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“War song of America”: The Vigilantes and American Propagandistic Poetry of the First World War

Abstract

When the United States entered the First World War in April 1917, the Committee of Public Information (CPI) organised several branches of propaganda to advertise and promote the war in hundreds of magazines and newspapers nationwide. One of these organisations was the group of writers known as “the Vigilantes.” This essay examines *Fifes and Drums: A Collection of Poems of America at War* (1917), published by the Vigilantes a few months after the American declaration of war. The discussion frames the context under which the Vigilantes conceived their poems as well as the main strategies that they employed to poetically portray the role that the United States was to play in the conflict.

On 2 April 1917 President Thomas Woodrow Wilson addressed the United States Congress to ask his fellow congressmen to declare war on Germany and support an American intervention in Europe. The American government had decided to mobilise their men to intervene in a war that many Americans perceived as alien; this would be the first time in history that the United States would send troops to fight a war away from American soil. For this purpose, President Wilson and the American government had to convince their people of the need to support what many perceived as a merely European affair. The American government expected Americans to be willing to sacrifice their lives for a great moral cause, but this would not be an easy task. Before the declaration of war, the United States was deeply polarised regarding a potential intervention in Europe. Once the US Congress supported President Wilson’s petition, the American government faced two main challenges: on the one hand, they had to fully convince the American public of “the rightness of the cause” (St. John III 2009, 150); on the other hand, they needed American citizens to “embrace sacrifice to support the war” (St. John III 2009, 150).

The American government designed several methods to convince the public opinion about the crucial role that the United States would play in the European

conflict. The administration initiated a propaganda campaign that imitated the strategies that the British had followed at the beginning of the war. At the request of the Prime Minister, Herbert H. Asquith, Charles Masterman had established in September 1914 the War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House, which “rapidly developed into the most active of all the propaganda departments, arranging for the production and overseas dissemination of books, pamphlets and periodicals as well as photographs, lantern slides and picture postcards” (Taylor 877). The British had soon realised that words would become an essential weapon in this war; they created different propaganda campaigns to support the troops, keep up the morale in the Home Front, and encourage the younger generation to embrace the struggle. To this end, Wellington House shaped multiple campaigns that Masterman expected to be of the “highest literary quality, academic in tone and scholarly in content, rather than simply propagandistic diatribes” (Sanders and Taylor 107). Masterman even decided to create a special branch of Wellington House in the United States which would deal solely with British propaganda in America, appointing the Canadian novelist Gilbert Parker as the head of the American department (Sanders and Taylor 167–168.). At the beginning, the main goal of propaganda in America was to maintain the appearance of “benevolent neutrality” (Buitenhuis 17) on the part of the United States, and to safeguard American loans, shipping of food, and war material to support the Allies. This initial neutral stance would gradually evolve into a more aggressive policy in which the American press would call more or less subtly for an American intervention in the European war.

1. The CPI

When the United States finally declared war on Germany in April 1917, the American government was therefore widely familiar with some of the propaganda techniques that could shift public opinion in favour of the war. On 13 April 1917, only a week after the declaration of war, President Woodrow Wilson appointed the Committee on Public Information (CPI). The CPI was created to disseminate facts about the war, to coordinate propaganda material, and to serve as the institutional liaison with newspapers. George Creel, an investigative journalist, became the person in charge of the propaganda campaign in the United States. Creel was mostly concerned with the “creation of thought” (Axelrod 81), so he did not initially establish any institutional censorship. He conceived the war as “the fight for the *minds* of men” (Creel 3; original emphasis) and for this purpose the CPI initiated a campaign “to spread the word of America’s war aims and appeal for public support” (Creel in St. John III 2009, 40), and to educate Americans and others in the “gospel of Wilsonian democracy” (Axelrod 82). The image that Creel wished to create was that of a country that should come “to the rescue of civilization” (Mock and Larson 5).

George Creel conceived the conflict as “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising [...] with the war as the product to be merchandised” (Harries and Harries 165). The thousands of miles that separate Europe and America turned the war into “a virtual phenomenon” for most Americans (Matthews 217). The American view of the war relied on the war materials published in newspapers, magazines, posters, pamphlets, and other forms of information such as rallies or public speeches. In a way, “American writing of the war *was* the war” (Matthews 217). Creel took advantage of this physical distance between America and the European continent and controlled almost the totality of the incoming information. Yet, he also wanted to “inject positive thoughts into the nation’s psyche” (Harries and Harries 168). He structured this positive discourse around the definition of America as a democratic world leader (Jeffrey 221). The war was presented as a “holy war” (Quinn 178), “a life-and-death struggle against the forces of darkness” (Ross 226). The government needed to persuade the different political, intellectual, and economic lobbies about the rightness of America’s war cause, and also needed to inspire American soldiers in their fight for democracy.

Propaganda naturally became a crucial tool to achieve these objectives. As Alan Axelrod has explained in *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (2009), propaganda is “the message – the picture of reality – the state wants the people to receive and believe [...]. Propaganda is not necessarily untrue, but it has little to do with people thinking for themselves” (49). Creel created a propaganda network made up of thousands of intellectuals who engaged as public speakers and writers who advertised and promoted the war in hundreds of magazines and newspapers nationwide; he organised rallies, speeches, and published the *Official Bulletin* of war news. True facts were moulded and manipulated to be presented as evidence to American people. These strategies, Creel thought, would be sufficient to weigh in and persuade Americans to “make the decisions the state wanted them to make” (40). The government and the CPI expected American civilians to positively embrace the declaration of war and to be willing to sacrifice their lives and their economic privileges for the great cause.

The CPI set up hundreds of lectures, designed a vast number of posters to be distributed throughout the United States, produced film documentaries, organised war exhibitions, and created advertising photographs, postcards, and cartoons to support the American intervention. Inspired by Charles Masterman’s work at Wellington House, who had organized a conference with more than twenty British writers who later supported the war by signing the Authors’ Manifesto,¹ George Creel assembled all American writers willing to support the war into a team. The CPI “gathered together the leading novelists, essayists, and publicists of the land, and these men and women, without payment, worked faithfully in the production of brilliant, comprehensive articles” (Creel 8). The News Division under the CPI sent weekly war reports to twelve thousand daily newspapers, which resulted in about six thousand columns of war stories encouraged by the CPI (St. John III 2009, 150).

2. The Vigilantes

The Vigilantes, who had been co-founded by German-American poet Herman Hagerdon in 1916, are one of the literary groups that emerged under these circumstances. At the beginning, the group was “a military-style organization of intellectuals and writers dedicated to propagate American interventionism abroad” (Piep 178). It was not until a few weeks before Wilson’s declaration of war that they became an officially established group. In keep with the policies of the CPI, the Wheeler Syndicate and the American Press Association managed this group of writers and “recruited prominent authors, artists, and editors to produce anti-German propaganda that would extol democratic beliefs, motivate the populace, inspire patriotism, and encourage Allied involvement in the war” (Underhill 71). The Vigilantes called themselves “The Minute Men of the Pen” and volunteered to promote the American war effort for free as they agreed to write essays or editorials of around 1,000 words every month (Van Wienen 2002, 29; Underhill 73). The group defined itself as “a non-partisan organization of authors, artists and others” (Rosebault ii) and it included authors such as Gertrude Atherton, Gelett Burgess, Amelia Josephine Burr, or Irvin S. Cobb.² Their objectives were: a) “To arouse the country to a realization of the importance of the problems confronting the American people”; b) “To awaken and cultivate in the youth of the country a sense of public service and an intelligent interest in citizenship and national problems”; c) “To work vigorously for preparedness; mental, moral and physical” (Rosebault ii).

Creel considered that Americans needed “role models, both fictional and real” (Quinn 173), and the Vigilantes was one of the many resources that he employed to advertise the war in the United States. The Vigilantes published two books in 1917: the first one, *For France*, was an anthology of prose and poetry that appeared in April; the second one, a book of poems entitled *Fifes and Drums: A Collection of Poems of America at War*, was published in June and included more than sixty patriotic poems conceived as a “striking record of the emotional reactions of the American people during the fortnight and the six weeks following the declaration of war” (Rosebault v). By the end of the war, more than 300 writers had enrolled in the Vigilantes, who had “formed to feed patriotic writing under strict editorial guidelines” (Whalan 2014).

The Vigilantes became one of the most active and productive groups in the sphere of literature related to the First World War in America. Despite their significance, few critical studies have discussed the role that the group played in the construction of the specifically American discourse during the First World War and its impact on the portrayal of the American experience of the war. Led by Paul Fussell’s influential and controversial *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), traditional critical studies on the English-speaking literature of the First World War have evolved around the anti-war poetry produced by British soldiers

on their mutilating and traumatic experiences in the trenches. This trend has been widely contested and positively reversed in the last decades, as some of the volumes on the poetry of the First World War published in the last years prove.³ Nevertheless, critical studies on American poetry during the First World War are still scarce, especially those devoted to the poetry of those civilians who wrote about the war without participating in actual combat.

There are two major studies about American poetry of the First World War, *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poets in the Great War* (1997) and *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War* (2002), both published by Mark Van Wienen, which briefly explore the work of the Vigilantes and the nature of the texts they produced. The latter is presented as the first collection of poetry “representing the wide range of American poems published in response to the Great War” (Van Wienen 2002, 1). His anthology includes more than a hundred poems which stand as an example of how current criticism has contested the traditional canon of the poetry of the First World War. Van Wienen moves beyond “the strictures of literary value [...] formulated in the 1910s by the modernists and the conventions that continue to inform literary judgments [...] in the present” (3), while at the same time moves away from “the cult of the soldier-poet” (7).⁴ Van Wienen acknowledges the powerful role that this wide variety of poems played in the America of the time; the authors who produced them perceived the poems “as weapons: literally, as tools of war that might bring U.S. citizens to kill their German counterparts” (1). Van Wienen also includes, in “Part 5, 1917” of *Rendezvous with Death*, a brief reference to the Vigilantes; he establishes that organisations such as this were

crucial for Americans to believe that the ideals prompting intervention were distinctive from, and superior to, the European powers’ motivations in 1914; that American citizens felt they had freely chosen their roles in the war effort and the sacrifices entailed by those; that patriotic American poets [...] gave expression not to a partisan position but to a transcendent national purpose. (153)

In spite of Van Wienen’s interest in moving beyond “the strictures of literary value,” his anthology of American poetry of the First World War does not include any of the poems published in *Fifes and Drums*. Moreover, he fails to critically discuss the role of the poems written by the Vigilantes beyond the short explanation provided above these lines.⁵ In 2017, Lonnie E. Underhill published an article on vigilante Hamlin Garland, arguing that “the patriotic work of the Vigilantes, and in particular the contributions of author Hamlin Garland [...] deserve further recognition” (71). Nevertheless, Underhill’s focus is directed at the role of a specific author; he fails to map the common structure and ideology underlying the collection of poems gathered together in *Fifes and Drums*.

The patriotic and propagandistic role that these poems played is widely acknowledged; notwithstanding, no comprehensive study that discusses the poems

in *Fifes and Drums* in their relation to the American propagandistic discourse of the First World War has been published yet. This essay seeks to fill in this gap as well as to enlarge the critical discussion around the Vigilantes through the examination of the strategies that this group of authors employed to create American propagandistic poetry with a specific purpose in mind: presenting the United States as a safe keeper of democratic ideals. The main question under discussion is to what extent *Fifes and Drums* contributed to the dissemination of a specific ideology that portrayed the American nation as a chosen land and as the cradle of modern civilisation and modern democracy. For this purpose, I shall examine the rhetorical and stylistic strategies that the poets employed to perpetuate this patriotic discourse, and to what extent these are in keep with the larger propagandistic campaign that was created to mobilise the American public opinion in favour of the war. In doing so, I shall amplify the literary map of the First World War and establish new connections within a war tradition – that of civilians contributing to the war effort through their writing about the war from the rear-guard – that radically differs from the literary construction of the war portrayed by the more canonical American authors of the First World War such as John Dos Passos, John Reed, E. E. Cummings, or Ernest Hemingway, as well as from the work of the war poets of different warring nations such as the British Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, or the French Guillaume Apollinaire.⁶

The Vigilantes thought that they needed to convince the American people about the need to fight the war and, at the same time, they needed to explain the specific nature of this war. In my discussion of how *Fifes and Drums* portrayed a specific vision of the war, three main ideas need consideration: firstly, the name that this group of writers chose to define themselves; secondly, the main strategies they employed in their poems to promote this specific ideology; and thirdly, the underlying relationship between their chosen topics and specific founding values of the American republic such as freedom or justice.

Vigilantes is a name with strong resonances in the American mind-set. The term has been historically associated with frontier culture. During the Western expansion of the 19th century, upon the explorers' and settlers' arrival in new territories, vigilante committees were created to play the role of the official sheriff or person of law that *invigilated* that the newly created communities of these territories respected the laws of the Constitution. The committees were made up of civilians who created their own system of justice and usually took the law in their own hands.⁷

Although the ideals of the Vigilantes during the First World War did not promote lynching or radical violence against other Americans, the group was nevertheless conservative in their ideology, as their texts contributed to the limitations placed “on progressive political groups and their causes” (Van Wiene 2002, 29–30), while they promoted a ‘white view’ of the American intervention, ignoring the role that African Americans may play in the war. Their choice of

name was, therefore, not happenstance: by presenting themselves under the tradition of vigilantism, they were putting forward the underlying defining features of a specific ideology; they presented themselves as advocates in the defence of ‘white’ American values, as the keepers of the American democracy that would help to safeguard freedom and democracy in Europe. The Vigilantes had a duty: informing the world of the things they believed were in danger. As Edith M. Thomas’s closing poem of *Fifes and Drums*, “Ride Vigilantes” claims, “Tell them who sleep – so loth to awake, / All unprepared for the storm that must break – / Tell them, Humanity’s all is at stake! / Tell them, ‘Tis Freedom that falls in the breach!” (Rosebault 141). Their role was to spread the word to invigilate that the values of the Republic were not violated.

3. *Fifes and Drums*

In their spreading of the American gospel of democracy, the authors appealed to the emotions of the readers. The poems “furnish a striking record of the emotional reactions of the American people”; they try to encapsulate the nation’s feelings about the new role that the United States was to play in the struggle. The pro-war British poets had responded to the war by presenting the war as a great adventure, as the great battle of the British Empire, or as an honourable patriotic duty to die for the country (Murdoch 24). The Vigilantes, however, looked for a different strategy: their collection of poems was “presented to the public in the belief that men and women in every corner of the Union will find reflected in them some of the love and aspiration they themselves are experiencing for their re-discovered country” (Rosebault v).

Their poetical response resorts to different propagandistic strategies. As Alice Goldfarb Marquis has argued in “Words as Weapons: Propaganda in Britain and Germany during the First World War” (1978), the press of the period followed the eight basic methods of propaganda discussed in James A. C. Brown’s *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing* (1963): stereotypes, pejorative names, selection and omission of facts, atrocity stories, slogans, one-sided assertions, pinpointing the enemy, and the bandwagon effect (Marquis 486).⁸ The poems in *Fifes and Drums* follow some of these propaganda techniques, namely the use of slogans, the bandwagon technique and the pinpointing technique. They were meant to appeal to common American ideals so as to motivate American readers to support the cause.

The musical resonances of the title of the book, *Fifes and Drums*, work as the first slogan. Fifers and drummers have been a symbol of the US army since the times of the American War of Independence. By choosing to gather this collection of poems under this title, from the very beginning the Vigilantes put forward one of the underlying ideological goals of the volume: *Fifes and Drums* is a book of

poems that sound like martial songs, songs that can be easily remembered and repeated, and that will certainly contribute to spread a specific ideology among the American population. This is a book of poems with ‘songs’ for America; as a matter of fact, four of the poems are entitled “Songs of...” or “Songs to...,” namely, “The Song” by Marion Couthouy Smith (18), “A Song of Democracy” by Lee Wilson Dodd (44), “War Song of America” by Grantland Rice (57), and “A Song of Confidence” by Theodosia Garrison (139).⁹

Slogans were also created through the type of poetry that the Vigilantes produced. It was simple, repetitive and memorable. They followed a strategy that had proven very effective for the British at the beginning of the war. Propagandistic poetry does not take a long time to write or publish. It can be easily read and remembered, it allows for “improvisation, rapid response” (Longley 60), and it is naturally a powerful tool to appeal to the readers’ emotions. For example, in “The Song” (18–21), Marion Couthouy Smith imitates the style of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and ends each of the stanzas with similar linguistic phrases: “a song is sounding on,” “its call is sounding on,” “its call is sounding on,” “that still is sounding on,” “her soul is marching on,” and “while God is marching on.” These lines echo the closing lines of each stanza in Julia Ward Howe’s anthem. At the same time, Couthouy Smith interweaves three of the original stanzas from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in her own song. Thus, she takes the American tradition of the American Civil War and updates it to create the new patriotic message for the First World War.¹⁰

In “Peace with a Sword (22–23), Abbey Farwell Brown follows a similar pattern. She ends each of the stanzas in the poem with a couplet and each of them has similar rhyming and linguistic patterns that contribute to convey the effect, and the message, that she wants to send to her reader. The first line of each of the closing couplets refers to “the sword” (“even with a sword,” “the freeman’s sword,” “yeah, ‘with a sword,’” and “‘Peace, with a sword!’”), while the second line includes a litany: “Help us, O Lord!” – repeated in the first, third, and final stanza – and “Not this, O Lord,” which appears in the second stanza. The religious and Puritan background of the United States acts as a guiding pattern in Farwell Brown’s poem. The image of “peace with a sword” is borrowed from St. Matthew 10:34. In it, Jesus claimed: “think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword”; just like Jesus had warned his disciples that his arrival would cause trouble, Farwell Brown seems to acknowledge that despite the desire of the United States to preserve peace, now they are involved in the struggle their duty is “in godly liberty” to “unsheathe the patriot sword in times of need” (23). The Americans must wield the sword to keep the American gospel and founding values alive.

The poem turns into a poetic jeremiad of war, as do other poems such as “The Test;” “Marching with Papa Joffre,” that I shall discuss later in the essay; or the already mentioned “Ride, Vigilantes.” The authors underscore what Sacvan

Bercovitch defined as “the typology of America’s mission” (93). In his much influential study, *The American Jeremiad* (1978), Bercovitch argues that the Puritan jeremiad is a rhetorical tradition in American literature that has turned into a specific American genre. Jeremiads are usually long sermons with repetitive structures that build upon the idea that God’s punishment is a sign of being the elect and is perceived as an opportunity for society to repent, redeem, and improve (6–8).¹¹ In these cases, the poetic Jeremiads remind the citizens of the United States of their duty while they go back to the ideals of honour and self-sacrifice upon which the republic had been founded. In “The Test,” Ameline Josephine Burr reminds American citizens of the economic and personal efforts that they had to make “to help dear Liberty to live” (138). With a series of rhetorical warnings, she reminds citizens that “words are not the price / at which the wares of God are sold” (138), but citizens must be willing to sacrifice their “own flesh” and lend any of their gold for the war cause (138).

Regarding the portrayal of the enemy, the Vigilantes refrain from including any poem that refers to German atrocities in the volume. As opposed to some of the examples that were found in the American press of the period, *Fifes and Drums* does not include any references to the German as the ‘evil Hun.’¹² The only two poems that deal with German matters are “The Kaiser” (77–78) and “The German-American” (66). In the first one, Florence Earle Coates portrays the fall of the German leader. Before the war, the Kaiser was “the monarch of the hour!” (77), the man who stood alone “in sovereignty sublime,” who used to be a “uniquely great,” “lofty in courage, wise, above his time” (77). However, in 1917, the Kaiser stands “lone today,” with his “throne ensanguined, his bright aegis dime” (77). The view of this fallen man makes the poet exclaim: “what spectacle more sad!” (78).

In “The German-American,” Katherine Lee Bates addresses to the large German community in the United States.¹³ The foreign-born workers in the United States were one of the most important targets of the propaganda machine, “on the assumption that [their] loyalty to [their] homeland might complicate [their] attitude about the war” (Harries and Harries 178). This was particularly challenging when writing to the Germans in America, as they might have felt incapable of joining the war effort in their new land. Lee Bates writes to those dutiful German-Americans that have already supported the American side of the struggle. She opens the poem by honouring those Americans of German origin who remember “the old, enchanted dream-song of the Rhine” (66), that is, their original motherland. The author traces the journey and origins of these German-Americans and acknowledges that they are still, somehow, alien in a foreign land, “still strange in speech and manner” (66). Yet, despite their German origin, she reminds the reader that their honour relies on the fact that they keep their “flighted faith” with the American “young Freedom” (66). These German Americans hail “the Starry Banner” and have now become true American patriots, “by duty, not by birth” (67).

The poems also explore the existing links and newly created bonds with the Allies, in pieces such as “To the Allies” (74) by Laura E. Richards, “Our Flag in France” (96) by Marion Couthouy Smith, “Marching with Papa Joffre” (102) by Percy MacKaye, or “A French Captain” (117) by Amelia Josephine Burr. In “Marching with Papa Joffre” (102–104), Percy MacKaye cheerfully portrays the arrival of Marshal Joseph Joffre, known as Papa Joffre, in the United States in late April 1917. Joffre, “blue jacket and reed breeches and mustachios / gleaming white” (102) has arrived in America, “with a Tommy on his left hand and a Johnny / on his right [...] to give to America his Godspeed for the fight” (102). The Johnny (the American soldier) has joined the Tommy (the British), and the Poilu (the French) to “make free men, now and evermore” (103). In these lines MacKaye portrays the bonds that were created among the Allies on both sides of the ocean. More importantly, MacKaye creates a poetic Jeremiad through his repetition of the expression “Vive la –Vive la France” (often accompanied by “Viva l’Amerique!,” “l’Angleterre” or “Vive l’Alliance”), as well as through the interweaving of religious values with democratic principles: “We are marching in alliance that our faith may be / restored; / We are fighting, we are cheering, for a nobler / world-accord; / we are praying, through the tempest, unto Lib-erty, our Lord” (104).

Yet, the most recurring elements in *Fifes and Drums* are the idea of America and the American Flag. Six poems are addressed to America: “America Unafraid” (13) by Charles Hanson Towne, “To America” (33) and “America” (88) by Lee Wilson Dodd, “To All Americans” (55) by Amelia Josephine Burr, “America in Arms” (71) by Percy MacKaye, or “America, To Arms!” (91) by Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff; in them, America becomes a theme, a central object of attention, in keep with Bercovich’s claims about America as a symbol of identity that “has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country’s past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal” (176). America, the poets claim, “will wake / to the stern task before her” (Rosebault 13); America, “the anxious Mother of unhasty men” will offer “noble” answers” to those who ask “are you for ease or honor?” (89), and the answer will naturally be that she is for “the rights of living men, in peace of war”; Americans in this struggle “shall prove if we are clay or steel” and will prove themselves “clean of untruth and fear and greed / free faithfully to serve the need / of God, wherever he may lead” (55–56).

The American flag also becomes a symbol in the already mentioned “Our Flag in France,” as well as in poems such as “The Flag Goes Up” (38) by Amelia Josephine Burr, “The Flag” (53) by George E. Woodberry, or “The Stars and Stripes” (64) and “The American Flag” (98) by Theodosia Garrison. All these poems had a common goal: to mobilise the American people and to make them aware – through symbols such as the American flag or the allegory of the American nation – of the crucial role that the Union was to play in this struggle. The war

would perpetuate, and even strengthen, American democratic values and that is why the founding ideals of the American nation, “life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness,” are referred to in most of the poems in *Fifes and Drums*.

Conclusion

The power of rhetoric put forward through the use of songs and Jeremiads were some of the strategies that these authors successfully used to mobilise minds and opinions. These resources helped to construct an American view of the war that was shaped around honourable ideals. This was not new, neither in American literature nor in the history of literature in English. From the epic tradition of *Beowulf* to Henry V’s speech at the battle of Agincourt, there are numerous examples throughout the history of English-speaking literature that revolve around this noble conception of warfare. Henry V’s “we few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (Shakespeare 291) are, in this case, the American citizens that were caught in a remote struggle that was hard to understand for Americans and that could only be portrayed in terms that related to their own American ideology and culture. If we have an even deeper look, we must point out that these elements – the American flag, the idea of America as Promised land, and the American people as the elect who must protect civilization – do not differ so much from the elements that still pervade the American political discourse of today. In fact, they are at the heart of the debate in the Trump era.

The noble ideals may have died with the First World War, but the ideology behind some of those ideals still prevails. For this reason, one hundred years after the Armistice, the poems published in *Fifes and Drums* deserve consideration. Their literary value may not be as innovative as the poems written by the war poets or as sophisticated as the poems of avant-garde artists such as T. S. Eliot. Yet, they give evidence of a rhetorical struggle, of a “war of words” that was equally important to Americans as the actual involvement of fighting men in the war. Moreover, the poems help us in our understanding of the past that, unfortunately, scarily resembles the world of today. By looking at the poems that were written in 1917, and how they were used back then, we may remember that words can become weapons as powerful as the sword. The way we used words and poetry in the past may help us understand the present, and even help us shape our future.

Notes

- 1 The meeting was probably “the most important gathering of creative and academic writers ever assembled for an official purpose in the history of English letters” (Buitenhuis 14). On 2 September 1914, Charles Masterman had

summoned a group of male British authors to a meeting at Wellington House. Two weeks later, the attendees published the Authors' Manifesto supporting the war, signed by fifty-four distinguished British writers such as Sir James M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, R. H. Benson, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, or H. G. Wells, and a few women such as May Sinclair. Rudyard Kipling and Sir Arthur Quiller Couch had also been invited, but as they were unable to attend the meeting in person they sent messages offering their services (see Buitenhuis, Hynes and Prieto).

- 2 Gelett Burgess (1866–1951) is mostly known for founding the humorist magazine *The Lark*, one of the magazines of the American cultural radicalists of the *fin de siècle*. These magazines are thought to have contributed to the foundation of modernism in America (Knight 29). Gertrude Atherton (1857–1948) belonged to the group of European Americans such as Henry James or Edith Wharton, she wrote extensively on her travels and was a prolific writer of fictional biography (see Petrie); Amelia Josephine Burr (1878–1968) was an American poet and novelist who was also a Red Cross Member during the First World War. She became one of the most prolific American war poets (Van Wienen 2002, 320). Irvin S. Cobb (1876–1944) was an American journalist, particularly popular in his time as the author of humorous columns. He was the country's highest paid journalist and even hosted the Oscars in 1935 (see Prieto 134–135). Other authors who joined the Vigilantes were prominent poets in the United States at the time such as the Edith M. Thomas (1900–1909); the imagist Amy Lowell; Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931), who promoted the use of poetry as an art form of the common people; Edgar Lee Masters, author of the *Spoon River Anthology* (1915); Southern novelist George Washington Cable (1844–1925); and Pulitzer Prize winner Hamlin Garland (1860–1940) (Piep 178).
- 3 Cases in point are Catherine Reilly's groundbreaking *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (1981), Nosheen Khan's *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (1988), Vivien Noakes's *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (2006), Stuart Sillars' *Fields of Agony: British Poetry of the First World War* (2007), Tim Kendall's *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (2007) and *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (2013), and Santanu Das's critical collection of essays *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (2013). All these studies include examples or discussion, among others, of the voices of women poets who wrote about the struggle from an alternative perspective to the one provided by the soldier-poet, as well as examples of propagandistic popular poetry, colonial voices, and modernist forms.
- 4 In doing so, Van Wienen seems to follow the path initiated by authors such as Brian Murdoch who in the preface to *Fighting Songs and Warring Words* (1990) justifies the need to study "pro-war poetry" as a popular form during

the First and Second World War. Murdoch argues that “some of the war poetry accepted as canonical in English, for example, has become widely read only relatively recently, and then in limited context, while a great range of relevant material had (and sometimes still has) a popularity of a different and in some cases far wider kind” (x).

- 5 In Part 5 of *Rendezvous with Death*, Mark Van Wienen anthologises thirty-three poems published in 1917 (155–207). Four of the authors who contributed to *Fifes and Drums*, Katharine Lee Bates, John Curtis Underwood, Edith M. Thomas, and Amelia J. Burr, are included in the anthology, but the poems Van Wienen selects do not appear in the 1917 collection.
- 6 The United States had a “distinctive relation to the Great War” that is mostly explained due to the physical distance from the event (Matthews 217). Other remote English-speaking areas such as Canada, Australia, or New Zealand joined the war in 1914 because they were still under British dominion. The United States, on the contrary, entered the struggle only a year and a half before the Armistice. The generation of young Americans that fought in Europe was not as deeply influenced – and traumatized – by the trench experience, the constant exposure to gas attacks, the incessant bombing, and the stalemate as were the soldiers from other countries. In consequence, the literary responses to the war were not as numerous or influential as they would be in other countries. In addition, the American soldier-poets were not as impelled to contest the genteel tradition established by the “poets of the Empire” like Ruyard Kipling or Rupert Brooke, who had defended the honorability of war and the soldiers’ patriotic duty at the beginning of the conflict. Nevertheless, those fiction writers such as Hemingway or Dos Passos who volunteered in the war and wrote about their experiences as ambulance drivers before the United States joined the struggle have achieved canonical status in the collective imaginary of the literature of the First World War. Their works are in keep with the premises established by Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* due to the autobiographical status of their works and the anti-war tone employed by the authors, resembling other canonical texts such as Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to all That*, both published in 1929.
- 7 Further information on the history of vigilantism in America can be found in Madison 1973, Brown 1975, Culberson 1990, Calman et al. 2002; the relationships between vigilantism and violence and radical organisations has been explored in studies such as Waldrep 2006 or Cohen 2007, among others.
- 8 Pinpointing the enemy is often used in war situations to present a complex problem in simple opposing terms of right and wrong whereas the bandwagon technique uses peer pressure to compel an audience to join a cause because so many people have already joined it.

- 9 A fifth poem, "Marching with Papa Joffre," by Percy MacKaye, is subtitled 'A Song to Fifes and Drums' (102).
- 10 Excerpts from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" were often used in the United States during the First World War. For example, the journalist Irvin S. Cobb titled his book about his experience in Europe as a war correspondent as *The Glory of the Coming: What Mine Eyes Have Seen of Americans in Action in this Year of Grace and Allied Endeavor* (1918), adapting from the opening lines of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic": "mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." As I have argued elsewhere, Cobb borrowed from Ward Howe's song to mark the American sense of duty in the war and to present the arrival of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe as a glorious body to the rescue of civilisation (Prieto 143).
- 11 Well-known Jeremiads are John Winthrop's sermon "A City upon a Hill" or African-American texts such as *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* and the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr. (see Hower-Pitney 1986).
- 12 During the neutral years, pro-Allied texts emphasised the stories of atrocities committed in "plucky little Belgium" by the invading armies and the Germans were presented as inhuman barbarians who had attacked a "tiny defenceless country" (Ross 47). On 27 May 1915, every New York newspaper had published the Bryce Report, denouncing attacks against Belgian civilians by the German troops. In 1916, *German Atrocities: An Official Investigation* was published to supplement the Bryce Report on the atrocities committed in territories other than Belgium (Morgan 2). As John Horne and Alan Kramer argue in *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (2001), the war was conceived in terms of moral justification, and to the neutral powers it did not matter which side made a better case but "which held the higher moral ground" (250). The case of the Allies defending Belgium against an alien invader, combined with the rumours of the questionable methods employed by German militarism, was therefore more favourably received in America than the German claims about the rightness of their cause (261).
- 13 At the beginning of the war, the population of the United States had a positive disposition towards Germany (St. John III 2010, 38). In August 1914, the German reading population of New York City had eight dailies, five weeklies, two Sunday papers, and one semi-monthly paper (Ross 107). Americans had historical ties with Germany; much of its population was of German origin, and many people still had relatives and friends in Europe. Additionally, German culture had influenced American education and language, and was very much present in the American collective unconscious. German American immigrants, just like many other groups of immigrants in the United States, had "settled in enclaves where they could enjoy their own language and culture" (Manning 16). This changed after gradual suspicion on German American communities started to arise in the United States (Manning 16), especially after

events such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the Zimmerman Telegramm gradually shifted public opinion towards the Allies. Members of the government started to appeal to this German Americans as members of the Union, with claims against “hyphenated Americanism” (Manning 16).

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