And about the Mud…

Rosanna Warren answers questions from Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec (November 2011)

By way of introduction, Rosanna Warren is Hanna Holborn Gray Distinguished Service Professor of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. To her volumes of poetry, *Snow Day* (1981), *Each Leaf Shines Separate* (1984), *Stained Glass* (1993), *Departure* (2003), and *Ghost in a Red Hat* (2011), can be added publications in *The New Yorker*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Slate*, and *remue.net* (2011).[1] Her other publications include, as editor, *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field* (1989); a translation of Euripides, *Suppliant Women* (1995); and *Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry* (2008). She was a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1999 to 2005. She and her publisher have generously granted the use of her poem "Mud" for this inaugural issue of *Arts of War and Peace Review*.

Mud

It's not as simple as rhyming "mud" and "blood"
as Owen did and does ("I, too, saw God through mud")
in his "Apologia."
Or feces and "fecit" which is
a kind or rhyme as in
"Walker fecit," which he

did and does through
mud, bruised flesh, pigment, glossy
oil pressed from memory's trench:
"God" rhymes of course with
everything. It's not enough
to spread damp clay ("Was it for this

the clay grew tall?") across canvas: he can't
bury father, uncles,
sons, they keep
sprouting, worms their words ("Men went
to Catraeth as day
dawned"): Our words, his

words: Aneirin, Jones, a seethe on
the surface we cannot

possess. The dead belong
to no one, live their own
maggoty life observed
by the small, sheep-skulled soldier;

by the father who clambers out of the painter's skull;
by the easel which wants
to be lantern and cross.
The Somme? July 1, 1916: men went, men
want: all those men marched
which century? Sixth? The

Welsh at Catraeth, three hundred dead: a sum:
a song. Whose ribcage
gapes? Whose numbers ooze
in the ditch of years? This painter comes
too late. He hoists
his loops of pods upon

a firmament of mud, he hangs dark swags
of script and
sacrament. (A
duchess approves. She likes chiaro-
scuro in love and
war). The painter has brought

a necklace—no, a rosary—of human
kidneys, slick
and soiled. It is
not as easy as rhyming "mud"
and "blood." The words belong
to no one. (Not that we

wanted. Not that we wanted to know.)[2]

In your book *Departure* (2003), the opening poem "Cassandra" suggests that the entire collection may somehow be linked to war. Is that something you were conscious of as you were composing the poems?

Yes. I have long been haunted by our human propensity toward violence, and I have meditated on *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid* for years, but as this book grew, my country astonished me by invading Iraq on obviously trumped-up pretexts. As horror followed horror, the book became an oblique reflection on our

contemporary national shame. At the same time, I bear in mind a longer perspective such as we find in Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing," which recognizes the heartbreaking fact that homo sapiens has kept hurling himself into war for millennia: "Again the guns disturbed the hour,/ Roaring their readiness to avenge,/ As far inland as Stourton Tower,/ And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge."

What wars have particularly marked your work? Have any peace agreements or peacemaking gestures had as much of an influence?

The Trojan War, presented in *The Iliad* with Homer's godlike 360-degree range of compassion for all parties, seems to me a current event. It colors the poems "Cassandra" and "Arrival" in *Departure*, and my poem called "The Twelfth Day" in an earlier book, *Stained Glass*. The sad, grim, imperial war of Virgil's *Aeneid* seems to me even more contemporary, and it colors the poems "Poetry Reading," "Turnus," and "Bonfires" in *Departure*. World War I turns up there in my poem "Mud," an homage to the British painter John Walker and his series of ravaged, marvelous paintings inspired by that war and by the war poets Wilfred Owen and David Jones. World War II strikes into my book in the poem "Departure," an homage to the German painter Max Beckmann. These are bleak poems. There is no peace-making in them. "Mud" concludes with an angry sense of civilians' willful ignorance of war: "(Not that we/ wanted. Not that we wanted to know.)" "Departure" concludes with a sense that the realm of peace and blessed abundance is inaccessible to us: "because that open boat/ has not set sail/ from our shores/ nor will it, while we are alive." I'm afraid to say that peace-making gestures have not struck my imagination as forcefully as the destructive ones.

Was there a turning point in the way you viewed your own creative activity after the World Trade Center attack in September 2001?

The day after the attacks, I said that I feared that we as a nation

would learn the wrong things from the event. That turned out to be horribly the case. It didn't produce "a turning point" in my writing, but an intensification of my sense of tragedy. And an increasing rage at the militant idiocy of our leaders. Not only did President George W. Bush invade Iraq on criminally false pretexts, but the Occupation that followed was so arrogantly misguided, so incompetent, so corrupt, it condemned that country to years of suffering and confusion, and condemned our country to a futile waste of American lives, a waste of our financial resources, and a waste of our moral capital. It has made us a cynical, politically bankrupt people. In my most recent book of poems, *Ghost in a Red Hat*, there are several poems which express this rage more directly, in particular a poem called "Fire."

Your poetic works make frequent mention of France, and the Anne Verveine sequence in *Departure* presents a Simone Weil-like persona. In the third poem there is an allusion to the "calamity" that Hafez sang. Does that line link to war?

Not explicitly. I never thought of Anne Verveine as a Weil-like persona: I thought of her more as an erotic-artistic-mystical possibility. The calamity in Hafez's poems is a mystical sense of love interrupted or denied (whether it is the intimacy between human lovers, or between a mortal and God). In Anne Verveine's fifth poem, though, war becomes a force, as we are to understand that her lover, an Uzbek artist she had known in Paris, has returned to his blasted country, and that their intimacy has been shattered by their places in history: "You knew about design from the holes / blown through your country. / We spoke in a language of no country on earth."

The second of three poems you translated by Max Jacob in *Stained Glass* (1993) seems like an apocalyptic medley of wars. Can you explain what first interested you in the life and works of Max Jacob?

Do you mean the poem, "Infernal Vision in the Form of a

Madrigal"? That poem is not so much a medley of wars as a meditation on forbidden homosexual love: "When I had renounced your love, o women…" I became enthralled by Max Jacob when I was twenty years old, living in Paris and doing research in the André Derain archives in the Fondation Doucet in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. Derain had done woodcuts for an early book of Jacob's, and I found correspondence between them that fascinated me, and began reading Jacob's poems. Jacob's artistic life, divided between writing and painting, echoes divisions of my own. I was also intrigued and pained by his search for a spiritual life between the Judaism of his birth and the Roman Catholicism to which he turned, and by his erotic torment as a homosexual man in a society in which such an identity was considered shameful. The tensions from which he suffered fueled some remarkable poems. I do not romanticize his suffering but I honor some of the poems.

What gestures did Max Jacob make toward peace?

None directly. He was a profoundly unpolitical creature, and when he did make a political gesture, it was misguided, to say the least: his Catholicism led him to publish a poem, "Douleur," in December 1937 in the right-wing review *Occident* that supported Franco; the poem appeared on a page next to a photograph of the generalissimo. In February 1938 he signed a manifesto of support for pro-Franco Catholic intellectuals drafted by Claudel, also published in *Occident*. And this was just after the massacre at Guernica in April 1937. He was at least embarrassed by these gestures, his correspondence shows. His friend Picasso would certainly have taken him to task. History then reared up and kicked him: he was arrested as a Jew by the Gestapo in 1944, and died of pneumonia soon after in the prison camp of Drancy outside of Paris. He was on the list for deportation to Auschwitz. His "gestures toward peace" in his life were the writing of mystical love poems, a corrosive irony, a gift for generous

friendship, and a freewheeling dreamlike whimsy.

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) is one of the first paintings many people think of when they think of art that represents war. What painting(s) would you mention as affecting the way you wish to imagine a world at peace?

Simone Martini's fresco of the lone "condottiere" Guidoriccio de Fogliano in a bleak, moonlike landscape between distant fortified cities in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena

Titian's *Descent from the Cross* in the Louvre, with Christ's head in shadow.

Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents*

Goya's prints, *The Disasters of War*

Should children be required to read classical literature as a peace-fostering measure?

I don't think so! But I hope they could read classical literature as a human-fostering measure.

The Modern Language Association has recently emphasized the importance of literary translations... Are there links to be made between comparative literatures and peace-making abilities?

This question is too big to answer seriously in this medium. One could only make the obvious banal points about reciprocal cultural understanding…

In *Fables of the Self* (2008), you devote a chapter to Auden's elegy for Freud, and you highlight Auden's search for "an ideal brotherhood" as well as the poet's shortcomings concerning his civic ideal. How is a civic role for poetry being acted out in the United States at present?

Obliquely, but at times powerfully. Usually when poets try to be poet-citizens, let alone unacknowledged legislators, the poetry stinks. We're not in ancient Sparta where Alcman composed odes for the girls and boys of the city to sing and dance to in celebration of the virtues of the polis. Probably the most civic role for an American poet these days is to act as private conscience and critic, not presuming to speak for others or to hector them into action. Clarity of vision seems to me the gift to be sought. And an alert, self-skeptical language. And a perspective longer than the feverish op-ed pronouncement or talking head blabber.
Imagination can be a political force. How can we have a good politics without it? How else can we imagine justice?

Some examples I admire:
Brenda Hillman's book *Practical Water*. In the poem of that name, she writes, "An ethics occurs at the edge/ of what we know// The creek goes underground about here"

Robert Pinsky's poem "Gulf Music" (and a good many other poems in the book of that name). "Dolors, dollars. Callings and contrivances…"

Tom Sleigh's book *Army Cats*. That book is largely situated in Beirut and in Iraq. In the poem called "Stranding," he writes: "But the ditch knows/ just who we are—"

Geoffrey Hill (in England these days, not the US) is of the course the giant writing a poetry of resistant political vision in a language under monumental and inventive stress.

Citation *Arts of War and Peace* 1.1. (March 2013) **The Fallen & the Unfallen** http://www.awpreview.univ-paris-diderot.fr

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