Fighting for a Voice

American poetry and the Civil War.

Several decades before the Civil War, the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz asserted, in his influential treatise On War, that "war is merely politics continued by other means." In 1832, Clausewitz's dictum was meant to clarify the political purpose of war as an expression of national will, but latent within it is a biting implication regarding the military effects of political disunity. In To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave, Faith Barrett's book on American poetry and the Civil War, Clausewitz's famous formula could easily be adapted to read, "poetry is merely politics continued by other means," with commensurate impact on the aesthetic effects of poems created in its chaotic ferment. Such a substitution of terms drives home two points, neither apparent to contemporary readers accustomed to viewing poetry as either a quaint or obscurantist occupation engaged in by disaffected iconoclasts and marginalized, self-appointed prophets. First, poetry in the 19th century was experienced by most readers as a unifying and universal language of the human spirit, with aesthetic techniques and forms appropriate to its broad cultural appeal; and second, advances in publishing and disseminating poetry in the mid-19th century radically democratized and atomized poetry's universal claims and audiences. Poetry and the moral insight and aesthetic relief it offers to the public sphere haven't been the same since.

The conflation of civil war and poetry in Barrett’s nuanced and rewarding To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave reveals how the practices of both strain toward politically unifying ends even as they fracture along isolating and individualized responses to grief and violence. That the Civil War inspired partisan and heartfelt poetry from a broad spectrum of society North and South is not news, but Barrett—taking a fresh look at poems and songs previously discounted for their conventional forms and sentiments—elucidates the ambivalence and emotional complexity of poets grappling with the difficult task of reconciling their personal experiences and beliefs about war with the more polarized and standardized positions available to them as they strove to speak for and to a national audience.

Literary historians have long recognized the Civil War as a dividing line in the public role of American poetry. Among its many effects, the Civil War shattered the presumed consensus of emotional and philosophical responsiveness that underwrote poetry's ability to crystallize and harmonize experiences and beliefs common to its readers. Poets were less able to confidently address audiences like sages, crafting a consensus through accessible narratives, lyrics, and ballads. The
immediate postbellum period in poetry, so frequently denigrated in criticism with the epithet of “genteel,” maintained this older version of poetry’s social function and its elevated, universalizing diction. However, emerging poets like Stephen Crane and Edward Arlington Robinson began to find audiences by adopting a more alienated posture in their poetry. The long slide toward modernist dissolution through realist and naturalist despair drove poets towards aesthetic forms that had no pretensions of gathering a popular audience, much less unifying it. When T. S. Eliot has his speaker in *The Waste Land* declare, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” he was less a herald of a new reality in poetry than he was capitalizing on a psychological and aesthetic sensibility that had been emerging for decades.

Barrett’s examination of Civil War poems and songs captures the dynamism of poetry’s movement from a means of consensus in the antebellum period to a conduit of dissensus in the modernist era. At the same time, she charts the narrowing of American poetics from a variety of narrative, ballad, and elegiac forms into the more isolating stance of lyricism, that unsurpassed mode of individual and prophetic speech. Barrett engages criticism of Civil War poetry, notably leveled by Edmund Wilson in *Patriotic Gore*, as sentimental, simplistic, and reductively nationalistic. She does so by discovering in poems and songs by Julia Ward Howe, Sarah Piatt, George Moses Horton, Henry Timrod, Frances Harper, and a host of other less known literary and soldier-writers “the origins of the modernist poets’ commitment to skepticism, irony, and fragmentation.”

*To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave* includes extended discussions of wartime verse by Dickinson, Whitman, and Melville, writers who have long been admired as modernist precursors. The analyses of Dickinson’s poems are particularly valuable, as Dickinson’s oblique emotional response to the Civil War is only recently gaining the critical attention it deserves. However, the depth and care Barrett gives to soldier-poets like Obadiah Ethelbert Baker, George Washington Hall, and Lyman Holford, as well as the attention she pays to other southern and female writers, make up the book’s most distinctive contribution. Barrett co-edited “Words for the Hour”: *A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry* (2005), a teachable collection where all of the poems discussed in this more recent book can be found. Readers of the anthology have long anticipated *To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave* as a critical companion piece.

Barrett focuses on three traits that establish the aesthetic merits of Civil War poetry when weighed upon a modernist scale of accomplishment. First, she carefully accounts for the slippage between individual and collective pronouns in a number of popular poems in order to suggest the uneasy ways that poetic speakers attempted to convey personal experience while still speaking for and with a larger community. Second, she documents the easy commerce between verse and song in the era, a circumstance that exemplifies the way singular and collective stances can collapse together in the bodies of singing soldiers and civilians at rallies and along the road. Finally, she focuses on the “voice effects” of speaking from multiple narrative vantage points within a single poem, a strategy that Sarah Piatt, for example, uses to devastating ironic effect in her poem “Hearing the Battle.”

Barrett’s commitment to justifying Civil War poetry within an anachronistic aesthetic system causes her to perceive ambiguity and irony at times when amateurism or earnestness are more likely. Even so, she is well aware of the limitations in proto-Modernist definitions of poetry, such as John Stuart Mill’s “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.” She is remarkably attuned to nuance and interpretive possibility, a stance that is richly rewarded in the chapters that discuss Dickinson’s use of landscape imagery to make nature scenes as horrific as battlefields and in describing the tensions within Howe’s
famous “Battle Hymn of the Republic” as it modulates from a woman’s experience of walking among the troops to a triumphant nationalist “we” who “fight to make men free.” However, she seems to reach for these effects in her analysis of uncelebrated poets, like the soldiers Obadiah Ethelbert Baker and Jasper Jay Stone. Consider, for example, this assessment of Baker’s “After the Battle”: “While the awkward rhyme scheme and the ungainly inversion ... may reflect the limits of Baker’s abilities as a poet, these verbal stumbles also suggest that he feels some discomfort with this ideal of forgiveness.” Still, speculative as this and other passages like it are, this weakness is characteristic of ambitious modes of literary criticism and isn’t a specific failing of Barrett’s.

Barrett’s incorporation of plebeian and popular poets along with canonized figures makes the book particularly rich reading for those interested in learning how an individual poet’s experience of war can speak to a national audience. The nation, after all, is responsible for initiating and sustaining the organized and dehumanizing violence that marks modern war, of which America’s Civil War was arguably the first example. The political and social distance of those most affected by today’s wars from the majority of Americans whose political choices or disaffection determine national policy stands in stark contrast to the broad impact, influence, and interconnections of Civil War casualties and survivors. Barrett’s book is both an elegy for a lost period of social and literary grappling with the effects of war and an enticement to seek out the poetry that will, in years to come, be written by the veterans, civilian survivors, and bereaved of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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