“Im no Wilfred Owen, darling”

An unusually large number of poems written by the poets of World War II refer to earlier wars or make intertextual allusions to war poems by poets of previous generations. The most important one, which will resound throughout this book, is a line culled from a Civil War poem, “The March into Virginia,” by Herman Melville, which Robert Lowell adopted in his World War II poem “Christmas Eve under Hooker’s Statue.” “All wars are boyish,” Lowell quotes from “The March into Virginia,” but he adjusts Melville’s phrase by adding “but we are old.” The quotation that Lowell uses exemplifies his generation’s awareness of writing within a tradition of war poetry, and suggests, as Lorrie Goldensohn has argued, that the World War II generation of poets looked back “in extreme self-consciousness,” measuring “its own perceptions and accomplishments against that of another.”

The poems that this generation wrote about the war in Vietnam will be explored later, but this chapter traces which wars, war poems, and war poets from the past are alluded to by the middle generation, and it explores the reasons why so many wrote intertextual war poems. The poets of World War II were certainly not unique in their reliance on their predecessors. “In the history of poetry,” as James Anderson Winn writes in *The Poetry of War*, “even the most original poems depend on past practice, building older forms and ideas into their texture.” Virgil’s *Aeneid* consciously builds on Homer’s *Iliad*, and during the First World War Edmund Blunden, for instance, quotes a line from Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in “Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau, July, 1917,” and Owen’s “Exposure” echoes the opening line of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” British poets of World War II—for instance, Keith Douglas, John Jarmain, and Alun Lewis—were equally aware “of a sense of tradition,” as Dawn Bellamy has shown. The Vietnam War poets Doug Anderson and Yusef Komunyakaa also wrote war poems
inspired by Homer, but their generation of war poets was generally less allusive than their World War II predecessors. What distinguishes the American poets of the Second World War is that they nearly all wrote intertextual war poems and that these poems all revolve around the poets’ incapacity, unwillingness, or reluctance to take on the masculine challenge to be soldiers.

Like many other poets of the Second World War, Robert Lowell published several poems about the First World War and the Civil War, which were historically, geographically, or mentally closest to them. Lowell may have been the most historically minded poet of his generation, but Alan Dugan, who was an engine mechanic for a B-29 in the Pacific during the Second World War, wrote most significantly about other wars. Dugan also penned seemingly offhand poems about more ancient wars, drawing on Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the medieval German epic poem *The Song of the Nibelungs*. In these poems Dugan relates war to masculinity and tries to make understandable why men become or stay warriors. Rather than talk directly about his own experiences during World War II as most others did, Dugan often chooses parody as a way of addressing topics that arose from his involvement in that war, as he acknowledged in an interview: “One of the things I think about constantly is the relation between the old dynasties and the nature of imperialisms, so it’s given me a way to play back and forth with time. Given that historical bias, I think I can talk about modern armies accurately in terms of a Roman army or Athenian army or Spartan army. And it’s very useful to me to be able to acknowledge the fact that there is a past, because in the United States of America by its nature, the past is in a constant process of destruction. Most Americans pretend there isn’t a past at all.”

“So Speech for Aeneas” is a case in point. In this short interior monologue Aeneas comments on his decision—which Virgil details in Book IV of his *Aeneid*—to leave his lover, Dido, behind in Carthage when told by the gods that he has more important civic duties to attend to. Whereas Virgil sees Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido as a personally difficult but a publicly justified course of action for the greater good of the Roman Empire that he goes on to found, Dugan has his doubts. Dugan’s Aeneas is not the troubled and love-smitten soldier of Virgil, but rather a coarse man who concludes that “an oecumenical society / is more important than matrimony.” The tone of “Speech for Aeneas” is ironic throughout. Virgil’s verbose hexameters are replaced by Dugan’s loose iambic pentameter with silly rhyming couplets that ridicule the ease and complacency with which Aeneas takes his decision: “so we sailed on the earliest possible tide / and she went and committed suicide.” The vulgar and clichéd diction that Dugan’s Aeneas uses—“a roll in the hay is good for you” and “a great queen and a swell
dish”—is reminiscent of the slang a soldier from the 1940s would use and a far cry from Virgil’s formal and dramatic language.9

“Speech for Aeneas” is a parody of Virgil’s epic poem, but not just for comic effect. “Parody is another way of dealing with tradition,” as Winn has claimed: “By retaining some parts of the original and distorting others, the writer of parody reveals the weaknesses of the original and gains an indirect way of expressing his own views.”10 In “Speech for Aeneas” but also in “Stentor and Mourning,” Dugan tries to expose a type of masculine figure that Western culture has spawned from its beginning and which has held sway well into the twentieth century. “Stentor and Mourning” is also an interior monologue spoken by a foot soldier who serves under Stentor, a Greek herald during the Trojan War as mythologized in The Iliad, and whom Dugan presents as the epitome of military manliness. Robert Fitzgerald—a poet of Dugan’s generation—translated Homer’s description of Stentor as follows: His “brazen lungs could give a battle shout / as loud as fifty soldiers.”11 While the historical and mythical backdrop of “Stentor and Mourning” is taken from The Iliad, Dugan’s poem feels remarkably contemporary. Dugan deliberately uses several anachronisms—alluding, for instance, to “artillery over the hill” or Stentor’s “captain’s football voice”—that clearly do not belong to Greek antiquity.12

These incongruities are humorous and give “Stentor and Mourning” a light and breezy tone, but they also emphasize that Dugan’s poem has a contemporary American relevance, as the football reference suggests. “Stentor and Mourning” shows by historical analogy how cultures make men out of boys and soldiers out of civilians, and indirectly how Dugan himself became a soldier during World War II. “Soldiers fear remarks / more than probably mutilation,” and they fight for “good opinion” more than for “a buddy’s safety” or for beautiful women like Helen of Troy.13 Dugan’s emphasis on how a cultural consensus on masculinity shapes the conduct of soldiers, and the sorrow and grief that this enforced behavior occasions, makes “Stentor and Mourning” a prototypical American poem of World War II. Like Dugan himself during the war, his speaker longs to be brave enough to rebel against society’s norms of masculinity, but he does not dare to.

Dugan’s reaction to the medieval German epic poem The Song of the Nibelungs (or Richard Wagner’s adaptation of the saga) is titled “On Shields. Against World War III.” This poem shows more explicitly than either “Speech for Aeneas” or “Stentor and Mourning” why Dugan wrote intertextual war poems. More abrasive than even “Speech for Aeneas,” Dugan belittles this heroic saga and insults Siegfried, its principal hero:

Ah what bastards they all were, and are, those heroes of the Nibelungenlied,
echt krauts, liars and fancy dressers, 
robbers of the peasants for mere money 
and cowards, too. Even their greatest, 
strongest warrior, that Siegfried, 
is afraid to fight honestly: he has 
to wear a cape of invisibility and 
impregnable skin-armor to win honor. 
What bullshit. Worse than Hitler, a pure, lying, 
murderous slob.14

Dugan hints at how Siegfried bathed himself in a slain dragon’s blood, making him invulnerable, and how he helps Gunther defeat Brünhilde by wearing a cloak that makes him invisible.

The myth of Siegfried fascinated the American poets of World War II. William Meredith refers to it in “June: Dutch Harbor,” and Jarrell used the name Siegfried in one of his war poems as well.15 In fact, “Siegfried” is Jarrell’s only war poem in which he gives one of the flyboys he describes a fictitious name; all the other airmen he dramatizes in his poems remain nameless. “Jarrell’s tone,” as Thomas Travisano has pointed out, “is cool, distant, sober, and dreamlike—apparently impersonal and hardly Wagnerian.”16 The insecure, vulnerable gunner in Jarrell’s poem who realizes that he is “in particular dispensable / As a cartridge” is thus in no way like the unflinching Germanic warrior, making Siegfried’s name highly ironic.17 Dugan’s parody, however, is direct and comical while Jarrell’s take-off is less obviously connected to Wagner and more tragic.

Of Dugan’s three intertextual war poems, “On Shields. Against World War III” is the only one that refers explicitly to World War II by arguing unreasonably that Siegfried and his gang are “worse than Hitler.”18 The title of Dugan’s poem indicates that, like “Stentor and Mourning,” this historical poem has a contemporary relevance. Veneration of heroically masculine types like Siegfried can lead to new wars, as they hold a perpetual appeal for boys and men, even to the poet himself, as the poem’s last two lines concede: “That Siegfried is your hero, you cowards, / and I, too, have to acknowledge his nobility.”19 Dugan finds exalted and outstanding qualities in Siegfried, even though he hates to admit it.

John Ciardi is more explicit than Dugan in addressing his own experiences in his intertextual poem “To Lucasta, About That War.” The title of Ciardi’s poem alludes to Richard Lovelace’s most famous poem, “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars.”20 The tone of Ciardi’s poem is from the beginning much more somber than the boisterous and insolent farewell to his lover by the seventeenth-century English poet, soldier, and Royalist. Lovelace is more than glad to exchange Lucasta for “honor” on the battlefield,
replacing her with “a new mistress” he is chasing; the enemy.\textsuperscript{21} “I was mostly bored,” Ciardi reports instead, voicing how many poets of World War II experienced the war, as Paul Fussell has detailed.\textsuperscript{22} Whereas Lovelace and his early modern contemporaries considered war a rite of passage that could distinguish a man from his peers, Ciardi and his fellow poets felt no urgency to excel as soldiers: “With reasonably-honorable and with humanly-mixed motives I did what I could of what had to be done, griped as much as everyone else while it was going on, and ran for my civilian clothes the minute I had my ruptured duck,” Ciardi later reported about his years in service. He did his duty reluctantly, but was ecstatic when he got that much-coveted insignia of an eagle inside a wreath signaling to himself and the rest of the world that he was an ex-soldier: “The minute I zipped up those pleated slacks I was out of it and it was over.”\textsuperscript{23}

Ciardi does not say that he is immune from using women, however. As if he is hiding something he hardly dares to admit, Ciardi’s diction becomes fairly impenetrable midway through his poem when he appears to be describing a brothel visit:

\begin{quote}
I did, and won’t
deny several (or more) pig-blind

alleys with doors, faces, dickers,
    which during, the ships slid
    over the hump where the packs hid.
And talking voodoo and snickers
    over the edge of their welts, I did
    what I could with (they called them) knickers;

and it was no goddamn good,
    and not bad either.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Without specifying what was hiding in the alleyway and why he was bargaining, Ciardi’s suggestive sexual diction and his indirect confession that he has wronged Lucasta, his girl on the home front, hint at his unfaithfulness. Unlike Lovelace, Ciardi has moral scruples about his “inconstancy” as he reports about it reluctantly and ambiguously.\textsuperscript{25} His adulterous behavior was “no goddamn good” and yet “not bad either.”

In the last lines Ciardi tries to account for his sexual indiscretions by addressing Lucasta directly:

\begin{quote}
and you
    were variously, vicariously, and straight and with kinks,
    raped, fondled, and apologized to—
    which is called (as noted) war. And it stinks.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}
Ciardi excuses himself for any wrongdoing—his infidelity was, after all, occasioned by war—but also apologizes for his behavior. Ciardi does not brag about his newly gained independence as Lovelace does, but moans about his loneliness. He does not exalt war but admits that “it stinks.” Ultimately, he is not proud of his unfaithfulness and tries to understand his primal impulses and how the war may have influenced his actions.

“To Lucasta, About That War” suggests Ciardi’s profound interest in the relationship between war and masculinity, which he shared with other poets of his generation. In fact, the biological, psychological, or historical connections between war and manliness were the foremost collective concern for these poets. Despite his “lifelong macho behavior and clubby, male-only attitude toward poetry,” to quote Ciardi’s biographer, Edward M. Cifelli, Ciardi was intrigued by the female psyche and wrote several poems from the perspectives of women, just as Jarrell did. “Poetry may have been a masculine business to John Ciardi,” Cifelli continues, “but women were at the heart of his world.”

Jarrell himself also adapted two classic English war poems: Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” which are both less humoristic than those by Dugan and Ciardi. Jarrell never finished or published his “The Charge of the Light Brigade, converted.” Yet his draft at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library tells enough of how he positioned himself against Tennyson’s veneration of the ill-fated British cavalry attack of October 25, 1854, during the Crimean War. The most striking difference between Tennyson’s poem and Jarrell’s “converted” version is that Tennyson’s speaker is a far-away, upper-class commentator, someone on the home front like Tennyson himself. While mourning the deaths of those who have fallen and blaming the anonymous “someone” who has “blunder’d,” Tennyson honors the unquestioning loyalty of the soldiers who obeyed the orders to attack the Russian fortification even though they were hardly protected: “Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die.”

Using prosopopoeia, as he often did in his war poetry, Jarrell instead speaks for one of the silent soldiers who takes part in the violent rush forward. Like the ball turret gunner, Jarrell’s Crimean soldier may be speaking from the other side of life, but we do not have absolute certainty whether he is dead or whether he is one of the few survivors. Jarrell’s voicing of the thoughts and feelings of one of the English soldiers of the Light Brigade gives his rudimentary draft a sense of immediacy and poignancy that Tennyson’s more traditional elegiac narrative has done less forcefully, at least to a twenty-first-century reader. This emphasis on personal experience, on the vulnerability of a human being, on the single voice will prove to be characteristic of the American poets of World War II.
Jarrell’s soldier is not unquestioning, but instead full of questions:

Was something won? was something cost?

Was all a fool's mistake?
Was that defeat or victory?—
A guess

I cannot tell; but truly,
We were born to die today.

Lucin did I lose

(I)? Did we win or lose? Was it only

A mistake, as people say?

Cannot tell or care.

? I can neither tell nor care. But truly,

(I was) We were born to die today.29

The soldier’s indecisiveness and hesitancy to draw any definitive conclusions about this battle is similar to how the middle generation wrote about World War II. Uncertainty and skepticism also distinguish Jarrell from Tennyson. In all fairness, Tennyson’s speaker also asks a question about the Light Brigade, in the final stanza: “When can their glory fade?”30 Yet considering the peremptory tone that Tennyson uses throughout, there can be no doubt that in his mind the answer should be: “Never.”

Jarrell’s revision of Rupert Brooke’s even more patriotic “The Soldier” was one of the first war poems that he finished while he was in the army after a long spell where he could not write poetry. “Here’s my The Soldier, to compete with Brooks’ [sic],” Jarrell wrote home to his wife, Macky.31 Of all poems from the First World War, Brooke’s poem expresses most perfectly the sense of idealism and self-sacrifice in the face of death: “If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England.”32 Brooke died of blood poisoning a year after writing his poem and was buried on the Greek island of Scyros. Instead of Rupert Brooke’s patriotic and sentimental sonnet, Jarrell offers three embittered octets in blank verse.

Jarrell replaces Brooke’s nationalism with a Marxist internationalism. Soldiers do not die for their country, but so “a bank in Manchester” can ship “textiles to the blacks the Reich had taxed,” Jarrell cleverly suggests.33 Jarrell’s early war poems often evince the view of the war as purely driven by economics. Malcolm Cowley, an editor at the New Republic, which had rejected another poem by Jarrell, lectured him about the reductiveness of
viewing the war solely as a matter of profit: “This war isn’t being fought for marbles or foreign trade, though there are plenty of people here who would like to make it that kind of war.”

Irrespective of the clear political point that he is making in “The Soldier,” however, we can also detect a reason why Jarrell parodies Brooke and Tennyson. The phrase halfway through the final stanza that “our poor wits [are] sharpened with their blood” is crucial in this respect and epitomizes how Jarrell and his fellow World War II poets looked at the soldiers and poets of earlier wars. Millions of soldiers before them had “marched to die / For all the sad varieties of Good,” and the poets of World War II were careful not to fall into the same masculinity or patriotism trap. Jarrell eventually modified his Marxist reading of war and came to see World War II as tragic and regrettable, but also a necessary war. Yet like other members of his poetic generation, he was not keen to risk his life and limbs for brotherhood as Owen had done, or in an act of patriotic sacrifice for his country like Brooke. Unlike Ciardi and Dugan, however, Jarrell never publicized his parodies. A casual reader of Jarrell’s “The Soldier” will not notice that it satirizes Brooke’s poem, and Jarrell’s take on the Light Brigade was until now buried in Jarrell’s archive. This might indicate that Jarrell was reluctant to spoof his poetic ancestors in his own poetry.

“There was a conspicuous absence of Rupert Brooke–like verse” written by American poets during the Second World War, as Paul Fussell has claimed. The World War II generation refused to glorify war and the soldier-hero. Like Jarrell, Karl Shapiro also wrote poetic replies to Brooke. His early poem “Scyros”—referring to the Greek island where Brooke was buried—was “a tribute to and an irony upon Rupert Brooke,” as Shapiro noted in The Younger Son, and was one of his first war poems. Shapiro’s “The Soldier” was one of his last poems he wrote, dating probably from the mid to late 1980s. Robert Phillips included it in Shapiro’s posthumous volume Coda: Last Poems. In it Shapiro juxtaposes a gung-ho soldier who plants “the flag upon a rock” in Iwo Jima style with another “professional soldier,” most likely a conscientious objector stuck in a “night-bright cell,” fighting for peace. The epigraph to Shapiro’s poem—“all evil shed away”—is taken from Brooke’s “The Soldier,” but actually applies more to Shapiro’s “man of peace” than to Brooke’s patriotic soldier.

This skepticism about the heroics of war may have been dominant among the World War II generation, but James Dickey’s war poetry shows that it remained alluring. Dickey simply could not suppress his urge to panegyrate war, as “Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek” illustrates. While tagging along with his brother who is scouring a former battlefield for memorabilia from that bygone war with a metal detector, Dickey not only bonds with his sibling but also senses a spiritual connection with the soldiers from
the Civil War, whom he ultimately calls dramatically his “Fathers! Fathers!” Dickey’s narrative war poems are infused with a strong sense of lyricism and mysticism that is absent in the more self-ironic poems of his peers:

But underfoot I feel
The dead regroup,
The burst metals all in place,
The battle lines be drawn
Anew to include us
In Nimblewill

Dickey’s gesture of kinship and admiration for soldiers from this earlier war is reminiscent of Allen Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” but particularly rare among the poets of World War II. Only Louis Simpson’s “I Dreamed That in a City as Dark as Paris”—where the speaker talks to a statue of a soldier from the First World War and imagines they are similar—comes close. Yet Simpson feels pity for the other soldier and himself, while Dickey is in awe of the warriors of the past. Whereas previous generations of war poets always had to glorify or worship at least someone or some aspect of the war—whether it was a military or political leader, the common soldier, or the camaraderie that soldiers felt—the middle generation charily but collectively refused to accept war as an honorable and respectable enterprise. Jarrell’s Crimean soldier wants none of Dickey’s band-of-brothers’ idea: “What cared we for those who stayed / By the wood along the wire?”

Even a war poet like Walt Whitman, whose democratic principles and sorrow for all of war’s victims the middle generation poets shared, reveled in brotherhood and patriotism and could not help but celebrate Abraham Lincoln as a martyr in “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” No such poems were written by major American poets about Franklin D. Roosevelt, the third most respected president in American history (after Lincoln and Washington), who had also steered the United States through a major crisis and also died a few weeks before the end of a significant war in the nation’s history. Instead of “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman’s “most popular, if personally his least favorite, poem,” Louis Simpson wrote “Carentan O Carentan” shortly after World War II, which seems to mimic Whitman’s title, the poem’s rhythm, and some of its key lines and imagery. Carentan is significantly not the name of a person, but the name of a village between Juno and Omaha on Normandy beach where so many Allied soldiers died on D-day, June 6, 1944.

Whitman presents Lincoln in “O Captain! My Captain!” as heading a large ship, which represents the United States and which has become rudderless now that the captain has died. The platoon that Simpson describes in “Carentan O Carentan” is equally disorientated:
Tell me, Master-Sergeant,
The way to turn and shoot.
But the Sergeant’s silent
That taught me how to do it.

O Captain, show us quickly
Our place upon the map.
But the Captain’s sickly
And taking a long nap.

Lieutenant, what’s my duty,
My place in the platoon?
He too’s a sleeping beauty,
Charmed by that strange tune.

Carentan O Carentan
Before we met with you
We never yet had lost a man
Or known what death could do.

The “Master-Sergeant,” the “Captain,” and the “Lieutenant” are all silent when the infantry soldier asks in which direction they should shoot, where they are on the map, and what his task now is. All of the soldier’s direct superiors appear to be dead, but his naivety or shock prevents him from accepting this truth. The childlike alternating rhyme and the short and simple iambic lines further emphasize the elementary confusion that Simpson’s soldier experiences. Simpson’s iambic trimeter seems to echo the rhythm and sense of confusion that Whitman uses in “O Captain! My Captain!”:

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won:

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
   But I with mournful tread,
   Walk the deck my Captain lies,
   Fallen cold and dead.

Simpson’s use of apostrophe, addressing an inanimate object rather than a person as Whitman does, is ironic, but also typical for the poets of World War II. They no longer believed that they could look to leaders or heroes to guide them, but felt bitterly alone in a confusing mess of war. Heroic agency is no longer plausible.
“Carentan O Carentan” not only invites a comparison with Whitman’s Civil War poem “O Captain! My Captain!” it also uses several central tropes of First World War poetry. Simpson could not help but notice that he was moving through Flanders fields with all the battle sites of the Great War when he was fighting his war. “Carentan O Carentan” is clearly about the loss of innocence, the most dominant theme of the Great War poetry. At the moment when the bullet hits him he is all but shaken out of his naïveté, just like Jarrell’s ball turret gunner when hit by “black flak and the nightmare fighters.”

Simpson also depicts “war as the ultimate anti-pastoral,” to use Paul Fussell’s phrase. The associations of blue skies, lovers, trees, and farmers in the opening of his poem make Carentan look like an Arcadian place, lulling the speaker and his fellow soldiers into a false sense of security.

More than any other American poet of World War II, Simpson had internalized the imagery of the English poets of World War I. This is nowhere more pronounced than in Simpson’s “On the Ledge,” which is a simple poem in terms of diction and form but impressive because of its compelling narrative and powerful central trope. It opens evocatively with the speaker’s infantry regiment waiting for a signal to attack enemy lines. The analogy to the First World War that Simpson draws is characteristic for the poets of World War II who had learned about the dire fate of the soldiers in the Great War, the thousands upon thousands of dead men at Verdun and at the Somme. Right at this moment, at the climax, Simpson interrupts his narrative by almost casually referring to a passage from Fyodor Dostoyevsky where a man is given the hypothetical choice to die or to stand forever immovable on a ledge. This interruption heightens the anxiety for the reader, as if replicating the fright of the soldiers who await their destiny. The quote that Simpson refers to is an allusion to a passage in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* where the poor student Raskolnikov ponders about survival as the primal impulse of life:

“Where was it,” thought Raskolnikov, as he walked onward, “where was it I read about a man who’s been sentenced to die, saying or thinking the hour before his death, that even if he had to live somewhere high up on a rock, and in such a tiny area that he could only just stand on it, with all around precipices, an ocean, endless murk, endless solitude and endless storms—and he had to stand there, on these two feet of space, all his life, for a thousand years, eternity—that it would be better to live like that, than to die so very soon! If only he could live, live and live! Never mind what that life was like! As long as he could live! . . . What truth is in that! Lord what truth! Man is a villain. And whoever calls him a villain because of it is one himself!”
Simpson’s allusion to world literature is again typical for the college-educated and book-smart poets of World War II, but the analogy is different from the other examples we have encountered so far. Rather than distancing himself from the literary works of his predecessors as Ciardi, Dugan, and Jarrell did in their intertextual war poems in terms of tone and in their skepticism of military heroism, Simpson finds comfort and solace in Dostoyevsky’s passage. Dostoyevsky is an ally who helps Simpson articulate a traumatic experience.

The end of “On the Ledge” is “anticlimactic,” as Janis P. Stout writes, but it provides an anticlimax that the speaker (and reader) is relieved to experience. Unlike the infantry troops in the First World War, the regiment that Simpson belongs to is given a free exit. Assisted by Allied airplanes overhead that have bombed the enemy lines, they can march freely on. They are off the hook, at least this time. More so than the First World War, World War II was decided in the air, as Simpson’s poem suggests and many other World War II poems testify. “Air warfare originated during the First World War as an ancillary aspect of the land battle,” according to military historian Michael Howard. “Only very slowly, as aircraft increased in range, speed, and armament, did it become clear that an air force which enjoyed command of the air over the battlefield might act not only as the eyes of the artillery but as a substitute for the artillery, and on a scale which might make all movement on and behind the battlefield impossible.” Some forty years after the experiments of Orville and Wilbur Wright with aerial flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903, the aerial assistance that Simpson and his infantry colleagues got was just one hint at how aerial warfare would change the face of battle. The nuclear bombs that were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of the war underline how revolutionary and destructive this change was.

This predominance of the air war during the Second World War is reflected in the large number of poems written about aerial warfare by the American poets of that war. Whereas nearly all of the famous English poets of the First World War were in the army, many of the prime American poets of World War II—Ciardi, Dickey, Dugan, Jarrell, and Nemerov among them—were in the air corps. Their poems offer, literally and figuratively speaking, a different perspective on war since “there appear to be hardly any famous poems about the air war during the 1914–18 conflict,” as Peter Robinson has suggested. Modern wars had become increasingly “the wars of technologists,” as Howard has argued, making such heroism on the battlefields as described in *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, and *The Song of the Nibelungs* obsolete. Experienced airmen like Ciardi, Dickey, and Nemerov never came face to face with their enemy, and wielded their destructive power from high above.
Yet “On the Ledge” shows another crucial difference between how the Great War and World War II were fought. Whereas the English soldier-poets of the First World War were at the start supremely innocent and were shocked by the brutality of trench warfare, the American poets of World War II (thought they) knew what was in store for them, in part from the poems of their literary predecessors. Richard Wilbur confirmed this in an interview: “My generation went into World War II in a more realistic and less crusading spirit, resolved to do what plainly had to be done; and so there was less damage to our expectations. It may be that the literature of World War I, which told of so much beastliness and stupid waste of lives, prepared us to be not altogether surprised.”

The title of Dugan’s “Memories of Verdun” suggests the same awareness and a sense of déjà-vu similar to the one experienced in Simpson’s “On the Ledge.” Yet Dugan’s title is slightly misleading because strictly speaking Dugan has no personal memories of the long and bloody Battle of Verdun of 1916 where an estimated quarter of a million soldiers died. Unlike Simpson, Dugan was not even stationed in Europe, but in the Pacific, and probably never even visited that town in the Lorraine region of France.

Dugan’s memories echo the subtitle of Susan Gubar’s book Poetry after Auschwitz: “remembering what one never knew.” Like Simpson and all intellectual soldiers of the Second World War, Dugan understood full well the lessons of Verdun through collective memory. Dugan knew most likely through the poems of Owen and Sassoon that millions of “men laughed and baaed like sheep / and marched across the flashing day / to the flashing valley.” Like docile sheep they are brought to the battle site where guns flare and where they are slaughtered in the “valley of death” as Tennyson called the no-man’s-land between the trenches in “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”

The men smile because they are blissfully ignorant of what will happen. “Never such innocence again,” the British poet Philip Larkin famously quipped in his poem “MCMXIV.” Larkin, who was about the same age as the American poets of World War II, expressed in that line the awareness that Dugan verbalizes in this poem. Dugan wonders, however, whether those who died at the Somme and Verdun were “heroically wrong” or whether he was “the proper coward.” Dugan admits that unlike the British soldiers of the Great War, he was not afraid of his superiors, but only “of a nothing, a death.” Dugan’s blunt admission that he is afraid to die and his concession in an interview that he “worked on ground crews” because it was “a nice peaceful boring existence” might have been considered unmanly in the Great War and by some in World War II. Yet this candor and caution was representative for his poetic generation. When Karl Shapiro was briefly part of a mobile army surgical hospital following marines who invaded beaches
when General Douglas MacArthur’s notorious island-hopping or leapfrogging expeditions were taking place, Shapiro wrote to his fiancée woefully: “I’m no Wilfred Owen, darling, I can’t write when the bullets whistle.” Soon Shapiro asked for a transfer back to his old rearguard, and to his surprise and delight his request was granted.

The American poets of World War II were never naive, wanted to survive, and avoid heroics as much as possible. A “draftee in the Second World War with the education and sensibility required to become a writer was very unlikely to find himself among the combat troops,” as W. H. Auden stated in his short article “Private Poet.” Sacrificing their lives for honor was something that belonged to the old war. In order to stress the innocence of the English poets and writers of the First World War, Paul Fussell writes in The Great War and Modern Memory that “it was not until eleven years after the war that Hemingway could declare in A Farewell to Arms that ‘abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.’” When the poets of World War II grew up they were painstakingly aware of what a disillusionment the First World War had been for all its participants. Like Hemingway, they were more than skeptical of words like “glory,” “honor,” and “courage.”

With his usual sense of exaggeration, Shapiro mentioned in a review of the English World War II poet Keith Douglas’s Alamein to Zem Zem and Collected Poems that “like so many British poets,” Douglas’s “bravery was extraordinary,” before adding: “American soldier-poets are never cited for heroism. The British soldier-poet, especially of the officer class, leaps into battle joyously and brilliantly.” Ciardi’s more realistic account of his own attitude to the military and war quoted earlier—that he ran for his “civilian clothes the minute” he had his “ruptured duck”—confirms the gist of Shapiro’s sweeping statement and sums up the collective spirit of his generation of war poets. Yet this less heroic attitude was not something that they felt proud about, as Dugan’s “Memories of Verdun” shows. The poets of World War II were constantly grappling with internal and external expectations of wartime masculinity.

The poets of World War II measured themselves self-consciously against the tradition of war poetry because they wanted to understand how their perspective in the middle of the twentieth century on their war was different from earlier war poets writing about their wars. Looking at their intertextual war poems, it becomes apparent that they realized that they could not conform to age-old masculine myths that they ought to distinguish themselves on the battlefield. They saw war “as an unpleasant obligation rather than an opportunity for individual heroism or male initiation rituals,” as Walter Höbling has mentioned. The mechanized, industrialized nature of
modern warfare had eroded the possibility of heroic dueling, and according to the World War II poets, heroic agency thus belonged to the past. Unlike previous generations, they did not believe that there was honor in their own deaths. The poets of World War II wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible and stay alive. Rupert Brooke’s “corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England” in Scyros and Wilfred Owen’s premature death a week before armistice in the Great War were frightening examples of what could happen. They were not keen to follow that tradition.