

The Other War Poets

Easter 1916, and the Rebellion breaks out in Dublin, as a group of poets fight for Independence for Ireland. But if, as Yeats claimed, every poet is more of his time than of his place, what were the contemporaries of Pearse and MacDonagh doing in other European countries? Like the 1916 poets' Irish colleagues, Tom Kettle and Francis Ledwidge, many of them were wearing uniforms on the various European front lines.

One contributor to the pioneering German Expressionist magazine *Der Sturm* wrote to the editor from the Belgian trenches, of how he dreamed of throwing not grenades but copies of the magazine over the trench into the British lines, to show them what was really going on in Berlin. The sentiment is admirable, but I suspect German poetry might have received the same welcome as it still does in the Anglo-Saxon world a century later. Somehow the term 'War Poets' never seems to include the men who wore the French, German, Austrian, Italian and Russian uniforms.

As General Maxwell engaged in practical poetry criticism, another kind of rebellion was going on all over Europe, not just in poetry, but in music and the visual arts. The unprecedented carnage of the First World War was having a devastating effect on the minds of young men in France, Germany, Austria and Russia. The old order, the old bourgeois world, was dying, and the inherited forms of art now seemed redundant. Simultaneously with the Easter Rebellion, a group of young writers and artists came together in Zurich to form the Cabaret Voltaire. Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Hugo Ball, and later Kandinsky and Picabia gave birth to a movement called Dada. From now on art would be stripped back to basic components and re-evaluated. If poetry could not express the horrors and absurdity of modern mechanised slaughter, nonsense sounds and absurd conjunctions seemed the only response. As Pearse *et al* were entering the GPO, Hogo Ball was going on stage wearing a strange costume and chanting:

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla
großiga m'pfa habla horem
egiga goramen

poetry which was basically nonsensical, in every European language. It seemed the only sane response to the war. Pre-war Vienna had been called 'a laboratory for the end of the world', but it was in Zurich that European culture was being taken apart. Another resident of Zurich at that time, of course, was James Joyce. In Vienna, the composer Arnold Schoenberg who was experimenting with atonality said that he was doing to classical music what the German army was doing to France. Joyce might have said the same about the English novel. Likewise the visual artists in Dada gave up representational painting and turned to collage and marginal forms of art. They were hugely influential on the course of 20th century art, and often seen as a precursor to postmodernism.

By Easter 1916, however, the main German-language poet of the war was already dead. Georg Trakl was a neurotic pharmacist from Austria who was serving as a medical orderly on the Galician front in 1914. Unable to deal with the ninety wounded men left in his care, he killed himself with a cocaine overdose. His dark, intense poetry is some of the greatest of the century, like the poem 'Grodek':

At evening the woods of autumn are full of the sound

Of the weapons of death, golden fields

And blue lakes, over which the darkening sun

Rolls down; night gathers in

Dying recruits, the animal cries

Of their burst mouths.

His work would have a huge influence on Expressionism and future generations of German poets, like Rainer Maria Rilke, but also Americans like Robert Bly and James Wright.

One of the most fascinating figures in twentieth century poetry was Guillaume Apollinaire. Of obscure background, his real name was Guglielmo de Kostrowitsky, and he was born in Rome to a Polish courtesan and an unknown father. By the outbreak of war he had become one of the leading French poets. He is credited with coining the term Cubism to describe the work of his artist friends, like Pablo Picasso, and in 1917, he first used the term Surrealism to describe the work of the composer Erik Satie. Apollinaire rhapsodised the modern city, and modern technology, smashing the old forms of poetry in works like 'Zone', later brilliantly translated by Samuel Beckett. Paris was full of innovative art, and the new forms of tango and cabaret thrived in the city, and would set the tone for the great artistic blossoming in that city in the 1920s. Apollinaire joined the army in 1914, and as an artillery officer fought in Verdun, was wounded, and died in 1918, but not before writing a book of formally-innovative poetry inspired by his experiences, called Calligrammes.

Apollinaire's war poetry is remarkable for its dead-pan approach, as in the poem 'There is...'

There is this German prisoner carrying his machine-gun across
his shoulders
There are men on earth who've never fought in the war
There are Hindus here who look with astonishment on the
occidental style of campaign
They meditate gravely upon those who've left this place
wondering whether they'll ever see them again
Knowing as they do what great progress we've made during this
particular war in the art of invisibility

Yeats famously dismissed the English war poets like Wilfred Owen as 'all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick' and the contrast with writers like Apollinaire is striking. Like them Apollinaire was appalled by the horrors of trench warfare, but this is tempered by a fascinated delight in the technology and scale, and the sheer newness of the experience. In this he resembles the Italian Futurist Marinetti, and Trakl's patron, the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who spent his inheritance on new guns for his artillery unit, in which he served with distinction. The only equivalent in the Anglo-Saxon world was another artillery officer, the Canadian painter and writer Wyndham Lewis, who founded Vorticism, often described as the only modernist art movement in these isles.

Poetic revolutions, as well as political ones, were also taking place in other European cities, like Warsaw, Madrid and St. Petersburg. Now that we have commemorated the 1916 Rising and are in the midst of commemorating Irish participation in the First World War, we should not lose sight of the fact that what was happening in the publishing houses, studios, cabarets and cafes of Europe is just as much part of our cultural heritage.