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When Women Write the First Poem: Louise Driscoll and the “war poem scandal”

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When Women Write the First Poem: Louise Driscoll and the “war poem scandal”

Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec

1 Writing in the October 1914 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, founded by Harriet Monroe in Chicago in 1912, Amy Lowell asserted: “neither poet nor painter chooses his subject. It is the subject which chooses him” (Lowell 37). This statement, as well as her own poetic contribution, shows that Lowell approved of Alice Corbin’s decision as co-editor of the magazine to launch a contest for the best war poem in *Poetry*’s September issue.¹

2 There were 738 submissions leading to the “War Number” published in November 1914. It opened with the prize-winning poem, “The Metal Checks” by Louise Driscoll “of Catskill, New York”, which was awarded 100 dollars.² The poem uses the form of a dramatic dialogue between The Counter (who represents death) and The Bearer (representing the world bearing the burden of War). The Bearer’s role is to bring metal checks to The Counter, and each of these metal disks stands “for a life”. The disks bear an unsettling resemblance to coins and are stacked the same way. They are “the little metal disks that have been used for the identification of the slain common soldiers”. The Bearer begins the poem by bringing a sack full of checks, and two stanzas begin “This is the toll” first “of common men”, then “of working men”. The Counter is not indifferent, although the onomatopoeia he pronounces suggests violence since it mimics the mechanical sound of guns loading as well as of gun-fire:
“C l i c k e t y—c l i c k e t y—c l a c k!”

The spacing between the letters of the line is voluntarily different to accentuate the sound effect. Death’s discourse expands: “every button a man” becomes “Every disk a soul!” and “That was a man a month ago”. Later in the poem, The Bearer asks:

Would not the blood of these make a great sea
For men to sail their ships on? It may be
No fish would swim in it, and the foul smell
Would make the sailors sick. (Driscoll in Monroe and Corbin 1947, 149)

- 3 The counting of coin-like disks continues throughout the poem, and is not yet finished at the end, so that the idea of endless lost lives is communicated. The text successfully blends genre and gender, drama and poetry, enabling a woman to write an effective war poem, even though she did not personally fight at the front.
- 4 Louise Driscoll is a name that is all but forgotten now. She lived in the Hudson Valley and published two books, *The Garden of the West* (1922) and *Garden Grace* (1924) (Monroe and Corbin 1947, 708). She is not mentioned in Elaine Showalter’s *A Jury of Her Peers, American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009), but she did contribute other verse and stories to *Poetry Magazine*, with approximately thirteen submissions between 1913 and 1929. No one would assert that Driscoll’s poetry is consistently better than that of Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Sandburg, Frost, or even Brooke, who were also published in *Poetry* during the same period, but it should be acknowledged that Driscoll wrote one of the first war poems of interest concerning World War I. It is a poem that forecasts the positioning of the poetry that would come from the trenches, and also the poetry of witness that followed, as later poets noted, with emphasis on “the outnumbering dead” (Hill 7). It seeks to emphasize the heavy human cost of war that was as far from the minds of young women who were presenting young men with white feathers and encouraging them to enlist as it was from Rupert Brooke’s metaphor about going to war in his sonnet “Peace”: “To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping” (Brooke 1915, First World War Poetry Digital Archive).
- 5 Driscoll uses sound to further her point, and the poem eventually draws the reader into the text, giving him or her time to assess the toll of war, before the ending which reads, in its context, as a mere beginning. The Counter is like a banker as he “*continues to pile up the metal checks, and drop them by hundreds into the trays which he piles one upon another*” (the italics are Driscoll’s). While Driscoll did not say that the war was all about money, she insidiously implied that material gain was a primary motivation for warring. So it was that Driscoll’s poem won the prize, and that Harriet Monroe would write, some thirty odd years later, that she still thought Driscoll deserved it (Monroe 1938, 342).
- 6 Monroe had declared in her September 1914 editorial in *Poetry*: “Poets have made more wars than kings, and war will not cease until they remove its glamour from the imaginations of men” (Monroe 1938, 341). And so, the tone of the entire November 1914 issue seems consistently anti-war, as expressed in Parke Farley’s “If War is Right” where the last stanza reads:
- If war is right, then God is might
And every prayer is vain:
Look not for Christ upon the hills—
He lies among the slain. (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 56)
- 7 The notion of God’s backing for war is also questioned in John Russell McCarthy’s “The Hero”, where “a nameless corporal” organizes the rape and slaughter of defenseless women until later immortalized for carrying the flag. The poem ends with jabbing irony: “Bronze on granite forever he stands / (Was he not chosen of God?)” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 57-9). Amy Lowell’s contribution, “The Bombardment” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 60-63), portrays an old woman, a scientist in his laboratory, and a child. All three are caught in a bombardment and its ensuing fire. The poem’s lyric qualities are disturbing: perhaps the rhymes are just a bit too pleasing. There was also Carl Sandburg’s “Among the Red

Guns” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 64), Maxwell Bodenheim’s “The Camp Follower” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 65), Florence Kiper Frank’s “The Jewish Conscript” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 66), Joseph Campbell’s “Whence Comes the Stranger” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 68), which borrowed imagery from the Apocalypse, and Wallace Stevens’s “Phrases” (perhaps one of the most often quoted poems from this volume, and the first time a poem by Stevens was printed [*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 70-71]). Continuing in their order of appearance, is Alice Corbin’s “Fallen” (which did not compete for the prize, since Corbin was the instigator of the competition), Margaret Widdemer’s “The Wakened God”, which begins “the War-god wakened drowsily”, and Karle Wilson Baker’s “Unser Gott”, in which the religious justification for war is exposed for what it is: “They held a great prayer-service in Berlin,” but the author pleads, “Since we must make our God, / Oh, let us make Him large enough for all, / Or cease to prate of Him!” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 75-77). “War Yawp”, Richard Aldington’s contribution, asks the anti-war question:

Say, have you forgotten 1861?
Ball Run, Gettysburg, Fredericksburg?
Your million dead? (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 78)

- 8 Despite a disappointing ending to the poem, concerning “the peace of the arts”, that readers such as Pound must have considered mawkish, there are powerful ironic evocations that contradict propaganda:

It’s good to march forty miles a day
Carrying ninety-one pounds on your back
To eat good coarse food, get blistered, tired out, wounded
Thirst, starve, fight like a devil. (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 78-81)

- 9 Of the fourteen poems included in *Poetry*’s “War Number” of November 1914, six were written by women. There is no bellicose sentiment anywhere to be found, since it would not have conformed to the position of the editors. Alice Corbin Henderson wrote a short critical essay, “Poetry and War”, that followed the poems, in which she criticized recent poetry by Hardy, Kipling, Bridges, and Masefield for attempting “to justify the ways of man—or nations—to God” (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 82). The failure of most poets to justify war, she asserted, was that they lacked conviction:

Actually the poets have progressed beyond the stage of that confident national self-assertion which the particular crisis calls upon them to celebrate. If their poems are not faint-hearted, they are at least interchangeable, and would apply equally well to any country engaged in the struggle. (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 82)

- 10 Alice Corbin would have been surprised to know that numerous writers had already been engaged in early September to further the cause of war by the British War Propaganda Bureau, established in August 1914, but such activities were not made public until 1935.³ Her own preference, in the selection of poems presented, was to promote anti-war sentiment:

The American feeling about the war is a genuine revolt against war, and we have believed that *Poetry* might help to serve the cause of peace by encouraging the expression of this spirit of protest. English poets are not in a position just now to celebrate the Spirit of democracy, as against that of empire. Yet is not this democratic sympathy the cause of the subtle undercurrent of regret we detect in their poems? (*Poetry* 5:2, 1914, 83)

- 11 Writing her memoirs years later, Harriet Monroe restated Corbin’s own words: “All these war poems of our contest were protests. There is very little of the taint of military imperialism in the 738 poems received in this contest” (Monroe 1938, 343). Thus, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, could pride itself on being not only the first American

magazine to publish poetry, but also the first magazine to devote a complete issue to war poetry about World War I that was not, definitely not, pro-war.⁴ The point needs to be emphasized, since modernist poetry specialist James Longenbach, describing the same war issue of *Poetry*, presents a significantly different story:

Stevens’s poems were among the best in a jingoist collection filled with Kipling’s imperialism and Housman’s soldiers dying young. The prize for the best poem was awarded to Louise Driscoll’s ‘The Metal Checks’—causing Pound to refer to the whole incident as ‘the war poem scandal.’ When he first read the announcement for the competition he wrote Harriet Monroe that he was ‘VERY glad’ she had nothing to do with the prize. (Longenbach, 113-4)

- 12 It is worth remembering that *Poetry*, November 1914, with its many female contributors, followed another War magazine of sorts, the first issue *Blast* of June 1914, which its editor Wyndham Lewis intended to bring a revolutionary war to the arts, and in particular to poetry. Having published the anthology *Des Imagistes* in 1914 (with contributions from Richard Aldington, H.D., F.S. Flint, Skipwith Cannell, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Hueffer, Allen Upward and John Cournos), Pound had just broken off definitively with Amy Lowell who, with more money, but, he thought, less flair, took Imagism upon herself. Instead, Pound was devoted to the new cause of Vorticism in Wyndham Lewis’s *Blast*. When war broke out, the sound of those guns would fade, as Harriet Monroe noted in her memoirs:

Never in historic time was any outcry of rebellion so promptly answered; for the huge magazine had scarcely appeared when all its blasts and curses were smothered, swallowed up, reduced to ignominy, by the counterblast of Mars. (Monroe, 1938, 355)

- 13 Pound’s perspective on the war was perceptibly different from the American views held by Monroe, Corbin and Driscoll. Pound was living in Britain and, even as he continued to be the foreign correspondent for *Poetry Magazine*, spent two consecutive winters working as Yeats’s secretary at Stone Cottage (in 1913-14 and again in 1914-15, after he married Dorothy Shakespeare). To read Longenbach’s version of the story of the war years at Stone Cottage is to see a self-absorbed side to both Pound and Yeats, who at first, even though distressed about the war, seem even more concerned with how their literary affairs will be ruined (Longenbach 108). Pound was incensed at the war poem contest and wrote an inflamed letter to Harriet Monroe, quoted at length by Longenbach, in which he called the contest “a high school folly, a prize for a poem ‘In Occasion’”. He also expressed his opinion that to merit writing about the war, you had to be a participant: “those who aren’t carrying rifles ought to keep quiet” (Longenbach 113-4). Monroe was used to Pound’s vivacious and combative character, but this letter may have been enough to keep his own war poem, which he later sent, declaring it was not a submission to the war poetry contest, from ever being published in *Poetry*:

‘War Verse’
 O two-penny poets, be still!—
 For you have nine years out of every ten
 To go gunning for glory—
 with pop-guns;
 Be still, give the soldiers their turn
 And do not be trying to scrape your two-penny glory
 From the ruins of Louvain
 And from the smouldering Liège
 From Leman and Brialmont. (qtd. Longenbach 115)

- 14 What had so enraged Pound? Was it that *Blast* I had fallen on deaf ears? Was it that a woman he had lately disagreed with—Amy Lowell—was now involved in writing poetry about war? Was it that women were writing war poems, when they had not experienced front-line action? Did the fact that several poets from his former *imagiste* circle (Amy Lowell and Hilda Doolittle’s husband Richard Aldington) were published in the war issue of *Poetry* anger him? Was he vexed that the war issue came out before publication of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” that he pleaded with Monroe to publish without alteration beginning in October 1914?⁵
- 15 These are questions that James Longenbach never asks. He never ponders why Monroe did not print Pound’s war poem. Monroe chose not to publish a poem that called the contest enterprise into question. Her own account of the War Number, written years later in her autobiography, suggests that she was sensitive to some of Pound’s points in the incendiary letter, especially that good poetry might not be able to be written on demand within two week’s notice. But she never at any time consented that good war poetry could only be written by soldiers or by men. She herself wrote a moving poem about the first air raids, “On the Porch”, published in *Poetry* 6:5, in August 1915 (Monroe in Reilly 1981, 77-78).
- 16 Pound was still seething about the contest however, as revealed in his review of Robert Frost’s second book *North of Boston* in the December 1914 issue, where he tried to highlight the difference between Frost’s timeless poetry and the trends of the day (such that the following lines seem intended as darts to Alice Corbin and Amy Lowell):
- Mr. Frost is an honest writer, writing from himself, from his own knowledge and emotion; not simply picking up the manner which magazines are accepting at the moment, and applying it to topics in vogue. (*Poetry* 5:3, 127)
- 17 Pound had helped Frost get his first two books into print in London and his admiration was steadfast, but he was still fighting a battle against American poetry that would not go in the direction he desired. However, it would seem that Frost did not dislike the November 1914 issue of *Poetry*, or Edith Wharton’s 1916 anthology, *The Book for the Homeless*. In fact, according to Tyler Hoffman, Frost’s poem “An Old Man’s Winter Night” uses “the final figure” in Yeats’s lyric “On Being Asked for a War Poem”. The poem, which evolved into Frost’s poetic reply to Yeats, was first begun in some notes from 1906-7, but then was reworked and twice dated by Frost as “1916” (Hoffman 565).
- 18 Could any poet remain unaffected by the war? *Blast* 2, a “War Number” with the new subtitle *Review of the Great English Vortex*, was printed July 1915, and demonstrated that the Vorticist movement was affected by death and loss in the most immediate way. One of the key contributors, Gaudier-Brzeska, had died at the front, “killed in a charge at Neuville St. Vaast, on June 5, 1915” (*Blast* 2, 34). While the issue featured artistic compositions representing the war, there was only one poem about war, contributed by Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford). In his “The Old Houses of Flanders”, the “illuminated rain” of the bombs ruins the city:
- The high white shoulders of the gables
Slouch together for a consultation
Slant drunkenly over in the lea of the flaming cathedrals.
They are no more, the old houses of Flanders. (Hueffer, *Blast* 2, 37)
- 19 Eliot’s poetic contributions to *Blast* 2 (“Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”) make no mention of war, nor do Pound’s, although the repeated use of “Goddamm” in “Ancient Music” (Pound, *Blast* 2, 20), may somehow be linked to his use of the same in

his incensed letter to Harriet Monroe, mentioned above. In 1915, neither Pound nor Eliot had yet written a war poem. Of Pound, A. David Moody noted, “Rather than accepting the war as the fittest subject for poetry, he soon came to see it as the enemy of art, crushing the civilizing intelligence of the artist as it killed off the artists themselves” (Moody 261). Meanwhile, Rupert Brooke had composed his War Sonnets in late 1914 (first published in *New Numbers* 4, in January 1915). Harriet Monroe reprinted three Brooke sonnets in April 1915 (“Peace”, “The Dead”, and “The Soldier”). On Easter Sunday 1915, “The Soldier” was read at St. Paul’s Cathedral by Dean Inge. Three weeks later, Brooke was dead. His *Nineteen Fourteen, and Other Poems* (1915) were published posthumously in June. When Alice Corbin Henderson reviewed Brooke’s *Collected Poems* in February 1916, she wrote: “His death is a symbol of the waste of war” (*Poetry* 7:5, 264). Harriet Monroe would later recall how Rupert Brooke made a visit to Chicago in the late spring of 1914, and that she was “alone there when ‘the most beautiful young man in England’ stepped into the sunshine that flooded our office through west windows” (Monroe 1938, 340). Monroe kept a photo of Brooke on the wall of her office until her death.

- 20 D.H. Lawrence did not enter a poem for Alice Corbin’s war poem contest, but he did write to Harriet Monroe to say that he liked “the woman who wrote ‘Metal Checks’—her idea, her attitude”, and *Poetry* published “Six Poems” by Lawrence in December 1914, with titles or lines that seemed appropriate for the war (“Grief”, “Memories”, “Weariness”, “Service of All the Dead”, “Don Juan”, “Song” [*Poetry* 5:3 102-6]). He later submitted “Resurrection”, that Monroe called his great war poem, published in *Poetry* of June 1917 (Monroe 1938, 345-6). Lawrence wrote to Monroe in late 1914 or early 1915:

The War is dreadful. It is the business of the artist to follow it home to the heart of the individual fighter—not to talk in armies and nations and numbers, but to track it home, home, this war. And it’s at the bottom of almost every Englishman’s heart—the War, the desire of War, the will to War—and at the bottom of every German’s. (qtd. Monroe 1938, 345)

- 21 Eliot would let *The Waste Land* express the atmosphere the war had wrought (Sherry 224), and Pound would eventually remark that some “walked eye-deep in hell / believing in old men’s lies,” (Pound 2003, 551) and so express the rawness of the war in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920), after publishing *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* in 1916, but the influence of Yeats was at first too strong for him to consider writing a war poem.
- 22 *The Book of the Homeless*, edited by Edith Wharton and published in 1916, did far better than *Blast* 2 at collecting war poetry in both French and English, with Laurence Binyon’s “The Orphans of Flanders” (3), Jean Cocteau’s “La Mort des jeunes gens de la Divine Hellade. Fragment” (9), Thomas Hardy’s “Cry of the Homeless” (16), Wharton’s own “The Tryst” (41), Margaret L. Woods’s “Finisterre” and the odd contribution by W.B. Yeats: “A Reason for Keeping Silent”:

A Reason for Keeping Silent
I think it better that at times like these
We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He’s had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth
Or an old man upon a winter’s night. (Wharton 1916, 45)

- 23 This poem, an “irritable little lyric”, as Marjorie Perloff calls it, was what resulted when Yeats answered Henry James’s request, on behalf of Edith Wharton, for a war poem (Perloff 227-8). In 1916, Yeats, a leading senior poet, still felt that war poetry about the European conflict was inappropriate. And yet, as Perloff has argued, “Easter, 1916”, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War” were his own war poems that responded “to particular situations in all their ambiguity” (Perloff 231). However, it is worth remembering that Yeats’s *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) excluded poems by Wilfred Owen. Yeats had even remarked that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry” (qtd. Longenbach, 110). This is quite different from Pound’s perspective in 1937. He had just published his fifty-first Canto. War is one of the major themes in the *Cantos*, with World War I crucially present in Cantos 16 and 18, and a telescopic vision of all wars, most likely resulting directly from Pound’s meditating on what Longenbach has called “the war poem scandal”, combined with the loss of Gaudier-Brzeska.
- 24 The year after Wharton’s anthology, using poems first published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin brought out *The New Poetry: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Verse in English*, first in 1917 (with a shorter title), and then again in 1923, 1932, and 1947. Louise Driscoll’s poem “Metal Checks” was included in each successive edition. *Poetry Magazine* did not host another “War Number” during World War I, but it did print a steady stream of poems concerning the war, with Monroe and Corbin remaining undeterred in their anti-war positions. Pound continued as foreign correspondent for the magazine until 1919 (Carpenter 345), and he also joined the editorial team of the competing *The Little Review* (founded in Chicago by Margaret Anderson in 1914). Harriet Monroe published Pound’s *Ur-Cantos* in June, July, and August 1917, then Canto XXXIV in April 1933 and Canto XXXVII in March 1934.⁶
- 25 After breaking with Imagism Pound called it “Amygism.” After breaking with *Poetry* in the early 1930s, and following Monroe’s death in 1936, in 1938 Pound would refer to *Poetry* as “Harriet’s *Home Gazette*” (Moody 217). Harriet Monroe has been criticized elsewhere for her “open-door” editorial policies and her inclusion of mediocre and minor poetry in *Poetry Magazine* (Williams 276). Yet—“war poem scandal” or not—it is worth remembering that Monroe was seeking to promote a new American poetic voice, and it was a voice that would include women.

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NOTES

1. In this paper I wish to amend an erroneous statement in an earlier paper of mine, concerning Ezra Pound and *Poetry Magazine*, to the effect that he “probably encouraged Monroe’s decision to have an issue devoted to ‘Poems of War’ as early as November 1914”.
2. The editors announced the recipient of the prize at the end of *Poetry* 5:2 (November 1914), on page 93.
3. Concerning the propaganda campaign, one may consult Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime* (1928); John McDonald MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: the Manipulation of British Public Opinion*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984; Gary S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992. and Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.
4. Among other “firsts”, Monroe published Sandburg’s “Chicago” in 1914 and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot in June 1915.
5. When Monroe finally published it in June 1915, she sent Eliot a check for eight guineas (Eliot 106).
6. Eliot’s and Blackmur’s comments on Pound, and a section from Canto LXXX, appeared in *Poetry* in September 1946. These documents can be found at The Poetry Foundation, consulted October 12, 2009.

ABSTRACTS

Could anyone writing poetry in 1914 be unaffected by the war? This paper turns to some of the first war poems of World War I, published in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* (Chicago) to address that question, and presents a broad survey of poets writing at the time. Ezra Pound’s aggressive stance toward Harriet Monroe’s open door editorial policy did not prevent her from promoting war poetry written by women. *Poetry*’s “War Number” of November 1914 opened with Louise Driscoll’s prize-winning poem, “The Metal Checks”, and raised questions about the legitimacy of war poems written by those not fighting. Some poets, such as Pound and Eliot, would not see war as an appropriate subject for poetry until after World War I had ended.

Etait-il possible pour un poète de ne pas se sentir bouleversé par la guerre en 1914 ? Cet article explore quelques-uns des premiers poèmes sur la Première Guerre Mondiale, publiés dans la

revue *Poetry Magazine* (Chicago), éditée par Harriet Monroe. Nous passons en revue l'œuvre de certains poètes de l'époque. L'attitude fort critique d'Ezra Pound sur la largesse de la politique éditoriale de Monroe ne l'a pas empêchée de promouvoir une poésie de guerre écrite par des femmes. Le numéro de *Poetry Magazine* consacré aux poèmes de guerre, de novembre 1914, s'ouvre par le poème primé, “The Metal Checks” de Louise Driscoll. Se pose ainsi la question de la crédibilité des poèmes sur la guerre écrits par des personnes qui ne sont pas au front. Certains poètes, dont Pound et Eliot, ne trouvent en la guerre un sujet de poésie, qu'une fois le conflit terminé.

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Keywords: war poetry, war poets, poetry magazine (Chicago), World War I, women writers, imagism, vorticism

Mots-clés: poésie de guerre, poètes de guerre, poetry magazine (Chicago), Première Guerre Mondiale, écrivaines, imagisme, vorticisme

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