

KORNELIA FREITAG
BRIAN REED (Eds.)

Modern American Poetry

Points of Access

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Heidelberg



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Herausgegeben von

Gabriele Linke

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Introduction: How to Read

That one being one teaching is one teaching some one
everything.

Gertrude Stein

Terry Eagleton begins *How to Read a Poem* (2007) by complaining that the young men and women in his classes habitually ignore how poems are written and instead jump to shaky, reductive conclusions about what they "mean." They seem to believe that "[p]aying attention to form [...] means saying whether the poem is written in iambic pentameters, or whether it rhymes," but, as he points out, "saying what the poem means, and then tagging on a couple sentences about its metre or rhyme scheme, is not exactly engaging questions of form." Language is not "a kind of disposable cellophane in which the ideas come ready-wrapped." For example, one interprets the same facts differently depending on whether a writer's tone is "shrill or sardonic, mournful or nonchalant, mawkish or truculent, irascible or histrionic" (2).

Marjorie Perloff makes a similar argument in the introduction to *Differential Poetics: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (2004). She laments her students' tendency to offer "bizarre" readings of lyrics that expose fundamental misunderstandings of textual specifics (xii). She, too, recommends heightened attention to the selection, ordering, and placement of words in a poem as an antidote to hasty (mis)interpretation. She advises readers to learn to "discriminate *difference*," that is, to perceive and appreciate the shifts in meaning that follow from even the slightest variations in sound patterns, grammatical syntax, and page layout (xxvi; her emphasis).

Eagleton and Perloff are eminent, influential critics who more typically take on sophisticated intellectual topics such as the origins of modernism and the fate of the humanities. Veteran readers of poetry might find it somewhat surprising to discover them writing polemics on behalf of what can sound like close reading techniques

that used to be taught in English 101. What has happened? In the twenty-first century, are the very basics of poetry interpretation truly in need of delineation, defense, and modeling?

A rash of recent publications offering professors pragmatic advice about how to teach verse certainly suggests so, among them Paula Bennett, Karen Kilcup, and Philipp Schweighauser's *Teaching Nineteenth Century American Poetry* (2007); Peter Middleton and Nicki Marsh's *Teaching Modernist Poetry* (2010); Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr's *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (2006); and Joshua Maria Wilkinson's *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook* (2010). The MLA Bibliography, too, will confirm that poetry instruction is currently a lively area of scholarly inquiry. Searching the database using the keywords "poetry and teaching" will turn up over one thousand books, book chapters, and articles published since 2000. The keywords "poetry and pedagogy" will yield another 156 entries dating from between 2000 and 2009.

The same two database searches will also reveal another important fact, after the total number of hits (roughly three thousand) are broken down by decade:

	Search String "Poetry and Teaching"	Search String "Poetry and Pedagogy"
1920-1929	59	0
1930-1939	75	0
1940-1949	64	0
1950-1959	101	0
1960-1969	164	0
1970-1979	181	1
1980-1989	397	20
1990-1999	628	42
2000-2009	982	156

While these simple keyword searches do raise many questions, definitional and otherwise, nonetheless, the overall tendency is unmistakable. Eagleton and Perloff are belatedly joining a fifty-year-old conversation. Starting in the 1950s, every decade has seen a substantial increase in the total number of scholarly publications

concerning *die Didaktik der Dichtung*. This trend, moreover, is not simply a result of an increase in academic publication in general. If one looks up "poetry and meter" and "poetry and prosody," for instance, one will find that those subjects reached their peaks in the 1980s and have fallen steadily ever since. Academics seem increasingly driven to discuss what kinds of education help people become "poetry-literate" (Middleton 332).

A long list of causes – cultural, economic, political, vocational, and institutional – have surely contributed to this half-century of steadily intensifying investment in poetry and pedagogy. One key factor, though, has doubtless been the swiftly escalating number of creative writing programs in the United States since World War II. Although this phenomenon's origins date back to the 1880s, the idea of "having practitioners of that art teach that art" only began to gain widespread respectability in academic circles around 1950. By 1967 enough "accomplished authors" had been hired by colleges and universities to teach creative writing that they were able to found a national umbrella organization, the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) (Fenza). Since then, the credentialization of creative writers has mushroomed into "an enterprise that now numbers some 350 institutional participants and continues to grow" (McGurl xii). And insofar as creative writing as a discipline places at its center not the "conservation" of literature but its production, one outcome has been the proliferation of publications that provide advice – and analyze and speculate – about how poetry writing is best taught (Fenza). How should a teacher conduct a workshop? Should she present herself as a role model, a facilitator, or an editor? Can she ever hope to pass on to students the ineffable *je ne sais quoi* that distinguishes true genius from hackwork? Classics in this vein include Kim Addonizio's *The Poet's Companion* (1997), Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town* (1979), and Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* (1994).

While the question of the workshop and the problem of how to teach poetry composition to students who want to become poets themselves do feature prominently in recent publications such as Middleton and Marsh's *Teaching Modernist Poetry*, Retallack and Spahr's *Poetry and Pedagogy*, and Wilkinson's *Poets on Teaching*, the contributors to those works also overwhelmingly share Eagleton's and Perloff's concern that most of today's students – far from wanting to write it – appear to lack the tools, experiences, and

concepts necessary to *read* poetry. Does this mean that – except among aspiring poets – "poetry literacy" in general has been declining? There might be something to this thesis, as the status of poetry seems to have dropped over the last decades. As Joseph Harrington has argued, "in U.S. criticism from the 1950s to the present, the emerging field of 'American literature' has come to be defined preeminently by prose narrative" (508). *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Bob Perelman's 1996 book title) in academic and public discourse has led to more or less heated debates which culminated in dramatic declarations of the *Death of Poetry* (part of a 1993 book title by Vernon Shetley), the question "Who Killed Poetry" (Joseph Epstein 1988), and battle cries like "Death to the Death of Poetry" (Donald Hall 1992). Yet while Hall, Epstein, and Shetley centered their lamentations narrowly on poets, their texts, and national reading preferences, Harrington argues convincingly that "the exclusion of American poetry from 'American literature' and the identification of the latter with prose narrative has more to do with institutional history than with any inherent generic or national characteristics" (510). Somewhat along the same lines, Alan Golding has observed that one reason for the "intellectual narrowness" of preferring prose to poetry is the widespread assumption that "prose forms (usually fiction) [...] have a superficially more 'direct' connection to social and historical reality" (xiii).

And the study of poetry itself, which – death warrants notwithstanding – of course has never ceased, has also been influenced by "institutional history" (Harrington). Hence, a further frame that can help one think about developments and changes in post-World War II interest in poetry and pedagogy is the history of poetry study as a profession in the United States. According to Gerald Graff, the 1950s and 1960s, the years when, according to Table 1, the publication of scholarship on the teaching of poetry began to take off, were a time of "routinization of criticism" (240). A bundle of analytic and pedagogical practices loosely and somewhat misleadingly called "New Criticism" – promoting "close reading" of "respectable poetry" to cherish the "ordered" ambiguity created by "great" writers (Richards 203) – became ubiquitous and normative. But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Nicholas Birns's *Theory after Theory* (2010) narrates, students and professors began vigorously challenging that orthodoxy, and the subsequent decades have been marked by a series of successive "waves" and "turns," as different

approaches, theories, and methodologies gained currency and fell out of favor. The challenge of feminism, the vogue for poststructuralist philosophy, the popularization of postcolonial critique, the provocation of queer theory, the impact of cultural studies, and the emergence of a variety of neo-formalisms: Table 1 suggests that academic interest in the teaching of poetry continued its smooth upward ascent during each leg of this pass-the-baton narrative.

One can intuitively grasp why this might be the case. Over time, as critics repeatedly revisited the same corpus of poets, they discovered new and productive routes into their writings. New canons and kinds of poetry began to be studied, too, which in turn led to the re-evaluation of long cherished aesthetic, cultural, and moral norms. Different varieties of close reading were devised to enable pursuit of distinct ends, and the connections between poetic language and many other types of discourse were identified and analyzed. Under such circumstances, is it any surprise that confusion and disagreement might arise over – and that people might seek guidance concerning – what constitutes basic, intermediate, and advanced knowledge and skills? Today, as Marsh puts it in the introduction to *Teaching Modernist Poetry*, specialists in modern and contemporary verse who want their students to benefit from the many breakthroughs and advances of the last half century have to take an "overwhelming array of new methodologies, resources, and knowledge" and adapt them to the "practical exigencies of a pedagogy that is attempting to encourage ten, twenty, or even two hundred students to confidently approach a poem that appears to resist a singular reading" (3). How can one ever hope to carry out such a daunting task?

But – isn't it worth a try? For all its apparent marginalization within the academy, the publishing industry, and popular culture, poetry nonetheless remains a vibrant, variegated art form in the United States. A series of recent high-profile anthologies – among them Reginald Shepherd's *Lyric Postmodernisms* (2008), Cole Swensen and David St. John's *American Hybrid* (2009), and Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's *Against Expression* (2011) – testify to the continuing ingenuity and ambition of American poets. And those poets also continue to publish a great deal. The Poets House in New York City, "which aspires to acquire every book of poetry published in America, excluding vanity press publi-

cations [...] shelved over 20,000 volumes from between the years 1993 and 2006" (Dworkin 8). Verse is positively thriving online, too. There are popular portal sites such as Poetryfoundation.org, Poets.org, and PennSound; poetry-focused e-zines such as *Eoagh*, *Jacket2*, and *Rain Taxi*; and innumerable blogs, most famously Ron Silliman's, which exceeded two million total hits in 2009. Older poetry has benefited as well as new. On YouTube.com, for instance, one will find that a recording of T.S. Eliot reading "The Waste Land" has been downloaded over 180,000 times. Allen Ginsberg reading the first part of "Howl" clocks in at around 212,000 downloads. Sylvia Plath reading "Daddy" over half a million. Today's youth might not be ideally prepared to grapple with the many interpretive difficulties that modern poetry often poses, but there is a whole world of it out there to discover, and a surprising number of students are already aware of its wonders and, when given the chance, are eager to learn more.

The present volume – *Modern American Poetry: Points of Access* – assembles ten essays that offer "reports from the front lines." These pieces distill and share tips, facts, arguments, interpretations, and techniques that a range of different German and American scholars think to be helpful and have previously tried out in classroom situations. Some of the essays have a personal and meditative tone. Others are more objective and strive to pass along a summary of what a person would need to know to teach a subject properly. Regardless, all the participating scholars share a single goal: to provide interested readers and especially instructors with insight into how aspects of an exciting, chaotic, contested field of study can be transformed into lessons that are enlightening and, ideally, enjoyable.

At issue, again and again, is the problem that vexes Eagleton and Perloff, namely, how to persuade students to perceive and wrestle with the linguistic and material specificity of poetry as an indispensable part of making a responsible, supportable statement about "what it says." This insistence on the quiddity of language, on its sensuous, tangible, and stubborn *thereness*, is more than a recurrent theme. These critics ascribe value to it, aesthetic and otherwise, and, each according to his or her own lights, seek to persuade readers of the rewards of exploring its marvels, intricacies, and urgencies. After a generation of challenges to New Criticism from every quarter, this shared investment in poetry as patterned,

resonant language represents a hard-won but significant consensus about how and why one reads – and teaches – poetry.

Three of the essays – Sabine Sielke's "To 'Dwell in Possibility': On the Challenges and Rewards of Teaching and Studying Emily Dickinson," Susanne Rohr's "On Being in Love With the World: Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*," and Heinz Ickstadt's "Frank O'Hara and the 'New York School': Poetry and Painting in the 1950s" – concentrate on individual poets. They showcase a variety of ways of approaching works that often perplex beginning readers, and they point to contexts that can enrich and ease students' first exposure to these poets' artistry. Sielke examines Dickinson's place in contemporary American popular culture, Rohr places Stein within what she calls the "upheavals of modernism," and Ickstadt examines O'Hara's involvement with the New York arts scene.

An additional three essays – Wolfgang Wicht's "'Language is Made Out of Concrete Things': The Imagist Movement and the Beginning of Anglo-American Modernism," Brian M. Reed's "Confessional Poetry: Staging the Self," and Kornelia Freitag's "Contemporary Indian-American Poetry: At the Crossroads of Cultures" – look at groups of writers, providing abundant opportunities for comparison as well as for meditations on the relationship between literary composition and the social milieu in which it takes place. Wicht surveys the origins and character of Imagism, both as a movement and as a set of prescriptions about good verse-craft that catalyzed the modernist revolution in literature. He spotlights the contributions of Ezra Pound, F.S. Flint, T.E. Hulme, and H.D. Reed describes the origins of the literary-historical term *confessional poetry* in the mannered, highly theatrical writing styles of mid-twentieth-century poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Freitag discusses several contemporary Indian-American poets, including R.K. Ramanujan, Meena Alexander, Prageeta Sharma, and Srikanth Reddy, and she examines the role played in their work by such themes as immigration, diaspora, and exile.

The final four essays each tackle a particularly thorny pedagogical question. Drawing on poetry from the American Revolution, Civil War, and World War I, Lisa Simon's "Teaching War Poetry: A Dialogue Between the Grit and the Glory" demonstrates that one can conscientiously and effectively introduce politically and emotionally troubling material into the literature classroom. In "Postmodern Poetic Form in the Classroom" David

Huntsperger surveys several varieties of the tricky, eccentric, experimental post-World War II verse that are collectively called "postmodern," and he explores ways of making them accessible to readers who might otherwise consider them off-putting or unintelligible. Martina Pfeiler rehearses in her contribution "No Rules But in Schools?: Teaching and Learning from Slam Poetry" the history of "slam poetry," and she offers formal and sociohistorical approaches to an exciting body of oral literature that has rarely been studied with the care that it deserves. Lastly, Walter Grünzweig and Julia Sattler share details concerning two translation initiatives at Technische Universität Dortmund. They suggest in "People's Poetry: Translation as a Collective Experience" that small groups working together to translate modern American poetry into German can provide an invaluable lesson in what Perloff calls "discriminat[ing] difference" (xxvi). These groups must wrestle with fine nuances of meaning, and they must think through how to balance syntactical and referential fidelity to a source text with a deeper faithfulness to its style and spirit.

The essays in *Modern American Poetry: Points of Access* are organized roughly chronologically, beginning with Simon on nineteenth-century poets such as Joel Barlow, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman and ending with Pfeiler on Zora Howard, a contemporary performance poet and the author of the slam poem "Biracial Hair." This collection provides examples of how to teach Civil War-era, modernist, late modernist, and postmodern verse. It features both well-known authors – like Whitman, Dickinson, Stein, Pound, O'Hara, and Plath – and writers who might be less famous but are today considered important figures within the expanded multicultural American poetry canon – Agha Shahid Ali, Lyn Hejinian, June Jordan, and Zora Howard. Poet-scholar Charles Bernstein has written, "[t]he point is not that all poetic study needs to be fun, but that thematic and formal analysis needs to be connected with the experiential dimension of the poem" (47). As should be clear, this collection means to open manifold routes to poetic experiences. Encountering the poems and authors that are discussed here, students will have the chance to lose themselves in the warp and woof of artfully arranged language. May they come to agree with Audre Lorde: "Poetry makes something happen, indeed. It makes you happen. It makes your living happen [...]. A poet is by definition a teacher also" (184).

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Lisa Simon (Missoula, Montana)

Teaching War Poetry: A Dialogue Between the Grit and the Glory

Poems about war date back to our earliest literature, and yet they are still being written in earnest today. The subject holds the gravitas of time-honored tradition at the same time it is continuously renewed by the energy and immediacy of current events. Yet the subject of war is too often taught as if it were one or another – historical or current. Literature often views the past in epochs, which inadvertently overlooks a crucial element in the study of war poetry – its dialogue across time. This dialogue within the poetry has great potential for generating dynamic discussion about the conflicts implicit in war itself, and about how literature helps us – and has always helped us – understand what it is to be human.

Good poems find ways to express conflicting ideas simultaneously, and war poems in particular convey the often deeply conflicted values of a culture. On one hand positive human qualities are routinely acknowledged and honored in the poetry of war: great human strength, bravery and grace; arguments for justice, liberty and the autonomy of a nation. The good is often also celebrated in the ingenuity of war strategy and the power of new technologies of warfare – guns, airplanes, submarines, even biological weaponry. On the other side of the coin, of course, is the violence and carnage on the battlefield, the suffering of soldiers and the widespread grief caused to families and cultures by massive losses of human life. Good poems tend to demonstrate a spectrum of thought; they find ways to both honour courage and show regret for loss. And poets always have been, as James Anderson Winn points out, great teachers of complexity and doubleness (8). Poets have long practiced what John Keats called "Negative Capability" – the capacity to acknowledge, even live with, inherent contradictions without any "irritable reaching" toward univocal truth (41-42).

Teaching war poetry then is a particular and delicate challenge and one much needed in today's world. Poets deepen our understanding of the experiences of the battlefield; they temper the claims of grandeur; they can make us see and feel the lives behind the abstractions, expose military euphemisms like "collateral damage" and "rendition" to the tragedy of individual lives again. They show us over and over that even so-called good wars are rife with suffering and scarring, both physical and psychological. So while it is generally acknowledged that literature has dealt with war since Homer's *Iliad* the fact that poets have been writing *back* to Homer and to each other has received less attention. But it is here where the most earnest dialogue takes place. Poets examine what it is to go to war – to believe in national causes, to suffer, to survive, and to wish one had not. We can deepen our understanding about armed conflict from these teachers as we take the poetry of war into our classrooms.

Using just American sources, primarily from three wars – the American Revolutionary War, the American Civil War and World War I – I'll be tracing an evolution of thought and its depiction in poetry down to the twenty-first century. At the start of this evolution, poets generally align themselves with "the fight," presenting panoramic, even bird's-eye views of war that barely consider the actual conditions of combat. A few generations later, however, we see poets complicating this one-sided view, moving to a more complex position of critique. America's Civil War poets negotiate the "good" of war as depicted by their predecessors while introducing the gritty and unflinching realism of the battlefield and the physical suffering of soldiers. By the early twentieth century, we see poets taking up war's effects on individual psychology. Since World War I, in a theater where millions waited to die in putrid trenches – by gunfire, suicide, gas, frost or by drowning in the mud itself – poets have been preoccupied with expressing through language the mind's response to prolonged exposure to violence – how it breaks down and how it fortifies itself against the inevitable horrors of war. Even as new poets deepen our understanding of martial conflict, they use poetry of the past to guide the way. My goal in teaching war poetry is to give students these seemingly simple but accruing concepts to take with them in their own negotiations of ideas about war.

1. Early American War Poetry

America's Revolutionary War was the product of Enlightenment philosophical and intellectual discourses of democracy. America was imagined as a place that could resist the tyranny of monarchs and despots, where citizens could reasonably choose leaders who would govern under agreed-upon rules of law. Enlightenment thinkers often regarded war as *necessary*, a way to purge corruption, to purify the oppressive heads of state and truly begin a new way of life. The preponderance of idealism in this new national venture allowed early poets to focus on the righteous cause and to downplay the loss of human lives. Most of the era's war poems extol the power and glory of war. In one such poem, *The Columbiad* (1807) by Joel Barlow, the bloodshed and fighting are subordinate to the atmosphere and spectacle of war:

Now roll like winged storms the solid lines,
The clarion thunders and the battle joins,
Thick flames in vollied flashes load the air,
And echoing mountains give the noise of war;
Sulphureous clouds rise reddening round the height,
And veil the skies, and wrap the sounding fight. (198-99)

Barlow eyes war from a lofty distance and pays attention to the sights and sounds as if they were merely powerful occurrences within the natural world. Like many Enlightenment-era authors, he chooses the metaphor of a mountain's erupting volcano to depict war (Fuller 5); that is, he sees battle as a force that begins with a rumbling and then demonstrates a fiery power that, importantly for a fledgling America, forges new ground. Lacking in this period of poetry are the experiences of individual soldiers. Poets primarily depict the visual spectacle as in the "vollied flashes," and how the "clouds rise reddening round the height," but we remain remote from the actual "sounding fight." The "noise of war" is cast as an environmental phenomenon within the larger framework of "echoing mountains."

This focus on war's visual aesthetic – its capacity to purge with literal fire via bombs, firearms, and cannons – is known as the *military sublime*. Like more traditional uses of the term sublime, it denotes an apex of aesthetic experience while connoting a potential

for destruction. It emphasizes the excitement, noise, and chaos of battle that Homer called "the wild joy of war" (qtd. in Fuller 105).

The military sublime is apparent in the poem "Defence of Fort McHenry" (1814), composed during the War of 1812. This war, like the Revolutionary, was fought against Britain and is often called America's *second* war of independence. The poem and its back-story are well known to Americans. The inspiring event takes place during a tense period when the British were attacking ports all along the Eastern seaboard. Under a flag of truce, a small emissary for the United States – including John Stuart Skinner, a diplomat, and the poem's author, Francis Scott Key – boarded a British battleship to arrange for the release of a prisoner, Dr. William Beanes. These negotiations were successful, but the British feared that if they let the Americans return too soon they would alert their side to an impending attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore. The British chose to detain them until morning. During the heavy bombardment that continued throughout the night, the captive party anxiously watched the fort's shoreline. As daylight broke they searched for any sign that the British had been defeated. At last the smoke cleared and they saw the American flag, tattered and blackened, still flying over the fort. That image became a rousing symbol of defiance and courage for the new democracy. And the poem penned by Francis Scott Key would eventually become America's national anthem. In this first stanza, the anxious inquiry is focused on the blazing sky above the hostile combat:

O! say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there –
O, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave? (18-19)

Like Barlow, Key trains the poem's gaze on the awesome visual spectacle. He depicts the "rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" more like a delightful fireworks display than a lethal, devastating shelling. The flag, that "star-spangled banner" (as the poem was eventually renamed), attracts attention away from the human beings who died in order for it to fly. These lives are pre-

sumed to have been given with dignity and taken with honor, a point later poets will question. But here, soldiers are largely anonymous and invisible heroes who pay the ultimate price for "the land of the free, and the home of the brave." This is familiar and enticing language, and it is precisely what needs to be complicated by pointing out what it excludes: namely the human experience of war. Did, in fact, the soldiers die with dignity and honor? Is soldiering always, by definition, heroic?

If we answer yes to those questions, we have to wonder then why the imagery of war poetry is so often fixed in an imaginary or romanticized past of medieval knights or ancient Greek heroes. Can't it be noble within the context of its own time, its own reality? We see Key display this romanticizing impulse when he describes the flag, as seen over the ramparts, in a personification of a chivalric knight, his "banner" "gallantly streaming." Key harkens to a past that imagines war as a romanticized knightly conquest in a medieval setting. This long-standing trope of war poetry denies the horrific levels of violence, corruption and mayhem that scholars tell us characterized the actual culture of knights. The poet's use of the military sublime and the imaginary past in this work deflect from the gore and loss of human lives in a way that is misleading at best. In the last stanza, Key does confess to the "war's desolation" on the ground, but his work largely keeps the reader's gaze above that grisly reality – both in its imagery and via its underlying idealism (19).

The poetry and songs of early America are steeped in patriotism, professing a greater good that might be achieved in a "free" society. These rousing calls for national solidarity, coupled with the attention to the visual aesthetics of war, are part of the complicated pleasure people derive from war poetry of this era. But most literary critics agree that the poetry of this period is not particularly good, largely because it is too simplistic. In the classroom, I use the poetry of this period to tease out my students' ideas about what is "good" about war – to get them to articulate their own feelings of patriotism and nationalism; their thirst for adventure and danger; their desire to be brave, to earn praise from their peers, loved ones and communities; and their interest in guns, machinery and war technology. I let class discussion digress into their enthusiasm for popular books and films that depict war. It's my belief that to truly prepare for the next stage, to truly feel the complicated, ethical