



Bio: Mihăilescu Clementina Alexandra, lecturer, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu; research fields: Stylistics, Cognitive Grammar, New Directions in British and American Studies.

## CLEMENTINA MIHĂILESCU

Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu (Romania)

post address: Romania, Sibiu, Bulevardul Victoriei no. 35, post code 550024;

e-mail: mihailescuclementina@yahoo.com

## Possessed of an echo of war but not a fate

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### Abstract

Background. The background of the paper is represented by the presentation of conflicting zones.

Problem. The aim consists in depicting the profound consequences of war events on modern society.

Material and Method. The methodology employed includes Bachelard, Cioran, Howard and Ricoeur's psychological and aesthetic contributions.

Results and Conclusions. In terms of results and conclusions our analysis will prove that the pragmatism of descriptions and the poetic power of imaginative transfigurations will transmit poetic messages non accusatory but stimulative as concerns the readers' awareness and apprehension of reality.

Modern American poetry, namely that written by James Dickey, Richard Hugo, Donald Justice, Anthony Hecht, Denise Levertov, William Meredith, Theodore Weiss and James Wright, reveals the pathos of “unaccommodated [Howard 1969: XI] selves. Most of the above-mentioned poets seem to be helplessly torn between their poems, regarded as creative instruments endowed with “the primary force of discovery” [Howard 1969: XII] and the world in which all of life's messy ontogeny, here specifically referred to as conflicting zones, is possible.

Since most American poets concerned with various types of conflicting zones were themselves personally involved in military events, a summary of the war issues detailed by them, will be introduced at the beginning of our paper in order to create a more coherent structure

for those preoccupied with this topic. For example, James Dickey was a veteran of Air Force service in World War II and also in the Korean War. Dickey poetically evokes the devastating consequences of WW II, not only focusing on the physical level but also on the spiritual and moral level of apprehension. Richard Hugo, another veteran of war, expands upon military conflicts in Italy during the WW II and the destruction of consciousness and sensibility. Donald Justice posits that violence is inside moving outwards, into the troubled historical environment during WW II. Denise Levertov, a civilian nurse, inspiringly comments upon the terrors of war and the dramatic experiences of surviving. William Meredith's war experience translate itself into denunciations of war's consequences such as alienation, isolation,

suffering. Theodore Weiss' war experience is rendered through the distressing description of wounded soldiers, the execution of prisoners. James Wright's implications with war issues explode in images where the landscape is the common ground for graves, for intense and contradictory memories.

The above mentioned summary of the personal experiences of the poets concerned with the war reveals their consciousness regarding the world contaminated and maculated by chaotic inhuman hysterias. For such issues regarding war to be properly commented upon Howard, Ricoeur, Cioran and Bachelard's aesthetics will be extensively employed.

As early as his first book entitled "Into the Stone" was written, he spoke of war as "the mighty head of military gold" [Howard 1976: 76]. For decoding the profound significance of such verses and for identifying the aesthetic coherence of various conflicting experiences depicted by different modern American poets, Cioran's triad "enunciation, denunciation and transfiguration" [Buciu 2005: 72] will be extensively employed.

Modern American poetry reveals rather loosely cast in the emblems of conflicts and quest the preoccupation with "the metamorphosis of the material memory and consciousness into the spiritual memory and consciousness" [Bachelard 2005: 12] (our translation). Such a transition or metamorphosis necessarily implies a movement outward upon a real world, and then, back inward. In "The Firebombing", for instance, James Dickey envisions in a waking dream a napalm raid upon Japan. Dickey denounces destruction in the image of the pilot working an "unimaginable and soundless destruction": "In a red costly blast / Flinging jelly over the walls" or in the image of "another Bomb" which "finds a home / And clings to it like a child."

Ironically, the poet himself is "cool and enthralled in the cockpit".

Turned blue by the power of beauty  
In a pale treasure-hole of soft light  
Deep in aesthetic contemplation ...  
It is this detachment  
The honored aesthetic evil  
The greatest sense of power in one's life  
That must be shed.

[Howard 1969: 94]

Such poetic instances, filled with beauty and death, self and circumstance, can also be interpreted as Dickey's yearning to transcend literature itself until the reader is separated from the writer by his own aesthetic response to such experiences and then reunited to him by a "shared recognition" [Howard 1969: 96] of their meaning.

"The Firebombing" is Dickey's heroic poetic enterprise which consists in depicting two significant temporal cells, according to Ricardau's terminology [Ricoeur 1984:

99]. The first cell refers to his self entrapped in a napalm raid, the other refers to his later prosaic life, worrying about his present day concerns such as his house "where the payments / for everything under the sun / pile peacefully up", or his responsibility:

All this and I am still hungry  
Still twenty years overweight, still unable  
To get down there or see  
What really happened  
[in: Howard 1969: 97].

Such temporal cells share in common the scheme of Dickey's self tormented by the failure, the incapacity or even the refusal to understand the burden of harm done by the "anti-morale raid". Such failure is dramatically encapsulated in the last two lines: "Absolution? Sentence? No matter, the thing itself is in that" [Howard 1969: 97].

Stevens, cited by Howard, contemplates the idea that most of the time a poet oscillates between "the thing as idea" and "the idea as thing" [Howard 1969: 245]. Howard encourages us to understand "*thing*" as a place, "a weather", that is a certain period of time, and the poet as "a man moving through them and keeping his eyes open". As concerns the *idea*, Howard regards it as "the recovery of meaning" [Howard 1969: 245] from a world which perpetually refuses direct access to it.

Richard Hugo seems to be that poet who has rendered special justice to recovering the meaning of what happened in Italy, during his wartime service. Puglia was Italy's least successful battle terrain, as, there "the bomb group was already employed by us" [Howard 1969: 243].

According to Ricardau's model, metaphorically speaking, Puglia can be interpreted as the first temporal cell. The second temporal cell is the newly visited Italy, 20 years after the event. Italy is still "a country where we never fail, grow old or die, but simply move unnoticed to the next cold town" [Howard 1969: 243]. Hugo aspires to comprehend the meaning of the bare rocks and barely fertile fields. When his ship gets to the Palermo harbor, Hugo notices a group of Sicilian emigrants, home again, and their faces all in tears make him reproach to himself:

You can't weep like them, can't pound the rail  
with love for this or any land.  
You never understood a cloudy north  
so how these tears or that syllabic sun?  
This rock that came at you for hours  
came at others twenty years ago  
in dread. You pass the bay  
where they invaded, saying it was wrong...  
Learn the names  
of streets or give them names to fight.  
You have five hours here. If here before

with hate, you walk a street called war  
and beg a man who was a beggar then  
now I have no gun, show me how to cry  
[Howard 1969: 243].

After those twenty years, visiting some Saracen ruins, the poet still speculates on military necessity. The picnic in the vicinity of ruins represents the second temporal cell charged with profound psychological connotations. Both temporal instances share in common Hugo's displaced self that is still lamenting for his wartime comrades and for all the war victims.

Military conflicts as the thing remembered is emotionally conjugated with the thing seen. Torn between Italy as a place and wartime as a significant moment in his life, Hugo moves through them, keeps his eyes open and this is what his outward and inward eye perceives:

...The sky  
is yellow, moving right and back  
away from fight toward the dark  
behind Vesuvius, the private war of sky  
always far away from what you are...  
[Howard 1969: 244].

After having enunciated the wartime service circumstances, after having denounced the destruction of both consciousness and sensibility by war, which reverberates in the verses "you can't weep like them" and "show me how to cry", the poetic impulse carries the poet inwards. There, past and present are unitarily perceived, and this makes Hugo's privation appear extremely credible and rich in meaning.

Exactly as Hugo, who celebrates the world's failures and defeats such as beauty, old age, displaced selves and death, Donald Justice's approach to such topics betrays his conviction that the violence is inside, moving outwards. He reveals both the historical and the emotional environment in the mode of timelessness:

Weary the soldiers go, and come back weary,  
Up a green hill and down the withered hill,  
And Jack from Joan, but they shall never marry...  
[Howard 1969: 254].

Defeat, separation, isolation, alienation, all emanate from the opposition "up a green hill" versus "down the withered hill"; their emotional charge arises from the terminal assonance of / i / in "weary", "hill" and "marry". These three words, an adjective, a noun and a verb, associated with the negative adverb "never" impress us with their insistence on the heroes' fate.

An evident change in the wording of military authority and transactions, with an eagerness to invoke some sort of ethical generalization is to be noticed in Anthony Hecht's verse: "while heroes die to maintain /

some parts of our existence clean / and incontaminate..." [Howard 1969: 172]. Such a poetic instance contains two powerful verbs "die" and "maintain" and two predicative adjectives "clean" and "incontaminate". The verse is powerful enough as it can be interpreted as "life experience" [Howard 1969: 172], not as a reaction or defense against experience.

The same loyalty to depicted and transfigured experience is to be noticed in Denise Levertov's poetry. She received "partial training and lots of experience as a civilian nurse" [Howard 1969: 294]. This accounts for her poetic contributions inspired from the years spent in zones of conflict.

The poem entitled "Terror" is Miss Levertov's account of the dramatic experience of surviving. She enunciates the terrors of war and, at the same time, she denounces the meaninglessness of such experiences which are nothing but "an ordeal upward through experience to knowledge":

Face-down; odor  
of dusty carpet. The grip  
of anguished stillness.

Then your naked voice, your  
head knocking the wall, sideways,  
the beating of trapped thoughts against iron.

If I remember, how is it  
my face shows  
barely a line?...

How did morning come, and the days  
that followed, and quiet nights?  
[Howard 1969: 295].

Her intense effort "to ascent inside herself" and to poetically interpret conflicting events betray her visionary and transfiguring potential. The poem called "Christmas 1944" reveals terrors, fears, restlessness which are somehow rhetorical, being outside the poet:

Come in, then, poverty, and come in, death:  
this year too many lie cold, or die in cold  
for any small room's warmth to keep you out.  
You sit in empty chairs, gleam in unseeing eyes;  
having no home now, you cast your shadow  
over the atlas, and rest in the restlessness  
of our long nights as we lie, dreaming of Europe  
[Howard 1969: 296].

And yet, besides the enunciation of war events and the denunciation of such atrocities, psychological transcendence, veiled as it is, is subtly alluded to through the intensification of momentary consciousness, in the poem called "At the Edge":

The gods die every day  
but sovereign poems go on breathing  
in a counter-rhythm that mocks  
the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power  
[Howard 1969: 300].

The emotional intensity of such lines betrays her attempt to reconcile herself with her own spirit and, in some other poems, with her own history, with "something forgotten for twenty years" [Howard 1969: 300]. The same thread of "Christmas 1944" is to be identified in "A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England". England, depicted twenty years before, represents, in Ricardau's terminology, the first temporal cell, which is a significant ground for understanding:

All the Ivans dreaming of their villages  
all the Marias dreaming of their walled cities,  
picking up fragments of New World slowly,  
not knowing how to put them together nor how to join  
image with image, now I know how it was with you...  
a child who traced voyages  
indelibly all over the atlas, who now in a far country  
remembers the first river, the first  
field, bricks and lumber dumped in it ready for building,  
that new smell, and remembers  
the walls of the garden, the first light  
[Howard 1969: 301].

Those lights which enchanted her on Regent Street are associated with different lights she sees twenty years later in New York. This poetic instance can be interpreted as the second temporal cell:

The lights change: the avenue's  
endless nave echoes notes of  
liturgical red  
[Howard 1969: 302].

These verses also reveal her self which released into the awareness so that she can control the movement of speech, through the verb "change", the shapes of speech, through the syntagm "endless nave", and the colors of speech, through the metaphorical image "liturgical red".

These steps can be metaphorically interpreted as the poet's inner boiling depicted as "passing into enlightenment, without a moment's pause" [Howard 1969: 303], as she beautifully says in "The Sorrow Dance".

William Meredith is another poet seriously committed to military transcriptions. He wrote beautifully articulated verses which are clearly submissive to his war experience:

Providence occurs to me;  
I will salvage these parts of a loud land

For symbol of war its simple wraths and duties,  
Against when, like ... sailors  
Disbanded into chaos ...  
I shall resume my several tedious parts,  
In an old land with people reaching backward like many curtains,  
Possessing a mystery beyond the mist of mountains  
Ornate beyond the ritual of snow  
[Howard 1969: 320].

In this poem entitled "Dover Beach" Meredith proves that he has assimilated the experience of war and has poetically transfigured it. Mutability and denunciation of war are rendered through "symbols of war", "loud land", "wraths and duties" and "disbanded into chaos". And yet, the poet strives to oppose mutability, casting linguistic charms against chaos through the poetic image of the people from an old land who reach backward "like many curtains", "possessing a mystery beyond the mist of mountains / Ornate beyond the ritual of snow" [Howard 1969: 320]. Meredith employs such a poetic strategy as if he wanted to assure his readers that words are not a medium "to record life, but to restore life to order" [Howard 1969: 324].

In the poem entitled "Notes for an Elegy", the loss of an airman is dealt with in terms of duty and reconciliation with public war. This navy flyer, though alienated, discovers equilibrium and determination in his tactical exercises, which unfortunately ended in death.

But for your car, jeweled and appointed all for no delight,  
But for the strips that scar the islands that you need,  
But for your business, you could make a myth.  
Though you are drawn by a thousand remarkable horses  
On fat silver wings with a factor of safety of four,  
And are sutured with steel below and behind and before,  
And can know with your fingers the slightest unbalance of forces,  
Your mission is smaller than Siegfried's, lighter than Tristan's,  
And there is about it a certain undignified haste.  
Even with flaps there is a safe minimum;  
Below that the bottom is likely to drop out  
[Howard 1969: 321].

If Meredith developed from intolerance towards a reconciliation with the public war, Theodore Weiss detaches himself from that sort of poetry which was "his stay against chaos" [Howard, 1969: 556] and becomes more concerned with the others' suffering and despair.

"Gunsight" dramatically records the emotional states and memories of a wounded soldier who is undergoing surgery. It is the poet's version of stoic acceptance of death:

Some things – the crag, the granite sea, the slug,  
This mouth that grinds incessantly in you –



cannot be turned into the human. All  
that we can do is try, while we are men,  
to meet them humanly...

[Howard 1969: 564].

What makes this piece of poetry distinctive is the fact that war is regarded as an individual's "normative activity" and, as such, man is put in relation with his past childhood, agonies of school, sport, hunting, reaching the climax in the "brutality" and "boredom" of "soldiering itself". Unexpectedly, colors are related to objects:

Remember me and these,  
but locally, like lilac, bunched-out grapes,  
and in conspiring of wind and sea

[Howard 1969: 564].

"These" has been associated by Howard with an emotionally overcharged speech delivered by the dead soldier's mother, with the execution of prisoners of war and with an intense impression of "ultimate outrage and ultimate endurance", all metaphorically rendered within the poem.

High emotion and great exactitude resound in the last verses of this poem, focused on the last moments in the life of the wounded and dying soldier:

Soon, the window thawed, its frost  
like mountain flowers strewn upon these day-  
heaped sheets, the world, barefoot in my eyes,  
as walking to and from my bed, once more  
begins

[Howard 1969: 566].

The earth knows how to "handle the great dead" and the living need only to seek for love "underfoot" as, another poet, James Wright posits in the following lines:

Walking here lonely and strange now, I must find  
A grave to prod my wrath  
Back to its devotions

[in Howard 1969: 578].

It can be the grave of the cheated, the weak, the dispossessed or of the dead soldiers. Past and present, outer and inner visions, the latter approached by Howard as "vision of landscape" and "landscape of vision" [Howard 1969: 577] respectively abound in the poetry of most of the poets dealt with within this paper. As such, James Wright focused on "the perpetual savagery of graves" which can be interpreted via Wallace Stevens, cited by Howard. He calls such experiences "a happening in space and the self that touched them both at once and alike" [Howard 1969: 576]. Landscape, the common ground for the graves, is directly depicted by Wright in his last book "Shall We Gather at the River" as follows:

... things that lured me to decay:  
The ground's deliberate riches, fallen pears,  
Bewildered apples blown to mounds of shade...

[Howard 1969: 577].

On the other hand, the inner ground full of internalized emotional accents is present in the verses:

...shattered hillsides of yellow trees  
In the autumn of my blood where the apples  
Purse their wild lips and smirk knowingly  
That my love is dead

[Howard 1969: 578].

It is the earth, the metaphorical equivalent of our destiny, that binds the two visions (inner and outer) irrevocably into life, thought into action, victory into remorse, all elements into their apparent opposites, claims Howard. The binding of the above-mentioned elements into the apparent opposites together with the merging of the retrospective experiences of war with their present connection and moral implications can and probably will diminish the fear caused by war. Moreover, this binding will push us into learning precious lessons from it. They are: the lesson of learning how to recover meaning, how to never forget the wartime comrades and, by extension, the war victims, how to move upward through experience to knowledge, how to restore life to order, how to evolve from intolerance towards a reconciliation with the public war and, finally, how can one surpass personal vulnerabilities and become enlightened.

The modern world offers lots of instances of dividing in order to conquer, of doubling in order to recreate oneself. Bachelard claims that the creative mind can accomplish the unified self by turning the philosophy of not into the philosophy of yes through art [Bachelard 2005: 12]. Only art can afford occasions for such transcendence, such embrace of otherness, such resolution of opposites (life and death, hatred and love). Art relates opposites "to freedom, to our life course, to eternity" [Howard 1969: 484].

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## Owładnięci echem wojny, ale nie przeznaczenia

**Słowa kluczowe:** przemoc, strefy konfliktu, strefy kontaktu, świadomość, śmierć, wyobcowanie, przemienienie

### Abstrakt

Tło. Tło artykułu stanowi przedstawienie dramatycznego i bardzo napiętego okresu w historii ludzkości, a mianowicie II wojny światowej.

Cel. Celem pracy jest zbadanie świadomości i wrażliwości kilku amerykańskich poetów dotyczących stref konfliktu w czasie wojny w przeszłości i ich głębokie konsekwencje dla współczesnego społeczeństwa w teraźniejszości. Owe konsekwencje są relacjonowane zarówno pod względem analizy pamięci materialnej, jak i duchowej oraz świadomości w odniesieniu do doświadczeń wojennych. Taka metoda badania zostaje rozwinęta na podstawie dowodów materialnych doświadczeń

wojennych (bomby, naloty, ataki, terror, strach), ale także od „wspólnego rozpoznania” problemu i wniosków z nich płynących.

Materiał i metody. Zastosowana metodologia obejmuje koncepcje Emila Ciorana dotyczące wyrażenia, wypowiedzenia i przemienienia, koncepcje Howarda „krajobrazu widzenia” i „wizji krajobrazu”, oraz estetykę Ricoeura i Bachelarda.

Wnioski. Pod względem wyników i wniosków analiza niuansów i głębokiego zrozumienia zagadnień wojennych zrealizowanych przez kilku poetów amerykańskich wykazuje, że taki poetycki wkład może nie być oskarżycielski w swoim przesłaniu. Ich utwory z pewnością zmniejszają strach przed wojną przez retrospektywę obecnych połączeń i konsekwencje wydarzeń wojennych, a wyciągnięte z nich wnioski i przekształcająca moc ich poetyckiej wyobraźni mają tworzyć pamięć dosłownie i semiotycznie nazwaną „echem”, a nie „losem”.