



## Remembrance Sunday Service War, Literature, Love and Magnificence

13 November 2016  
Kate McLoughlin

*Micah 4: 1–5    Philippians 4: 6–9*

It's Remembrance Sunday, and I've got that helpless feeling again. This year it's 100 years since the Battle of the Somme. Now, there is no one still alive with personal memories of 1st July 1916, when some twenty thousand British and eight thousand German soldiers were killed.<sup>1</sup> But we can look up on-line the Roll of Honour of the 619 Trinity men (fellows, students and staff) who died in the First World War and learn a little about the six who were killed in action that day. Let's hear their names: Alan Clough, from Keighley, aged 21; George Dewhurst, from Knutsford, aged 24; Robert Gilson, from Harrow, aged 22; Charles Hartley, from Brookline, Massachusetts, age not given; Keith Robertson, from Melbourne, Australia, aged 27; Edmund Trouton, from Orange, New Jersey, aged 24.<sup>2</sup> And let's hear the name of another young man, killed at 27 in another war – Captain Hamayun Khan, winner of a Purple Heart and Bronze Star. Nowadays, the internet makes the wars of the past accessible as never before; museums are more user-friendly than ever; there are as many TV programmes as we have time to watch, as many histories as we have time to read. But it's Remembrance Sunday, and I've got that helpless feeling again – that feeling that we are very small, that war is very big and that remembering, while important, can sometimes seem very ineffectual.

War is very big, bigger than any one discipline can grapple with. We need political thinkers to steer us towards decency and amity. We need historians to remind us of what brought us to armed conflict in the past – and what helped us avoid it. We need lawyers to bring perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity to justice. We need philosophers to advise us how best individuals and communities can get along with each other. We need economists to work out how wealth can be shared most equitably. We need scientists and mathematicians to improve the quality of life of everyone on the planet, and to help us understand how to look after the planet itself. But what do we need literature for? What can poets, fiction-writers and playwrights do in the face of war?

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/01/the-battle-of-the-somme-as-it-happened-on-july-1-1916/>, accessed 5 November 2016.

<sup>2</sup> <http://trinitycollegechapel.com/media/filestore/general-documents/RollofHonourWWI.pdf>, accessed 5 November 2016.

Well, a lot of claims have been made. Some have argued that literature about armed conflict imposes some order on its subject and thereby renders it more comprehensible. That might be thought a good thing, or a bad. Others have pointed to literature's ability to keep the record, both for the self and for other people – those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves and those who were not there and need to be told. Still others have suggested that literature can give meaning to mass death, that it can memorialise. Yet others have noted that it can bring home the nature of battle to civilians, which might in turn smooth the re-entry of the veteran into peacetime society. The critic Gene Ray speculates that literature can be a means of processing trauma, a space 'for the work and play of mourning, for "acting out" and "working through"'.<sup>3</sup> It has been noted that literature is very well placed to act as a warning. And the largest claim of all: that literature can promote peace.

Can it? Can literature bring about peace? It seems unlikely that it can, given that we have so much of it – millennia's worth – and that war shows no sign of letting up. What would a literature be like, that could stop war? If such a literature existed, it would need certain qualities. It would be clear-eyed and purposeful. It would probably be messy. It would disconcert. It would do its best to convey the horror and the misery of armed conflict by whatever techniques it could find, and it would also discover a way to suggest how the horror and the misery might be avoided. It would have a tone of sorrow and of bravery. It might have to sugar the pill, even as it shocked. It would query whether there was redemption in the deaths. It would lament its own ineffectuality. It would find its task difficult and it would go off the point.

It still wouldn't succeed. Peace is elusive: ours is an age in which, as the theorist Nick Mansfield has written, the question 'why did we choose war instead of peace?' has been forever supplanted by 'what configuration of the peace-war complex embroils us now?'<sup>4</sup> In Kurt Vonnegut's searing and fantastical novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the movie-maker Harrison Starr says to Billy Pilgrim, 'You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books? I say, "Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?"'<sup>5</sup> Writers might as well attempt to move mountains.

But this morning, I'm not going to pursue the question of whether literature can stop war. What I want to do is tell you how, as I see it, literature might help us on a day like this, in times like these. I'm going to make two, overlapping suggestions, but we have to be careful. As the American writer and Vietnam war veteran Tim O'Brien warns us, 'If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.'<sup>6</sup> But O'Brien also says, 'this too is true: stories can save us'.<sup>7</sup> My two suggestions are as follows. The first is that war literature can show us how to be magnificent. The second – which is related – is that it can show us how to love.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory. From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Mansfield, 'War and its Other: Between Bataille and Derrida', *Theory & Event* 9.4 (2006), unpaginated.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* [1969] (London: Vintage, 2000), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* [1990] (London: Flamingo, 1991), 68.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, 221.

Magnificence. In 1821, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote an essay about how to be magnificent. The essay – now famous – is called ‘A Defence of Poetry’.<sup>8</sup> ‘The great secret of morals,’ says Shelley in this essay, is ‘a going out of our nature’. In other words, to be ‘greatly good’, we need to put ourselves in the place of others and try to see things from their point of view. To do this, we require excellent imaginations. Literature exercises our imaginations and this, like other forms of exercise, is strengthening. The example Shelley gives of how this works in practice is the earliest – some might say also the greatest – example of war literature in the Western canon: Homer’s *Iliad*. Homer’s first audiences, Shelley argues, would have wanted to be like Achilles, Hector and Odysseus, and, as they imitated their heroes’ friendship, patriotism and devotion to duty, would have come to see things from their perspective. Now Shelley doesn’t make the mistake of recommending that everybody should try to act like Achilles, Hector and Odysseus – one can only imagine the mayhem if we all carried on nowadays like Bronze Age warriors. But his general point holds. Literature has a special talent for showing us how to be magnificent, and it does so by reminding us that our own needs and setbacks are merely personal, minor inconveniences in what should be the big joint effort of guaranteeing every human being a fair shot at happiness.

War literature piles up the instances of people being magnificent. In amongst the killing, pain and loss, we glimpse acts of mercy; selfless bravery in rescuing, saving and protecting other human beings; and extraordinary sacrifices, both on the part of those at home waiting and on the part of those fighting for those who wait. Roger Cohen, a war correspondent for the *International Herald Tribune*, made a list of what he learned from war: ‘the fierceness of moral clarity’, ‘the quietness of courage’, ‘the indivisibility of integrity’ and ‘the importance of a single dissenting voice’.<sup>9</sup> His conclusion? ‘The head is useless without the heart. War teaches that.’ Let me quote again from Tim O’Brien. As I mentioned earlier, O’Brien is himself a war veteran. He was drafted into the United States Army and served from 1969 to 1970 in Vietnam, a sergeant in the 46th Infantry Regiment of the 198th Infantry Brigade. Here he is, writing about how war makes you feel magnificent:

After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. [...] You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self – your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. [...] You recognize what’s valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what’s best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost. [...] [Y]ou feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not.<sup>10</sup>

Imagine that feeling. It’s a feeling of openness, generosity, welcome. A feeling of great luck. A feeling of love. The title of Tim O’Brien’s piece is ‘How to Tell a War Story’. This title can be read in two ways: how to narrate a war story and how to distinguish a war story from other kinds of story. O’Brien’s advice is the same in both cases: you can tell a war story because it’s a love story.

---

<sup>8</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’ [1821], <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69388>, accessed 5 November 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Cohen, ‘Karadzic and War’s Lessons’, *International Herald Tribune* (24 July 2008), 6.

<sup>10</sup> O’Brien, 77–8.

This, then, is my second suggestion. War literature reveals and recommends love. I have in mind love of various kinds. The psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who has worked extensively with American veterans of the war in Vietnam, observes that armed combat calls forth 'a passion of care among men who fight beside each other'.<sup>11</sup> Comrades-in-arms show each other 'special gentleness and compassion'.<sup>12</sup> 'In times of war', wrote W.H. Auden in *The Age of Anxiety*, 'even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the whole world stands so desperately in need.'<sup>13</sup> Alongside and resembling this comradely love, there is the love of and for waiting families. There is the authorial love which manifests itself in the taking of pains to keep the record and to honour the dead.

And then there is love for the enemy. The Jewish-French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, a Second World War veteran and prisoner-of-war, was unconvinced by Kant's famous argument that reason can bring about peace, let alone perpetuate it. In his book *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1961, Lévinas assembled the arguments in support of his own conviction that love must precede reason – a love in which the sight of another's face is crucial. Seeing the Other's face is, in his view, a first step towards perceiving and embracing his otherness, and that is the beginning of not killing, of acceptance, of non-totality, of pluralism.

But armed conflict is less and less a matter of face-to-face encounters – nobody is fighting with swords any more. Here's where literature steps in. Literature, which is not subject to any physical laws, need obey no rules of evidence, is not even obliged to remain within the bounds of reason, *can* bring individuals face-to-face – can even resurrect the dead. Wilfred Owen does just this in a poem which many of you will know, 'Strange Meeting'. Owen wrote this poem just months before he died on active service in 1918, shot as the British attempted to bridge the Sambre canal less than a week before the Armistice. The speaker of 'Strange Meeting' imagines that he has escaped from battle down a tunnel to a place he recognises as Hell. Here he confronts a face 'grained' with 'a thousand pains', the face of a man he has killed:

'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'  
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.'<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone, 1995), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Shay, 47.

<sup>13</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* [1947] (New York: Random House, 1947), 111.

<sup>14</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments: Volume I: The Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus / The Hogarth Press, Oxford University Press, 1983), 148–9.

No animosity exists between these former enemies. Though it is too late now to resile from killing, the speaker makes a tacit exchange: for having caused this 'strange friend's' death, he will publicise his insights. More sorrowing than bitter, the poem stages the basic requirement for love: the embracing of otherness. Think what this kind of love – the love of one's enemy – requires. Putting one's own needs second. Great-heartedness. Courage. Owen and Lévinas and O'Brien and Shelley – they are not alone – are all making the same point: in the midst of war there is a kind of love that is also a kind of magnificence and a kind of magnificence that is also a kind of love.

It may not be enough. We live in frightening times. I mentioned in passing authorial love. Let me read again two lines from Owen's 'Strange Meeting'. 'By my glee might many men have laughed, / And of my weeping something had been left.' If only I had lived, in other words. If I had only lived, other people might have laughed and learned. Feel the aching regret of those lines, lines which contrive to turn hypothesis into yearning. 'What might have been' is the mode of much war literature, which mourns both the human cost of its subject and its own impotence. There is love in the 'if only' – ongoing, best-intentioned, helpless love. In the darkest of times, it is a love well worth having. Hear it sound in the last lines of 'Last Post', an elegy written in 2009 by the poet laureate Carol-Ann Duffy on the deaths of the last British veterans of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Duffy wistfully imagines a poetry that could reverse history:

You walk away; drop your gun (fixed bayonet)  
like all your mates do too—  
Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert—  
And light a cigarette.  
There's coffee in the square,  
warm French bread  
and all those thousands dead  
are shaking dried mud from their hair  
and queuing up for home. Freshly alive,  
a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd, released  
from History; the glistening, healthy horses fit for heroes, kings.  
You lean against a wall,  
your several million lives still possible  
and crammed with love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food.  
You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.  
If poetry could truly tell it backwards,  
then it would.

---

<sup>15</sup> Carol-Ann Duffy, 'Last Post' [2009], [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8175000/8175790.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8175000/8175790.stm), accessed 5 November 2016.