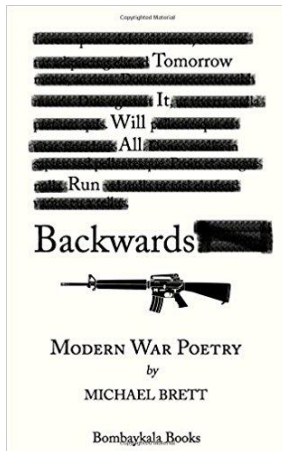


Review Article

Nostalgia or Futility: a Review of Michael Brett's *Tomorrow It Will All Run Backwards: Modern War Poetry*

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Tomorrow it will all run backwards: Modern War Poetry

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A simplistic definition of war poetry as ‘poetry about war’ does not do justice to its various facets. Right from the Anglo-Saxon period, the presence of minstrels who coined verses about war is chronicled. The origin of heroic poetry too, is in war. But these tended to be solely poems of praise for the warrior/king. The end of the last century forced a rethink regarding such glorifying of war. A sense of disillusionment that wars did not achieve anything, as they were primarily facades, has set in, along with the realisation that millions of lives are being lost in futile wars. This led to a surfeit of poems devalorizing war. Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854), could be read as a precursor to such poetry – as it critiques the Crimean War. However, the poem was still from a third person perspective. The First World War witnessed several war poets, many of whom were soldiers. While a few poems, such as Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldiers” were patriotic; a majority, such as Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum est”, were critical of the supposedly lofty aims of war.

Michael Brett’s poetry needs to be assessed with this background in mind. His poetry, written over a span of forty years, addresses more than one single war. He writes about many wars: the World Wars in retrospect, the Civil War in Former Yugoslavia, the Gulf War, the 9/11 Terrorist attacks and its aftermath. A majority of the poems were written by Brett as a Press Officer in the Information Centre of Bosnia-Herzegovina, London, during the time of the Civil war in Former Yugoslavia. Although his grandfather and father’s services in the First and Second World Wars do have their marked influence on Brett’s view of life, and poetry, it is his own experience as a Press Officer that primarily moulds the poems in the collection. This unique perspective gives a new approach to war poetry, as he not just questions the glory of war, but also the impact of war on humankind – the deadening of senses and the casual shrugging off of casualties as collateral damage.

This understanding of war shapes all the poems in the collection. The poems are divided into three sections – Easdale Island by Oban, Argyll, Scotland 1974-80; The Information Centre of Bosnia-Herzegovina, London 1990-95; and London 2000-2015; make the reader believe that the sections

would focus on the wars *per se* and their effects as well as the dissemination of war news. But that is not the case: The poems are more philosophical – expounding on the meaninglessness of War itself, not any particular tussle or battle.

The poems are rich in novel imagery that put across Brett's sentiments about war. For instance, he compares the effects of violence on the human psyche as a wrong soundtrack tuned in to the brain (34, "Extreme Violence"); press releases are "cicadas into Fleet Street" (100, "Europe after the Rain"); fear is a "kind of odd ballerina who pirouettes/On the zigzag crests of smoke and shell bursts/" (83, "Fear") and a bridge collapses like a "loopy grin" (32, "Artillery Barrage"). Imagery of this kind helps expand the overriding theme of the poems – the devaluing of human life and their transformation into mere instruments of war. The likeness of soldiers in war to cards at casinos, or the toys of croupiers, in "Twenty One" (29) reduces human lives to non-living entities. But more significantly, by using the symbols of gambling, the poem shows war as not an arena of logical reasoning, but a gambling den, where the players are degenerates. In "Ivory Coast Pineapples", the soldiers are compared to packed crates of pineapples, with no recourse to emotion (30).

Several poems in the Second Section of the collection, especially "Monthly Killed Numbers for You", emphasises on this mechanical aspect of the war, where the people in the Press Office are forced to view the casualties mechanically. The poem refers to the press officers waiting for the number of killed, as "Egyptian monkeys playing with graveyard skulls" (49).

While "loss of life and property" is a term used commonly to describe a tragedy, both physical and financial, Brett seems to suggest that more importance ought to be given to life rather than property. "All human lives are simply artefacts, bracelets", he rues in "Walls of Byzantium" (127). 'No stone structures ought to outlive human lives' can be the summation of "Let Our Cities Burn" (57).

If human life is not valuable, the non-living instruments of war are, and this is shown in the ascribing of human qualities to them – artillery barrage is described as a giant's fist and a drunken juggler, in "Artillery Barrage" (32), and "Atomic bombs" (135) would have you believe that the namesake of the poem is like a cat.

All this provides a new perspective on war itself, one which is full of incomprehension. "Mad Old witch: the War in the Former Yugoslavia", for instance, speaks about how war in the present age is different, as it is "bright and noisy" (80). Here, it is worth noting that the poetic form that Brett adopts to express this is well-suited. Written in free verse, the absence of rhyme in the poems is symptomatic of the disordered world that the poet presents to the reader.

Set in a milieu where disillusionment is the norm rather than the exception, and hope and redemption seem mythical, the increasingly strange way in which humans are indulging in war encourages a questioning of civilization and its tools – as, for instance, is done in "Stonehenge Artillery Range" (28). War is now fought in a civilized manner, as it is all a façade, a drama, where newspapers and election deadlines dictate war (52, "Theatre of War").

The new and strange nature of the war comes to the fore even in the allusions in the poems, which are numerous. These references to art and literature in the poems are significant not just to highlight the erudition of the poet, but also to illustrate an important aspect of the speakers of the poems. A new kind of soldier (who may not necessarily be battling on the field, but is fighting the war nevertheless) is discernible in the pages of the book; one who is a literate, nay, a learned person. As if to protest his treatment as an automaton, the soldier displays his knowledge by his references. This forces the reader to naturally contrast the learned soldier with the wild fighter of yore, and doing so brings to the fore the question – has education, and learning improved our condition? Or has it made us sadder than before, as it has made us aware of the gross injustices of the world?

The references are all used as symbols, highlighting the bleak and confusing nature of the war. The Greek figure of Ariadne becomes a symbol of the maze that the war has become, and so

does the reference to Lewis Carroll's Alice following the rabbit into the hole (89, "Wartime Time"). Nature is invoked only in the form of the violent paintings of Turner, and there is social criticism in the manner in which Renoir's nudes are referred to. A feeling of futility is evident when Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is invoked in "Cathedral Under the Sea", where Brett says that in the sea, there is "no withdrawing Arnoldean roar but a simple sense/Of plodding on between the breakwaters/And the wrecks, torpedoed, weeping rust/On little pathways between magnificence and folly. (18)

If one acknowledges that there is unease about the present, one also needs to ask whether there is nostalgia for the past. Although there seems to be a longing for a simpler past in the poems, it is not unqualified but tainted with the doubts of the present. Otherwise, how would one explain the yearning for a time when ghosts were simpler apparitions, in "Ghosts?" (25-26).

This wistfulness for the past is however, rather conveniently, knit into a hope for a better future. The title of the collection, "Tomorrow It Will All Run Backwards", expresses this hope. The poem that the title is taken from, "9/11" is a hope of reversal of catastrophe. However, it seems like mere wish fulfilment, and not unbridled hope. While "Tomorrow" suggests the future, "Backwards" denotes a motion of moving back. The overwhelming feeling is that of the present being caught in the tussle between the past and the future. There is a mild anticipation that the future 'might' be peaceful, but this cannot change the tragedies of yesterday and today. "The Glasgow Ice Cream Wars", the very first poem of the collection, speaks of "future looking down time's one-way telescope" (11), implying that retrospection may be possible, but not clairvoyance.

This leads to an acceptance that war is inevitable. "Afterwards" notes this with despair:

I have learned that blood is in the power of continents
Locking and wrestling like tectonic plates
In the time span of glaciers (108).

One way of getting away from this is to become a news exile, like the escapist speaker in "Oil Heart (Second Gulf War)". However, as this is neither possible nor desirable, what one can try to do, is not to be stuck in the past, or have one's head stuck in the clouds of the future, but to assess both and make the present liveable enough. Yes, this is not ideal, and never utopian, but a life that one is forced to eke out at present, and the book seems to encourage this view.

Modestly priced, the quality of the book is good, enabling easy reading. The cover page, with its image of a gun, suggests the violence of war that the book seeks to chronicle, and the redacted text conveys the erasure of people and rewriting of history that takes place during war. However, better care could have been taken as far as printing of poems is concerned, as there are avoidable errors. "Walls of Byzantium" has been printed twice in the book, while "London, from Aqaba to Zem-Zem" is the same poem as "Bangladesh, London" with a few lines added to the former poem.

However, such errors could easily be rectified in forthcoming editions; and do not take anything away from the fact that it manages to effectively convey how the impact of war is far more pronounced now than ever before. As the veracity of this statement is unquestionable, the book is a worthy addition to any reader who is humane enough to be willing to empathise with the active participants in the wars and/or fully comprehend the anguish and angst that comes out of war to shudder and cry out: "The horror! The horror!"

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