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Poetic Propaganda and the Provincial Patriotism of "In Flanders Fields"

Can pro-war propaganda ever be considered good art? Can good art ever be used as propaganda? Questions like these have resurfaced recently after a decade or two of quiescence. Just this past week, for instance, in a fascinating essay in *The New Yorker* on the forthcoming movie *Jarhead*, Adam Gopnik has written that Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, considered by many to be one of the finest anti-Vietnam war films ever made, is used as "war pornography" by soldiers and would-be soldiers. One year ago, in the October 2004 issue of *Poetry*, Eleanor Wilner voiced serious concerns about the NEA's "Operation Homecoming," a writing program for veterans of the war in Iraq partly funded by the Boeing Corporation that will soon result in an anthology of writing by soldiers. Wilner ended her essay by saying "Amen" to author Kevin Bowen's use of the "p-word" that isn't "poetry": "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." NEA chairman Dana Gioia responded, "I don't think that Operation Homecoming in any sense is propaganda. I imagine that we'll probably have something in the book that will make everybody unsettled no matter what their politics are, because that is the reality of the situation. But what we're getting at is really the truth of these events as individuals saw them moment by moment."

[Title slide] [2nd slide: text of poem, with audio if possible] In thinking about these questions, we might want to consider one of the most famous propagandistic poems of all time. John McCrae's rondeau "In Flanders Fields," first published anonymously in the December 8, 1915 issue of the London illustrated magazine *Punch*, was a tremendous popular phenomenon in World War One. Its author was a Canadian doctor, Scottish by birth, who had served in the Boer War of 1899-1902; he died in 1918, just before the war ended, of pneumonia. Although it is not clear who first singled out the poem for attention, by 1917 "In Flanders Fields" was so well known that one famous Canadian Victory Bonds poster and billboard could simply allude to it. [3rd slide: Victory Bonds poster] That particular Victory Bonds campaign had been meant to raise \$150 million; instead it raised \$400 million, and the poster's artist, Frank Lucien Nicolet, was awarded a prize by the Canadian government. At least a dozen songs based on the poem appeared between 1917 and 1919. "Reply poems" also proliferated. Most famously, after a fundraising campaign for the American Legion [check this], the Flanders poppy became an instantly recognizable symbol of mourning for the dead of the Great War, worn by citizens of Canada and Britain every November 11, Remembrance Day. This campaign had been founded by Moina Michael, a teacher at the University of Georgia, who had been enormously and instantaneously moved by an illustrated copy of the poem that appeared in the November 1918 *Ladies' Home Journal* [4th slide: LHJ image], just as the war was ending.

Despite or more likely because of its immense popularity, "In Flanders Fields" has often been disregarded or harshly judged by literary scholars. Notably, in his well-known work *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell writes that "words

like *vicious* and *stupid* would not seem to go too far" to describe the final stanza of the poem, which calls for its readers to "take up our quarrel with the foe." Fussell also avers that "indeed it could be said that the rigorously regular meter with which the poem introduces the poppies makes them seem already fabricated of wire and paper," even though the poem's meter is by no means clumsy, varying through caesura and enjambment (249). Fussell nevertheless makes an interesting point about the implications of the poppy as a choice of symbol; in Fussell's argument, the image of the poppy serves to link McCrae's poem with the work of the fin-de-siècle Decadents:

It would be a mistake to imagine that the poppies in Great War writings got there just because they are actually there in the French and Belgian fields.[...] For half a century before the fortuitous publicity attained by the poppies of Flanders, this association with homoerotic love had been conventional, in works by Wilde, Douglas, the Victorian painter Simeon Solomon, John Addington Symonds, and countless others. (247-8)

Fussell sees "the conception of soldiers as lovers" in the lines "Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved and were loved, and now we lie / In Flanders fields"; such references serve to link the poem only too firmly, in Fussell's view, to "Victorian male sentimental poetry" (248).

Fussell does not discuss the fact that the poem is a rondeau, though this lends weight to his point that the poem draws on the Wildean aesthetics of the eighteen-eighties and -nineties. The rondeau and other French forms had become very popular in *vers-de-société* of Gosse, Dobson, Swinburne, and others at the end of the nineteenth century after the revival of medieval *trouvère* forms in French poetry. [5th slide] Those who

admired the poem and co-opted it for use as propaganda, however, did not recognize the poem's form. Medieval and Renaissance fixed-form rondeaus were of ten, thirteen, or fifteen lines; in the nineteenth century, the post-Romantics (including Banville in his *Petit traité de poésie française*) overwhelmingly preferred the fifteen-line scheme shown on the slide. McCrae's poem, like the rondeaus of post-Romantics such as Banville and Dobson, adheres precisely to this scheme, whereas the scheme of Moina Michael's 1918 reply poem "We Shall Keep the Faith" is only somewhat similar: [NEXT SLIDE]

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet -- to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead.

Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields. (Michael 3)

The scheme of Michael's poem is abbcd eeffggR gghhR; it is a form based essentially on stanzas of rhymed couplets with a single hemistich appended to each stanza. With its three top-heavy stanzas of varying length, it looks like "In Flanders Fields," but it is almost as different in structure as it is in tone, diction, meter, and sense.

Another notable example of ignorance of the rondeau with respect to "In Flanders Fields" came in 1919, when a posthumous collection of McCrae's poems was published. A biographical essay appended to *In Flanders Fields, and Other Poems* explained at length that "In Flanders Fields" was a highly original variety of sonnet. Sir Andrew Macphail, a college friend of McCrae's who had also been a military officer, argued that the (supposedly) unusual form is proof of McCrae's originality [NEXT SLIDE] The rondeau, so far from being "a new mode of expression in verse," as Macphail called it, was highly old-fashioned in 1915, recalling the London society verse of the eighties and nineties. The form of "In Flanders Fields" shows that its author is writing from the cautious margins rather making daring forays from the safe center of arts and letters; in 1915 London, Ezra Pound was moving from Imagism to Vorticism at the height of high modernism. To be Canadian was always, necessarily, to be provincial, and this often expressed itself in outdatedness.

The scholar Thomas B. Vincent addresses the question of why the heroic ideal survives in the work of McCrae and other Canadian poets of the Great War when British

poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen abandoned that ideal; he attributes this difference chiefly to Canada's emerging nationhood: [NEXT SLIDE] In this argument, McCrae's poetry defines itself as Canadian by defining itself against British poetry, but it might be more accurate to say that McCrae's poetry defines itself as Canadian by defining itself with pre-war poetry and values. McCrae's values, like his poetic forms, were just behind the curve of nations more secure in their nationhood.

Still, when compared with the typical rondeau in Gleeson White's 1887 anthology *Ballades and Rondeaux, Chants Royal, Sestinas, Villanelles &c*, "In Flanders Fields" looks remarkably modern. "The Sweet, Sad Years," by Rev. Charles D. Bell, D. D., for instance, begins "The sweet sad years; the sun, the rain, / Alas! too quickly did they wane" and continues in the typical key of a pleasurable romantic melancholy expressed in end-stopped lines, archaic diction, and inverted syntax (153). And some modernists thought the poem had considerable value. When *In Flanders Fields, and Other Poems* was reviewed in the July 1919 issue of *Poetry* along with several other war-themed works, Alice Corbin Henderson recognized "In Flanders Fields" as a rondeau. This, she considered, was a flaw--but otherwise, her judgment was far different from that of more recent critics. [NEXT SLIDE] Fred Crawford, in his 1988 book *British Poets of the Great War*, writes, "That the poem's closing seems unworthy of its beginning results from two abrupt shifts--the change in tone to the demand and threat of the last six lines and the use of chivalric imagery and diction [...] outside the pastoral tradition for which the reader has been prepared" (38). Crawford seems to resent what is after all nothing but a standard *volta* in the third stanza, finding the turn both unconvincing and offensive, and the more so because the first two stanzas of the poem seem to promise a fully modernist take on

the Great War. As Vincent writes, "Indeed, the narrative voice of the poem has some disturbing similarities to that of Eliot's 'Hollow Men' " (169). Vincent, like Crawford and Fussell, places the poem in the pastoral tradition, but because none of these critics discuss the rondeau form, they all miss the point that the poem is most influenced by the faux-pastoral and decidedly chivalric "tradition" of late-Victorian London and Paris. The false pastoral of the "French forms" becomes, even if unintentionally, highly appropriate for the false pastoral of the battlefield, and one of the chief points of "In Flanders Fields" is that pastoral conventions simply cannot be applied any longer.

One of the most interesting and most modern aspects of the poem, I would also argue, is the very "demand and threat" that Crawford recoils from. Barely buried in "In Flanders Fields" is the true engine of war. The poem appeals only apparently to Victorian sentimental chivalric values such as honor and loyalty: ultimately, it appeals to fear. We do not go to war because we are righteous, or even angry; we go to war because we are afraid. And war does not and cannot conquer fear, because, being disembodied, it is unkillable. It is also our own, with us always, not "out there." [REFER BACK TO LHJ IMAGE] The central image in the final stanza of "In Flanders Fields" is of a spectral vengeance carried out by "our" own dead that is much more menacing than any merely human foe. The World War One era readers of the poem were no doubt glad to purchase protection from such a threat by buying indulgences in the form of Victory Bonds and British Legion poppies.