

Poetry and the Pentagon: Unholy Alliance?

By Eleanor Wilner

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On April 20 of this year Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, in tandem with Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, announced Operation Homecoming: Writing the War Experience. The program is described as 'an NEA project to help soldiers write about their experiences in war,' and it plans to bring writers to military bases to conduct workshops for soldiers returning from combat. It will also publish an anthology which, according to their website, will be 'open to active US military personnel and their immediate families' and will be a 'nationally promoted anthology of wartime writing that will be sold in bookstores and will be distributed free by the Arts Endowment to military installations, schools, and libraries.'

The project is being carried out in cooperation with the Armed Forces and Defense Department and the Southern Arts Federation, and has been funded (\$250,000 of its \$300,000 cost) by the Boeing Company, one of the US's leading defense contractors, and therefore a major recipient of our tax dollars and a corporation that profits from war.

A handsome red, white, and blue booklet-whose cover bears a moving photo of a helmet holding flag-stamped letters to a GI-contains the photos, bios, and book covers of thirteen well-published authors of fiction and poetry (some veterans of earlier wars, some from military families, many whose writing is principally about war) who will lead the workshops, and another smaller group of well-known writers who read excerpts from war-related texts or tips on writing on a promotional CD.

What we have here is a program that seems designed to be proof against all criticism, as if to raise any questions about it is to seem to target those deserving

soldiers and the writers who have signed on. But what if we look behind these unassailable shields? Are these returning troops once again being used as a shield against the scrutiny of the very policy which put them in harm's way in the first place? Will Operation Homecoming serve them? Will it serve poetry? Or is it designed to serve quite another purpose? 'The Defense Department,' said the Washington Post (April 20, 2004), 'believes the writing will reflect positively on military life. I don't have any concerns,' says Principle Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Charles S. Abell. We tend to remember those things which are good."

As a thirty-year veteran of the teaching of poetry, and an observer of the current chasm between public rhetoric and the language of experience, as well as the growing carnage, I read all this with incredulity and dismay. The sponsors, the context, the timing-how could it be more wrong? A military base? Soldiers still on active duty and under orders? Just returned from the violence and trauma of combat? Asked to write about those still raw experiences? Was this a context or a circumstance in which deep disclosure, or even reportage, could-or should-be invited? Are these writers qualified to pry open the doors to what may be scenes of inner desolation?

Bruce Weigl, a Bronze Star veteran of the Vietnam war, author of seven books of poetry, and former director of the MFA Program at Penn State, shares these concerns:

To expect young men and women who are just returned from a combat mission where they have seen and done and had done to them unspeakable things is to ask far too much of them. . . . As returning veterans, they are far too close to the war to trust their own immediate responses; they all need to come to terms with what they've been through and what they've seen, and then they'll be ready to tell the stories that no one wants to hear.

What is it like for a returning veteran to write under the aegis of the military, where language necessarily serves a far different purpose than it does for the poet? Jan Barry, also a poet and decorated Vietnam veteran, tells of his experience:

In 1964 I was appointed to West Point from the ranks after serving ten months in Vietnam. I was invited by upperclassmen at the military academy to write about my experiences for a student publication. I found it impossible to do. The whole mood at West Point was akin to a football team preparing for a big game against a rival team. I was stumped as to how to write, in that atmosphere, a serious reflection on life in a war zone of our own making. To find the space I needed to write more critically, I resigned from West Point and an intended military career. When I submitted my resignation, a kindly colonel called me into his office and told me a story about his brother, who had also wanted to be a writer and grew up in a military family. His father, a general, ordered the brother to stay in the military and write. 'You can stay in the Army and write official histories,' the colonel said enthusiastically. He could not conceive of the critical perspective I had acquired in Vietnam, in which official statements were often wildly unrelated to the facts in the field.

I have pulled from my shelf a slim volume of poems edited by Jan Barry, Larry Rottmann, and Basil T. Parquet in 1972, which was for me a touchstone in those war years, a way inside Vietnam's reality, as it was for many: *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*. It was a grassroots veterans volume, put together on Barry's kitchen table, dedicated to the children of Indochina, and published by 1st Casualty Press, named from the famous quote by Aeschylus in the fifth century b.c.: 'In war, truth is the first casualty.'

'[O]ne wonders at the shape of this generation's returning war narratives,' says Kevin Bowen, also a poet and Vietnam veteran, and Director of the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts, which has offered writing workshops to veterans since 1987. 'Will this war have its own Winning Hearts and Minds? Perhaps not, if Washington has its say.' In his protest against Operation Homecoming (which, by the way, borrows its name from the repatriation of American POWs at the end of the Vietnam war), he writes in the veterans online magazine *Intervention*: 'Beyond the language of self-help and therapeutic' aspects of writing, beyond the back-patting, it is not difficult to see in the project an effort to establish an official canon of writing from the century's first wars, neatly packaged, ready for mass distribution and classroom use.'

What's the rush here? Why doesn't the NEA help send discharged veterans to colleges and bona fide writing programs, investing public arts money to support their writing in educational settings, where, as Bowen says, 'it will be fostered over time and not immediately co-opted.' And give them the chance to develop some historical insight, and to contextualize experience in more than the blinding exigencies of the moment?

Indeed, this project appears to be an attempt to preempt the immediate (and even archival) record of this war by its combatants. It is well to remember here that the NEA is an arm of the government, its chairman and board political appointments by the administration. In the *Guardian* (April 20, 2004), Dana Gioia was quoted as saying: 'I have noticed a lot of similarities between the military world and the literary world. Both are highly specialized and highly professionalized. And when that happens, you tend not to see a lot outside your immediate world.' Perhaps Gioia was counting on this, thinking that other poets, less canny than he, and lost in a doze at the shuttered windows of their ivory towers, wouldn't notice the political ramifications of this project. And though he mentions in his eerily cheerful introduction every great epic of war from the

Iliad to War and Peace (works written long after the events), we might question whether it is literature that can be produced or even encouraged under such circumstances.

In that same glossy, glamorous booklet, each writer's page features a brief, enlarged, bold-face quotation from one of his or her books. It doesn't matter what the name of the author is since the following quote is lifted out of context and therefore from the frame of its meaning in the original narrative, and so can only be construed in its effect as a sound-bite in the context of Operation Homecoming. Here is the very first quotation:

He left a pause. He might have been considering telling her everything about himself. Then he said, 'Like most military people, I hate war. But there are tigers in the world, you know.'

The effect and purpose of these words in this context goes without saying. What does require pause is those tigers. When promoting a war, which means authorizing the killing of other human beings, it is necessary to use a language which robs them of their humanity. There are several ways this is done. One is by seeing them as members of another species-something bestial, primitive, predatory. Perhaps that is why most animals do not murder their own kind: they are not subject to this confusion. Another way, which is characteristic of military language, is to denature the enemy by the use of a detached, Latinate, and bloodless language, so that one 'neutralizes' opposing forces, or the burning, mutilation, and killing of civilians is masked as 'collateral damage.'

At the same time that the enemy's reality is demonized or neutralized (or both), the actions of one's own side, in military parlance, are redescribed in terms which reverse meaning, disowning the real harm that is being done: the US missions involving massive dropping of incendiary bombs over North Vietnam were called 'Sherwood Forest' and 'Pink Rose.' Poetry, which is

above all 'learning to call things by the right name,' has, therefore, goals incommensurate with the use of language by the military in the conduct of war.

'I just want to remember / the dead piled high behind the curtain,' writes the contemporary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. It is the poet's task, I too believe, to make us feel the full weight of the bodies hidden behind the rhetoric and the falsifying parlance, to embody truth, to remember the dismembered human form. 'For my enemy is dead,' wrote Walt Whitman, 'a man as divine as myself is dead.' 'It is difficult,' William Carlos Williams famously wrote, 'to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.' And I am taking that miserable dying just now as a literal and collective fact.

Once again we are at war; in the words of Yeats, 'the nightmare / Rides upon sleep.' We stand at what has been called by Lionel Trilling 'the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet,' not by choice-but by circumstance. As poets, we do not choose our subjects; the imagination is a force which can be invited, but it cannot be commanded. In fact, in those moments when we are poets (and we live many more when we are not), we must live, like Cicero in a poem by Gibbons Ruark, 'in that singular province that was never Caesar's.'

Returning at last to the first great war epic of the Western tradition, the Iliad, I remind us all that it is written from both sides, that the eye of the poet moves back and forth between the Greek camp and the city of Troy. There is no enemy: simply the ambition of Agamemnon, the lust of Paris, the wrath of Achilles, the laughter of the gods, the tragedy of war in which are 'hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls / of heroes.' The city of Troy is put to the torch, its women and children enslaved, and the epic ends, as all wars end, with a funeral pyre and a handful of bones.

It should be clear from what has been said that it is not the conjunction of poetry and soldiers which is problematic. On the contrary, sustained exposure to poetry might serve as one antidote to the violence and divisive language of war, and become the lifeline it has been for a number of Vietnam combat veterans who survived the postwar years, and whose words helped others to do the same. This project sadly mars this year's generous NEA literature grants, essential to so many small presses and writer's support groups. For this particular project arouses suspicion about its ultimate purpose-doubts fed by its feel-good rhetoric, its slick packaging, its inimical setting, its timing, its cozy insularity, the vested interests of its sponsors: the Pentagon and Boeing, and its disingenuous disclaimers that none of this will affect the selection of materials for the anthology which the NEA plans to widely disseminate.

'Most alarming to many of us,' writes Kevin Bowen, 'Operation Homecoming threatens to move the NEA into the business of supporting the generation of propaganda, a wartime exercise that is not part of its mission, and does writers, veterans, and the public a great disservice.' To which I say Amen.

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