
This is a feisty book, argumentative and enjoyable, unsurprising when one finds that many of its chapters have been published as articles or delivered as lectures. ‘Modern’ in its title means late nineteenth century and after, while the exact nature of ‘war poetry’ is what is debated throughout the book.

Tim Kendall proposes ‘a tradition of modern English war poetry’ from the Boer War to the present. He takes the First World War poets as a centre, with the crucial Wilfred Owen in Chapter 3, but claiming the equal importance of Edward Thomas, Charlotte Mew, and Ivor Gurney in Chapters 4 and 5. He prefaces his study of Owen with an examination of the poetry of Hardy and Kipling in Chapters 1 and 2, and follows it with studies of Auden, the poetry of the Blitz (which brought the front line into the front room), Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, Ted Hughes, and Geoffrey Hill. He rounds off the study with a chapter on contemporary poets writing of the Iraq war. It is obvious that it is in the chapters on Auden, Hughes, and Hill that the definition of ‘war poetry’ will be most under pressure.

Kendall wishes to make war the primary concern of twentieth-century poetry. His introduction states:

The most urgent issue addressed by the poetry of the period is the relationship between art and violence: how and with what difficulties and ethical questions, can one communicate with and about the other? War poetry, this study contends, is the arena in which those questions are most powerfully resolved. It is hard to think of a modern English poet of any significance—combatant or non-combatant—who has not contributed substantially to the poetry of war. (pp. 3–4)

Kendall’s prose is so fluent and enjoyable that one has to pause to consider more carefully such assertions as the first sentence quoted above, or the contention of the last sentence. It would take a long time to present Kendall’s assertions and arguments, and a book fully to take issue with them. They are complex, detailed, forceful, often persuasive, and free from academic jargon. He is closely attentive to the texts of his subjects and even of their critics, not letting them get away with slack thought. He is particularly lively when he is on the attack, as in the final chapter on those more recent poets who, he feels, cash in on the suffering of others without paying their due of pain or experience.

The most convincing and committed writing is on Keith Douglas, whose unflinching gaze and determination not to compromise the truth by emotion (even Owen’s ‘pity’) most clearly fulfil Kendall’s wish for a truthful witness. As he sums up Douglas’s approach, ‘analysis is worshipping’ (p. 153). This notion of witness as a validating element in the poetry of war occupies him much, though the structure of the book means that Kendall never seems fully to argue the case. Since each of the chapters reads like a self-contained essay rather than part of the argument of a book, the reader is left to put the ideas together from chapter to chapter rather than have the argument completed in one place.

Kendall can be, to use one of his phrases, ‘fluent to the point of glibness’ (p. 132). And when he is castigating the poets who write of the Iraq war without having paid for their emotion, one wonders what has been paid and what should be paid by the critic who mocks their attempt to say something.

But this response is exactly why the book is so good. It moves away from the conventional, argues its case with detail, and delights as much as it annoys. That seems to me to be what reading is for, and this book will become the starting-point for many a fruitful discussion.

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