

Poetry in the Nuclear Age

For too long nuclear weapons have threatened a quarter of a million years of human development on this planet. No other threat to human well-being has ever posed such possibly dire consequences. Much of what humankind has ever produced can still be blasted away in no more than a few hours. As modern human beings, we take it for granted that not only are the artifacts of civilization imperiled but also the environment itself and most forms of plant and animal life. For many of the survivors of such a catastrophe, life would barely be worth living. Since the late 1940s our threat to ourselves has steadily mounted to the inconceivably destructive nuclear arsenal of many times the overkill of the entire planet. Even after the implementation of the arms reduction treaties, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than enough weapons remain to overkill much of the human species. I believe we should remember with respect the general direction of the Acheson-Lilienthal-Baruch Plan following World War II. No greater pressure challenges our inveterate provincialism than the proliferation of the nuclear threat, which necessitates a reaffirmation of fundamentally humane values. A global humanism would give us a new critical perspective from which to view our history. During most of the postmodern period, poets largely conformed to the inclination of the age to withdraw into the self and sought refuge there from the increasing pressure of the external threat by extending the autotelic conception of literature of the modernist poets and critics. Now that the Cold War has receded into the past and we stand at the beginning of a new century, literature must reclaim its ancient duty to confront directly the objective world. During the last fifty years a few poets have managed to preserve the mimetic power of language, and a few, who are firmly in the solipsistic tradition, have managed to break through, at least momentarily and with varying degrees of success, to grapple with the harsh horror of nuclear annihilation.

In her "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," Edith Sitwell was the first poet of stature to perceive and respond to the implications of the nuclear threat. The first poem, "Dirge for the New Sunrise,"

evokes, after a brief dream of safety, a vision of the destruction of Hiroshima:

But I saw the little Ant-men as they ran
Carrying the world's weight of the world's filth
And the filth in the heart of Man—
Compressed till those lusts and greeds had a greater heat than that
of the Sun.

And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky
As if in search for food, and squeezed the stems
Of all that grows on the earth till they were dry—
And drank the marrow of the bone:
The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone—
Or black as thunder lie and grin at the murdered Sun.

The living blind and seeing Dead together lie
As if in love. . . . There was no more hating then,
And no more love: Gone is the heart of Man.

These lines, written in 1948, remain one of the most haunting contemplations of the horror of the nuclear age. They demonstrate Sitwell's awareness of the thermal pulse that has a temperature greater than the center of the sun, greater than 10,000,000°C, and that vaporizes, depending on megatonnage, everything at ground zero and as far away as several miles in only ten to twenty seconds. The thermal pulse or heat wave would desiccate, if not incinerate, "the stems / Of all that grows on earth" and would drink "the marrow of the bone." Whatever plants would escape vaporization in a full-scale nuclear war would surely be so thoroughly irradiated with beta and gamma rays that the long-term survival of many forms of vegetation is highly doubtful. The irradiation of bone marrow, to say nothing of the whole body, would lead to the ionization of hematopoiesis, anemia, a higher susceptibility to all infections, and a disruption of the manufacture of platelets, which cause the clotting of blood and thereby prevent bleeding to death from other injuries.

94 The Grove of the Eumenides

These maladies would come about, as Sitwell suggests, only if “The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed,” survive the initial radiation, the thermal wave, and the blast wave. It is more likely that most eyes and lips, in an instant, would be “gone,” or “black as thunder,” charred to scar-fried corpses that “grin at the murdered Sun.”

In the second poem “The Shadow of Cain,” Sitwell connects “the filth in the heart of Man” with the biblical murder of Abel by Cain, of man by his brother. Like the biblical passage, she uses the particularity of violence to suggest universal disequilibrium:

. . . there came a roar as if the Sun and Earth had come together—
The Sun descending and the Earth ascending
To take its place above . . . the Primal Matter
Was broken, the womb from which all life began,
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose
in memory of Man.

This “Sun” is both Christ as Son of God and the splitting of the atom that unleashes the “Primal Matter” of the universe, the stellar furnace that once forged the atoms of all life. Such a vast disruption of natural order finds its emblem in the “totem pole of dust,” the mushroom cloud as cross upon which hangs vaporized humankind.

Sitwell identifies the cause of the cataclysm with the lust of Dives for gold and material attachments, with the lust of perhaps armament manufacturers and aggressors:

To Dives: “You are the shadow of Cain. Your shade is the
primal Hunger.”
“I lie under what condemnation?”
“The same as Adam, the same as Cain, the same as Sodom,
the same as Judas.”

Such “primal Hunger,” such greed that sells humankind for gold, Sitwell equates with original sin, with fundamental limitations of human nature. Compared with the frequently sentimental

conceptions of postmodern poets, Sitwell's recognition of limitation in the "heart of Man" manifests, whatever one might think about the doctrine of original sin, a soberly just estimation of the Aristotelian actions of man in the twentieth century:

And the fires of your Hell shall not be quenched by the rain
From those torn and parti-colored garments of Christ, those
 rags
That once were Men. Each wound, each stripe,
Cries out more loudly than the voice of Cain—
Saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Think! When the last
 clamor of the Bought and Sold,
The agony of Gold,
Is hushed. . . . When the last Judas-kiss
Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ, those
 ashes that were men
Will rise again
To be our Fires upon the Judgment Day!
And yet—who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?
He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in the terrible
Rain.

Sitwell holds that nothing can quench the hell of hate in the heart of man but Christ, whom she uses as a symbol of the "ashes that were men" at Hiroshima, as in the cries of "Each wound, each stripe," the "clamor of the Bought and Sold, / The agony of Gold," the "Judas-kiss" that is the last one because of atomic annihilation, which she joins with the "Judgment Day."

She explicitly makes this correlation in her Preface to *The Collected Poems*:

This poem is about the fission of the world into warring particles, destroying and self-destructive. It is about the gradual migration of mankind, after that Second Fall of Man that took the form of the separation of brother and brother, of Cain and Abel, of nation and nation, of the rich and the poor—the

spiritual migration of these into the desert of the Cold, towards the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima.

Sitwell evinces a diachronic, historical conception of the “migration of mankind” from time immemorial “towards the final disaster,” which she believes Hiroshima heralds. Although her conception of redemption and last judgment is a traditionally Christian one, Sitwell’s originality lies in her identifying such imagery with the horror of nuclear war, as in the last line in which Christ “walks again on Seas of Blood, He comes in the terrible Rain.” This “terrible Rain” is the rain of retribution, the local and global fallout of radioactive particles.

In the last poem “The Canticle of the Rose,” Sitwell draws on the medieval myth of a rose growing out of fire and ash. The rising of the rose on its stem is symbolic of Christ, of the ephemerality of life, and of rebirth. A woman emphasizes the evanescence when she sings, “All things will end— / Like the sound of Time in my veins growing . . . / Yet will the world remain!” Sitwell follows this song with these lines:

The song died in the Ray. . . . Where is she now?
 Dissolved and gone—
 And only her red shadow stains the unremembering stone.

Although the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was only 12,000 kilotons, a mere firecracker by the standard of megatonnage, the only trace left of many human beings was the “red shadow” of their outline on the stone benches they were sitting on. Out of the fires of such a ray, out of the vaporization of millions, Sitwell suggests will come a horribly tragic rebirth of a spiritual understanding of man’s nature and a wiser recognition of human limitations:

But high upon the wall
 The Rose where the Wounds of Christ are red
 Cries to the Light—
 “See how I rise upon my stem, ineffable bright

Effluence of bright essence. . . . From my little span
I cry of Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire
Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man.
Springs come, springs go. . . .
'I was reddere on Rode than the Rose in the rayne . . .'
'This smell is Crist, clepid the plantynge of the Rose
in Jerico.'"

"The Wounds of Christ are red" underscores the typology that the shadows on the stone imitate. The light is conceived of as both a divine one and the flash of light that is brighter than the sun. The light is, to Sitwell, in both senses, "the ultimate Fire / Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man" and restore man's power of scent.

Edwin Muir's "The Horses," which T. S. Eliot called "that terrifying poem of the 'atomic age,'" presents a more pastoral restoration. The speaker of the poem recounts that less than a year after nuclear war "the strange horses came" and that by then the few survivors had made their "covenant with silence," with the devastation of any outside world with which to communicate. Warships and planes, in the early days, wander past with their dead pilots slumped over the controls, the radios pick up nothing, the nations lie asleep, tractors rust about the fields. The speaker grants what would probably be the plight of most of the world after nuclear war:

We make our oxen drag our rusty ploughs,
Long laid aside. We have gone back
Far past our fathers' land.

Civilization would be pushed back far past the level of hundreds of years ago. What economy might survive, if enough people did, would surely be at least initially a medieval agricultural one, since the complex modern economy would never be able to operate with the means of production and distribution devastated. This collapse of the economy would deprive "farmers" of the benefit of hybrid

98 The Grove of the Eumenides

seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and fuels that support modern agribusiness. Hence Muir's poem makes recovery sound too easy. It is unlikely that people who have always relied on a highly interdependent world economy could create within a year a system of supplying the food, shelter, heating, and so on needed for their survival in the midst of a global radioactive dump that would poison almost anything they managed to grow, raise, or produce. Instead of Muir's vision of a saving remnant reduced to idyllic medieval farming, I would more realistically expect to find wandering bands of forest dwellers, of hunters and gatherers, though little would remain for which to forage.

Muir ends the poem with the coming of horses and the vision of a refuge or "Eden" in the "broken world":

In the first moment we had never a thought
That they were creatures to be owned and used.
Among them were some half-a-dozen colts
Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,
Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.
Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads,
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

Writing in 1956 Muir can be excused the failure of even the scientific community to realize the lethal dose of gamma radiation for most animals ranges from about 200 to 1,000 rads. For the oxen dragging the ploughs, it would take to kill them about 180 rads; for the horses, about 350 rads; for the colts, probably less, if they survived their birth defects; for the "farmers" themselves, radiation sickness would begin at about 150 rads, fifty percent survival possible at 450 rads, and almost one-hundred-percent fatalities at 600 rads. In the first few weeks following a one megaton explosion, radiation can be expected easily to reach more than 3,000 rads as far as a hundred miles from ground zero and to cover thousands of square miles. If only a relatively small percentage of megatonnage still available today were detonated, it is quite possible the level of

global radiation could reach lethal doses even after the most dangerous period of approximately two weeks. It is doubtful any horses would survive to change lives by offering their “free servitude” to man. In Hiroshima, dead horses were a common sight.

In her sequence of poems of 1957 “Time Hinder Not Me; His Arms Reach Here and There,” Muriel Rukeyser states, with a more soberly informed tone than Muir, “I realize what was done in the desert, at Alamogordo.” In the following passage Rukeyser focuses on the underlying physics involved in a nuclear explosion:

The work in the loss of mass.
The work in the lifetimes of the fixed stars.
The work in ideas of instability:
 divisible and transmutable as matter,
 divisible and transmutable as idea,
The inner passage of lifetimes and of forms.
Relations of stars and of the stages of life.
The half-life of the forms.
The laws of growth and form.

“The work in the loss of mass” alludes to Einstein’s equation $E=mc^2$, the conversion of mass into energy. In fission bombs the critical mass required to start a chain reaction that splits the atoms can be as little as a few pounds of uranium 235. In the Hiroshima bomb the amount was merely a few ounces compressed by a triggering explosion to begin the chain reaction, the same reaction that occurs in “fixed stars.” It was “The work in ideas of instability” that led to the use of uranium 235, the least stable isotope.

This atomic reaction is the fundamental energy of the stars in which all atoms of matter and life were once forged and in which, one day, millions of years in the future, all atoms will be reformed:

The universe passes along a way of cycles.
A process of matter dissolving in the stars,

Turned into radiation, passing through forms
Again to matter; again, perhaps, to birth.

We are, as the astronomer Robert Jastrow wrote, from star-stuff and to star-stuff shall we return. Yet Rukeyser's hopeful vision of the cycles of the universe melting down all atoms to reconstitute life and of time not hindering anybody is hardly a consoling thought, though an undeniable aspect of "Nature, red in tooth and claw," raised to the nth degree. She counterpoints this quality of nature with her "central belief" that humankind "are children of God / That their lives come first and are sacred."

Robert Lowell's "Fall 1961" is more responsive than Rukeyser to the actuality of the threat of nuclear war. The historical background of its composition was the Berlin Crisis in late summer and early fall of that year. Lowell is, therefore, confronting, as uncharacteristic of him as it may be, an objective historical crisis that, as was widely feared, might very well have triggered a nuclear war:

All autumn, the chafe and jar
of nuclear war;
we have talked our extinction to death.
I swim like a minnow
behind my studio window.

Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror.
The state
is a diver under a glass bell.

The overwhelming pressure of the threat forces itself on the isolated speaker's consciousness. The public discussion of the possibility of extinction has been too much in terms of abstractions, statistics, probabilities. Confronted with the objective threat, the individual is reduced to the small powerless figure of a minnow, which is absurdly seeking refuge from the blast wave behind the flimsiest of

structures. The terrifying prospect of devastation is projected on and reflected from the moon, “while our end drifts nearer.”

The powerlessness of the individual and of the mass of people is emphasized in the next stanza:

A father's no shield
for his child.
We are like a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears.

The inability of the father to protect his child discloses the utter powerlessness of the individual to fulfill the most basic duty when faced with the devastation of nuclear war. The “wild spiders” suggest humankind’s ineffectuality and fragility before the immensely destructive force of nuclear weapons. As time runs out the “tock, tock, tock” of “the grandfather clock” marks the passing of lopsided historical time and the urgency of the crisis. Compared with the placid hopefulness of Rukeyser and Muir, Lowell’s suffering speaker offers a much more accurate mimetic representation of reality, of the stakes involved in the world outside his own mind. It is this poignant dramatization of every human relationship and facet of nature at risk that gives the poem its intensity. Most “studio windows” would be blasted out as far away as twenty miles. After the heat wave, the greatest threat to people caught in the open would be from flying debris from which almost nothing could “shield” them. One of the most common injuries at Hiroshima was lacerations from flying glass, which, because of reduced ability to ward off infection and to produce platelets, often proved fatal.

Robert Hayden’s “Zeus over Redeye,” written in 1970, recounts a visit to the Redstone Arsenal in Alabama. The poem begins with the speaker establishing a historical perspective by comparing the “new mythologies of power” with the old mythologies of Greek and medieval myth. He also ironically reflects on the rockets “named for Nike” and “for Zeus, Apollo, Hercules— / eponyms of redeyed

102 The Grove of the Eumenides

fury.” Unlike Lowell’s passive speaker, Hayden’s persona visits the Redstone Arsenal with a member of the staff from whom he seeks to understand the implications of the “energy and power”:

Ignorant outlander, mere civilian,
not sure always of what it is
I see, I walk with you among
these totems of our fire-breathing age,
question and question you,

who are at home in terra guarded like
a sacred phallic grove.
Your partial answers reassure
me less than they appall.

His persistent questioning testifies to the pressure on his consciousness of the distinctive mark of our time, the “totems of our fire-breathing age.” The old mythologies are also extended to the new one by describing the missile fields as a sacred grove, as though the arsenal were at a Greek shrine, such as Delphi or Oedipus’ grove of the Eumenides. The partial, guarded answers of the guide “appall” him with the implications of annihilation, as they would any sane, informed, rational person.

Though not in a time of public crisis, Hayden’s speaker shares with Lowell’s an intense fear of devastation, which is based on his firsthand experience of the undetonated potentiality of the weapons:

I feel as though invisible fuses were

burning all around us burning all
around us. Heat-quiverings twitch
danger’s hypersensitive skin.
The very sunlight here seems flammable.
And shadows give
us no relieving shade.

One of the greatest barriers to confronting the nuclear threat is the feeling of impotence a person has before the “invisible” danger of holocaust. Nearly all missile fields are far from populated areas and access to them is restricted. Since nuclear war has fortunately never been waged, other than the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, few people have any experience of what such a war would be like. This permits most people to remain oblivious of the danger. It is only by a rational, compassionate exertion of the human will that a quarter of a million years of human evolution on this planet can be assured of at least as many more years of further development. As Jonathan Schell writes in his book *The Fate of the Earth*, it is “only by descending into this hell in imagination now that we can hope to escape descending into it in reality at some later time.” The issues are as complex as the appalling sophistries of the human will. Although the shadows of that will “give / us no relieving shade,” what can be willed can be unwilled—we can break through the abstractions of annihilation, feel imaginatively the heat wave “burning all around us,” know its possibility, and stand against what Hayden once called “the technology of disaster,” stand for what is humane and enduring.

Denise Levertov takes such a stand, descends into the hell, in her poem “On the 32nd Anniversary of the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” written in 1977. The speaker recalls having been told as a young twenty year old, “With this / the war is over.” As was typical of most people at the time, she did not truly understand the implications of the bombing and “the technology of disaster” in which it would result. Levertov’s speaker remarks on the “quantum leap” of death statistics: “eighty-seven thousand / killed outright by a single bomb, / fifty-one thousand missing or injured.” Somehow in youthful preoccupation, this unprecedented reality, “This we ignored.”

Unlike the resurrected rose of Sitwell’s poem, Levertov holds out no hope of rising from the ashes but simply presents the statistics of devastation, which the speaker took no notice of at the time, having been caught up in the jubilation over the end of the war and the “vague wonder, what next? What will ordinary / life be like, now

104 The Grove of the Eumenides

ordinary life as we know it / is gone?" Along with ordinary life the lives at Hiroshima were incinerated, vaporized into the stone by the heat wave, into the conscience of succeeding generations:

the shadow,
the human shadowgraph sinking itself
indelibly upon stone at Hiroshima
as a man, woman or child was consumed
in unearthly fire—

The shadow "cries out to us to cry out," digs its nails "into our souls / to wake them," proclaims

. . . something can yet
be salvaged upon the earth:
try, try to survive,
try to redeem
the human vision
from cesspits where human hands
have thrown it, as I was thrown
from life into shadow. . . .

The horror of vaporization is counterpointed with the capacity to save "the human vision" from the degradation to which humankind has debased it. Although Levertov shares some of the shortcomings of postmodern poets, her ability to uphold a human vision distinguishes her work at times from the more decadent solipsists of the period. Her poem brings to mind Masuji Ibuse's *Black Rain* which poignantly acknowledges the tragic complicity of both the Japanese and Americans.

Richard Eberhart bears witness in "Testimony," written in 1984, to a similarly high vision of humankind, a "vision of immateriality":

We are the materialists of the atom bombs,
Fear seizes us in the joints,

We think a vision of immateriality
Must have no meaning, none,

In our teeter and balance before annihilation,
The end of us,

When it comes, when it comes, the blast,
Destruction of the best and worst,

We wanted to look in the eye of God,
We got six feet of radioactive sod.

Eberhart asserts “We are the materialists of the atom bombs,” the children, the offspring of Einstein’s theory of relativity, which has been put to nihilistic purposes Einstein himself never held or intended. What has become the “normative” vision of our age is the meaninglessness of life, the absurdity of existence, the corruption of all human intentions. Such nihilism, when not explicitly stated by many postmodern poets, is implied by the lack of respect with which any vision of man’s more noble, humane capacities is treated. Eberhart connects, as Levertov and Hayden do to a degree, this debasement of man into a mere expendable animal with our fear and precarious position “before annihilation.” He extends this suggestion in the line “Destruction of the best and worst,” which may allude to Matthew Arnold’s “The best are silent now” and to W. B. Yeats’s “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” According to Eberhart, the threat under which we suffer is but the reflection of a cosmic disequilibrium, a disruption that could lead to a radioactive grave.

Yet Eberhart is probably too hopeful about our needing or receiving “six feet of radioactive sod.” It is unlikely that enough people would survive to bury all the millions of charred and decaying corpses or enough would be able to spend what little energy and resources they might have left to do so. It is precisely the materialism and the lack of caring, the lack of love, that Eberhart confronts in “Fantasy of a Small Idea”:

Maybe it is time before atomic holocaust
To fantasize that any small act of love,
Say any goodwill eye-flash to a passer-by
Is just possibly a great gain to humanity,
That to love anybody is a triumph of instinct
And if there are enough small acts of love to save us
We might outwit perhaps dream-bombing scientists,
Even take care of our planet without stabbing and killing.

Disdain for a transcendent human vision so thoroughly poisons the atmosphere like fallout that the small idea of love, announced, as Eberhart says, by the ancient fifth-century Greeks, Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha, indeed by all the great religious figures, has been struck down by the cynicism of Freud and the “Satanic Hitlers and Stalins.” Although there is a tenuously nostalgic quality to Eberhart’s avowal of love, although it relies on vaguely romantic good intentions, as is demonstrated by his relegating scientists to the one-dimensional world of “dream-bombing,” he soberly acknowledges the reality of the pressure of the threat by undercutting his vision with the word “fantasy” and by contrasting his desire to “look in the eye of God” with the harsh horror of “radioactive sod.” Such acknowledgments toughen, at least to a degree, his humane vision of love, testify to his awareness of what is at stake, and indicate somewhat his recognition of the historical upheavals that have culminated in the potential holocaust, whether global or to local isolated cities, that threatens us all.

Whatever one may think of any spiritual vision, whether it emanates from a traditional revealed religion or a cranky, postmodern American Adam or Eve, a humane, transcendent understanding of our basic human oneness proffers a much needed standard from which to evaluate the still immensely destructive stockpile we have built up in defense of national sovereignty. Although the Soviet Union has been swept aside, I believe we must remember that the nuclear age is not over. We still stand on the edge of the abyss while many continue to split hairs over their risible systems of nominalism, while others wallow in subjective worlds of

trivia, while most are becoming less capable of confronting the spiritual crisis of the prevailing international culture that is taking place outside our narcissistic heads. Our age is one of anarchy, confusion, and receding hope and belief in the sanctity of the individual and of human life in general. After a quarter of a million years of human evolution, no greater fear troubles the psyche of the diverse peoples of the globe and drives home to us our common humanity, our common frailty, than the still enormous and dangerous national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the proliferation of nuclear materials to rogue states and perhaps terrorists. Chernobyl is a mere foretaste of what the world could suffer. Only the principles of a global humanism, channeled through such cooperative institutions as the International Atomic Energy Agency, can protect us from nuclear weapons of mass destruction, as well as chemical and biological weapons. Only a quantum leap from the level of the nation to the oneness of the globe, as it has been routinely viewed from the heavens, can prevent “final disaster” from becoming a ghastly reality, here on the threshold of the twenty-first century, in some possibly unpredictable way, outside in the given world.