Debunking ‘The Good War’ Myth: Howard Nemerov’s War Poetry

This essay offers the most comprehensive analysis to date of Howard Nemerov’s war poetry. Nemerov (1920–1991) was a fighter pilot of the Royal Air Force and the U.S. Air Force during World War II and became one of the most prolific American poets of that war. Whereas his early poems about World War II tend to be impersonal and dense, his later war poems, especially those in War Stories (1987) are more autobiographical and lyrical. Throughout his career Nemerov resisted the idea that World War II had been a ‘Good War’ and all of his poems are testimony to his traumatic experiences as a fighter pilot.

“Poetry is a way of getting something right in language”

Howard Nemerov, “On the Measure of Poetry”

Of all the American poets who were involved in and emerged after World War II, Howard Nemerov (1920–1991) tried to debunk ‘The Good War’ myth most consistently and assertively.¹ Nemerov published over twenty-five volumes of poetry, won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, was poetry consultant at the Library of Congress, and was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in 1987, the highest distinction the American government can bestow on its artists. Despite all the prizes and awards given to him during his lifetime, Nemerov was quickly forgotten by literary historians after his death, partly because of his reputation as an opaque and intellectual poet and partly because his life was less controversial than that of some of his contemporaries, for instance James Dickey and Robert Lowell. Yet Nemerov’s poetry, especially his war poetry, deserves more attention, as he was one of the foremost American poets to write about World War II. A close analysis of his war poems from 1947 to 1987 will also show that Nemerov was a more personal and accessible poet than he is given credit for.

Made popular by Studs Terkel’s Pulitzer Prize-winning oral history, the term “The Good War” was often used by former American servicemen to denote World War II as distinct from other wars, such as the Vietnam War and the Korean War where the enemy and the goal of the military conflict seemed less distinct and clear. Terkel consciously put ‘The Good War’ in quotation marks realizing that “the adjective ‘good’ mated to the noun ‘war’ is so

incongruous”.2 With the passing of time, however, ‘The Good War’ has lost its quotation marks and has become a pervasive myth in the United States. As Michael C.C. Adams has asserted in his ironically titled book The Best War Ever: America and World War II, this war,

has been converted over time from a complex, problematic event, full of nuance and debatable meaning, to a simple, shining legend of the Good War. For many, including a majority of survivors from the era, the war years have become America’s golden age, a peak in the life of society when everything worked out and the good guys definitely got a happy ending. It was a great war. For Americans it was the best war ever.3

Since the publication of Adams’ book in 1994, the celebration and even glorification of America’s involvement in World War II has increased rather than waned, as movies and television series such as Saving Private Ryan (1998), Pearl Harbor (2001), and Band of Brothers (2001) indicate, culminating in the dedication of the World War II memorial in Washington DC, in 2004. Tom Brokaw’s bestselling book about World War II, The Greatest Generation (2001), appeared, significantly, without quotation marks.

A member of this “greatest generation” and a war hero in the conventional sense of the word, Nemerov did not feel the urge to glorify that war or his contribution to it. On the contrary, despite the diffuse and elusive nature of his poetry, Nemerov warns against the perennial temptation of war and how quickly people forget the horror of previous wars. Shortly after graduating from Harvard in 1941 and just before Pearl Harbor, Nemerov had signed up for the American Air Force, attempting to fulfill his childhood dream to become a pilot and asserting his independence from his father. As a kid, Nemerov played with model airplanes he himself constructed, and his childhood hero was Charles Lindbergh, the first aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Like many inductees in the air force, Nemerov failed the rigorous training and was washed out. Undaunted, Nemerov enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, qualified as a Fighter Pilot, and went overseas in June 1943. Nemerov flew with the Royal Air Force until January 1944 when he was transferred to the American Air Force. He completed his tour in April 1945, was shipped back to the United States, and was honorably discharged in August 1945 at Fort Dix, New Jersey, just at the time when World War II came to a grinding halt after the explosions of the two nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.