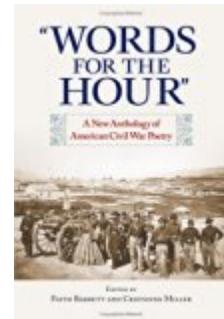


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Faith Barrett, Cristanne Miller, eds. *Words for the Hour: A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. xvii + 401 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-510-4; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-509-8.

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The War in Verse This timely anthology serves two important purposes. First, it makes a significant contribution to recent scholarship that examines, and in certain cases re-examines, the literary representation of the Civil War.[1] Indeed, the preface by Cristanne Miller and the introduction by Faith Barrett provide historical context and literary analysis; however, the book's second and more obvious purpose is to supply primary material for students and scholars. That the anthology focuses on poetry is especially noteworthy, since most readily available literature written during the war consists of diaries, memoirs, and fiction.[2] Drawing in large part from a number of poetry anthologies published in the nineteenth century, *Words for the Hour* demonstrates a range of poetic responses—from writers North and South, male and female, white and black—that deepens our understanding of how ordinary people thought about the war. Moreover, as Barrett asserts in her introduction, this anthology challenges the opinion of Edmund Wilson and Daniel Aaron that most Civil War poetry is beneath criticism.[3] Instead, Barrett argues for a prominent place for popular poetry in studies of America before, during, and after the war: “In reading nineteenth-century poetry from a twenty-first-century standpoint, we must bear in mind that in this era, poetry was seen as serving a vital political function. A nineteenth-century reader of poetry would not have considered a politically engaged stance to be an artistic liability; indeed, both during and after the Civil War, poetry was seen as playing a central role in defining new versions of American identity” (p. 3). As Barrett and Miller’s source list indicates, anthologies of Civil War poetry were rather common in the later decades of the nineteenth century, appearing with titles such as *War Poetry of the South*(1866)

edited by William Gilmore Simms and *Bugle-Echoes: A Collection of Poems of the Civil War Northern and Southern* (1886) edited by Francis Fisher Browne (p. xxix). In fact, anthologies of Civil War poetry were published with some regularity up until the mid-twentieth century. In recent years, however, only one major anthology comes to mind: Richard Marius’s *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry* (1994). But unlike that volume, which collects poems from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Words for the Hour* concentrates on poetry written during the war and shortly after it, while including some antebellum poems. Though much of this poetry was later anthologized, most of it first appeared in newspapers and magazines, reflecting responses to the war as it was happening. Competing political ideas are therefore apparent in many of these poems. More compelling, however, is an immediacy of emotion that can be felt only in poems by writers for whom the war was a lived experience. Organized in three parts, the anthology encourages cross-reading of individual poems. Part 1 presents poems in the chronology of publication, beginning with the antebellum period and continuing through each year of the war. Within these sections, poems are arranged chronologically as well; for example, the year 1861 opens with poems published in April and ends with works published in December. Throughout part 1, this arrangement allows readers to easily see, if not necessarily a progression in thought and sentiment, clear changes that correspond with unfolding events in the war. The section with poems from 1863, for instance, opens with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Boston Hymn,” a poem written in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, and concludes with two poems that call for peace. Both Severn Teackle Wallis, in “A Prayer for Peace,” and Frederick A. Bartle-

son, in “In Libby Prison—New Year’s Eve 1863-64,” registers pleas that God “speed” the end of the war. That Wallis, a pro-slavery lawyer and politician, and Bartleson, an army colonel from Illinois, would express such similar feelings suggests a deepening weariness with the war’s cost. These later poems stand starkly in contrast to earlier poems that sought to rouse public opinion in favor of the war. Lucy Larcom’s “The Nineteenth of April,” published in Boston less than a week after the surrender of Fort Sumter, urges readers “To war ... Life hangs as nothing in the scale against dear Liberty!” (p. 49). Also in 1861, Southern poets evoke liberty to support secession, frequently using images of slavery to impugn the Union’s motives. Most obviously, this trope appears in M. Jeff Thompson’s “Price’s Appeal to Missouri,” which insists to white Southerners: “That the chains they are striking from Africa’s black sons / Are being welded again to be placed upon thee” (p. 64). Part 2 presents poems from single-authored “collections and volumes of Civil War poetry” and here one finds poets from the famous (John Greenleaf Whittier, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville) to the less well-known (the Southern poet Henry Timrod and the African American writer Frances E. W. Harper) to the even lesser-known (former slave George Moses Horton and socially prominent Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt). This section is not the only one to present canonical writers, as figures such as Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Bret Harte appear in part 1. But part 2 follows the book’s strategy of placing well-known and lesser-known poets together. In addition to being inclusive, then—all of Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* poems appear, for example, here in their 1881-1882 arrangement—this section also invites cross-reading of individual poems and poets. Here as well, Barrett and Miller offer more critical assistance. The headnote on Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) reads these poems as an “intervention into the lyric tradition, suggesting that poetry might meld traditional formal commitments with a new kind of realism” (p. 258). One also turns to the note on Henry Timrod, who is enjoying a bit of pop culture celebrity since it was discovered that, in his latest album, *Modern Times* (2006), Bob Dylan has taken lines from Timrod’s poetry.[4] In the note, one learns that Timrod, “Poet Laureate of the Confederacy,” suffered greatly during the war, and turned his verse away from celebrations of “the beauty of nature in the South” (p.311) to a strain of “sadness” (p. 312). In the poem “1866,” the speaker, with the war ended, thinks of “law, love, labor, honest loss and gain— / These are the visions of the coming reign / Now floating to them on this wintry air” (p. 330). The third and

final section juxtaposes two poets, one “unpublished” and the other “posthumously published.” Obadiah Ethelbert Baker is the previously unpublished poet, here presented as representing “the many common soldiers, both Northern and Southern, who responded to the war by writing poems” (p. 363). His poems were written during active service with an Iowa cavalry unit and, like the numerous Civil War letters and diaries now in print, they provide evidence of a soldier’s concerns. Baker writes, for example, of his wife, of his reasons for going to war, and of his battle experiences. “The Charge at Farmington” describes a frontal assault. “Through a gauntlet of fire / Sometimes a boy of tender years / Beside a gray-haired sire. / And many a one who charged that day / Did charge unto his pyre” (p. 368). More expert, though equally firsthand, are the nineteen posthumously published poems by Emily Dickinson in this section. While Baker’s poems are offered as representative of a soldier’s views, Dickinson’s are offered as representative of her unique “philosophical, religious, and moral questioning” of the war (p. 352). Most apparent in these poems is the war’s effect on Dickinson’s imagination, as images of battle and death pervade them. Readers will likely find these poems to be most challenging thematically, however, and the section on Dickinson in Barrett’s introduction is recommended. There one learns that Dickinson wrote more poems during the Civil War than during any other period in her life and that the poem beginning “The name—of it—is ‘Autumn’ ” may well be a response to the September battle at Antietam“ (p. 18). But as always with Dickinson, pleasure is found mostly on one’s own, taking the time to make the most of lines such as “Except Thyself may be / Thine Enemy— / Captivity is Consciousness— / So’s Liberty—“ (p. 358). *Words for the Hour* is certainly practical for readers who wish to study the Civil War through a previously under-recognized body of popular literature, but its principal value may be the way it rewards reading and re-reading—which is, of course, the value of poetry itself. Notes [1]. Kathleen Diffley, *Where My Heart Is Turning Ever: Civil War Stories and Constitutional Reform, 1861-1876* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Kathleen Diffley, “Representing the Civil War and Reconstruction: From Uncle Tom to Uncle Remus“ in *A Companion to American Fiction 1865-1914*, Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson eds. (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 240-259. [2]. See especially Kathleen

Diffley, ed., *To Live and Die: Collected Stories of the Civil War, 1861-1876* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). [3]. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); and Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973). [4]. Motoko Rich, "Who's This Guy Dylan Who's Borrowing Lines from Henry Timrod?" *New York Times*, 14 September 2006, sec. E, p. 1.

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