourself go. Then when you have got it all out of your system, go home and write your husband the swellest letter you can compose, with not a hint of sob in it" (qtd. in Litoff and Smith 26).

[10] Indeed, Harvey Shapiro identifies this feeling of being trapped in the war machine as a defining feature of American World War II poetry, claiming that American World War II poets viewed themselves as "individuals caught up in a giant machine" (xxii).

[11] Even though Brooks contends that the sonnet-ballad's "claim to fame is that I invented it" (*Part One* 186), the poem is, in fact, a modified Shakespearean sonnet that begins and ends with a balladic refrain. The sonnet-ballad's rhyme scheme is *abab bcbc dede aa*, which follows the *abab bcbc* Spenserian pattern, introduces a new pair of rhymes in its third quatrain like a Shakespearean sonnet and repeats the first rhyme in the final couplet.

[12] This passage almost veers into a racial caricature with the reference to smacking lips, recalling the description of wide-eyed surprise in "Memorial," and threatens to reduce Maud to a stereotype.

[13] The flat, unemotional tone of this passage recalls the only section in *Report from Part One* in which Brooks mentions the war: "This was 1941, 1942. Then many of the men were sent away to war, and a few of them were killed. I supposed, in a way, an age had ended" (30).

[14] In a 1974 interview with Haki Madhubuti, Brooks states her intention "to begin a brief sequel to [*Maud Martha*] this summer" (*Conversations* 78).

CHAPTER V

THE FORMS OF HISTORY IN RICHARD WILBUR'S WAR POEMS

In "The Bottles Become New, Too," Richard Wilbur's response to speeches by Louise Bogan and William Carlos Williams at the 1948 Bard College conference on poetic form, he rejects the prevailing contention that modern poetry must discard traditional forms: "when poets put new wine in old bottles, the bottles become new, too. [Williams] lays all the stress on structural reforms and inventions, as if structure were a practically separable thing, instead of talking about the need of a perpetual revolution of the entire sensibility, in the incessant task of achieving relations to the always changing face of reality" (*Responses* 223).[1] For Wilbur, content and form, the wine and its bottle, are inseparable. Poetry's structure and sensibility need to establish a dynamic relationship with an ever-changing, outside reality. He argues that the very artifice of conventional forms, in contrast to the free verse illusion of artlessness, can convey the complicated relationship between a poet and the external world:

> The relation between an artist and reality is always an oblique one, and indeed there is no good art which is not consciously oblique. If you respect the world, you know that you can approach that reality only by indirect means. The painter who throws away the frame and rebels at composition is not a painter any more: he thinks the world is himself, and that there is no need of a devious and delimited struggle with it. [. . .] paradoxically it is respect for reality which makes a necessity of artifice [. . .]. Recurring to my statement that difficulties of form are a substitute for the insuperable difficulties of direct expression, I would add that the formidably meaningless seems to me the best substitute for the alien, and that therefore strict stanzas are preferable to "free" or "organic" form. (220-22)

Wilbur gives a moral charge to his notion of form by arguing that "good" art "respects" and represents its indirect connection with reality. Old wine bottles or painting frames

don't restrict the artist to outmoded conventions; they have no inherent meaning. Instead the interaction between traditional forms and contemporary reality creates new meanings.

Throughout Wilbur's long and prolific career, in works which include poetry volumes and translations spanning from the 1947 to 2010, song lyrics for musicals, children's poems, and a wide range of literary criticism, he has continually defended himself against claims that his verse is dated and distanced from current events by emphasizing the vitality and morality of poetic form. In his opening remarks to an American Academy of Arts and Letters meeting in 1977, Wilbur argues that the artist has a responsibility to search for forms that articulate the experiences of contemporary society: "It seems to me that the job of art is continually to test all of our languages, discovering what words and concepts are truly alive for us, what patterns may be made in good conscience, what sounds, forms, colors, and volumes can honestly express us as we are now. Such findings are attended, for those who can bear them, by the by-products of beauty and joy" (*Catbird's* 169). The diversity of Wilbur's poetry from *The Beautiful Changes* (1947) to his *Anterooms* (2010) registers his perpetual formal experimentations. The poems in *The Beautiful Changes*, Wilbur's first volume published shortly after his World War II service, range from the *terza rime* of "First Snow in Alsace" to the sonnet "O," the septets in "Two Songs in a Stanza of Beddoes," the couplets of "The Peace of Cities," and the envelope quatrains in "On the Eyes of an SS Officer." Formal diversity persists in Wilbur's other volumes with the tanka and haiku in "On Lyman Flat" and "Thyme Flowering Among Rock," the Anglo-Saxon four-beat alliterative line in "Junk" and "The Lilacs," French ballades and rondeux in his translations of Charles D'Orléans

and François Villon, and riddles in translations from Symphosius and Aldhelm and his children's book *Opposites*.

Yet these varied forms consistently embrace one subject: war. War imposes itself even in the children's riddles in *More Opposites* when the speaker refers to the division of the nation in the American Civil War in riddle twenty-seven: "*Gray* is the opposite of *blue*, / Or was in 1862" (*Collected Poems* 549).[2] Likewise, the title of "The Lilacs" alludes to Whitman's famous Civil-War era elegy for Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in Door-Yard Bloom'd." Thus, the language of war pervades Wilbur's poem; the lilacs bloom "Like walking wounded / from the dead of winter / [. . .] Out of present pain / and from past terror / Their bullet-shaped buds / came quick and bursting" (195). The four-beat alliterative line, in the tradition of "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer," reinforces the poem's elegiac and heroic quality. In addition, the break in the middle of each poetic line visually reproduces a "staggered file" of lilacs (or wounded soldiers):

> Those laden lilacs
> at the lawn's edge
> Came stark, spindly,
> and in staggered file. (195)

Wilbur's flowers "come, stark, spindly" (3); the "old" form supports, not inhibits, their growth. Most recently in "*Terza Rima*" (2010), Wilbur overtly connects the form of his contemporary war poem to Dante's "great form":

> In this great form, as Dante proved in Hell,
> There is no dreadful thing that can't be said
> In passing, Here for instance, one could tell
>
> How our jeep skidded sideways toward the dead
> Enemy soldier with the staring eyes,
> Bumping a little as it struck his head,
>
> And then flew on, as if toward Paradise. (17)

Wilbur draws upon Dante's *terza rime* depiction of "Hell" in order to "tell" a story of war, which acknowledges the "dreadful" nature of combat and the possibility of spiritual consolation. In a 1998 interview for a special issue of *War, Literature, and The Arts*, Wilbur explains that his WWII service elicited a similarly complex response from him: "But of course the war did make me aware of the violence and perversity of man and nature and made it necessary to acknowledge those things while looking to reaffirm the sacramental in the world" (13). In Wilbur's war poems, the speaker's individual vision of war is defined by its relationship to a collective human history of violence and to earlier representations of violence in poetry and literature. "*Terza Rime*" registers the communal dimension of the war experience through the description of "our" (4) jeep, of course, but the speaker also belongs to a poetic community that extends back to Dante. The history of form and the history of war are inextricably linked in Wilbur's poetry.

In his interviews, prose, and poetry, Wilbur consistently connects his personal history of becoming a poet to his experiences of serving in WWII. Following his graduation from Amherst, Wilbur completed a correspondence course in cryptography, joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps, and completed his training at Fort Dix, Virginia. While in Virginia, he was investigated by the CIC and FBI for disloyalty because of his involvement with leftist causes. But, when one of the cryptographers from the 36th Infantry division in Naples went insane, Wilbur's superiors decided to overlook the investigations and sent him as a replacement. He served with the 36th division from 1942 to 1945 on the front lines in Africa, Italy, Southern France, and Western Germany. After returning from the war, Wilbur completed his MA degree at Harvard on the G. I. Bill and published *The Beautiful Changes* in 1947. In a 1966 interview, he identifies his war

experience as the impetus for his mature poetry and his desire to use poetry to organize and respond to the war's disorder: "I thought I had come to take poetry seriously for the first time as a soldier in World War II. [. . .] [D]uring these periods of anxious and boring waiting you contemplate a personal and objective world in disorder. And one way of putting the world to rights a little bit, or at least articulating your sense of the disorder, is to write poetry" (*Conversations* 37). Poetry creates order and acts, to quote Robert Frost, as a "momentary stay against confusion" (777). The fact that Wilbur continued to write about World War II in *Walking to Sleep* (1969), *The Mind-Reader* (1976), *Mayflies* (2000), and *Anterooms* (2010) speaks to the war's persistent influence on him.[3] Both James Longenbach and Edward Brunner have identified the Second World War in poems preceding and following *The Beautiful Changes*. Longenbach analyzes Wilbur's political writings from his undergraduate days, arguing that they foreshadow the value Wilbur places on hesitancy and doubt in his WWII poems. Brunner claims that Wilbur's later Cold War poems, like "Love Call Us to the Things of This World," appealed to his postwar audience by confronting and healing the trauma caused by the Second World War.

Too, Wilbur's military language characterizing the poet's adversarial relationship with reality in his prose writings argues for the war's importance in his poetics. In "The Bottles Become New, Too," Wilbur likens the poet to a soldier and poetry to a weapon:

> In each art the difficulty of the form is a substitution for the difficulty of direct apprehension and expression of the object. The first difficulty may be more or less overcome, but the second is insuperable; thus every poem begins, or ought to begin, by a disorderly retreat to defensible positions. Or, rather, by a perception of the hopelessness of direct combat, and a resort to the warfare of spells, effigies, and prophecies [. . .]. Poetry's prime weapon is words, used for naming, comparison, and contrast of things. Its auxiliary weapons are rhythms, formal patterns, and rhymes. (*Responses* 220)

Wilbur's poet as soldier recognizes the impossibility of attacking reality and instead mobilizes a defensive, formal arsenal. Here Wilbur's metaphor, one of poetry's prime weapons of comparison, casts the poet as a soldier battling the real world. Wilbur's patterns, rhymes, rhythms, and other formal characteristics draw attention to the reality of war paradoxically by registering their distance from it. Rather than waging a war against traditional verse, as other modernist revolutionaries like Williams advocated, Wilbur hails those forms. Some critics have attacked his approach. Bruce Michelson identifies the conflict between Wilbur's formally ordered poetry and trends in modern English poetry that value the breakdown of form:

> Conventional wisdom seems to be that language is supposed to break down, and Wilbur's usually does not [. . .] . For the last seventy years much of the discussion in and about British, Irish, and American poetry has stressed the breakdown of the form, failures of the word, the poet's self-validating sigh of giving up, stoic defeat in battles with conventional forms, and insurrections against previous poems. (14-15)

In a review of *Advice to a Prophet*, William Meredith shares Michelson's evaluation, claiming that Wilbur's ordered poetry contradicts the formal failure and disorder typical of confessional poetry from the 1950s and 1960s: "Wilbur's poetry, like a lot of good poetry, has always been about order in the universe. Nowadays perceptions of disorder, even the most casually observed ones, are somehow taken to be more *serious*. Wilbur's poetry [. . .] explores the human capacity for happiness. The human capacity for despair [. . .] is very big now with a lot of artists" (76).

Much criticism of Wilbur's poetry confirms such assessments. Writing about *The Beautiful Changes*, Peter Viereck equates formal complexity with escapist aestheticism; he argues that Wilbur's poems have "a sterile glass-flower perfection" (50) and display

"too serene a poise" (50). In a review of Wilbur's second volume *Ceremony*, Thomas Cole advises the poet to "channel [his] great gift into more serious poems, shying away from prayers on a pinhead" (39). Joseph Bennet equates Wilbur's technical skill with flaccidity: "The work is graceful, golden-tongued, sweet, even, and smooth. But much of it lacks vigor and force, is loose and merely cordial" (38). Theodore Holmes titles his review of *Advice to a Prophet* "A Prophet Without a Prophecy" and contends that Wilbur's poetry speaks from a "privileged and unthinking" (73) position in a style that "is of exceptional grace and often beautiful, the manner perfect, and the mind tuned, but such a period glamour of the human mind can never fill those needs which rise to it from its deepest resources" (73). Randall Jarrell, a contemporary of Wilbur, wrote perhaps one of the most influential critiques of him in which he also turns Wilbur's formal precision into a fault: "Richard Wilbur is a delicate, charming, and skillful poet—his poems not only make you use, but make you eager to use, words like *attractive* and *appealing* and *engaging*" (227). "Attractive," "appealing," and "engaging" are obviously not words that Jarrell values. He argues that Wilbur's polite restraint prevents him from being a great poet: "Mr. Wilbur never goes too far, but never goes far enough. In the most serious sense of the word he is not a very satisfactory poet" (230). Most Wilbur criticism since Jarrell has focused on whether Wilbur's technical skill encourages a passive attitude that prevents his poetry from tackling serious issues.

It's no coincidence that the admonishment Jarrell, a World War II soldier-poet, expressed concerning a fellow soldier-poet became so influential. Wilbur's poetry defies popular assumptions about what soldier-poets should write. Most of all, it does not conform to models of war poetry dominant since the British Great War poets. In his

introduction to *Poetry of the World Wars*, Michael Foss contends that WWI poetry shaped expectations for WWII poetry: "because of the powerful success of the Great War poets, a certain kind of production was expected. The petulant demagogues [during WWII] who hold forth on the leader-pages demanded to know 'Where are our War Poets?'" (8).[4] R. N. Currey carries on the comparison between WWI and WWII poets, arguing "[n]early all good poetry of the Second War sprang from Siegfried Sassoon-Wilfred Owen line of succession" (7). The poems of Sassoon and Owen celebrate the camaraderie between male soldiers, indict those not fighting on the front-lines (particularly women and pampered generals), condemn war as a meaningless waste of human life, and employ traditional forms like ballads and sonnets. But, what most critics focus on is Sassoon's and Owen's radical anti-war positions not their use of conventional forms. Rather, in his WWI poetry anthology, Jon Silkin characterizes that poetry by its sensibility according to four stages of consciousness. At the lowest stage is the state of "passive reflection of, or conduit for, the prevailing patriot ideas" (30) exemplified by Rupert Brooke's patriotic sonnets. In the second stage, represented by Sassoon's satiric ballads, the poet "protests against war variously: through the recreation of physical horror [. . .] ; through anger and satire; and through sardonic distancing" (31). Owen's poetry of pity embodies the third stage of "compassion," while Isaac Rosenberg's realistic yet visionary poetry epitomizes the last and highest stage "where the anger and compassion are merged, with extreme intelligence, into an active desire for change" (33).

But, for the most part, Wilbur's war poetry doesn't graphically detail his combat experiences or rail against civilians on the homefront. His poems don't call for political action to change reality; they reflect reality's continually adapting nature. Yet, instead of

recognizing Wilbur's approach as an alternative yet still valid way of confronting of the war, critics attack his poetry for not being more like Sassoon's and Owen's. Hyam Plutzik, thus, condemns Wilbur for his optimism and his poetry for its lack of violence: "Brought up, as we have been, to a literature of violence, one sometimes misses in Wilbur's work the extremes we find elsewhere [. . .]. Those who stretch forth their hands like Tantalus might well ask upon what nectar he nourishes himself [. . .]. How can he be so damnably good-natured in an abominable world?" (68). A related question is "how can someone who has witnessed the horrors of WWII write such damnably good-natured poetry?"

Wilbur addresses this in an interview with Joseph Cox by distinguishing WWII poets from the Great War poets. He contends early twentieth-century literature equipped his generation for war by alerting them to its brutality and wastefulness: "My generation went into World War II in a more realistic and less crusading spirit, resolved to do what plainly had to be done; and so there was less damage to our expectations. It may be that the literature of World War I, which told of so much beastliness and stupid waste of lives, prepared us to be not altogether surprised." (10). Fighting a just war and doing what "had to be done" decisively separated the WWII soldier from his WWI counterpart. Great War poetry graphically detailed the conditions in the trenches to shatter illusions about the nobility and heroism of war, epitomized in Horace's glorification of the sweetness and appropriateness of dying for one's country: "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori,*" a sentiment that Owen attacks in his most famous poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est." In his preface to a planned poetry volume, Owen had claimed that serious and honest poets uncover the ugly truth about war; they don't write pretty poetry: "Above all I am not

concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. [. . .] All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful" (31). Whereas Owen had suggested that past conceptions of war "Poetry" and "truth" are opposed to one another, Wilbur argues to the contrary. He defines truthful war poetry by its imaginative and artistic clash with reality: "Imagination, and not first-hand reporting, was what mattered. In general, I would say the good World War II poetry did not prettify or ennoble war and did not on the other hand repudiate it in horror, as much World War I poetry had done; positive human qualities were celebrated, the dreadfulness was faced, the war was regarded as obligatory" (Cox interview 15).

Wilbur's war poems recognize the dark aspects of war while nevertheless searching for beauty, order, and joy. Imagination and reality are not antithetical for Wilbur; instead, he approaches reality through poetic artifice. His well-crafted poems draw attention to themselves as created objects and to the discrepancy between the poem's order and the world's disorder. Wilbur imbues his poetry with a spiritual dimension claiming "poetry makes order and asserts relationships (sometimes of a surprising kind) out of a confidence in ultimate order and relatedness" (*Conversations* 54). He also distinguishes poetry's intuitive formal clarity from logical sense: "You could say that all poetry, however much it may be irrational, moves toward clarity and order, that it affirms all that is clear and orderly in the world, affirms the roots of clarity in the world" (24). Representing that clarity and order is increasingly difficult and thus increasingly important in the war's chaotic battlefields. Wilbur's war poems even more intensely crystallize the struggle between a disordered reality and an ordered poetic form than his poems on other subjects.

The title of "First Snow in Alsace," from Wilbur's inaugural volume published shortly after the war, locates the poem in a city connected to WWII and previous wars; this is not just a lovely nature poem. Wilbur served as a Staff Sergeant and cryptographer there in the winter of 1944. Located in southeastern France along the German border, Alsace was the source of several territorial disputes before and during WWII. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Alsace-Lorraine region was annexed to the German empire but then reclaimed by France after WWI in 1919. In 1940, the Nazi army took over the area and, after the war, the territory reverted back to France. The speaker confronts this history of the war-torn landscape through a series of metaphors for falling snow. The poem's language represents the paradoxes of war experiences, itself behaving like the snow that transforms and defines Alsace's natural landscape. "First Snow" knits the concealing and purifying associations of snow into the woven *terza rime* form. The poem's interlocking *aba bcb cdc* rhymes underscore the connection between the distinct metaphors in each stanza. In "The Bottles" essay, Wilbur stresses rhyme's ability to create potent comparisons: "rhyme is a device of great formal and magical value, and many writers have demonstrated that it is possible not to let it run away with you. [. . .] As a matter of fact, it is precisely in its power to suggest comparisons and connections—unusual ones—to the poet that one of the incidental merits of rhyme may be said to lie" (222). Rhyme's "magical value" recalls Wilbur's discussion of the poet's "warfare of spells, effigies, and prophecies" earlier in the essay. Like the snow, rhyme, form, and figurative language in "First Snow" transform the war scene and uncover "unusual" links between reality and the imagination. The poem connects the military history of past and present wars in Alsace to a literary tradition of snow poems in American and British

poetry, supporting Longenbach's claim that "in Wilbur's poetry, the material below the surface of the poem, giving it power, tends to be public and historical, rather than private and personal" (67). This grounding in literary and military history prevents the poem from getting carried away with its formal magic; history checks the warfare of spells.

In "First Snow," a series of figures register the magical and destructive elements of this war scene. The opening simile links snow to death: "The snow came down last night like moths / Burned on the moon" (418). The snowflakes are like war casualties, but this is only one aspect of the snow. The following metaphor likens the snow to a protective blanket: "it fell till dawn, / Covered the town with simple cloths." The *moth/cloth* rhyme reinforces the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, associations of snow with death and its concealment. Indeed, the snow transforms the title city "Alsace" into "the town" obscuring some of its historical associations. The shift from the opening explicit comparison claiming that snow falls like dead moths, which draws attention to itself as a figure, to an implied comparison between the snow and a white cloth represents the snow's concealing effect in language. The following stanza takes up the "simple cloths" image and transforms it yet again into a marker for the war-damaged landscape underneath: "Absolute snow lies rumpled on / What shellbursts scattered and deranged, / Entangled railings, crevassed lawn." By blanketing the battle-scarred landscape in an opaque, white covering, the falling snow paradoxically defines rather than conceals its underlying disfigurement. The contradiction between "absolute" and "snow," however, reveals this metaphor's transitory and illusory qualities. Snow depends upon the weather; "absolute snow" concealing the landscape indefinitely cannot exist. Consequently, "absolute snow" "lies" in the double-sense of the word; it covers and deceives. War also

disrupts the environment; its shellbursts "scattered and deranged" it and "changed" the "roofs of homes" rendering them "fear-gutted, trustless and estranged." But, the snow's magical and creative properties counter the war's destructive effects. Similes connecting falling snow with death and war change to metaphors celebrating the reshaping power of newly fallen snow. Snow transfigures the wounded landscape into a beautiful and reassuring place: "The ration stacks are milky domes; / Across the ammunition pile / The snow has climbed in sparkling combs" (418). These are military objects—the "ration stacks" and "ammunition pile"—but the poem recasts them as domestic figures. Both "milky" and "combs" suggest the comforts of home.

Yet, even in the midst of this tranquil setting, the speaker cannot forget about war and death. He returns to the opening imagery of mortality: "You think: beyond the town a mile / Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes / Of soldiers dead a little while" (418). The second-person address and the halting colon in the middle of the first line mark a transition from the third-person description of the snow defining and concealing the war's effects to people reacting to the snow, including the dead soldiers, civilians walking around, children, and a nightguard. The snow falling on the soldiers recalls the snow blanketing Alsace. The simple cloth image becomes a shroud covering the soldiers' eyes and bodies and depriving them of their ability not just to see, as the poem's conceit indicates, but also to be seen. The white sheet threatens to efface their identities and their participation in the war, and, by extension, to obscure the war itself. Yet, in Wilbur's poem the snow is not just one annihilating figure; its associations evolve in every tercet. For the living, the snow offers the chance to be reborn in a renewed environment: "Persons and persons in disguise, / Walking the new air white and fine, / Trade glances

quick with shared surprise." The innocence of such "surprise" prompts the speaker to remember childhood encounters with snow's mystery: "At children's windows, heaped, benign, / As always, winter shines the most, / And frost makes marvelous designs" (418). This picture of "heaped" snow that creates "marvelous designs" contrasts with the "rumpled" snow over the landscape that is "scattered and deranged" by bombs. The speaker embraces a child-like wonder toward winter but nevertheless relocates it in Alsace:

> The nightguard coming from his post,
> Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
> And warms him with a boyish boast:
>
> He was the first to see the snow.

The snow is a renewing force that returns the nightguard, who has surely witnessed horrific sights of war in his position, to childhood; he takes boyish comfort in seeing the snow before anyone else does.

"First Snow" thus ends on an optimistic note, a moment of human innocence and consolation in the midst of an inhuman war. For some, the last line of the poem raises the question of whether the guard's optimism conceals the war's devastating effects and is, therefore, a disingenuous representation of WWII, or whether the poem's formal and aesthetic order cancel out the war's grisly reality like a blanket of snow draping a landscape. Clive James argues that it does, claiming that even though the poem "holds a delicate balance for most of its length as the snowfall softens the deadly starkness, [it ends] with an orgy of consolation, providing the exact verbal equivalent of a Norman Rockwell cover-painting" (54-55). Like James, Cox claims, "Wilbur reconciles the paradox that is combat" (46) in "First Snow."

The final line, however, maintains the poem's "delicate balance" of war's paradoxes. "First Snow" conveys the multiple associations of falling snow with death, concealment, and innocence. The contrast between the poem's formal order and the war's disorder registers, rather than ignores, the battle between the poet and reality. The last stanza doesn't obliterate what came before; instead, it is part of the poem's "marvelous designs" (418). The concluding line of "First Snow," graphically detached from the previous stanzas and surrounded by white space, functions like a blanket of snow; it formally protects the nightguard from the war scene by isolating him in his memories. The poem also shifts from the present tense of the beginning stanzas in which the snow "fills the eyes" (418) of dead soldiers and the stacks "are milky domes" to the past tense when the guard remembers that he "was the first to see the snow," temporally distinguishing the final line from the previous ones. This is not an "orgy of consolation"; it is a transient memory of a time more innocent than the present. Edgecombe characterizes the layered quality of Wilbur's images "as a series of double exposures [making] us conscious all the time of the machinery of war buried beneath the purifying snow" (17). The reference to plural, rather than singular, "designs" confirms this complexity. The *benign/designs* slant rhyme differentiates itself from the other perfect rhymes in "First Snow." There is not just one "design" in "First Snow"; the creative and destructive elements are both part of its structure. The poem's *terza rime* is one design that certainly rallies the form's connection to Dante's vision of hell in *The Divine Comedy*, a connection Wilbur makes explicit in "*Terza Rime*" (2010). In a 1995 interview, Wilbur praises the *Comedy*'s complex formal structure and varied inflections, qualities also in "First Snow": "I admire [Dante] and his *Comedy* for a great many

reasons: a brilliant, intricate architecture that's wholly serious, and wholly justified in its intricacy; profound knowledge of heart and soul [and] a superb range of intonations" ("A Conversation"). Indeed, the dark imagery of moths burned by the moon and a landscape wounded by war machines depicts the battlefield as a hell on earth. But, "First Snow" also offers images of comforting milky domes, benign piles of snow, marvelous frost patterns, and a guard consoling himself with boyhood memories. The image of snow filling the eyes of fallen soldiers is simultaneously soothing and disturbing. The snow figured in the poem, like the poem itself, creates its own structures and designs, countering the war's power to "scatter and derange" (418).

"First Snow" achieves a careful balance, in part, by suggesting legendary snow poems, including Emerson's "The Snow-Storm," Whittier's "Snowbound," Dickinson's "It sifts from Leaden Sieves," and Frost's "Desert Places." Emerson's poem concentrates on snow's concealing effects as "the whited air / Hides hill and woods, the river, and the heaven, / And veils the farmhouse at the garden's end" (511), similar to the snow as blanket image in Wilbur's poem. But "The Snow-Storm," unlike "First Snow," juxtaposes the "tumultuous" storm outside with "the housemates sit[ting] / Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed." In "First Snow," there is no cozy fireplace for the Alsace guard to retreat to; rather, he must create a protective psychological space with his childhood memories of wonderment. Both poems, however, focus on the magical power of snow that creates artifice, a magical art and architecture. The speaker in "The Snow-Storm" personifies the north wind as a "fierce artificer" who crafts "frolic architecture" akin to the frost that paints marvelous designs in "First Snow" and echoing Emerson's claim in "Poetry and Imagination" about the importance of poetic design: "Great design

belongs to a poem, and is better than any skill of execution [. . .]. We want an architect" (453). "The Snow-Storm" endorses the transcendental visual apprehension of nature in the hope of revealing a larger spiritual world. The poem's speaker is like "The Poet" in Emerson's essay who "turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession" (205). The speaker in "First Snow" also practices Emerson's transcendentalism by perceiving multiple layers of designs. Hyatt Waggoner argues for Transcendentalism's significance to Wilbur's poetry, claiming, "Wilbur's basic assumptions and attitudes and his recurrent preoccupations have much more in common with [. . .] the American Transcendental [. . .] poets than they have with the dominant patterns of assumption and attitude in Modernist poetry" (592), particularly in regard to the "Emersonian aspect of Wilbur's thought" (594) and his reliance on "Emerson's vision of immanent spirit" (594). [5]

While "First Snow" brings to mind the transcendentalist vision of Emerson's "The Snow-Storm," it draws something different from Whittier's famous response to Emerson in "Snowbound: A Winter Idyll." Like the "The Snow-Storm," "Snowbound" contrasts a raging storm outside with the safety of a warm fireplace inside while depicting the snow's magical effects on the scene. The snow in Wilbur's poem changes ammunition stacks and piles into celestial domes much like the flakes in "Snowbound" transform mundane objects into fantastic and wonderful edifices: "The old familiar sights of ours / Took marvelous shapes; strange domes and towers / Rose up where sty or corn-crib stood" (169-70). Also, as in Wilbur's poem, the snow in Whittier's is terrifying and miraculous. The people in "Snowbound" find shelter from the outside storm around a welcoming fireplace: "Shut in from all the world without, / We sat the clean-winged

hearth about, / Content to let the north-wind roar / In baffled rage at pane and door, / While the red logs before us beat / The frost-line back with tropic heat" (172). The relationship between the snowstorm without and the hearth within is belligerent; the logs "beat back" a hostile enemy, the "frost-line." The references to abolitionist verses and to "War's bloody trail" (180) in this 1865 poem imply that the "baffled rage" of the "world without" is most crucially the Civil War. In Whittier's poem, the snowstorm is a powerful figure for war's destructive and transformative effects. Whittier, a non-violent Quaker who wrote progressive anti-slavery poems prior to "Snowbound," finds refuge from the war's violence by celebrating idealized, domestic spaces—a move that ranks him among the Fireside Poets. The Fireside poets typically wrote in traditional forms of mellifluous lines, making their poems amenable to memorization and recitation for families gathered around a hearth: "The śun that bŕief Decémber dáy / Rose ćheerless óver hílls of gŕay" (168). In "First Snow," Wilbur combines Dante's *terza rime* with Whittier's tetrameter. Instead of the interlocking rhymes of the form suggesting the spiraling down into the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno*, the *locus classicus* for *terza rime*, Wilbur's lines move away from images of death toward comforting visions, ending with a moment of innocent remembrance. "First Snow" recalls the Fireside tradition that seeks consolation in a congenial, domestic sphere even during wartime. Like the guard in the poem who comforts himself with memories of his childhood, the poem also finds peace by reaching back to a past literary tradition.

However, that moment of solace does not obliterate the war's destruction in Wilbur's poem. "First Snow" also shares similarities with the harsh depictions of snow in Dickinson's and Frost's equally famous poems, particularly the snow's frightening ability

to wipe out whatever lies beneath it. The "simple cloth" covering and defining Alsace's war-scarred landscape recalls the opening image of snow coating the scene in "[It sifts from Leaden Sieves]": "It sifts from Leaden Sieves - / It powders all the Wood - / It fills with Alabaster Wool / The Wrinkles of the Road" (129). Here, Dickinson blurs the *abcb* structure of the rhyme with *Wood/Wool* off-rhyme, aurally echoing the snow hiding the distinct trees in the wooded landscape under a blanket of whiteness. Dickinson's riddle-like poem never identifies "it" as snow; instead, the poem employs various figures for the snow, like "Alabaster Wool" and "powder" from a "sieve." The speaker conveys the snow's conflicting effects through a series of paradoxical similes, "It scatters like the Birds - / Condenses like a Flock," and finally in a self-effacing metaphor, "curls itself in Capricorn - / Denying that it was." By the end of the poem, the increasingly elusive comparisons have obscured rather than clarified the subject. Wilbur's poem also focuses on the snow's associations with death, concealment, and innocence through its exploration of figures. "First Snow" suggests that metaphors concealing an object act like snow covering the ground; the speaker shifts from identifying snow as "snow" to depicting the snow as "it," "white," "winter," and "frost" as the language subtly reshapes its subject.

In Frost's "Desert Places," too, the snow hides the underlying ground and its creatures; it "covered smooth" (296) the ground and "smothered" the animals in their shelters. The speaker connects the snow with human "loneliness" figured as psychological "desert places." Here, the snow wipes out expression: "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express." Wilbur's snow as a blanket over Alsace and as a shroud covering soldiers seems to take up Frost's "blanker

whiteness." "First Snow" warns against employing white cloths to hide an unpleasant reality. Whiteness does not imply just innocence; it also indicates the effacement of human lives and identity in war, akin to transforming the battlefield history into a meaningless desert space. In her analysis of British war poems set in winter landscapes, including those of Homer, Pope, Thomson, Cowper, and Wordsworth, Mary Favret identifies a tradition of employing snow to symbolize war's obliterating effects on history, arguing for its figural significance in war poetry in general: "If the snowy field provides a figure for the field of war, it also serves as a figure for disfiguration, the effacement of what Cowper calls the 'face / Of universal nature' and Thomson 'Earth's universal face.' Such burial leaves the field of history unmarked, inscrutable, and illegible: a white sheet" (1550). Just so the "simple cloth" of snow in Alsace threatens to bury history and the past. But while Favret argues that the snow as war simile "tends toward assimilation and annihilation: differences, feelings, motives, bodies, structures, landmarks all fall away while 'white Ruin' rises" (1549), that is not the case in Wilbur's poem. "First Snow" has the snow's erasing power of "Desert Places," "It Sifts," and other war poems but also the snow's marvelous creative potential of "The Snow-Storm" and "Snowbound."

In "Caserta Garden," Wilbur calls up the literary historical tradition of a different type of landscape poem—the garden poem—while drawing upon the military history of a specific locale. Like Alsace, Caserta has a turbulent past and a particular connection to WWII. In 1752, the Bourbon king, Charles III, commissioned Italian architect Luigi Vanvitelli to design a royal palace to rival Versailles. The original palace was located near the shore in Naples, but Charles feared it was vulnerable to sea-side attacks, so he

moved it inland to Caserta. After the death of Vanvitelli, his son continued the project, completing it in 1780. The Allies took over the Palace and its grounds after landing in Salerno in 1943 and used it as "a rest camp for the Anzio battlefront" (Cummins 8). A walled palace originally built as a refuge becomes, 150 years later, a military base: this irony reflects the inevitability of military conflicts. "Caserta Garden" juxtaposes the third-person perspective of its residents, who want to ignore the strife of the outside world to preserve the beauty inside their garden, with the first-person speaker, who recognizes the unavoidable relationship between their ideal garden and an imperfect human reality of war and mortality. "Caserta Garden" "is full of unspecified pronouns, 'they' and 'theirs' that obviously refer to the Casertesi but that also give them a more widely representative status" (Edgecombe 36). The Casertans can be likened to artists marking the division between their art (or garden) and reality. Indeed, as Hill argues, a garden is "itself a work of art, defined or bounded, its contents selected, its design planned and controlled. It is made of the stuff of the earth and resembles the countryside around it; but it differs in being more highly selective, organized, and cultivated. In these respects it is like a painting or even a poem" (37). The Casertans provide one possible stance for the artist or poet—retreating into an idealized space to avoid dealing with reality, while the poem's speaker offers another—recognizing the vital and inevitable battle between poetry and the outside world.

The speaker is a stranger, and his outsider perspective allows him to see the cracks in the garden wall and recognize the problem with using walls to shut out reality and history. He distances himself from the garden's inhabitants by referring to "their" garden: "Their garden has a silent tall stone-wall / So overburst with drowsing trees and

vines, / None but a stranger would remark at all / The barrier within the fractured lines" (459). A garden is supposed to embody order and design, supposed to tame and organize nature's wildness. Yet Caserta is "overburst" with uncontrolled trees and vines that create "fractured lines" covering up the "barrier." Moreover, the "silent" wall isn't able to block the military language of "barrier" and "fractured lines"; both the wall and its vegetation are identified as items on a battlefield map. The speaker implies that he, unlike the garden's residents, understands that the wall is designed to keep out reality: "I doubt they know it's there, or what it's for— / To keep the sun-impasted road apart, / The beggar, soldier, renegade and whore, / The dust, the sweating ox, the screeching cart" (459). He implies, though, that such realities can't be separated from Caserta. His reference to soldiers in this passage suggests that the speaker could be a soldier himself: "It takes the eye of a stranger to recognize [the dangerous illusion of Caserta garden]—the eye of the combatant, perhaps, who knows that Caserta was bombarded in the Second World War" (Edgecombe 36). The speaker's military language supports such a reading. He sees the beggar, the dust, the cart, and Caserta Garden as part of the design of the real "garden of the world" (460) as opposed to Caserta's illusory paradise.

The Casertans attempt to create and maintain an unspoiled, Platonic garden: "They'd say, 'But this is how a garden's made': / To fall through days in silence dark and cool, / And hear the fountain falling in the shade / Tell changeless time upon the garden pool" (459). This "cool," "shade[d]" spot where time doesn't pass seems appealing. The *f*ountain/*f*alling alliteration suggests the sound of gently flowing water, contrasting "the peace of the beautifully ordered garden [with] the chaos and violence of the outside world at war" (Cummins 8). The garden's residents argue that "beauties will grow richer walled

about" and see the circular patterns formed in the garden pool as beauty amplified through enclosure: "See from the tiptoe boy—the dolphin throats— / The fine spray bending; jets collapse in rings / Into the round pool, and each circle floats / Wide to the verge, and fails in shimmerings" (459). The garden also contains ethereal flowers; they "dream and look not out / And seem to have no need of earth or rain." But these images only appear perfect and timeless. The water imagery conveys fluidity not agelessness. The expanding rings formed by falling water push upon their boundaries, "wide to the verge," and then transform into shimmerings; they don't remain in an ideal state. The poem "delight[s] in evanescent things [while] recogniz[ing] their transience" (Jensen 256). In fact, the "tiptoe boy" and "dolphin throats" describe the actual fountains in Caserta garden modeled on figures from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, implying change, not stasis. The *dream/seem* rhyme argues that the wish to deny one's connection to the earth and to a larger community cannot be realized, only dreamt. The survival of the flowers depends on their environment; consequently, they can only "seem" to disregard it. Rather than the garden's plants representing a Platonic ideal, they are unrestrained, like the "lavish grapevine" that "trails its shade, irrelevant and free, / In delicate cedillas on the walls" and the opening image of the plants bursting through the garden wall. Even though the vine's patterns appear random and meaningless, "irrelevant and free," the poem interprets those patterns as linguistic symbols ("cedillas") invoking language in this supposedly "silent" space. In contrast to the overabundance of plant life within the garden wall, the outside world is "still" (460) with its mountain "frieze" on a "staring" day. The "lazar-skinned" hills convey the disease and sickness outside Caserta's walls, bringing to mind the war-scarred landscape in Alsace. The poem ends with an image of a world

garden combining both the sickness outside and the thriving life inside Caserta: "The garden of the world, which no one sees, / Never had walls, is fugitive with lives; / Its shapes escape our simpler symmetries; / There is no resting where it rots and thrives." "Fugitive" recalls the "renegade" who Caserta's walls were designed to exclude, including the renegade figures—the beggar, the soldier, the whore—to the world garden. The garden's designers envisioned an ordered space protected by walls. But the speaker identifies the failure of abstract designs and shallow patterns, claiming the world garden's order cannot be reproduced in Caserta's "simple symmetries."

Still, some critics equate the poem's ordered form with the simple symmetries of Caserta garden, claiming that the poem represents Wilbur's endorsement of lovely but socially and historically disengaged art. In this view, Wilbur falsifies his war experience into a beautiful poem that denies the war's reality and creates insulated, escapist art. James argues that Wilbur's war poems are failures that denigrate war experiences through their quest for order:

> [Wilbur] is trying to absorb the war's evil into a continuous, self-regulating process—a process in which a subdued Manichaean principle is balanced against an aesthetic Grace. The material resists absorption. The war is a mental hot-spot Wilbur tries to cool out, make sense of, reduce to order: trying to do that, he tends to devalue the experience, and his wealth of language becomes merely expensive-looking. All his poems on war-time subjects are flawed in their handling of language—his best gift goes against him. (54)

Here, James likens the cool artifice of Wilbur's poetry to that of Caserta garden, and he defines the process of creating order as a reductive act. Similarly, James Breslin contends that "Caserta Garden" expresses Wilbur's desire to preserve boundaries in his poetry: "'How beauties will grow richer walled about,' Wilbur writes in a kind of ars poetica line from 'Caserta Garden.' He is a poet more concerned with marking than with breaking

boundaries, especially those between life and art" (34). Thus, Breslin identifies Wilbur with the Casertans who try to deny life and retreat into a Platonic realm of art. He implies that poetry should break boundaries and calls *The Beautiful Changes* "a more than somewhat precious book that is continuously preoccupied with the poetic medium," linking Wilbur's "precious book" to Caserta's "cherished flowers [that] dream and look not out" (459). Wilbur contends that his motivation for writing war poetry is to "organize, not the whole of [war], because of course you cannot put the world in order, but make some little pattern—make an experience" (*Conversations* 196). In some sense, then, his motive is similar to Caserta garden's attempt to order nature. True, the poem's form is ordered. Wilbur organizes "Caserta Garden" into quatrains composed of rhyming *abab* pentameter lines. But there is a crucial distinction between evading reality by withdrawing into an empty design, like the Casertans, and trying to order an experience, like the poet. "Caserta Garden" preserves the tension between the poem's quest for order and the speaker's observation that such an order cannot actually be achieved. Indeed, Christian Wiman praises this "formal coherence whose reach exceeds its grasp" (209), arguing that the poem "wants to be the rest or 'stay' which it admits does not exist beyond its own border, but by such an admission it makes those borders at least partially permeable. Its strength inheres in the balance it maintains between a consciousness of its limitations and the assertion of formal order it makes in the face of them." Rather than assuming that the ordering of the disordered war experience is a reductive and disingenuous action, as many Wilbur critics do, Wiman identifies the difficulty and value of such an approach. "Caserta Garden" resists what Wilbur refers to as "the fallacy of imitative form [in which one must] write chaotically about chaos" (Cox interview 10); its

formal organization respects the complexity of reality by drawing attention to the uneasy battle between the artistic imagination and a chaotic experience. "Caserta Garden" is a significant *ars poetica* for Wilbur but not in the sense that Breslin claims.

Caserta garden symbolizes art alienated from civilization, in contrast to Wilbur's claim about the vital relationship between art and society. He argues "poetry is sterile unless it arises from a sense of community or, at least, from the hope of community" (*Responses* 116). "Caserta Garden," like "First Snow," engages the military and literary history of its subject. The garden reference in the poem's concluding stanza connects it to the popular "garden of the world" motif from earlier garden poems. Andrew Marvell's well-known "Upon Appleton House," for instance, was written in the wake of war, the English Civil War in the 1640s and 50s, and it juxtaposes that reality with a biblical Paradise. Marvell's poem praises Lord Fairfax's estate, Nun Appleton, in the tradition of country-house poems like Ben Johnson's "To Penhurst." As the name suggests, the estate was originally a nunnery. Lord Fairfax retired there after his service in Cromwell's parliamentary army to focus on his private life. Nun Appleton's history as a nunnery and retreat is similar to Caserta's; Lord Fairfax is like the Casertans wishing to create a protective space within their garden walls. Vitaliy Eyber argues that "Fairfax's garden appears as an oasis of prelapsarian harmony in the midst of England's chaos and disruption [that mobilizes] the topos of England as an Edenic garden [. . .] prominent in the poetry of retirement in the latter part of the Civil War period" (139). The fact that the garden only "appears" or "seems" like Paradise is significant. In "Upon Appleton," as in "Caserta," war and military language invade the garden space, spoiling Eden. In fact, Fairfax designs his garden like a military fort: "Who, when retired here to peace, / His

warlike studies could not cease / But laid these gardens out in sport / In the just figure of a fort" (59-60). Like the fort design, Caserta's garden wall is a barrier among fractured lines.

Both poems evoke biblical representations of gardens while distinguishing Eden from their gardens of the world. For Marvell, post-Civil War England is the island "garden of the world": "Oh thou, that dear and happy isle, / The garden of the world ere while, / Thou paradise of four seas, / Which heaven planted us to please, / But, to exclude the world, did guard / With wat'ry if not flaming sword. / What luckless apple did we taste / To make us mortal, and thee waste?" (61). The poem likens England's post-war situation to Adam's and Eve's after their expulsion from Eden after tasting the "luckless apple," a pun on Appleton.[6] Similarly, "Caserta Garden" contrasts the world garden, which includes World War II and Caserta garden's simple symmetries, with an unattainable Paradise. The "tortile trunk, old paradigm of pain" (459) inside Caserta garden invokes Christian images from Genesis.[7] The poem's references to "fall," "falling," and "fail[ing]" also point to the Genesis story. Bonnie Costello connects "Caserta Garden" to a specific type of artistic and literary garden, popular in Medieval and Renaissance times, claiming the poem represents a "'still moment' sensibility, [. . .] a *hortus conclusus* of 'changeless time' in dialectic with a world that 'rots and thrives'" (159).[8] The *hortus conclusus* design contained four paths dividing a square area into quadrants, relating to the four rivers flowing through Eden and representing the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, restraint, and courage. So too, the quatrains in "Caserta Garden" and reference to "the unjustest thing" (19) suggest the four rivers and virtues. Wilbur's poem implies that true faith requires celebrating the connection between

reality and an ideal artistic creation like a garden, rather than lamenting the loss an illusory paradise. The discontented speaker in "Upon Appleton," unlike in "Caserta Garden," yearns for a pre-war Eden, where the only wars were metaphorical battles between flowers.[9] At the end of "Caserta Garden," the speaker is not dissatisfied. Wilbur's world garden encapsulates decay and life, recognizing the necessity of both.

"Caserta Garden" confronts a key concern in Wilbur's war poetry—the relationship between reality and the imagination— instantiating his claim that "a good part of my work could, I suppose, be understood as a public quarrel with the aesthetics of Edgar Allen Poe" (*Responses* 125). The poem rejects Poe's escapist aestheticism, outlined in "The Poetic Principle," where he argues that poetry consists solely of unearthly beauty: "It has been my purpose to suggest that, while this Principle itself is, strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of the Principle is always found in *an elevating excitement of the Soul*" (198). Poe famously venerates "the poem written solely for the poem's sake" (202) and splits the mind into intellect, taste, and moral truth, explaining that "just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful while the Moral Sense is regardful to Duty. [. . .] Taste contents herself [. . .] to Beauty" (183). Poetry should reproduce heavenly beauty not dictate intellectual or moral truth. Moreover, Poe claims that poetry and truth are antithetical; there are "radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation" (183). In the poetical mode, the poet employs the musical effects of meter, rhythm, and rhyme to move the soul away from the material world to an abstract, ideal realm of beauty: "It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains

the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty" (184). In this view, beauty originates from the heavens not the earth.

Yet, whereas Poe's metrical technique is meant to elevate his poetry above reality, Wilbur's formal arsenal brings his poems closer to the historical world. Poetry's technical aspects are essential for Wilbur—not to create beauty for its own sake but to engage with the world. As a case in point, Wilbur's experience in the Second World War moved him to write poetry seriously and to employ it to organize one small part of the world's chaos. Ironically, Wilbur's introduction to Poe coincided with his combat experience: "I first read Poe sensitively during World War II, in a foxhole at Monte Cassino. The extreme isolation of my situation made for a great power to concentrate. I felt a tremendous symbolic or allegorical depth beneath Poe's prose, and this excited my curiosity" (*Conversations* 185). Wilbur would write critically about and continue to quarrel with Poe over the course of his career. But, as Wilbur claims in an interview, this antagonism also revealed similarities between the two poets:

> I felt a kind of bond, a kind of eerie attraction to Poe, and, at the same time, I was always aware that his imagination was after things that such writing as I was doing was not after. I remember a quotation from Yeats which goes, "out of a quarrel with others we make politics; out of a quarrel with ourselves, we make poetry." When I was quarreling with Poe, or stating my aesthetic differences with him, I'm quarreling also with myself, with the potential Poe who never quite got out. (Cantalupo interview 72)

Wilbur's conception of poetry as a "warfare of spells, effigies, and prophecies" connects him to Poe; both Wilbur and Poe recognize poetry's formal mysteries and the battle between the enchantments of imagination and imperatives of reality. In Poe, fantasy defeats reality; but in Wilbur, imaginative artifice brings a new, deep attention to it. Wilbur grounds the magic of his technique in human history, truth, and morality, unlike

Poe, who excludes truth and morality from poetic form. Wilbur's artifice always maintains its oblique relationship to reality. The speakers in "First Snow in Alsace" and "Caserta Garden" recognize the beauty and ugliness of the earthly world, unlike Poe's elevated artist who deliberately turns away from reality. Wilbur argues that "since Poe thought of poetry as concerned, not with earthly and human things, but with the pursuit of unearthly beauty, the superiority of the poet, like that of the mystic, consisted in a rapt disrelation to other men" (*Responses* 46). These poetics of unearthly beauty cast off humanity and morality, a troubling dismissal for Wilbur: "Poe excluded from poetry everything that might detain the soul on Earth. Thus, poetry must be disembarrassed of that moral sense which involves us with humanity: it must throw overboard that factuality, and that narrative or logical clarity, which would render it compassable by the mundane intellect; and it must eschew all human emotions" (63-64). "Caserta Garden" counters Poe's strategy of denying reality and retreating into a dreamlike mode. The garden's residents ineffectively wage their metaphorical war against the actual war outside their crumbling walls. The poem's speaker claims that Caserta garden is an "unjust" thing. Likewise, Wilbur contends that Poe's repudiation of the material world is "aesthetically [as well as] morally and religiously bad" (*Conversations* 58).

Wilbur's poet has a moral and aesthetic responsibility to tackle reality even though this interaction is sometimes violent: "It is the province of poems to make some order in the world, but poets can't afford to forget that there is a reality of things which survives all orders great and small. Things *are*. The cow is there. No poetry can have any strength unless it continually bashes itself against the reality of things" (*Responses* 217). Wilbur's poetry "bashing" itself against reality recalls Stevens's discussion of the poetic

imagination battling reality in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Edgecombe identifies a similar comparison in relation to "Caserta Garden," claiming the poem "could be viewed as a parable about the aesthetics of [. . .] Wallace Stevens" (35). "The Noble Rider" was a lecture Stevens delivered at Princeton in 1942. He defends poetry, his in particular, against claims that it is escapist and unconcerned with the war. To preserve the imagination, Stevens's poet must avoid the war's reality:

> I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent. [. . .] A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow. (27)

War, in this view, destroys the poet's imagination and poetry, whereas, for Wilbur, the war stimulates the need to create order and celebrate joyful moments in everyday life. Wilbur's poet discovers truth and unity through a detailed apprehension of the material world, while Stevens's poet resists and evades reality. Moreover, Stevens claims that, in war poetry, the imagination and knowledge of historical facts are antithetical: "The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact" (*Palm* 206). The facts of war cannot coexist with Stevens's poetry of imagination. But Wilbur approaches war's reality precisely through imaginative artifice. Stevens's imagination contrasts with Wilbur's earthly aesthetic represented in the final image of the world garden rotting and yet still thriving in "Caserta." Wilbur contends that "what poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility; it embodies them in persons and things and surrounds them with a weather of feeling; it

thereby tests the ability of any ideas to consort with human nature in its contemporary condition" (*Responses* 126).

Wilbur's poem "Mind," for example, argues that poetry must resist abstraction. The poem's simile compares the movement of the mind's thoughts to a bat flying in a dark cave: "Mind in its purest play is like some bat / That beats about in caverns all alone, / Contriving by a kind of senseless wit / Not to conclude against a wall of stone" (314). "Pure" imaginative thought attempts to avoid the material world represented by the "wall of stone." But this lack of interaction with the world is not ideal; it is just "senseless wit." "Mind" ends by expanding its simile; in order to transform the imagination into more than just abstract play, the bat must "beat" against the cave: "The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save / That in the very happiest intellection / A graceful error may correct the cave." To extend the limits of the intellect to the "very happiest intellection," the bat must commit the "graceful error" of hitting the walls, elegant in the sense that it frees the mind to explore other possibilities and "corrects the cave"; new thoughts derived from experience shape and reshape the mind's cave. The confrontation with the facts of reality is a vital part of the creative imagination and poetry. The form of the poem itself also works to shape the ideas developing inside of it; the form remains constant even though the thoughts are in motion. In Wilbur's poetry, the form orders and encapsulates the constant interplay between the real world and the poet's imagination.

Wilbur's confrontation with a different war, with the nationally controversial Vietnam War, tests his ideas about poetic form, the imagination, and reality as he looks back to WWII. His poem "On the Marginal Way" (1969) juxtaposes the Holocaust and Vietnam. The American location of this poem in a scenic walkway on Maine's seacoast

distinguishes it from the European sites in "First Snow" and "Caserta Garden," but he recalls the Second World War in his attempt to confront Vietnam. "On the Marginal Way" also registers Wilbur's distance from the battlefields of Vietnam: he was not a soldier in the conflict, like he was in WWII. Space and duty separate the speaker from the current war, but he relates to Vietnam through memories of WWII and the Holocaust. His observation of the rocks on Maine's beach leads to images of the mass graves at Auschwitz, and, in turn, his acknowledging the "tidings of some dirty war" (198): Vietnam. For Wilbur, the Vietnam War lacks the moral clarity of WWII. He claims that it "seemed to me an unjust war by every Augustinan criterion. I wrote and spoke to that effect. [. . .] Such references as my poems made to the Vietnam mess [. . .] were related to my own wartime experience in one way only: I had taken part in a just war, but this was different" ("Richard Wilbur: An Interview" 18). Consequently, the form of "On the Marginal Way" is strained to a greater extent than in "First Snow" or "Caserta"; it must order and contain a string of thoughts and associations about a "messy" and undefined war. The combat in "On the Marginal Way," initiated by the speaker's intense observation of the stones in the changing light, is between the speaker's conflicting thoughts about past and present wars, artistic and real instances of violence, and geological and religious creation narratives. The poem's form, however, does not break down even under the weight of the speaker's confusion; the form sustains and orders his thoughts and enables him to voice a cautiously optimistic hope at the end of the poem.

Wilbur underscores the significance of the combat zone in "On the Marginal Way" by separating it, along with ten other poems, including "The Lilacs," in a section

called “In the Field.” He contends that “Marginal Way” explores a field of thought generated from the altering seacoast:

> I’m sure I could think of a good many other poems which could be reduced in this manner to a field of thought and a scene or situation in which the thought is embodied. I know that’s true [. . .] of my more recent poem, “On the Marginal Way.” There are certain [. . .] thoughts on tap, and they’re all connected with the stones of a particular cove off the shore of Maine, and the geological history of those stones, and their changing aspect as the light changes, as the sea rises and falls back. (*Conversations* 94)

Here, Wilbur conveys the fluidity of the poem’s setting and sensibility—the liquidity of thoughts “on tap,” the sea rocks’ transfiguration in the fading light, and the movement of the waves—an important feature in the snow’s transformation of the landscape in “First Snow,” the metamorphic fountains and permeable garden wall in “Caserta Garden,” and the supple cave in “Mind.” In addition, “Marginal Way” like “First Snow,” taps the transformative power of poetic form and figurative language. The poem is written in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis stanza with sestets rhyming *abacc*. Shakespeare, in turn, based his “Venus and Adonis” on passages from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, and the shifting tone and imagery of “Marginal Way” also pay homage to these Ovidian origins. The form grounds the speaker’s wandering thoughts while also reflecting the importance of variation—in rhymes and line length—within that over-arching order.[10] The formal structure and fluidity match the depictions of the sea-rocks altered by the sun.

In addition to the literary historical significance of its particular form, the poem is part of a “long line of seashore poems from Arnold, Poe, and Whitman to Stevens, Moore, and Bishop, which meditate on human history against a backdrop of eternal flux and mortality” (Costello 164). Like Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” “Marginal Way” is deeply concerned with history. The sea in “Dover Beach” sounds “the turbid ebb and flow / Of

human misery" (93) while the speaker stands "here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night." The sound of human grief connects the speaker on Dover Beach with Sophocles by the Aegean Sea. The "ignorant armies" suggests both the battles occurring in Arnold's own time, such as the 1848 revolutions in Europe, and the night battle from Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Arnold's poem juxtaposes the dark, miserable, and violent sea with the "Sea of Faith [that] / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled." Likewise, jarring visions of human despair and mortality emerge from the "Marginal Way" landscape. But whereas the bright sea of faith retreats with a "withdrawing roar" into the darkness at the end of "Dover Beach," joy floods the speaker's mind in the concluding lines of "Marginal Way." Also, while Wilbur's wartime poem connects past and present wars in human history, "Marginal Way" faces the violence from other historical perspectives. The poem employs visual representations of natural and human history from various disciplines: the literary history associated with the nineteenth-century English missionary and author George Barrow, art history referring to the French Romantic painter Theodore Géricault, the history of the Holocaust, the geological history of the ocean rocks, and the religious history of creation.

The speaker's initial observation of the cove's amorphous rocks sets off a chain of associations, beginning with the Victorian Borrow: "But the beach here is rubbled with strange rock / That is sleek, fluent, and taffy-pale. / I stared reminded with little shock / How, by a shore in Spain, George Borrow saw / A hundred women basking in the raw" (197). The speaker distinguishes the beach "here" with its "strange" fleshy rocks from the

shore in Borrow's "The Bible in Spain" (1843) peopled with women. He develops the metaphor between the rocks and women by focusing on the details of the female forms: "That catch of bodies on the sand, that strew, / Of rondure, crease, and orifice, / Lap, flank, and knee." The sensuality of "rondure, crease, and orifice" recalls the sleekness of the rocks; but, "lap, flank, and knee" introduces harsher associations—as of a butcher describing cuts of meat. Borrow's "lenses of a fly" suggest that he relates to the bodies like a fly on meat. This is "a too abundant view," a graphically detailed sight that drains the subject of its humanity, for the speaker. Whereas the view would "not have waked desire in Borrow's eye," it does disrupt the speaker's vision; he recoils from the images of dismemberment and returns to "now," observing that "the rocks flush rose and have the melting shape / Of bodies fallen anyhow." The "melting shape" of the rocks brings to mind a new association: "It is a Géricault of blood and rape, / Some desert town despoiled [. . .] its people murdered to a man." Géricault was known for his fleshy painting style depicting human suffering and violence in works like *The Raft of the Medusa*. But once again this image proves too graphic for the speaker. A simile connecting the Géricault images to the Marginal Way seaside brings the speaker out of his troubling visions: "And those who murdered them / Galloping off, a rumpling line of dust / Like the wave's white, withdrawing hem." The "withdrawing hem" links this image to Borrow's nude women by suggesting the disrobing of both the women and the sea, establishing an oblique coherency between these metaphors. The clothing imagery also suggests the sea of faith's "folds of a bright girdle furled" (93) and the "withdrawing" roar in "Dover Beach." "Marginal Way" remains in control and intact, even though the speaker's thoughts are chaotic and unruly. The poem's formal structure

orders, rather than reflects, the speaker's thoughts as they shift from fancy to fact and past to present.

As "a swift cloud that drags a carrion shade" (197) dims the Marginal Way landscape, the dark facts of the Holocaust and mass grave sites enter the speaker's visions: "If these are bodies still, / Theirs is a death too dead to look asleep / Like that of Auschwitz' final kill, / Poor slaty flesh abandoned in a heap / And then, like sea-rocks buried by a wave. / Bulldozed at last into a common grave" (197-98). While Wilbur indirectly refers to WWII in "First Snow in Alsace" and "Caserta Garden" in his choice of particular settings and military language, here he directly invokes the details of the Nazi's Final Solution. Michelson distinguishes this stanza from the allusive treatment of war in Wilbur's other poems: "one does not think of Wilbur thinking of Auschwitz. The ugliness that he has seen he usually talks about more obliquely" (95-96). Adam Kirsh goes farther than Michelson to claim that the Holocaust imagery is not only uncommon for Wilbur but unsuccessful: "Wilbur has attempted poems of comprehensive moral statement, which aim to do justice to the horror of the modern world. But these poems are among his least convincing, because his invocations of evil seldom avoid seeming merely dutiful. Certainly, this is the case in 'On the Marginal Way'" (95). True, the poem graphically compares the rocks to the victims in Auschwitz's graves. But this comparison is self-consciously tenuous; it does not constitute a "comprehensive moral statement." The speaker doubts the initial metaphor of rocks as fallen bodies; he questions "if" (197), after this progression of metaphors, these are still bodies. "Marginal Way" strategically confuses the metaphor's tenor and vehicle, registering the disruptive power of Holocaust violence. Rocks are not like human bodies; human bodies are like rocks.

The direct encounter with specific violent images produces a powerful counteraction in "Marginal Way." The speaker retreats from the disturbing images in his mind's eye by attempting to ground himself back in his present surroundings: "It is not tricks of sense / But the time's fright within me which distracts / Least fancies into violence / And makes my thought take cover in the facts, / As now it does, remembering how the bed / Of layered rock two miles above my head / Hove ages up" (198). Rather than letting the rock metaphor lead his imaginative thoughts or "least fancies" during Vietnam's "fright" to the "violence" of Auschwitz, the speaker focuses his attention on geological information; he immerses himself in scientific and, later, religious visions of creation to avoid imagining death and destruction. But the reality of Auschwitz is worse than anything he can imagine about it, and his reaction to the horrific facts of the Holocaust steers his subsequent visions away from human actions toward the natural features of the landscape. The speaker returns to a time before humans "when the shrinking skin / Of Earth, blacked out by steam and smoke, / Gave passage to the muddled fire within" and "sanding winds and water, scuffed and brayed" the terrain. Longenbach claims that "Wilbur fights off a vision of the Holocaust with geological facts, but the violence of volcanic eruption and glacial movement is no haven from imaginative vision" (155). True, the personification of the earth's "skin" shrinking and "blacked out" by the "fire" makes an uneasy connection between the geological process and the crematoriums at Auschwitz. But there is an important difference between turbulent geological forces and the brutality of human history. The steam and smoke, flooding lava, sanding winds, and water create the Earth and its constantly changing landscape. Such violence, in the sequence of Wilbur's poem, results in an Edenic world.

The cloud's "carrion shade" disperses; the sun shines again, transforming the rocks into the first humans: the rocks "now recline and burn / Comely as Eve and Adam, near a sea / Transfigured by the sun's return" (198). The sun's light and warmth transform the poem's images from the earlier visions of a cold, grey lust to bright protective pictures of the rocks as three girls lying "golden in the lee / Of a great arm or thigh" of God. Costello claims that "the biblical narrative becomes a way of controlling the proliferation of grotesque metaphor and restoring the innocent eye" (165). And, the poem does try to recover a sense of innocence and joy by characterizing the scene as "a perfect day: the waters clap / Their hands and kindle" (198). But this innocence is tempered by the present war in the background— "high above the shore / On someone's porch, spread wings of newsprint flap / The tidings of some dirty war." The figuring of the transmission of war's news as a bird in that seaside environment with wings that "flap" tempers the celebratory image of the "clap" of the waves. This line alluding to Vietnam spills over the stanza break into the poem's final section, syntactically linking the war to the ecstatic flood that follows. "Marginal Way" acknowledges that happiness is transitory, like waves breaking on the shore: "And like a breaking thought / Joy for a moment floods into the mind, / Blurting that all things shall be brought / To the full state and stature of their kind, / By what has found the manhood of this stone. / May that vast motive wash and wash our own" (199). The speaker's imagination has uncovered the human aspects of the stone, its "manhood" (humanity), by exploring metaphors linking the sea-rocks to human bodies. At the same time, he remembers the human casualties of war who will never reach their "full state and stature" (manhood). The subtle puns (state/stature) hint that this gendered "manhood" is permanently arrested in stone statues and monuments of state

memorializing their deaths.[11] He laments this loss while also hoping that the "vast motive" of natural violent and evolutionary processes resulting in the creation and maturation of the earth "may" be able to justify even this dirty war.

This ending, like that of "First Snow," has proved problematic for critics. Kirsch criticizes the disjunction between the Auschwitz images and the final stanzas: "The poem does not take account of that evil in such a way that the memory of evil would affect the imagination of good. Instead, in its last stanzas, 'On the Marginal Way' turns away from evil altogether, in order to receive an unaccountable consolation" (96). Similarly, Michelson claims the poem doesn't realize its hope of purification: "The baptism-like ending of 'On the Marginal Way' might make the yearned-for redemption at the ending eerily familiar or consoling and Christian-*like*, but finally it does not seem Christian in substance, and it is not affirmed in any final gesture of faith" (99). However, the ending is more ambiguous than critics admit. Evil does affect the figuration of elation. Joy assaults, not consoles, the speaker; it "breaks" like a wave, "flooding" and "blurting" words into his mind, recalling Arnold's concluding image of humanity standing on "Dover Beach" "swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight" (36). The two spondees in the lines—"áll thíngs" and "fúll státe"—rhythmically underscore the blurting. In addition, Michelson's reading of the ending as "baptism-like" must not exclude other associations with washing, particularly with the biblical account of Pilate washing his hands of Christ's crucifixion—"[he] washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it'" (27:24)—and Jarrell's allusion to Pilate at the end of his well-known war poem "The Eighth Air Force." In Jarrell's poem, the speaker can't wash away the blood and refuses to condemn

Christ: “Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can: / I find no fault with this just man” (143). Nothing, not even holy water, can wash away their guilt; the Eighth Air force pilots are all implicated in the war. The speaker in “Marginal Way” also doubts whether the vast motive can wash the violent thoughts from humanity’s mind; note the use of “may” (199).

A disorderly, and apparently irrational, flight of joyful emotion issues from the speaker’s confrontation with the graphic image of the Holocaust and the war’s disorder. The joy is “unaccountable”; it doesn’t follow from the speaker’s thoughts. On the other hand, the form of the poem itself never reflects doubts or confusion; it doesn’t break down or change. The force and strength of the poem’s form push the poem toward a hopeful conclusion, and the poem’s lyric impulse supports its unaccountable joy. Indeed, Wilbur argues that “all poetry, however much it may be irrational, moves toward clarity and order” (*Conversations* 24); beauty and joy are the byproducts of that process. For Wilbur, his war experience made him “aware of the violence and perversity of man and nature [. . .] while looking to reaffirm the sacramental in the world” (Cox interview 13). The poet verifies the sacred by organizing the war’s chaotic reality into an ordered form. Poetic artifice creates beauty and joy that come out of but are distinguished from the war experience; so too Wilbur’s claims that “[meter, rhyme and stanza] are capable of a power and of a clear nuance to which free verse can’t aspire. On top of that, they offer a formal pleasure that free verse can’t provide” (Gray interview 38). Wilbur’s other war poems also register jubilance. “First Snow” explores various grim metaphors for falling snow—burned moths, a blanket over the crevassed landscape, a shroud covering fallen soldiers—but it ends with the nightguard comforting himself with the memory of

benevolent snow piled outside children's windows. The poem's ordered design awakens fascination akin to child's wonderment of the frost's patterns on the window. The fact that the snow is "heaped, benign" outside the windows suggests fullness like the flood of joy in "Marginal Way." Similarly, the plants in "Caserta Garden" burst through the garden wall, "irrelevant and free." Observing these vital plants breaking down the boundary separating Caserta from the world—and the imagination from reality—gives the speaker faith in the design of a larger garden of the world. Such faith is not necessarily logical; the speaker claims that a person who spent time in Caserta "would have faith that the unjustest thing / Had a geometric grace past what one sees" (459). The poem itself has a paradoxical geometric grace; it attempts to order formally what it demonstrates cannot be ordered or controlled. The belief that war's injustice may be part of some larger order or design in "Caserta Garden" is, in "Marginal Way," just a momentary blurted wish. Part of what distinguishes "Marginal Way" from "Caserta Garden" and "First Snow" is "time's fright" of the "dirty war" in its background. War's justifiable purpose is missing in "Marginal Way." It is not clear whether its depictions of human suffering are part of any design larger than the poem's formal structure. The speaker's encounter with the strange seascape produces a violent interaction between imaginative visions, historical facts, present observations, and memories; but the poem refuses to resolve those battles into a conclusive figure.

Wilbur's later war poems, though, relocate the meeting place of history, memory, and the imagination in more personal and domestic spaces than his previous ones. For example, in an interview, Wilbur identifies his "most recent explicit memory of war [in] the third section of 'This Pleasing Anxious Being' (2000), where as a child I 'might

foresee' such landings as my division made at Anzio and Fréjus" (Gray interview 37).[12] That memory consists of three lines toward the end of this three-part, fifty-four-line poem in which a young boy in the backseat of his parent's car "might foresee / The steady chugging of a landing craft / Through morning mist to the bombarded shore" (58). Here, unlike in "First Snow," "Caserta Garden," and "Marginal Way," there is no specific locale associated with WWII. While Wilbur identifies the "the bombarded shore" as Anzio or Fréjus in the interview, the poem doesn't. The title phrase is noticeably not a place like "Caserta Garden" or "Marginal Way," though it derives from a famous poem of place—Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard." The speaker in Gray's poem fears that the unknown dead in the graveyard will be forgotten and, therefore, feels obligated to sing their praises and compose an epitaph for them: "For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey, / This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd / Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day, / Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?" (41). "Dumb Forgetfulness" is the opposite of memory; people fall prey to it by forgetting the past and being forgotten. The living, "pleasing anxious" beings are supposed to resign themselves to death and renounce life's comforts without regret. The speaker in Wilbur's "This Pleasing Anxious Being" similarly faces "dumb forgetfulness" and must come to terms with his mortality; he combats forgetfulness by casting a long, lingering look back at his past and memorializing it in verse.

While the poem's title draws upon literary history through Gray's elegy, its blank-verse form calls up other associations than Gray's quatrains.[13] Wilbur's most frequent stanza is the quatrain. There are seventeen quatrain poems in *The Beautiful Changes* alone, while Wilbur's entire collected works contain only eleven blank-verse poems,

none of those in his first two volumes.[14] A possible influence on Wilbur's later blank-verse poems could be his translations of plays, which he worked on after the publication of *The Beautiful Changes* and *Ceremony*. Blank verse, of course, has its roots in Marlowe and Shakespeare. Wilbur acknowledges the effect his translation work had on his own poetry, namely an increased focus on the dramatic interaction between people rather than between people and things or places:

> I felt from the beginning of my writing that to pay attention to objects, to what's there outside you, was the exciting thing to do. And I said to myself, when worried about the small human population of my poems, that many of the gestures I was making toward the nonhuman "other" were gestures toward—prophecies toward—the human. I came to include more people and more human situations in my poems as I went along. Partly this had to do with some kind of social maturation that was going on in me. Partly it had to do with the extent to which I was getting involved in the translation of plays, in the finding of English voices for French characters. I was writing more and more about people in the interests of Moliere or Racine, and that led to my being a little more direct about people in my poems. ("A Conversation")

"First Snow," "Caserta Garden," and "Marginal Way" focus on the outward details of a location, the snow's transformation of Alsace, the plants breaking through Caserta's crumbling wall, and the sea-rocks in the changing sunlight; the speakers' observations summon memories of past and current wars. These poems are set in quiet, still environments where there is little or no human interaction. In "This Pleasing Anxious Being," however, the focus is not on one particular place. The three-part poem addresses three different childhood memories in three different places. It concentrates more overtly on personal history and memories, particularly on familial relationships and domestic spaces, than Wilbur's previous war poems do. All four poems concern themselves with literary, military, and human history; but in "This Pleasing Anxious Being," personal and literary history overpower the details of war. The attention to personal memories could

also suggest another aspect of the history of blank verse: the Romantic, meditative lyric poem. After Marlowe and Shakespeare established blank verse as the preeminent form for dramatic verse, Milton claimed it for his religious epic *Paradise Lost*, and the Romantic poets, like Wordsworth, later employed it for meditations on individual experience, nature, and the imagination. Milton, as Robert Shaw claims, is a major influence in Wilbur's blank verse: "the patterns of assonance, the arrangement of images in sequences [. . .] the gracefully sustained and extended syntax [. . .] all this suggests Milton. It is Milton tactfully scaled back from epic proportions to those of lyric meditation, but Milton nonetheless" (189). Indeed, the two poets Wilbur credits as his poetic forefathers are Milton and Frost, both well known for their blank verse. In a recent interview, Wilbur expresses his debt to Milton's poetry: "I continue to love Milton's blank verse. The extraordinary muscular energy with which he handles the pentameter line is just a wonder to me, and I try to emulate it when the subject elects that form" ("Richard Wilbur"). He similarly apprentices himself to Frost: "Frost was not only a metrist but a poet who gloriously manhandled meter, making it stress fine shadings of speech and thought. For that and for much else I would like to be his continuator" (Gray interview 38). Like Milton and Frost, he varies the stresses, pauses, and enjambments of his pentameter lines in "This Pleasing Anxious Being" to emphasize words and convey different tones, particularly in the poem's third section. The idea that poem's rhythm should express the sense of the poem and not just adhere to an abstract metrical pattern is a key claim in Wilbur's "Bottles" essay: "One thing modern poets do not write, thank heaven, is virtuoso poems of near perfect conformity to basic rhythms. [. . .] By good poets of any age, rhythm is generally varied cleverly and forcefully to abet the expressive

purposes of the whole poem" (*Responses* 221). Rhythm, however, is only one noteworthy formal aspect of this poem. As in "First Snow," "Caserta Garden," and "Marginal Way" imagery and metaphors are crucial here. The imagery in "This Pleasing Anxious Being" is visual as well as aural. The poem resurrects the past by focusing on the sights, sounds, and feelings associated with different memories. It explores three types of seeing and memorializing the past through art: painting, photography, and poetry.

The first section compares a memory of a childhood Christmas dinner to a delicately light painting: "In no time you are back where safety was / Spying upon the lambent table where / Good family faces drink the candlelight / As in a manger scene by de La Tour" (57). The French Baroque painter George de La Tour often created religious scenes lit by candlelight. The references to "spying," "lambent," and "drink[ing] the candlelight" draw attention to the setting's lack of light, framing the speaker's memory as a dimly lit space, barely discernable to the eye or mind. This is a still moment; "Father has finished carving," "Mother's hand has touched" a bell, and "Roberta looms." The speaker sets the scene, placing father, mother, and Roberta around the dinner table, similar to a setting description at the beginning of a play; he waits for the action to begin. But the figures in the memory and the painting can't come to life until someone remembers them. The scene must really be *seen* to be resurrected; "they wait for you / To recollect that, while it lived, the past / Was a rushed present, fretful, and unsure." The speaker appeals to "you" to remember not only the static visual details of the past scene but also its movement and vitality. "Rushed," "fretful," and "unsure" recall the "anxious being" of the poem's title. The past aurally awakens with a "muffled clash of silverware," "a laugh retrieved," and "warm, edgy voices." The feelings and sounds of life culminate

in the section's final image of "your small feet kicking under the table, / Fiercely impatient to be off and play" (57). Like the past, this boy is anxious and unsure. The reference to "feet" also suggests metrical feet; indeed, the line's momentarily falling rhythms—"kíckĭng únděr the táblĕ / Fíercĕly"—kick against rising iambics.

The poem shifts abruptly to another memory in its second section, which begins with a simile evoking the Angel of Death not the birth of Jesus, like the first section. "The shadow of whoever took the picture / Reaches like Azrael's across the sand / Toward grown-ups blithe in black and white, encamped / Where surf behind them floods a rocky cove" (57). The shadow registers the human fear and anxiety about death, but this is not a wholly terrifying photograph. The grown-ups are "blithe." Instead of the figures in the scene being lit by candlelight, these grown-ups "turn with wincing smiles, shielding their eyes / Against the sunlight and the future's glare." They try to remain still and timeless but the sunlight "notes their bathing caps, their quaint maillots, / The wicker picnic hamper then in style, / And will convict them of mortality." The bright sunlight registers the "quaint" details of their clothing and possessions; it "convicts" them as figures from the past. In contrast to the adults in this dated black-and-white photo, the speaker imagines two boys who "do not plead with time" and are distracted by "a whacking flash of gull-wings overhead" while "with his back to us, / A painter, perched before his easel." The onomatopoeia of "whacking" registers the suddenly disruptive sound of beating wings above the boys' heads, and once again aural vitality draws the speaker into the memory; he switches to the first-person "us." The painter offers a way of envisioning and preserving the memory other than through a camera lens; he is "seeing / The marbled surges come to various ruin, / Seek[ing] out of all those waves to build a

wave / That shall in blue summation break forever" (57-58). The waves, which in the moment appear as great "marble" edifices, break against the shore and come to "various ruin," shattering into fragments like broken marble statues. The painter, however, aspires to capture the motion of the waves "forever" in his painting. David Hamilton interprets this description of the painter as "no mean analogy to the poem [. . .] offered with no flourish to underscore the fact" (179). But the painter's wish seems too grandiose with its "shall" (58), "blue summation," and "forever" in contrast to the child spying on the faint memory of a family meal. The speaker doesn't seek to preserve a static memory in a frame for all time; he wants to revive the realistic uncertainty and anxiety of childhood reminiscences.

Like the previous two sections, the third begins with a simile; but, this one focuses on the memory itself, not a painting or a photograph: "Wild, lashing snow, which thumps against the windshield / Like earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid, / Half clogs the wipers, and our Buick yaws, / On the black roads of 1928" (58). Here, there is an immediate move to sound not vision. "Thump" and "yaw" convey the sound of a car plowing through a heavy snow-storm. The punctuation in the first line also creates pauses that slow the lines, similar to the snow's disrupting effect on the car. The doubled-up stress of "blǻck róads" adds aural weight to the car-as-coffin metaphor. The dark road brings to mind the threatening shadow in the black-and-white photograph; but, as in that second section, the dim and foreboding imagery lightens. Even though the car is "like" a coffin, it quickly becomes a place of cooperative and positive human interactions between family members: "Father is driving; Mother, leaning out, / Tracks with her flashlight beam the pavement's edge." The mother tracing the road with flashlight recalls

the speaker spying on the candlelit scene in the first memory; both images suggest that memories exist in a barely-lit, barely discernable environment, recalling the famous epistle "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (Corinthians 13:12). The delicacy of the beam in the dark night contrasts with the blinding glare in the black-and-white photograph. Despite the grim opening imagery, the mother and father create a comforting environment for their children in the car: "the two children in the back seat, safe / Beneath a lap-robe, soothed by jingling chains / And by their parents' pluck and gaiety" (58). The "jingling" of the chains quiets the thumping and yawing outside, so much so that one child is asleep. The other child is between waking and sleeping; his "half-closed eyes / Make out at times the dark hood of the car / Ploughing the eddied flakes, and might foresee / The steady chugging of a landing craft / Through morning mist to the bombarded shore." The child sees darkly, through half-closed eyes and the morning mist, like the mother tracking the road with her flashlight. Though "bombarded shore" and "landing craft" depict war, the poem doesn't end here. "This Pleasing Anxious Being," like "First Snow," tracks a transformation of images: "The steady chugging of a landing craft / Through morning mist to the bombarded shore / Or a deft prow that dances through the rocks / In the white water of the Allagash, / Or, in good time, the bedstead at whose foot / The world will swim and flicker and be gone." The prow dancing in the Allagash is a recreational, not military image of boating. The phrase "swim and flicker" draws together all three sections of the poem, by suggesting the flickering of the candle and the photographed adults in their bathing suits, into a powerful flood image at one's deathbed. The force of this ending recalls that of "Marginal Way"; both conclude with a

flood and a corresponding syntactical "flooding." The last nine lines of "This Pleasing Anxious Being" are all part of one long sentence disclosing the child's hazy vision of the past, present, and future. The world is not preserved forever on the painter's canvas; instead, the rush of language in the poem celebrates life's energy and transience.

It's no coincidence that many of Wilbur's poems, particularly his war poems, employ water imagery like the fountains in "Caserta Garden," the waves in "Marginal Way," the flood in "This Pleasing Anxious Being," and even, in another form, the frost in "First Snow"; the imagery reflects Wilbur's conception of the fluidity of poetic form. In "Poetry's Debt to Poetry," Wilbur identifies the importance of "our ever-present adaptive need to reshape the past" (*Responses* 162). Indeed, Wilbur's poems are concerned with finding a shape for and then reshaping history, encompassing literary, military, and personal history. Wilbur's formal experimentations respond to the ever-changing face of history; they put his poetry in dialogue with major poets in literary history, like Dante, Emerson, Frost, Marvell, and Gray, drawing strength from past traditions and forms and proving that old bottles can become new again. For Wilbur, war is an undeniable part of history; it threatens to destroy the world's order and structure, and poetry fights back against its destruction. The poet is engaged in a battle with the reality of war; but, instead of letting the war's disorganization define his poetry, he counters that disorder with the order of poetry's formal techniques, particularly rhythm, rhyme, and figurative logic. However, the poet must be careful not to let technique master the poem, "form for the form's" sake, to rephrase Poe, but must employ artifice to draw attention to the always oblique relationship between art and reality. Forms have their own strength and authority that poets need to harness: "My feeling about meters and forms generally is that for a

good poet—a poet who has the strength to take them over—they are undated and indeed timeless. For such a poet, they are simply instruments or contraptions which heighten and empower his words—underlining the shape and steps of the argument, [. . .] hitting the important words hard, charging the utterance in every way" ("A Conversation"). The force of "strength," "hitting," and "charging" conveys Wilbur's exuberance for poetry's formal power. His poems reflect that energy with increasing intensity. The confrontation with violence and suffering produces an opposing desire to track down and affirm beauty and joy in a World War II battlefield or a fading memory.

Notes

[1] Ironically, Williams draws upon an old source to make his point about the need to create new forms for American poetry: "Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:17). Pound also likens poetic form to a container, arguing: "I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase. That most symmetrical forms have certain uses. That a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms" (*Pavannes* 103-4).

[2] All quotations of Wilbur's poems are cited by page number from the *Collected Poems 1943-2004* (2004), except for his "Terza Rime" poem from his most recent collection *Anterooms* (2010).

[3] Although many critics, including Cummins (8) and Hall (22), identify only seven WWII poems in Wilbur's first volume, Wilbur refers to the war in later poems like "On the Marginal Way" (1969), "Flippancies" (1976), "This Pleasing Anxious Being" (2000), his translation of Valeri Petrov's "Photos from the Archives" (2000), and "*Terza Rime*" (2010).

[4] British WWII poet Cecil Day Lewis's poem "Where are the War Poets" conveys to the predominance of this idea among poets across the Atlantic.

[5] In addition, Wilbur endorses Emerson's Transcendentalist conception of nature in multiple interviews. For example, in a 1968 interview Wilbur contends that "if Emerson's Nature means that kind of a circuit, in which the mind is attuned to nature, rather than simply learning from it; if the mind properly finds its figures out there, is co-natural with the world out there, yes, I can go right along with that kind of Emersonianism" (*Conversations* 51). Later in a 1979 interview, Wilbur claims, "I think I'm a little more Emersonian than Mr. Frost in that I do think we and the birds, we and the trees, are part of one scheme" (218).

[6] Likewise, Marvell's sword alludes to the description of the flaming sword God placed in the Garden to keep out Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:24: "So he drove out the man; and placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."

[7] In particular, the tree in Caserta evokes "the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:8) and the cross of Christ's crucifixion.

[8]The *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden, derives from the garden metaphor interpreted as a symbol for Mary's purity in the *Song of Solomon*: "A garden inclosed *is* my sister, *my* spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (4:12).

[9]"Unhappy! shall never more / That sweet militia restore, / When gardens only had their towers, / And all the garrisons where flowers" (61).

[10] The first two lines in each stanza contain three and then five beats; but the remaining four lines in each stanza vary between four and five beats each.

[11] Thanks to Professor John Gage for his insights into these lines.

[12] The poem was first published in the December 21, 1998 issue of *The New Yorker* and later published in Wilbur's 2000 collection *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations*.

[13] Wilbur's earlier homage to Gray's "Elegy" titled "In a Churchyard," from the same "In the Field" section as "On the Marginal Way," is composed in quatrains. Wilbur suggests a relationship between his and Gray's form in that poem, claiming "'In a Churchyard,' derived, as I remember, from my on-and-off meditations on the status of absent things in Mallarmé or unheard music in Keats or the unseen gem and flower of Gray. As my thoughts on that subject began to be marshaled and spoken, I may have been formally influenced by Gray's pentameter quatrains" (Gray interview 40).

[14] Wilbur's blank-verse poems include "The Reader" (2004), "A Wall in the Woods: Cummington" (2000), "This Pleasing Anxious Being" (2000), "Lying" (1987), "All That Is" (1987), "In Limbo" (1976), "The Mind-Reader" (1976), "The Agent" (1969), "Walking to Sleep" (1969), "Shame" (1961), "The Mill" (1956).

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