VINTAGE

POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

DESMOND GRAHAM

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Acknowledgments

Biographical Notes and Anthologies

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About the Book

Poetry of the Second World War brings to light a neglected chapter in world literature. In its chorus of haunting poetic voices, over a hundred of the most articulate minds of their generation record the true experience of the 1939-45 conflict, and its unending consequences. In keeping with its subject, it has an international scope, with poems from over twenty countries, including Japan, Australia, Europe, America and Russia; poems in which human responses echo each other across boundaries of culture and state. Auden, Brecht, Stevie Smith, Primo Levi, Zbigniew Herbert and Anna Akhmatova are set alongside the eloquence of unknown poets. The anthology has been arranged to bring out the chronological and cumulative human experience of the war: pre-war fears, air raids, the boredom, fear and camaraderie of military life; battle, occupation and resistance; surviving and the aftermath. Here at last, are the poems of the Holocaust, the Blitz, Hiroshima; of soldiers, refugees and disrupted lives. What emerges is a poetry capable of conveying the vast and terrible sweep of war.

About the Author

Desmond Graham teaches English at the University of Newcastle. He is the author of *Keith Douglas: 1920-1944*, a much acclaimed biography; he has also written two volumes of poetry, *The Lie of Horizons* and *The Marching Bands*.

POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

An International Anthology

Edited with an introduction by

DESMOND GRAHAM

PIMLICO

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War and Auschwitz have often been said to have silenced the poet, to have gone beyond words; to be too big to encompass, too terrible to find expression for: the war could not, above all, be expressed in poetry, that celebrating art form, that musical manner of speech, that making of beautiful things.

Time has shown, or rather, the poets have shown, quite the opposite to be the case. The need to break silence, to give witness, to relieve memory, to lament, cry out and question, has placed the Second World War in the centre of much of the poetry written during it and afterwards. The scale of the task has meant that it has needed time; though some did write contemporaneously, even in the most terrible circumstances. But poetry, with its artifice, its traditions of ways of saying and making fictions, has proved a positive aid to reaching towards the experience of the war.

The poems of that experience are gathered in this anthology. What emerges is a poetry capable of conveying the vast and terrible sweep of the war. A poetry in which human responses and experiences echo each other across boundaries of culture and state. Reading all these poems in English it is sometimes a surprise to find that some are translations, some not. At the same time details and nuances, the points of view from the different cultures, languages and poets, point back to the diversity and the scale of what took place. It is this immensity and variety of the war which the anthology sets out to convey. The experience, across time and people, of its course.

The poems were written both at the time and later, in almost equal numbers: I have made no distinction, though some are given dates by their poets and these are included. I have, however, generally limited myself to poems by those who were adult before the war's close. So much has been written of the war by the following generations, to have included poems by them would have needed another volume. I have also limited myself to poems which already exist in translation: one minute's thought would be enough to understand that to do otherwise would open the whole anthology up to an impossible task. I have sought help from poets, scholars and translators and have brought into being a few translations – in particular, of Baczyński, Poland's main 'war poet' – but this book is a gathering and not a monument. Some cultures are represented more thoroughly than others and the largest single selection is of poems originally in English; but from Australia, New Zealand and Canada as well as from America and Britain. With an impossible task, a 'world' anthology of a 'world' war's poetry, I can make no claim to being inclusive: within my chosen parameters, however, I have tried to select with authority, to aim at breadth and range and to bring the poems together so that they can speak.

The broad history of what had happened in literature throughout Europe, and pretty well world-wide, meant that poetry itself proved fairly ready for the task of writing of war. This may, of course, be putting cart before horse in a simple way. But for the writer from the 1920s on, poetry was already no longer wholly identified with beauty, the aesthetic, and with song, whether simple or epic. New potentialities of expressiveness had become normal to the writing of it; poets had turned to new, more open and variable forms; and, above all, there was a move – continuing through to this day – to bring poetry closer and closer to speech.

National traditions and language traditions met this ‘modernizing’ at different points and times, had different traditional strengths to offer the poet. In Japanese, for example, while the great literary impact of Europe came in the nineteenth century, it was only post-war, directly in response to the experience of the war, that the thorough-going ‘modernizing’ of poetry took place. Throughout Eastern Europe, a post-war move away from literary language coincided with the development of censorship and the police states of Stalinism: hence directness and statement combined naturally with allegory and obliquity. In Germany, many poets felt the language itself had to be re-made, started afresh to avoid the contamination of the Nazi past – Günter Eich’s poem ‘Inventory’, included here, is a famous instance of this. Other poets, like Miklós Radnóti, in the midst of it, made their poetry out of the very conflict between their art and war:

Is there a land still, tell me, where this verse form has meaning?

Without putting in the accents, just groping line after line,

I write this poem here, in the dark, just as I live,

Half blind like a caterpillar inching my way across paper;

Torches, books – the *Lager* guards took everything …

There is no one ‘international’ phenomenon of poetry this century any more than there was one ‘Second World War’; but a poetry which is more flexible and responsive to its subject matter, less distinctly ‘poetic’, more free and colloquial, is essentially more open to translation. In the 1940s, still, translations read very much like translations. By the start of the 1970s, translation practice had caught up with what had been going on in poetry: the translation had to be as readable as the poems in English which were themselves more colloquial, less literary. The emphasis within translation thus shifted towards the reader. This did

mean sacrifices – the more elaborate poems could be left untranslated; effectiveness could overtake faithfulness – but this emphasis upon the reader meant that translation could become a form of currency rather than a paying of tribute. It also opened up the practice of translation to poets who would not previously have ventured upon it. Through collaboration or expert assistance, poets could work on poems from languages which alone they could not tackle; literatures less frequently translated became available. Through the 1970s and 1980s poems in translation became a thriving, even a central part of the life of 'English' poetry. Part of what was revealed, dotted about in anthologies, dominating or momentarily appearing in collections, was a poetry of the war, so extensive and compelling it overturns all those generalizations about the lack of Second War poetry.

This anthology begins and ends chronologically. It starts with prewar intimations: sensed by Miklós Radnóti in a mountain garden in Hungary in 1936; by Osip Mandelshtam, in 1937, a year before his own death in Siberia, as he contemplates the misfortune of a birth date 'eighteen-ninety something'; by Charles Reznikoff, also a Jewish poet, on the seemingly safe west coast of America, receiving a letter which brings him to realize he may not be 'with Noah and the animals,/warm and comfortable in the ark' but with those to be drowned. It ends with the 'Aftermath' when, in the words of the Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann, 'War is no longer declared/but continued.'

Between these extremes is a broad onward sweep, each section carrying a descriptive title taken from one of the poems within it: '*By greatcoat, cartridge belt and helmet held together*' – conscription, military life, life in the Forces; '*Boswell by my bed, Tolstoy on my table*' – responses from the edge, places not immediately in the thick of it, people still managing within the Blitz, people feeling they are on the war's verge; '*Wounded no doubt and*

pale from battle' – the battlefields, in Europe, North Africa and Asia, on land, at sea, in the air; '*At night and in the wind and the rain*' – the civilians caught up as refugees, under occupation, resisting, in forced labour, suffering the raids at Hiroshima; '*Speechless, you testify against us*' – the genocide of the Holocaust; '*I am twenty-four led to slaughter I survived*' – the meaning of being a survivor; '*For dreams are licensed as they never were*' – liberation, victory, recovery and continuation.

Each section is self-contained; as much as any aspect of the war could be said to have been so. Inevitably poems could take their place in one section or another, but their placing has never been without thought. At times within sections there is a certain chronological and experiential development but for the most part poems are arranged by theme and juxtaposition: sometimes aimed at contrast, sometimes harmony.

The anthology is a communal effort, with poems from about twenty countries and by a hundred and thirty poets. A number of the poets are central, however, among them: Brecht, the commentating voice of the 1930s, of exile, of a German under threat of death from his own country, his poems only really brought to light and made available in the 1970s; Stevie Smith, a commentator from London of equally acute intelligence; Różewicz, a survivor from the Polish resistance, writing a spare, painful poetry which reclaims a minimal humanity so as to resist the final triumph of war's nihilism; Pilinszky, a Hungarian, witness to the Camps and starvation of 1945; Sutzkever, a Yiddish poet, actually writing from the Vilna Ghetto during the war's progress, joining the Jewish resistance and surviving; Nelly Sachs, German, Jewish and a Psalmist of the Holocaust; Rachel Korn, another Holocaust survivor, writing in Yiddish in Canada; Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish writer famous for his prose works on Auschwitz and

survival; Sankichi Toge who survived Hiroshima long enough to write of it and Tamiki Hara who survived and wrote of it, only to commit suicide at the confirmation of the symptoms of ‘atom disease’.

Others left their witness before they were killed during the war: Radnóti, a well-established Hungarian Jewish poet before the war, turning to literally Classical form – the Eclogue – in order to counter barbarism with the ‘civilization’ which defined its evil, writing poems of Forced Labour which were found in his pocket when his corpse was disinterred at a roadside; ‘Two children from Terezin’ whose poems remain anonymous; Baczyński, a brilliant young poet killed in the Warsaw Uprising; Keith Douglas, probably the finest British poet of the war, killed in Normandy after having written poems as a tank officer from El Alamein on.

In Britain, in particular, there is a myth that the Second World War produced no ‘war poetry’, no battle poetry like that of the First. Here, the German poets Huchel and Bobrowski are heard, from the front, alongside their erstwhile adversaries, the Russian poets Vinokurov and Slutsky: the Japanese poets Kaoru Maruyama, Nobuo Ayukawa and Ei Yamaguchi alongside James Dickey, John Ciardi and Howard Nemerov from America. Alan Ross, writing post-war, brings us the war at sea. From air bases in America, with little first-hand experience of action, Randall Jarrell writes of the Air Crew’s war. From the wide range of Australian writing of the war, John Quinn and Eric Rolls write as soldiers in the Middle East and New Guinea; Donald Campbell as airman, and C. D. Griffin as a prisoner of war to the Japanese in the infamous Changi camp.

Almost a by-product of the anthology is that poems ‘from the margin’ (as Roy Fuller put it) reveal their true weight within the context of what they were on the edge of. Poems by Scovell, Blunden, Elizabeth Bishop or Seferis resonate

so much more ominously within their context here. Similarly, the little known ‘The Edge of the War’ by William Montgomerie, written from Fife Ness, with its glimpsed submarines, suddenly appearing planes, gossip and intrusions of death, can take its place as a defining poem of war’s edges. For too long, the ‘poems of wartime’ of British writing have sunk under the weight of numbers, surrounded by others on similar themes; their subtle, well-judged understanding of war’s threats and insidious ways lost within inappropriate claims that they are ‘war poems’ like those of the 1914–18 war.

For what was the centre and what was the edge could be quite unclear. Anna Akhmatova from Leningrad wrote in sympathy for Londoners during the 1940 Blitz. Within three years she had written of Leningrad’s suffering, while herself in Tashkent. Centre and margin, perhaps, could be clear to those whose experience was of war at its most terrible. Yet even at this point, there could be, so very rarely, a denial of war’s absoluteness. Luba Krugman Gurdus, saved at one Polish collection point for a death camp, because an SS guard remembered her from art college in Berlin pre-war, lived on in hiding, within inches of the murderers’ grasp, to write down poems for her dead child, killed by diphtheria: the extent of war’s savagery, finding its way through virus and neglect, through heartbreak and loss as well as through weaponry.

I compiled this anthology so that such poems could be heard. Before making my acknowledgements, a quick word on the kinds of poem I have not included: French poetry suffers a little here; there was a great deal of poetry from the Resistance but of its nature it was coded and often the chosen code was literary subterfuge. Poems from Char and Aragon and Jean-Jouve are included. In isolated translations, however, the relevant poetry rarely reads well. Similarly, the crucial mass of Russian ‘patriotic poetry’, does not read well enough out of context. Tvardovsky’s

‘Tyorkin’ (in an extract), however, is here. Translation problems limited my ability to draw on the immense work of Josef Leftwich (Isaac Rosenberg’s childhood friend): his translations from Yiddish are, for the most part, tragically outmoded. Hundreds of poems from the war which deserve recognition could not find place because the war itself had been traced at too oblique an angle: Seifert, for example, writing wonderfully from memory, so often transposes war into a key of autobiographical rumination; T. S. Eliot, in the *Four Quartets*, makes from the London Blitz his Dantesque encounters. This anthology is not of ‘poems from the war’, or ‘the best poems’ connected with it; everything written during its course bears its mark in some way. This is an anthology of poems where the experience of the war is apparent and central: an anthology revealing the war through the poets’ words.

For that reason, my saddest, necessary, omission is of poets who did not leave poems directly on the war but who were killed by it. They, in a sense, are the truest war poets of all. Because all our witness comes from survivors, however temporary or painful their survival, I will end with an account of Ohrenstein, a young Jewish poet living in Prague and publishing under a non-Jewish pseudonym, ‘Jiri Orten’. In 1941, crossing the road to buy cigarettes, he was struck by a speeding German car. The first hospital to which he was taken refused him admission because he was Jewish. He died in the second.

I have included a brief biographical note on each poet, together with some help for further reading. The specific sources for the poems can be found in the list of Acknowledgements.

I would like to thank all those who have helped with this book. It has been ten years in the making, so there are more than I can list here. I must first stress, with especial force, the customary caveat that none of those mentioned is responsible for any error or shortcoming in my text. I may

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Newcastle upon Tyne 1994

I

‘I lived on this earth in an age…’

BERTOLT BRECHT

from *A German War Primer*

(1936–1938)

When the leaders speak of peace
The common folk know
That war is coming.
When the leaders curse war
The mobilisation order is already written out.

• • •

It is night
The married couples
Go to their beds. The young women
Will bear orphans.

• • •

Those at the top say: peace and war
Are of different substance.
But their peace and their war
Are like wind and storm.

War grows out of their peace
Like a son out of a mother
He bears
Her terrible features.

Their war kills
Whatever their peace
Has left over.

• • •

On the wall was chalked:
They want war.

The man who wrote it
Has already fallen.

translated by H.R. Hays and Lee Baxenball

MIKLÓS RADNÓTI

A Mountain Garden

Summer has fallen asleep, it drones, and a grey veil
Is drawn across the bright face of the day;
A shadow vaults a bush, so my dog growls,
His hackles bristling, and then runs away.

Shedding its petals one by one, a late flower stands
Naked and half-alive; I hear the sound
Of a withered apricot-bough crack overhead
To sink of its own weight slowly to the ground.

O, and the garden too prepares for sleep, its fruit
Proffered to the heavy season of the dead.
It is getting dark. Late too, a golden bee
Is flying a death-circle around my head.

And as for you, young man, what mode of death awaits you?
Will a shot hum like a beetle toward your heart,
Or a loud bomb rend the earth so that your body
Falls limb from limb, your young flesh torn apart?

In sleep the garden breathes; I question it in vain;
Though still unanswered I repeat it all.
The noonday sun still flows in the ripe fruit
Touched by the twilight chill of the dew fall.

Istenbegy (a Buda mountain), 1936
translated by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

Aortas Fill with Blood

Aortas fill with blood.
A murmur resounds through the ranks:
– I was born in ’94,
I was born in ’92 …
And, clutching the worn-out year of my birth,
Herded wholesale with the herd,
I whisper through anaemic lips:
I was born in the night of January the second and third
In the unreliable year
Of eighteen-ninety something or other,
And the centuries surround me with fire.

1937
translated by James Greene

MIGUEL HERNANDEZ

War

Old age in the towns.
The heart without an owner.
Love without any object.
Grass, dust, crow.
And the young ones?

In the coffins.

The tree alone and dry.
Woman like a stick
of widowhood across the bed.
Hatred there is no cure for.
And the young ones?

In the coffins.

translated by Hardie St. Martin