

The Anti-War Poetry of Herbert Read: “Kneeshaw Goes to War” as an Example

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the nature of the anti-war poetry of the English poet, Sir Herbert Read (1893 -1968). First, it surveys the different styles that the anti-war poets followed in their criticism of war in an attempt to figure out afterwards the characteristics that distinguish Read’s anti-war poetry from other poetry. It then presents the main features of Read’s anti-war poetry. The study moves on to examine its main objective that lies in analyzing Read’s poem “Kneeshaw Goes to War” (1918) as an example of his own anti-war poetry. This thematic study follows a descriptive and analytical method in carrying out its aim. It starts with an introduction about the different modes of war poetry and literature review, develops into a discussion of Read’s attitude towards the poem’s main subject and comes to an end with the main findings in the conclusion. Read was able to use a realistic approach in his criticism of war in his poem “Kneeshaw Goes to War”. In his portrayal of the destructiveness of war, he managed to expressionistically convey his sense of despair that the war had generated in the individual’s personal experience with war. The representation of human experience is thus as important as the anti-war theme itself in the poem.

Keywords: Anti-war Poetry, First World War, Herbert Read, “Kneeshaw Goes to War”, British Poetry

1. Introduction:

Anti-war poetry is a term used by critics and professional readers to describe the poetry that expresses the rejection of war with all the policies, ideologies and fantasies connected to it by exposing its fatality. While all anti-war poets used their poetry as a means to criticize the evilness of war, each one of them was distinguished in his/her different style and main focus. Their poetry also differed as some of them witnessed closely, participated actually in the war activities and others observed it from a distance. Thus, each anti-war poet has a distinctive artistic approach towards criticism of war. Herbert Read was one of them. He enrolled at the University of Leeds in 1912, and then he served for three years as an infantry officer during World War I. War and his lost childhood often appear as themes in his several volumes of poetry, beginning with *Naked Warriors* (1919); his first *Collected Poems* was published in 1926 (Britannica). That Herbert Read’s “post-war reflections on the war are so different in tone from those other writers regarded generally as ‘anti-war’, bears witness to the general truth that every participant in the war had their own particular vision.” (Cecil, 1998, p.1).

T.S. Eliot who was a prominent observer focused in his anti-war poetry, namely “The waste land”, on the criticism of the whole decadence of the European civilization and the loss of that fundamental sense of humanity caused by the war. Other observant anti-war poets chose the philosophical approach in criticizing the war, like Thomas Hardy in his “The Pity of it”, the religious approach such as Edith Sitwell in her known poem “Still Falls the Rain”, and Wilfred Owen’s criticism of war, lyrical mourning of its futility and expression of the sad consequences and shocking violence of modern war in his poems. Mud, moreover, appeared in the British poetry of the First World War and was not only “associated with dirt and disgustingness, but also with vitality, insurgence and creativity” (MacLoughlin, 2015, p.1). This recalls to us the mud that the protagonist of Read’s ‘Kneeshaw Goes to War’ encounters, a ‘viscous’, ‘oozing’ mud which offers ‘A sucking, clutching death’. A man drowns in this mud: ‘They could not dig him out’, writes Read, ‘The oozing mud would flow back again’ (Read as cited in MacLoughlin, p. 6). In the poem, this mud is not wholly abject. Particularly striking in Read’s evocation is a sense of the mud’s irresistibility, its repetitive, fluid motion. This is Nietzschean (Kneeshawean) mud, excessive and chaotic, an expressionistic response to the war by Read, who had come up against the limitations of Imagist poetics (p. 6).

The problem of testimony in the context of the experience of witnessing has to do with the difficulty of fully or properly 'knowing' what has actually been witnessed, even by those most directly involved whether as victims or persecutors. But the matter of witnessing also involves the idea that, as Jacques Derrida puts it, the testimony that "always goes hand in hand with at least the possibility of fiction, perjury, lie" (Derrida, 2000, p.27). As Derrida states clearly, this does not indicate that all testimony is fiction, perjury, lie, not to dissolve the crucial distinction between truth and lie, truth and fiction, but to suggest that they are closely linked. This is evident, not least, in the writings of the First World War poets, the writings of participants, victims or persecutors, and witnesses such as Wilfred Owen and Herbert Read, who themselves sought to make sense, to form narratives, out of their experiences, and to piece their own talents together into coherent poetic forms.

The focus of the poets, who were soldiers and witnessed its tragic consequences, was often on the horrors of the war itself and the resulting misery men encountered in the battle fields more than praising the soldierly virtues of warriors. And this is the peculiar experience that attracts attention. However, their poetry differed as each one perceived war in a different way. Wilfred Owen (1963) declared in his famous speech "My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity. ... All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful." (*Collected Poems*, p.31). He wrote anti-war poems in which he questioned the proposed loyalty behind fighting in the war as the men were humiliated and killed monstrously, "Dulce et Decorum Est" is a prominent example. He speaks in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" of the collective sufferings and misery of the men who participated in the war. Owen is known for "the recurrent themes of honour, glory and the loss of youth. Critics often treat Owen's poetry, which is generally considered elegiac, as a therapeutic implement..." (Astrid, 2014, p.19). Fuad Abdul Mutaleb and Tarik Hamadneh, in their article "War Poetry: Wilfred Owen as a Soldier and Poet", commented on this theme in his poems that "the imagination of Owen is saturated with horrors and bloody war pictures. The war experience launched his imagination and completely captivated his mind. His imagination is so active to respond and create a sense of responsibility toward/among various public categories all around the world (2019, p.1).

In describing Siegfried Sassoon, Read says "His 'sarcasm' spoke directly to 'our post-war mentality', but once this began to fade, Sassoon lapsed into being a 'conventional Parnassian'" (Read as cited in Adams, 2015, p.7). "[W]hile Sassoon often simplified 'the complexities of original emotion' in the service of articulating a more powerful anti-war line, Read's war writing continually implied the variety of experience." (Adams, p.7). As such, each poet has his own way in depicting the horror of the war and Herbert Read is no exception.

In effect, a great deal of stimulating and useful critical studies appeared on English literature and the First World War. Some of these were generally consulted or referred to in this study; such as, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975, 1989), Samuel Hynes's *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1991) and Allyson Booth's *Postcards from the Trenches* (1996).

2. Discussion

Herbert Edward Read (1893-1968), is an English poet and critic who was an advocate and interpreter of modern art movements. His critical works embraced literature, society and education from the perspective of a philosophic anarchist and pacifist. He served for three years during World War I. Read wrote and published several collections of poetry about war. Specifically, Read wrote war poetry first when he was a soldier, and then he drew upon his experience during that war. The horror of the war haunted him throughout his literary career as a poet (Ryan, 1983, p.34). It has been aptly pointed out that "In spite of his need to insulate himself from the emotional impact of war, Read was concerned with portraying what war did to men, and he used his poetry to that end." (p.39). In his own words, Read expresses his vision about the nature of his poetry saying that "one must use the exact word and not the merely decorative word . . . or the word that may happen to rhyme but does not exactly express the idea." (Read as cited in Adams, p.4).

Read is so keen to portray reality as it is, which proves to be an effective style in depicting the horror of World War I as will be seen in the following analysis. He focuses on the individual's personal experience in the war. The suffering that the war brings about to all human beings can be seen in his poetry, just as it is seen in all anti-war poetry. However, because portraying reality along with the individual's experience were important for him, Read's anti-war poetry is rather ambiguous as the reality of the war was. An examination of his poetry shows "What makes Read's contribution to Great War literature of special interest is his combination of an intense vision and philosophical turn of mind with an actual battlefield heroism," (Cecil, 1998, p.2). For Read the war was "at once disabling and liberating, and his continual return to the conflict as a subject in his writing was a process of attempting to fix its ultimate meaning to his life." (Adams, 2015, p.1).

Herbert Read's known poem "Kneeshaw Goes to War" (1918) is one of the most realistic anti-war poems in its

presentation of the destructiveness of war (Astrid, 2014, p.53). As one of the victims of war, the “crippled protagonist Kneeshaw returns home tortured by his experiences and guilt about a moment of failing nerve, mercifully just at the moment of being wounded, so that this spiritual desertion remains unknown.” (Cecil, 1998, p.5). Thus “Kneeshaw Goes to war” can be described as an ambiguous anti-war poem, but it has a chronological order. The focal point of the third-person persona is Ernest Kneeshaw who “is plucked from this life and experiences the gruesome barbarity of war...” (Adams, 2015, p.6). The poem shows how Kneeshaw’s mentality has changed before and after witnessing the war. It consists of six parts each of which contributes to the anti-war theme in its different way. The horrors of war are shown in some instances explicitly and in others in a subtle way.

The first part is dedicated to the phase of Kneeshaw’s life before the war. This part begins with the name of the main character including its first and last parts, “Ernest Kneeshaw.” It indicates that unlike other anti-war poets who ignored the identity of the soldiers and focused only on their sufferings, Read is concerned with the individual not just as a casualty of the war but as a human being who has got his own personal life and experiences. In this sense, Read becomes an anti-war poet as he is challenging the way war deprives human beings of their true identities and recognizes them only as victorious, defeated, soldiers, victims, injured or casualties.

The first part presents Kneeshaw’s life in a way that makes him appear as a young person who has the whole life in front of him. Neither war nor any kind of serious thought occurs to his mind. Kneeshaw has a “forest” of dreams in which he is “like a woodland flower whose anaemic petals/ Need the sun.” (Read, lines. 3-5). Thus Kneeshaw “is receptive of neither emotional nor intellectual influence” (Ryan, 1983, p.42). He has got a life which lacks its livelihood. It cannot be said that Kneeshaw is depicted in a positive way before the war. He was in need of everything that the “sun” represents for the “anaemic petals”. Life is presented through the use of metaphor as a gloom that surrounds Kneeshaw from each corner. However, Kneeshaw, as said explicitly in the poem, has never tried to approach the gloom of his life. He has never tried to understand it or to think about how it is going to be. He spent his time in contemplating his “feet”.

The first part in the poem is significant in its contribution to the anti-war theme. In depicting Kneeshaw as not having any serious thought about life, Read is suggesting that those who participated in the war did not do so out of reasonable and logical thinking. The part may be understood as a criticism of the young people who did not try to approach life with enlightened minds which allowed the gloom of war to approach them despite their will. However, the important thing here is that war is not the reasonable decision on the part of the people who fought in it.

The second part introduces the theme of war as it tells how Kneeshaw has changed through his journey to “the scene of war” (Read, line. 60). Kneeshaw’s journey starts with him walking in dreary swamps with tough “fellows” who took the pain in preparing him physically to fight in the war. However, what is going in his mind is something that others are not aware of. While in the first part he ignored the gloomy life, now he starts to pay his attention to the gloom around him and to contemplate life. First, he perceived things without understanding them, but with the continuous thinking the gloom around him started to vanish slightly. “The journey to Europe begins his (Kneeshaw’s) mental awakening” (Ryan, 1983, p.43).

The anti-war theme in this part is apparent in the thoughts that flood from Kneeshaw’s mind while he contemplates the ships that are going to participate in the war. Through the forest motif, Read links Kneeshaw’s thoughts and dreams to the ships that are going to war. First, Kneeshaw contemplates the “forest” made of ships then he moves to contemplating the “forest” of his youth.

The ships have come from different places and each one has a different experience with a different sea. However, all of them contribute to form the gloomy scene of the army that is going to invade other lands. Besides, the whole fleet ultimately is constituted of “living cells”, in other words, of human beings. Those humans are the ones who have diverse “personalities and experiences” (Read, line.42). Thinking about the ships in a human perspective reminds Kneeshaw of the forest of his dreams before war became a part of his experience in life.

Kneeshaw questions his ability to free himself from the “black columns” of life that were surrounding him before his going to war and are now encircling him “with dread”. Why the people who started the war were able to send a fleet to conquer other lands and he could not send his thoughts, may be through learning and communicating with other cultures, in a “fleet” to spread all over the world is not clear. Unlike the forest of the ships that will create war, his “forest” of dreams and thoughts will spread such beautiful and hopeful things as “light and colour and the fragrance of winds” (Read, line.50). Kneeshaw contemplation continues, if he sends the ships of his thoughts to communicate with the world, they may return enriched and enlightened by other cultures which are “strange” to his own. If the fleet in the sea is his thoughts, metaphorically speaking, they will be sent “unregretted”. However, the persona concludes the part saying that those thoughts occur to Kneeshaw’s mind just as “musings”. Instead of sending

scholars, merchants to exchange benefits and knowledge with other cultures, the officials and politicians send fleets to invade other lands.

Even though the anti-war theme is an implicit one in this part, it is of high significance. It suggests the idea that war has stolen the dreams and energies of the youth. The people who started the war exploited the youth's "fleets" of dreams and of curiosity to discover the world to achieve their own agendas. The youth had different dreams, goals and experiences, while war unified them to achieve one evil aim.

The third part makes explicit the negative effects of war. Kneeshaw along with the other men has been delivered to the battle field in a "cattle-truck." It may be that Read is being realistic in depicting the scene without a poetic touch. However, this suggestion does not negate what the image symbolizes, on the contrary, it solidifies it. The men are just like cattle being led by the politicians to their slaughter without having a free will connected to their being human beings. The persona in the third part makes clear the idea that was implicit in the first part. War for Kneeshaw is a "chance" not a decision. This chance is not that bad at the beginning except that it causes Kneeshaw's mind to sear, then, it becomes intolerable.

Read again emphasizes the idea that war is not to be seen only as a destructive force of life, it is rather the war that creates for each human being his own war. It is the human being's experience that matters not how many soldiers were killed or injured. This idea is apparent when the persona identifies the war as "Kneeshaw's war" and not, for example, the war that meant to everybody just what it meant to Kneeshaw.

The poet-soldier depicts what he has seen in the war saying that the fights, destruction, and horror are taking place in the hearts of men just as they were taking place in actual reality. The misery that the ships caused "sank" in the soldiers' hearts, so, they become black and filled with awe and terror. Kneeshaw now cannot think, but he can feel, on the contrary to his depiction in the previous part. "Kneeshaw felt himself/ A cog in some great evil engine" (Read, lines. 69-70). In this phase, Kneeshaw recognizes that war is equal to evilness and that it is not something he is willing to participate in. However, it seems that being in the middle of the horrors, Kneeshaw has lost control over his mind that becomes "listless". As a result, he fights with all his might even though he knows that what is moving him is not his own sense that he is doing his duty or so, but he is rather moved by "unseen springs". It is an allusion to the fact that the people who create the wars are not the ones who are found in the battle fields to fight.

As if Read wanted this poem to convey the whole horror of the war. So, first the poem presented how Kneeshaw's journey with the war started and developed, then, it moves to describe the horror of the war itself. In part four, the poem presents the sufferings of the other men that Kneeshaw witnesses and thus they become parts of his own experience and suffering. And in the fifth, Kneeshaw's own suffering is presented. It indicates that the destructive power of war does not exclude anyone.

The persona says in part four that there are "a few" men who will remember the horror of the battle in Polygonveld. It indicates that most of the men who participated in that battle were killed. In this part, "[t]he poem conveys the poet witnessing the death of his companion" (Astrid, 2014, p. 53) which is described in detail. While the men were walking in the mud, one of them sank because of the weight of the weapons he carried. He was terrified as the mud overwhelmed him up to his neck. The other men tried hard to help him out of the mud but they could not as he was stuck and they were in a hurry. The wise solution that the officer thought of is to help that sunken man by shooting him in the head so he will not be terrified anymore. Because the man was shot from a close distance, it appears that the scene was miserable as all the parts of his head were scattered all over the place. It indicates how war makes a human being's soul cheap as it is hailed by being killed.

Part five begins with Kneeshaw participating unwillingly again in military works. Though the deaths and horror that took place, the "unseen springs" continue to move the men to fight. Kneeshaw is working under the commands of someone who is giving orders from a distance. He is ordered to dig in the ground. He is aware that he must think about the situation but he could not ignore obeying orders. As if he becomes as a robot following orders while he is deprived of the human quality of thinking. However, being a robot lead Kneeshaw to a horrible end.

While he was digging in the ground, Kneeshaw crumbles the "skull of a buried man" (Read, line. 116). He cannot think or feel anymore, he shouts from the top of his voice. "His response... results in a complete loss of will. He is mercifully saved from total submission to his senses by a bomb blast which hurls his mangled body "into the beautiful peace of coma"" (Ryan, 1983, p. 43). It "is 'beautiful' because it allows him to return to his original state, where he was effectively unconscious." (Winn, 1998, p.8). As in the fourth part the man was consoled by death, Kneeshaw is saved from the horrible scene by a merciful bomb that distorts his body. It appears that in war death and injuries are the consolation of the human soul rather than other human souls.

It can be noted that “Read has dealt with the effect of outside forces on an individual, and with the effect of war on the mind of a participant, but the summing up at the end into a tidy maxim is rather forced” (Ryan, 1983, p.44). The final part depicts Kneeshaw’s life after the war as he returns from the war to his homeland without a leg and he spends his time walking in nature.

Kneeshaw thinks of the forests he contemplated in the second part before fighting in the war. On the one hand, the gloom of the “forest” of the ships that participated in the war is gone, and the ships continue to do what they were doing. On the other hand, the gloom of the “forest” of Kneeshaw’s youth is gone, but, unlike the ships which achieved their aim in spreading destructiveness, he was not able to pierce his gloom by his own free thinking and achievements and it was pierced by the war. Kneeshaw now is alone. He reached a point that life for him is the moment he is in. He accepts whatever surrounds him in the moment. It has been thus indicated that “What Kneeshaw has learnt is the importance of attachment to the world of present perception, in the knowledge of its fragility.” (Winn, 1998, 8). Kneeshaw sings a war song in which “he recognizes the error of being ruled either by his emotions or by other humans (Ryan, 1983, p.43).

Kneeshaw compares himself to Judas claiming “that even Judas was less bloody than he” (Ryan, p.43). While Judas’s betrayal was for another man and was done in purpose, Kneeshaw betrayed his own self as he exposed it to war and he does not do so out of a free will and determination. Kneeshaw now will accept whatever comes to him by “chance.” As chance has given him the “crutches” it now gives him the “flowers ... and the deep beauty of the still tarn” which he will accept just as he accepted the war before. This is important because it suggests how the war has stolen the life of the youth, and it then deprived them from their original thinking and determination.

Adams contends that while Read presents Kneeshaw as physically distorted, he is “mentally emancipated,” he writes:

Despite his suffering, Read presents Kneeshaw achieving a certain equanimity and self-mastery. While damaged, in acquiescing to the demands of fate, Kneeshaw begins to recognize the deeper importance of life... Even in an indictment of war, therefore, Read suggests that its personal impact can be multifaceted.” (2015, p.7)

Ryan also agrees with Adams saying that “[w]ar is ghastly, it has taken the vital physical man and mutilated him; yet at the same time it has freed him intellectually” (Ryan, 1983, p.44).

Read stands out as a distinct anti-war poet due to a mixture of multiple individual and artistic aspects as manifested in the sections of his poem. Realism is a key quality of Read’s depiction of war in his poems; “Kneeshaw Goes to War” is one good example. This realism acquires its credibility particularly from the fact that Read was keen to portray the horrors that he himself had witnessed in action; and also because of the poet’s artistic style and his use of imagery that bring us closer to the scenes in which he was an actor and which he is trying to draw through his poetry. It may be plausible to end discussion with this critic’s conclusive and expressive statements of the ghastly situation that

War’s violence scars and kills those that experience it. Soldiers may send us postcards from its dangerous spaces, but without a broader change in perceptual habits, war will never make its way into the general consciousness, and its lessons will have to be repeated generation after generation. The position of the civilian speaker will always be suspect because it will always be relatively safe, but it is the view from that position that must be altered. For only when we learn to negotiate the space between representation and war will we be able to navigate history along a path that avoids war (Booth, 1996, p.169).

Booth is giving readers, whom we may exceptionally call civilians, what may be understood as a notice that the poet, or whomever is trying to tell us how horrible war is, did his duty and now it is our turn to change the way through which we perceive what we have been told about war. Ending wars thus becomes a shared responsibility of messengers, among them are poets, who deliver their testimonies about the bitterness of war and the recipients of their messages. This responsibility that lies on the shoulders of the recipients is dependent on and cannot be properly activated without sincere and authentic messages and trusted messengers. This highlights and intensifies the significance of the role that anti-war poets have performed during wars, and among them is Sir Herbert Read.

3. Conclusion

Briefly stated, Read’s realistic approach towards the criticism of war is apparent in his poem “kneeshaw Goes to War”. His portrayal is all encompassing of the different aspects of the destructiveness of war. Simultaneously, He was able to convey in his anti-war poetry the general sense of despair that the war had generated along with the individual’s personal experience with the war. The identity of Kneeshaw is not less emphasized than the anti-war theme itself in the poem, it rather seems to have equal importance. Another point that distinguishes Read from the other anti-war poets is his objectivity. Read suggests that even if the war deprived Kneeshaw of his dreams and

future, it liberated him from his carelessness and lack of interest in the world around him, even if it is done in a very tough way.

We might express here a final remark that it is sometimes sentimental to discuss the subject of war and its tragic consequences, without acknowledging that there are people who celebrate war – not only the idea of it, but also the fighting itself. Though this may be true even of people whose experiences in war were terrible, and which ruined their lives. That certainly seems to have been an absurdist case in the early twentieth century big war when writers, artists and philosophers expressed pacifist horror at finding in First World War under the feeling that war was a profession, a delight to many people. It is for this reason, perhaps, that literature is not sometimes totally against war, and that poetry should not be taken only an expression of pity. An understanding of this issue may better help us to grasp the strange plurality in the meaning of literature, and to appreciate the deep, troubled and constant conjunction of literature and war.

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