Kilroy Study Guide

Kilroy by Peter Viereck

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Introduction

Peter Viereck's "Kilroy" appeared in his first collection of poetry, *Terror and Decorum: Poems 1940-1948*, published in 1948. The poem's title is taken from the phrase "Kilroy was here," popularized during World War II to draw attention to the wide scope of territory on which American soldiers landed or which they occupied during the conflict. The name "Kilroy" represented every GI from the United States, and thousands of soldiers scrawled the phrase on walls, tanks, latrines, train cars□virtually anything that would accept a marking. The graffiti's appearance in so many likely and unlikely places made a loud statement about the mighty American presence in Europe, Asia, and the South Pacific islands where GIs fought, killed, died, and were held captive. Soldiers from all the enemy nations were familiar with the phrase and, obviously, were not too happy to see it turn up nearly everywhere they looked.

Viereck's poem emphasizes not only the daunting American presence in World War II, but also the spirit of adventure with which the culture hero Kilroy was associated. Through allusions to several historical and mythical figures who were widely traveled and gallantly successful in one way or another, Viereck portrays the World War II American soldier as a courageous, romantic globetrotter□ a swashbuckling daredevil unafraid of strange lands and a far greater man than the sedate suburbanite who was not up to the same noble challenges. "Kilroy" incorporates legendary adventures from Roman mythology, Marco Polo's travels, even Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Dr. Faustus. These heroes (or anti-heroes) are compared to allegorical figures with negative names□Can't, Ought, But, and so forth□as a form of praise and admiration for the soldier who did his duty not with blind submission and formality but with a flare for the exotic experience and a hearty appetite for both danger and victory.

Author Biography

Peter Viereck was born in New York City in August 1916, the second son of well-to-do and welleducated German-American parents. Several of his relatives in both the United States and Germany were writers, including his father, who wrote poetry mostly in the period before World War I and prose later in life. Viereck's literary heritage inspired his own writing, and his powerful intellect enabled him to produce highly prolific works in history, politics, philosophy, and verse.

Viereck earned a bachelor of science in literature and history in 1937 and a master of arts in history in 1939, both from Harvard. Three years later, he was awarded a Ph.D. in history from Harvard. He had been writing and publishing both poetry and political essays throughout his academic career. Even before earning his bachelor's degree, he had written much of what would become his first book, *Metapolitics*, which was published in 1941. His interest in politics and history was fed by his coming of age in the tumultuous period before World War II, as well as by his father's pro- Nazi beliefs, which Viereck abhorred and which created a rift in the family that would last throughout the war. The older Viereck underestimated Hitler's power and intentions, believing the dictator was a positive influence and that he could bring peace and prosperity to the Germans. The younger Viereck, however, was a fiercely proud American, and he wrote scathing essays against the rise of Nazi Germany and against all Nazi sympathizers in America.

In 1943, Viereck was drafted into the army and sent to Italy and Africa, where he served in the Psychological Warfare Intelligence Branch, analyzing anti-Allied radio broadcasts. In 1944, his brother was killed in action in Anzio, Italy□an extremely distressing event for Viereck that inspired poems in memory of his fallen brother. While serving overseas, Viereck also met and married Anya de Markov, a Russian emigrant, and began his teaching career as an instructor in history at the United States Army University in Florence, Italy. Upon returning to America in 1946, Viereck taught history and German literature at Harvard for a year, then moved to Smith College. After a year at Smith, he moved in 1948 to Mount Holyoke College, where he taught until his retirement in 1987. He continued to teach a survey of Russian history until 1997 and now remains at Mount Holyoke College as professor emiritus in Russian history.

Over the decades following World War II, Viereck continued to publish both poetry and prose. Although he never attended writing classes or had any formal instruction in verse, he has been one of the most highly praised and widely published poets in modern America. Believing that too much creative training can stifle the creative spirit, Viereck chose to concentrate his studies in the disciplines he would teach and leave his poetic efforts solely up to inspired imagination, free of any rules or standards. While many academic poets disdain that attitude, Viereck has won numerous prestigious awards for his poetry, including his first volume, *Terror and Decorum: Poems 1940-1948* (1948), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1949. "Kilroy" is included in this collection.

Poem Text

1

Also Ulysses once□that other war.
(Is it because we find his scrawl
Today on every privy door
That we forget his ancient rôle?)
Also was there□he did it for the wages□
When a Cathay-drunk Genoese set sail.
Whenever "longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,"
Kilroy is there;
he tells The Miller's Tale.

2

At times he seems a paranoiac king
Who stamps his crest on walls and says, "My own!"
But in the end he fades like a lost tune,
Tossed here and there, whom all the breezes sing.
"Kilroy was here"; these words sound wanly gay,
Haughty yet tired with long marching.
He is Orestes□guilty of what crime?□
For whom the Furies still are searching;
When they arrive, they find their prey
(Leaving his name to mock them) went away.
Sometimes he does not flee from them in time: *"Kilroy was "*
(with his blood a dying man
Wrote half the phrase out in Bataan.)

3

Kilroy, beware. "HOME" is the final trap
That lurks for you in many a wily shape:
In pipe-and-slippers plus a Loyal Hound
Or fooling around, just fooling around.
Kind to the old (their warm Penelope)
But fierce to boys,
thus "home" becomes that sea,
Horribly disguised, where you were always
drowned,□
(How could suburban Crete condone
The yarns you would have V-mailed from the sun?)□
And folksy fishes sip Icarian tea.
One stab of

hopeless wings imprinted your
Exultant Kilroy-signature
Upon sheer sky for all the world to stare:
"I was there! I was there! I was there!"

4

God is like Kilroy; He, too, sees it all;
That's how He knows of every sparrow's fall;
That's why we prayed each time the tightropes cracked
On which our loveliest clowns contrived their act.
The G.I. Faustus who was everywhere
Strolled home again. "What was it like outside?"
Asked Can't, with his good neighbors Ought and But
And pale Perhaps and grave-eyed Better Not;
For "Kilroy" means: the world is very wide.
He was there, he was there, he was there!
And in the suburbs Can't sat down and cried.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Kilroy" is rather odd in starting with the word "Also," as though the reader is already in the midst of the poem. However, it serves to set the tone for the series of allusions to both legendary and historical adventurers—allusions that follow one another in rapid succession and sometimes become entwined. All the heroic explorers and travelers referred to are compared to Kilroy, the "everyman" American GI of World War II, and the first comparison is to Ulysses. In Roman mythology, Ulysses (called Odysseus in Greek mythology) was the creator of the giant wooden horse that was used to trick the Trojans and allow the Greek army to enter the city of Troy. The Trojan War left Troy in shambles, and its destruction angered the gods. As punishment, Poseidon sentenced Ulysses to ten years traveling the treacherous seas, suffering misfortune after misfortune but eventually making his way back home.

Lines 2-4

These parenthetical lines refer to the overall prevalence of the "Kilroy" graffiti in the Second World War. The scrawl of the name is so common that it appears on restroom doors like common inscriptions, making one forget the namesake's connection to the heroic Ulysses—Kilroy's "ancient role."

Lines 5-6

Two different references may be inferred from these lines. Cathay is the name Italian explorer Marco Polo gave to the country of China during his travels there in the thirteenth century. Polo was from Venice, and in 1298, he participated in a battle between Venice and Genoa, Italy. Polo was taken prisoner by the Genoese, and, while he was in prison, he told a fellow inmate about the things he saw and experienced while on his travels to China. The other prisoner wrote down the account and it became the The Travels of Marco Polo, one of the most famous adventure books in history.

The other possible reference in lines 5 and 6 is to Christopher Columbus. He was a Genoese who enjoyed sea excursions and who was hired by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain to explore the possibility of reaching Asia by sailing westward across the Atlantic rather than trying to sail around Africa into and across the Indian Ocean. On October 11, 1492, Columbus and his ships reached North America, landing on an island he named San Salvador (Holy Savior).

Lines 7-9

These lines refer to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Written during the 1380s, this first collection of short stories in the English language is about a group of pilgrims who pass time telling stories on their way to Canterbury, the site of the shrine dedicated to Thomas à Beckett, who was martyred for his Catholic faith in 1170. Line 7 is specifically from the prologue of Chaucer's tales and translates as "Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage." Their journey, then, is in keeping with Kilroy's spirit of adventure and his willingness to travel to strange lands for a cause. Line 8 confirms that wherever pilgrims go, Kilroy has already been there. Had he been on the trip to Canterbury with Chaucer's travelers, he would tell "The Miller's Tale" because it is bawdy, raucous, and full of untamed characters who apparently share some of the reckless abandon that fuels Kilroy's adventures.

Lines 10-13

At the beginning of the second stanza, Kilroy is now like a "paranoic king," or one who is powerful and glorious but not too secure about it. And like a king lacking assurance who "stamps his crest on walls" to show everyone his importance and might, Kilroy tags walls and fences and such with his own name to exhibit the same thing. However, even epic heroes run the risk of fading "like a lost tune" and being "Tossed here and there" after all the glory days are over.

Lines 14-15

Continuing the idea of the more somber side of an adventurer's life, these lines reflect the weariness that sets in, making the words "'Kilroy was here'" now sound "wanly gay," or weakly happy. Though the phrase is still "Haughty" with selfconfidence, it is also tiring of the journey. The words "long marching" here keep Kilroy the soldier in the picture, as well as Kilroy the adventurer.

Lines 16-19

The allusion in these lines is again to Greek mythology, and Kilroy is now compared to Orestes, the son of King Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra. In their tale, Agamemnon is murdered by Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, when Orestes was just a boy. Upon reaching manhood, Orestes avenges his father's death by killing both his mother and her lover. Afterwards, the Furies, who are powerful goddesses personifying conscience that punish those who commit crimes against their own families, pursue him. In the poem, Viereck seems to justify Orestes's act of revenge, asking "guilty of what crime?" and showing the young man's victory over the Furies by noting that when they think they have found him, all they really find is his name scrawled somewhere "to mock them." This, of course, is a direct reference to Kilroy leaving his own name wherever he has been□to the delight of some, the frustration of others.

Lines 20-23

There are two allusions in these lines. Kilroy is still Orestes running from the Furies, but in line 20□when he "does not flee from them in time"□ Kilroy becomes the American soldier captured by the enemy. Lines 22 and 23 confirm this, for the "dying man" who passes away before completing the popular scrawl represents the troops who became prisoners of war or were killed on the island of Bataan during World War II. Between Manila Bay and the South China Sea, Bataan was the site of one of the Allies' losses. American and Filipino soldiers were overwhelmed by a Japanese invasion of the island, and thousands perished during the long, infamous Bataan Death March on the way to a prison camp erected by the Japanese.

Lines 24-25

Here, the poet warns his hero of what lies ahead after all the globe-trotting is done. For the free-spirited wanderer, "'HOME'" is not a good place to be. It is much too confining and restraining, much like a "trap." Kilroy is also warned that confinement may come in "many a wily shape," so he must beware of alluring places and people that would rob him of his freedom without his even knowing it at first.

Lines 26-29:

These lines give examples of the ways that "home" may disguise itself and, therefore, trick the traveler into settling down. The allusion goes back to Ulysses, whose "Loyal Hound," Argos, is the only one who recognizes him when he returns from his ten years at sea. The comfort of a "pipe-andslippers" or "just fooling around" are attractive to a tired wanderer, as is Penelope, the faithful wife of Ulysses who fends off would-be lovers and waits a decade for her husband to return. These sedate scenes may be "Kind to the old," but they are "fierce to boys" who should see and do all that is possible while they can.

Lines 30-31

During Ulysses's ten-year voyage, he suffers mishap after mishap, often at the hands of some devious god or goddess who uses charming disguises to tempt the weary hero in various ways. Ulysses is "always drowned" on the seas because he falls for these tricks and pays both mentally and physically.

Lines 32-34

Here, the poem shifts allusion to another mythological figure, Icarus, for whom the Icarian Sea (a part of the Aegean) is named. Icarus, the son of Daedalus, goes with his father to Crete where they both become trapped in a labyrinth. To free them, Daedalus

constructs wings out of feathers and wax that they use to fly out of the maze. Ignoring his father's warnings, Icarus flies too close to the sun, and the wax holding his wings melts, sending him plummeting into the sea below. The young Icarus, then, is like Kilroy□daring, foolhardy, and willing to tempt fate. The mention of "suburban Crete" and "folksy fishes" sipping tea ties the myth to the reality of suburban America, which is one of the "home" traps Kilroy has avoided to this point. The idea that Icarus could have "V-mailed" his adventure stories "from the sun" links him to a soldier of the Second World War who really did use this type of correspondence to write home. Because the load of letters from soldiers overseas was so overwhelming to the postal system, the United States Post Office adopted the V-mail system to use during the war. V-mail consisted of photographing correspondence and then transferring the photographs to microfilm for shipping. In terms of numbers, it took nearly forty mail bags to carry 150,000 one-page letters, but only one bag to carry the same amount of V-mail.

Lines 35-38

The final lines of the third stanza wrap up the exuberant joy of the daredevil spirit and of the thrill of going places where no one else has been just for the sake of shouting "'I was there! I was there! I was there!'" Sadly, of course, not all adventures end well, as with the high-flying Icarus who is on "hopeless wings" when he starts out.

Lines 39-42

Line 39 of "Kilroy" has been given much attention by readers and critics because of its unlikely irony. Here, Kilroy is not like God; rather "God is like Kilroy," exalting the free-spirited individualist to the higher position. Both God and Kilroy have seen it all□the latter in his worldly adventures and God in his awareness of every "sparrow's fall" and of every mishap that befalls people, including clowns on tightropes.

Lines 43-45

The final comparison between Kilroy and a legendary figure is in line 43, and this time his counterpart is Dr. Faustus, or "G.I. Faustus." The Faustus character has appeared in a variety of tales over the centuries, most notably in Christopher Marlowe's dramatic play *Dr. Faustus*, published in the early seventeenth century. Faustus is a welltrained scholar in both religion and the "sciences" of astrology, sorcery, and necromancy, as well as medicine and mathematics. Bored with normal human life, Faustus enters into a pact with Satan who offers him all the luxuries and excesses he desires, including the ability to travel through space and to give horoscopes that never fail to be correct. In exchange for these powers and pleasures, Faustus must agree to renounce his Christian faith and surrender himself□body and soul□to the devil after a period of twenty-four years. The deal made, Faustus lives a life of comfort, luxury, adventure, and perversion for two-and-a-half decades before it is time to keep his end of the bargain. At that point, of course, he regrets ever having made the pact. Though there is no

evidence that Kilroy the soldier ever sold his soul to the devil, he does exhibit the same lust for fast living that Faustus had. Unlike the doomed doctor, however, Kilroy has been "everywhere" and now has "strolled home again." Upon arriving, the first question he is asked is "'What was it like outside?'"

Lines 46-49

Viereck ends the poem with an allegory, or a representation of ideas through characters who symbolize them. In this case, Kilroy is met by his neighbors who remain in the suburbs while he is away at war, and their names imply their attitudes toward living the kind of life that Kilroy has lived: Can't, Ought, But, Perhaps, and Better Not. In spite of the more cautious mindset of the neighbors, however, they still display an envious excitement in considering what Kilroy's name implies adventure, freedom, travel, for "He was there, he was there, he was there!"

Line 50

The final line of "Kilroy" sums up the feelings of those who have opted for the safety and security (as well as dullness and boredom) of life in the suburbs as opposed to taking chances on a few adventures. Apparently, those who "Can't" end up regretting that they never tried.

Themes

Spirit of Adventure

The most prevalent theme in Viereck's "Kilroy" is praise for the spirit of adventure, particularly that of soldiers trekking through foreign lands with eagerness and bravado. The phrase "Kilroy was here" symbolizes the American GI's vitality during World War II and his widespread presence in cities and jungles, deserts and islands. The poem celebrates—ironically perhaps—a soldier's sense of liberation and desire to follow gut instinct. It turns the common soldier into an epic hero, comparing him to such historical adventurers as Christopher Columbus or Marco Polo and the mythological figures Ulysses, Orestes, and Icarus. Each of these characters brings an essential ingredient to the whole idea of spirit. Columbus and Polo bring the desire for discovery and the willingness to travel great lengths to find new places, new people, and new things. Ulysses has no choice in his ten-year voyage since he was sentenced to it by Poseidon as punishment for his part in the Trojan War; however, he makes the best of it by surviving devious tricks, alluring monsters, and dangerous waters. Therefore, Ulysses represents sheer willpower in the spirit of adventure. Orestes brings a sense of self-justification and belief in his own actions, even when it means avenging his father's death by killing his adulterous mother. The narrator asks "guilty of what crime?" implying there really is no crime because Orestes is justified in his revenge. Finally, Icarus brings youthful foolhardiness to the spirit. He dares to zoom toward the sun on wings held together by wax and pays dearly for the thrill, but his attempt is passionate and wild, as well as regrettable.

All these attributes—travel and discovery, willpower, self-justification, and foolish, youthful passion—make up the mindset of the legendary Kilroy during the Second World War. The lines from the poem that best sum up this spirit are the repetitive cries "'I was there! I was there! I was there!'" and "He was there, he was there, he was there!" If the point has not been clear enough, the poet throws in an allegory at the end to show how weak and mundane the anti-Kilroy citizen of the suburbs is— "Can't sat down and cried" because he either has no sense of adventure or lacks the guts to act.

The Anonymous Soldier

Obviously, not all is upbeat and exhilarating for soldiers gone to war, and some would understandably say there are no positive feelings associated with battle at all. Viereck's poem avoids the horrible realities of bloodshed and death in favor of highlighting travel opportunities and the chance to experience new ways of life. However, there is a subtle, underlying theme that is unavoidable in any writing with war as its subject—the anonymous soldier; the lonely GI who tires of long days in strange lands and who really misses his home even if he refuses to admit it.

The story of Ulysses is the most prevalent allusion in "Kilroy," and this legendary hero is an adventurer who is *forced* to go on his journey, much like a young man drafted into the service and sent overseas. Although Ulysses is victorious in the end and manages to return home, his travels are anything but free-spirited and thrilling. So, too, a soldier at times feels as though he has faded "like a lost tune" and that he has been "Tossed here and there" like a trivial pawn in someone else's game. The most direct description in the poem of how devastating war really is appears at the end of the second stanza with its reference to soldiers who perished on the island of Bataan during World War II. Unable to complete the scrawl "Kilroy was here," "(with his blood a dying man / Wrote half the phrase)." This is hardly the portrayal of a daring, young swashbuckler enjoying a new adventure. Rather, it is sadly much more representative of the real GI's experience.

Style

Viereck's style of verse is generally considered lyric poetry, but the description does not end there. Lyric poets use a melodic rhythm and rhyme to write subjectively and personally about feelings and events that most human beings experience. Viereck may do just this with his poems, but he often throws the melody off-key and the rhyme scheme askew by using coarse, unrhymed words and comedic imagery that surprise the reader, sometimes pleasantly, sometimes not.

"Kilroy" is an example of what may be called *near*-lyric poetry. It is filled with commentary on the life of a soldier□something that has been written about by thousands of writers for centuries. But Viereck's style is unorthodox in its glorification of a warrior's day-to-day activities. Here, the images shift quickly from one allusion to another, taking the reader from ancient mythology ("Ulysses once□ that other war") to the mid-twentieth century when World War II found American soldiers scrawling the Kilroy signature "on every privy door," and then back several hundred years to the travels of Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus, and back further to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. All of this is in the first stanza of "Kilroy"□the first nine lines□ and it sets the tone for the rest of the fifty-line poem.

The first stanza is also a mixture of exactrhyme and near-rhyme. Lines 1 and 3 end in "war" and "door" and lines 6 and 9 end in "sail" and "Tale," which are both examples of exact-rhyme. But lines 2 and 4 end in "scrawl" and "role" and lines 5 and 7 end in "wages" and "pilgrimages," which are both examples of near-rhyme. Again, these pairings are from the first nine lines, but one can go through the rest of the poem and find similar examples.

While typical lyric poetry is not immune to addressing comedic situations, "Kilroy" suddenly takes a turn for the absurd just when the subject seems wholly serious. Viereck travels quickly from a dying soldier in Bataan to "pipe-and-slippers plus a Loyal Hound / Or fooling around, just fooling around." He moves the last stanza from religious imagery to suburban America, noting first that "God is like Kilroy" and then describing how the GI "Strolled home again" only to face his envious neighbors who were too scared to follow the soldier into battle. Finally, Viereck resorts to allegory to end the poem, still using off-beat rhythm and coarse rhyming, but capping it off with the personification of negative attitudes and spiritless personalities.

Historical Context

The social, cultural, and historical events that surround the time "Kilroy" was written and the time it takes place are some of the most studied, re- searched, and talked about happenings in history. The 1940s literally erupted onto the planet, spurred by Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 and the beginning of World War II. But the war's real origins preceded that invasion by a decade and had a direct tie to America. Although the United States remained out of the conflict until Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the seeds of worldwide unrest were sown in the Great Depression that rocked the American economy after the stock market crash in 1929. Devastating economic conditions in the United States meant even more devastating economic conditions in other countries, both industrial and Third World. Production levels dropped dramatically in America and elsewhere, causing world trade to plummet and unemployment to skyrocket. Governments in Europe, Asia, and Africa tried to protect their nations by becoming isolationists and adopting anti-free trade policies, thereby worsening tensions with other countries and creating fear within the minds of their own citizens. Throughout the 1930s, political and social changes took place, particularly in Europe, that carried those seeds of American economic depression into the winds of all-out war.

"Kilroy" may have a naive reader believing that war for the American GI was a great adventure, full of excitement and exotic travel, and it is true that the cartoon character with a long nose peering over a wall was a favorite graffiti symbol for American servicemen during World War II. While there are various accounts of who, if anyone, the real Kilroy was, the most accepted story is that he was James J. Kilroy, a shipyard inspector from Massachusetts. After he had looked at tanks, ships, and airplanes, the inspector scrawled "Kilroy was here" in chalk on the side of each one. Servicemen who saw the markings when the military transports reached them overseas helped spread the phrase, and somewhere along the way, the little cartoon face was added to it.

But the portrayal of a real soldier's life is hardly represented by this poem, regardless of his or her nationality. Both military personnel and innocent citizens of all the countries involved felt the terrible forces of death and destruction as the Second World War escalated. In Japan, the 1930s saw the return to power of imperialistic and military leaders after the assassination of liberal Prime Minister Yuko Hamaguchi. This created tension be- tween Japan and China, leading to the second Sino- Japanese war even before World War II began. In Italy, fascist leader Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in a move to fuel his nation's spirit and economy, taking control of the African country with little resistance. Meanwhile, in France, a coalition of socialists and communists seized control of the government after democratic French leaders were accused of corruption and murdering their opponents. And in Spain, a civil war between leftwing liberals and right-wing fascists left dictator Francisco Franco in charge of the country in 1939.

While all this turmoil played out in Europe, Asia, and Africa, Germany was quietly building its Nazi government, poising itself for the invasion of Poland□the first step in Hitler's pursuit of world domination. Within a year of that invasion, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France□the major prize□all fell to German

forces. In 1941, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia were added to the list. Throughout this time, the United States remained on the sidelines, except for supplying the Allies with military equipment. But things changed on December 7, 1941, when Japan attacked America, and the United States entered the war. The accounts of American involvement in World War II are well known, from the decisive battle of Midway in 1942 to the Allies' victory on the beaches of Normandy□known as "D-Day"□and the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. Battered and worn down, Germany finally surrendered in May 1945, and Japan, reeling from atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, surrendered in September.

By the latter part of the 1940s, a conflict between the former allied countries who then controlled Germany turned into a "cold" war, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union. The conquered nation was officially separated into the republics of East and West Germany, and they would remain divided for over forty years. Economically, the United States came out of the war more sound than it went in, and the Marshall Plan□named for Secretary of State George C. Marshall and enacted in 1947□channeled billions of American dollars into war-devastated Europe to aid its economic recovery. The post-war years were both prosperous and technologically significant for the United States. Between 1946 and 1950, the television boom was under way with close to one million households having TV sets, and the invention of the transistor allowed for miniaturization in science and technology. On Long Island, builders erected "Levittown," noted as the first middle-class suburb, and the first freeway system in Los Angeles opened. At the end of the decade, the United States Gross National Product (GNP) had nearly tripled since 1940, reaching $284 million. In spite of the growth and good times, however, one would have had difficulty finding veterans of the war who would have described their experiences as Viereck describes Kilroy's. The poet, of course, knows this, as evidenced in his allusion to the horrors of Bataan and in his admission that Icarus flew on "hopeless wings."

Critical Overview

Viereck's poetry was not initially as well received as his nonfiction books and essays. The poems, critics said, were lively and experimental for the time but that usually translated into overwritten and insignificant. Set against the erudite composition of his historical and political writings, the poetry seemed immature and unfinished. In spite of the negative comments, however, Viereck's first fulllength collection of poems, *Terror and Decorum: Poems 1940-1948*, including "Kilroy," was received well enough to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1949.

Reviewing *Terror and Decorum*, many critics still noted mixed feelings toward its content although the favorable outweighed the not so favorable. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Idris McElveen says the book shows Viereck's "energetic control of language for purposes of wit and variety in tone and subject matter," then goes on to note that "The volume presents a full view of his art at its best and worst." Addressing "Kilroy" specifically, McElveen calls it "one of Viereck's most daring poems" and "perhaps the best example among all his poems of the kind of circus act that he alone would risk." In her book of biographical material and criticism simply titled *Peter Viereck*, critic Marie Henault is not as kind to the poem in question. She writes that

> In the early 1940s, 'Kilroy was here' meant no more than that American soldiers had been at the place so labeled. This connotation, now partly lost, makes this robust and technically adept poem diminish with the passage of time.

Henault goes on to say that, "joyfully as it begins, 'Kilroy' also becomes a despairing and somewhat cliché-ridden poem."

Over the years, Viereck has continued to write "robust" poetry that has been more widely appre- ciated by critics and scholars today than in the past. He has won additional awards for his work, including a Guggenheim fellowship and the Poetry Award of the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. But most of Viereck's career has been spent in academic history departments, and his name is not as recognizable to students and general readers as other more highly anthologized poets' may be. Still, Viereck's poems are often surprisingly fresh□even funny□and it is too bad that they frequently go unnoticed outside the circle of scholarly, academic works.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in poetry journals, and is an associate editor for a university communications department. In the following essay, she argues that praise for the American spirit of adventure may have great merit in certain circumstances but is misleading and inappropriate set against a backdrop of war.

"Kilroy" is a poem that could not have been written about the War in Vietnam, the more recent Gulf War, or even earlier conflicts such as World War I and the American Civil War. Its cavalier treatment of a soldier's experience (on the surface, at least□obviously, the poet is familiar with the actual horrors of battle) reflects Americans' overwhelming support of the government's declaration of war on Japan after its attack on Pearl Harbor. Shocked and angered by this act of aggression, young men were happy to sign up for the armed forces, not only to protect their own nation, but also to help rid the world of Nazism, Fascism, and any other governing system considered evil by most of the free world. Likewise, American citizens were happy to support them. But even in the midst of gung ho patriotic fervor and feelings of justification in fighting for a worthy cause, real combat is anything but glorious victories, conquering heroes, and exotic travel.

Adolph Hitler was one of the most feared and despised men in the history of the human race. As obvious as his unquenchable thirst for power and territory was, the full terror of his inhumane plans was not completely recognized by people outside the target groups□Jews, people of color, homosexuals, and others deemed unsuitable□until the war was over. Even so, the "Final Solution" was understood well enough by Hitler's enemies to know it was a threat to democracy and individual rights everywhere. Americans who may have felt isolated or protected from Germany's aggression changed their tunes in 1941, realizing Hitler's push to conquer the world was supported by nations hoping to gain more territory for themselves by supporting Germany□in particular, Japan and Italy. But a newly enlisted soldier who suddenly found himself in boot camp and weeks later in some distant land a world away from family and friends must have felt fear and confusion, if not panic and regret. Many who wound up in Europe, Africa, or the South Pacific islands had probably never ventured far from their quiet homes in the suburbs, that place considered a "final trap" in the poem. But how likely is it that a GI trying to fall asleep in a tent somewhere with death a possibility at every moment would be thinking of his home in America as a trap?

Throughout "Kilroy" the hero is compared to figures who are not even fighting a war when they go on their adventures. Only Ulysses has a connection to battle, but the accounts of his journeys make it clear that he would have preferred to go home to his wife after the Trojan War instead of being sentenced to ten years traveling dangerous seas. Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus were not warriors, but explorers. Their agenda was obvious and a great spirit of adventure came with the territory. In the tale of Icarus, the point is clear that he is a victim of youthful abandon and too immature to appreciate a need for caution. And Orestes is hardly a swashbuckling soldier; rather he is an accused killer on the run. So what do these mythological and historical figures

really have in common with Viereck's concept of the American GI in World War II? The most likely answer is that the overwhelming feeling of patriotism that permeated soldiers and citizens alike during this war is easily translated into a high-spirited sense of duty and self-righteousness. Kilroy is a man on a mission□ one that not only provides an opportunity to see the world, but that may also save it from destruction.

Consider a poem written about a soldier's experience in the American Civil War. Most likely a "Kilroy" in this conflict would have had a Blue or Gray counterpart just as heroic. Supporters of both the Confederacy and of the Union considered themselves "Americans," and, therefore, each side considered themselves patriotic and justified. But this war tore the United States apart, and a poet would have difficulty singling out any one particular trait of the real American soldier□especially a freewheeling spirit and lust for adventure since many men were fighting against their own brothers.

The same doubtful scenario may be assumed for a poem about World War I. Americans did not enter this war until the tail-end of it, and then had little difficulty helping defeat a battered German military. What may have been most difficult was grasping the full scope of "world war," the first one of its kind, leaving many Americans fearful, disillusioned, and angered by the seeming madness of politics and territoriality. While the "doughboys" were heralded as heroes in many accounts, there was not a representative figure like Kilroy that marked the spot of all the wondrous places where American soldiers had turned up. Most were stunned to have turned up at all in such unlikely foreign lands, and many did not understand for what they were fighting.

By the time World War II rolled around, Americans were in dire need of a hero. A decade of a depressed economy and a continued gloomy outlook was soon reversed by the nation's need to pull together to fight a common enemy. Japan had had the audacity to attack American ground, and that was enough provocation to muster wholesale support for entering the war. As men left for overseas, women went to work in factories, and many companies altered their normal production to manufacture war materials. It seemed that every American had an opportunity to do something for the war effort, and millions took advantage of it. This kind of support back home bolstered GI spirit around the world and made possible a poem like Viereck's "Kilroy." Many young soldiers surely did land in Europe and the South Pacific with dreams of being heroes and thoughts of how envious those who did not or could not fight would be. They likely had many "yarns" that they "would have V-mailed from the sun," and they would not have considered their wings "hopeless." Not in the beginning, anyway. But the poem does not venture into the dark, despairing side of being an American GI in a foreign world. It does not show that the same soldier who scrawls an "Exultant Kilroy-signature / Upon sheer sky for all the world to stare" is the same frightened young man who hunkers down in the trenches praying for the bullets and bombs to miss him. It does not say that the same godlike conqueror who "sees it all" is the same lonely cadet who longs to see his loved ones back home. Probably the most misleading notion in this poem is implied in the phrase "Strolled home again," specifically the word "Strolled." Few, if any, real soldiers have returned to the United States with casual, carefree steps. Even those fortunate enough to have remained unharmed during their service and to have participated in victorious battles still suffered the emotional trauma of combat. Given the atrocities witnessed in

the war, it is doubtful that anyone *strolled* home again, regardless of how happy he was to be there.

Even if one could make a case for Kilroy-like adventurism occurring in conflicts previous to World War II, it would be pure fantasy to claim it for any war after. The Korean War is often called the "forgotten" war because it occurred between the more memorable conflicts of World War II and Vietnam. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and even today, American soldiers have had a presence in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, and the Middle East, among other areas, and American citizens hold mixed feelings about these conflicts. Some argue that Americans should stay out of countries fighting their own wars, while others say leaders like Saddam Hussein are just as threatening as Hitler and need to be stopped. With this division, no cult hero has emerged from the ranks of the modernday soldier. But it was the Vietnam War that truly brought an end to the American war spirit, and Viereck's Kilroy could not have arisen from this strife.

The televised Vietnam War brought the massacre of thousands of people into American living rooms. Evening newscasts alternated between scenes of the bloodshed in Southeast Asia and scenes of riots on American streets and college campuses. The GI in Vietnam had little public support from home to take comfort in, and many soldiers contended with guilt over their own presence there as well as the hatred and accusations of antiwar protesters back in the United States and across the world. In short, Kilroy was *not* there. After the conflict ended, there were few hero welcomes, and most veterans were content to return home quietly and try to pick up the pieces of shattered illusions and lingering doubts. Ironically, many were probably elated to live sedate lives in the suburbs, unlike Kilroy, who felt superior to his neighbors Can't, Perhaps, Better Not, and so forth. During Vietnam, Can't turned into Won't, and most often it was the spirit of adventure that sat down and cried□a spirit broken by the realities of war.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Kilroy," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Viereck discusses his poetry and describes a need for clarity and form in contemporary poetry.

Critical Essay #3

Right from the start, I must disappoint many readers by the unexciting conservatism of my poetic techniques. After experimenting with more easy-going prosodies, I've found it more effective to adhere to the admittedly arbitrary laws of conventional rhyme and meter. In the history of English literature these have again and again been discarded as "outworn" but have returned to outwear the discarders. Irregular scansion can be useful onomatopoeia to bring out a jolt in the mood or the narrative. But as Amy Lowell's revolt illustrated, this is a habit-forming drug. Used once too often in poetry, irregularity becomes just another kind of regularity, that of prose.

Equally conservative is my passionate conviction that the time is now ripe for a frontal assault on obscurity as inartistic□*provided* the assault is not allowed to play into the hands of those who want a pretext for being lazy about poetry. The time is ripe for poets and readers, both making sincerer efforts at mutual understanding, to end the schism between them by restoring communication. The eighteenth-century motto "be thou clear!" expresses the timeliest need of American poetry in 1949.

It's not enough to say a poet must belong to none of the arty coteries. It's essential that he actively sin against their rituals. *My own sin is twofold*. (1) I've content□something to say about the profane world they scorn□and not only form; this makes me an "impure" poet. (2) I try to communicate to the qualified layman also, instead of only to fellow poets and critics; this makes me a philistine.

My style has been ironically summarized as "Manhattan classicism." In case labels are necessary at all, that's as accurate a label as any. Mine is not the arcadian escapism of an aloof anti-urban classicism but a classicism of the industrial age, with an ivory tower built where the subway rumbles loudest. Being classicist means that my poetry is equally interested in shaking off the vague sentimentalities of the pre-Eliot romanticism and the hermetic ingenuities of the post-Eliot version of neo-classicism. The latter contains (1) no fun and (2) no humanness, two "vulgar" qualities that are the lifeblood of art. What was new and imaginative in the master becomes a slot-machine stereotype in the disciples, who thereby create a new and more insidious type of Babbitt: the highbrow Babbitt- baiting Babbitt. Thus does an exciting literary movement age into a cocktail-party clique, a mutual admiration pact, a pressure group upon college English departments and Little Magazines. Think ye, because ye are virtuosos, there shall be no more cakes and ale?

In my book *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt* I've already defined my humanist and classical credo. Here I shall try instead to be more specific about concrete examples of my poetry. When they violate my conservative working principles, as they sometimes do, this is occasionally done on purpose, using disharmony to bring out the harmony by contrast. More often it may pretend to be on purpose but is really done out of insufficient competence, in which case: so much the worse for me and my writings rather than so much the worse for the principles.

Just as political liberty is not based on a radical smashing of traffic lights but on law and traditional established institutions, so poetry must be subjected to the challenge of form, the more rigorous and traditional and conservative the better, to bring out the response of beauty□if one may apply Toynbee's "challenge and response" to art. For my own poems, form□Toynbee's "challenge"□ always means rhythm and usually means rhyme. I try to avoid those fraudulent rhymes that change the *consonants;* the rhyming of "thornbush" and "ambush" in my long poem "Crass Times" is an exception that I now regret. But for certain purposes, my rhymes use slightly different vowel sounds with the same consonants. An example is stanza two of "Crass Times." In his essay "Peter Viereck: the Poet and the Form" Professor John Ciardi of the Harvard English department analyzes my characteristic use of rhyme vowels more ably than I ever could. Therefore, I quote from him (in condensed form):

"Viereck has what Eliot has called 'the audioimagination,'
with a sure sense of how rhyme can
function to punctuate, emphasize and resolve the flow
of the poem. The reader who has thought of rhyme
only as a regularly arranged ornamentation will do
well to underscore this point in his mind. Skillfully
used, rhyme is a rich device for controlling the
reader's voice, teaching him to hear the poem as the
poet heard it."For example, *"Crass Times Redeemed By Dignity Of Souls."* This is an incantatory poem. The poet
wants the poem read in a mechanical, litanized way.
Such a reading requires a full voice stop at the end
of each line. But normally, if the meaning does not
pause, the voice continues on to the next line. You
then have a run-on or *enjambement.* The first three
lines in this passage do not provide a pause in meaning.
Here, the poet makes rhyme function. The triple
use of the strong 'oals' rhyme demands stress. Thus,
despite the run-on, the rhyme produces the desired
voice-stress. In the subsequent lines, this device is
not needed since there is a meaning-pause at the end
of each line with the exception of the next to the last.
And there again you will note the rhyme of 'knives'
becomes heavy, again requiring a stress. By 'heavy'
I mean closely positioned as the second rhyme of a
couplet, a strong 'ives' sound and a literal rhyme as
opposed to the approximate rhyme of 'are' and 'hear'
that precedes:'"The weight that tortures diamonds out of coals
Is lighter than the skimming hooves of foals
Compared to one old heaviness our souls
Hoist daily, each alone, and cannot share.
To-be-awake, to sense, to-be-aware.
Then even the dusty dreams that clog our skulls,
The rant and thunder of the storm we are,

The sunny silences our prophets hear,
The rainbow of the oil upon the shoals,
The crimes and Christmases of creature-lives,
And all pride's barefoot tarantelle on knives
Are but man's search for dignity of souls.'"

Rhyme and meter are the unchanging stage on which the changing actors stumble or dance. By keeping rhyme regular, I can provide a background which, by contrast, makes more effective the utmost variety, change, and imaginative flight. When rhyme and rhythm become too irregular, there is no contrast to spotlight the goings-on of the actors on the stage. This regularity demands that the vowels of full-voweled rhymes be the same. But in the case of rhymes whose vowels are short, quick, and inconspicuous (e.g., rhyming "heard" with "stirred"), I shall continue to use rhymes of slightly different vowels in order to increase the speed and to force the reader into *enjambement* (by not lingering over the rhyme) even when the line ends with a punctuation mark.

It would distract from a slow, strong, openvoweled rhyme to repeat the same vowel in the middle of the same or following line. So I usually avoid this. For example, if the rhyme-word is "mood," I should not in the same line or following line use any word with an "oo" sound. This would distract the ear of the reader from doing what I will it to do: namely, to remain in unconscious suspense waiting for the second half of the rhymed pair. If the end-word "viewed" is to rhyme with the earlier end word "mood," I don't want any intervening non-end-word like "cruel" or "blue." If I find that, for the sake of lilt or meaning, I must repeat the rhyme-vowel inside the line, then I try to repeat it twice. Thereby the two repetitions, by pairing with each other, cease to distract the ear from the third repetition in the rhyme-word at the end of that same line. I try to have strong, open vowel-sounds occur an odd number of times in a line (once, three times, five times), never an even number of times, except in unrhymed poems (Alcaic or Sapphic odes or blank verse), where I prefer even to odd. I make no fetish of this or any other rule, the total effect of a poem being more important than any single detail.

Critical Essay #4

Free verse I write not at all: on principle. Unrhymed metrical verse only rarely. Almost all my poems are rhymed. For me the most difficult verseform is the form that glib or sloppy craftsmen deem easiest: unrhymed iambic pentameter. I've begun many poems in this blank-verse form but not one have I been able to finish. The exception□"A Walk on Snow"□proves the rule: except for some 1947 interpolations about art, it was written so long ago (in 1932 in high school when I was 15) that I cannot even remember what sort of person or poet I then was. Since then, no luck.

I don't mean I've given up attempting blank verse. But I've destroyed all the attempts because they all bogged down into pale reflections of the blank verse style of either the Elizabethans or Milton or Swinburne. "A Walk on Snow" I included in my *Terror and Decorum* collection (against the advice of so fine a critic as I. A. Richards) because, no matter how redolent of juvenilia, it at least has a personal blank verse style: a poor thing perhaps but all my own. Even here I stuck to my typical pattern, later exemplified once in each stanza of "Poet" and "Kilroy" and in the final stanza of "For Two Girls," of breaking the pentameter monotony with an occasional tetrameter of emphatic meaning.

Alliteration as a working principle? For me, definitely yes. If done not too unobtrusively, a poet can use it triply instead of doubly; and triply is to my ear more effective. More than triply is too obvious. Doubly, by a mathematical paradox, sounds more crudely obvious than triply. Triply can or cannot be obvious, depending on how it's handled. It is only effective when the reader hears it unawares. Shakespeare was not afraid to use alliteration, not only doubly as in: "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate" but even in three successive words: "To leap large lengths of miles." In the nineteenth century, alliteration was overused and used too mechanically by Poe and Swinburne. It became discredited after such mechanical usage as Poe's "Came out of the lair of the lion / With love in her luminous eyes." That fourth "l" ("luminous") is just too much of a good thing and becomes farce.

Wearing their heartlessness on their sleeve, modern poets go to the opposite extreme. Just as they are afraid to let themselves go emotionally and be wild, for fear of seeming ridiculous, with the result that their lyrics are unlyrical, so likewise are they afraid to let themselves go in alliteration, for fear of seeming crude, with the result that they lack lilt and music. They should take to heart the very wise words of a very vulgar song of the 1920's:

"It don't mean a thing
If it ain't got the swing."

My practice is to be both lyrically wild and musically alliterative when the meaning and mood of the poem are enhanced thereby, but never otherwise, never mechanically, never too frequently. Never alliteration for its own sake but only for the poem's total effect. In the following couplet, the purpose of the two triple-alliterations ("f" and "m") is

not lilt or music, their usual purpose, but a heightened emotional emphasis to signalize the climax and turning-point of the whole poem:

Then, with a final flutter, philomel□
How mud-splashed, what a mangy miracle!□etc.
(from "Some Lines In Three Parts")

It might be interesting to have each poet of the '40's name what poet influenced him most. Our answers might be wrong because we would not know of unconscious influences. Consciously, I'm most influenced by Yeats. In rhythmic technique his "Cold Heaven," published 1914, seems to me the greatest lyric in our language. Yeats is the poet whose rhythms I most imitate, especially his habit of a quick extra unaccented syllable amid an iambic or trochaic line. For example, the second syllable of "ignorant" when he speaks of "beauty's ignorant ear."

I've imitated this mannerism, though with a different purpose, in part III, line four of "Some Lines." The same type of quick extra unaccented syllable recurs in "cartilaginous": "A cártiláginous, móst rheumátic squéak." Were every alternating syllable in "cartilaginous" accented, as might normally be expected, then there would be no room for the word "most," and the line would read: "A cártiláginóus, rheumátic squéak." Contrasting the two readings, it will be noted that the latter is correct in iambics but pedestrian while the former gives the needed onomatopoeia of a rheumatic hobble and also the necessary ironic tone for describing owlish-pedantic wisdom in its painful effort to become the singing beauty of philomel, the nightingale.

Recently I heard an appeal for "liberating" poetry from the "tyranny of iambic pentameter"; but who will liberate poetry from such self-appointed liberators? My *typical* poem is a moderately long poem, often of several pages, in rhymed iambic pentameter, in which lyrical emotions and philosophical ideas are equally present and are fused into unity by expressing the ideas in sensuous metaphors. For variety or special emphasis, I periodically alternate the five-beat line with a shorter line, four-beat or three-beat. The shorter line occurs several times per stanza in "Kilroy" but, more typically, once only per stanza in "Poet," "Some Lines," "A Walk on Snow," etc. When long, this "typical" poem of mine is divided into stanzas of varying length, coinciding with changes of mood. "Crass Times," otherwise typical, omits the shorter line from all stanzas because, when a sound of steady incantation is desired, then monotony becomes for once desirable and variety undesirable.

Stanza two of "Poet" expresses my insistence on making intellectual concepts sensuous. In a prose essay, rhymes are rhymes, exclamation marks are exclamation marks, nouns are nouns. This being poetry, they become three-dimensional physi- cal creatures with lives of their own. The passage describes the revolt of the outworn romantic claptrap against the dead classical poet who has hitherto tamed them:

"Words that begged favor at his court in vain□
Lush adverbs, senile rhymes in tattered gowns□
Send notes to certain exiled nouns

And mutter openly against his reign.
While rouged clichés hang out red lights again,
Hoarse refugees report from far-flung towns
That exclamation marks are running wild
And prowling half-truths carried off a child."

Mine is a poetry of ideas. Above all, ideas connected with ethics or with the search for ethical values. Often my poems use history as grist for their mill, not only history of the past but of the future (chapter five of *Terror and Decorum* is called "News From the 60th century"). Ideas are the heroes, villains, and agonisants of an unusually large number of my poems. Unlike the arid didacticism of some eighteenth-century poetry of ideas, my ideas are presented not abstractly but sensuously: lyrical and philosophical at the same instant. Lyricism teaches ideas to dance rather than to plod along like a Ph.D. thesis:

"Here abstractions have contours; here flesh is
wraith;
On these cold and warming stones, only solidity
throws no shadow.
Listen, when the high bells ripple the half-light:
Ideas, ideas, the tall ideas dancing."
(from "Incantation.")

Critical Essay #5

Poets pretend to ignore their critics with lordly dandyism. In truth, I've constantly learnt from hostile critics and am grateful to them for my most valuable revisions and deletions. Intelligent hostile criticism is all the more important to me, indeed indispensable, in view of my inability to discriminate between my worse and better poems. I agree with Professor D. C. Allen's strictures:

"This deliberate effort to ruin a poem by what seems
a consciously chosen unpoetic word or phrase is
Viereck's main weakness as a poet. As there are scars
that disfigure individual poems, so there are poems
that disfigure the collection. I wish they had never
been written or, having been written, destroyed. One
can hope that the next collection will be smaller and
more selective."

In turn, some of my non-hostile critics have succeeded in explicitly and consciously summarizing those of my working principles which I follow only implicitly and semiconsciously and am unable to summarize competently. An example of such summarizing is Louis Fuller in the *Antioch Review*: "What has not been sufficiently noted by those who have a corner on modern poetry is that this book may be read and enjoyed *without any special key,* and without serving any *special novitiate.* Mr. Viereck doesn't write down, or up; he simply writes as person to person. If there is any misunderstanding of meaning or intention, it is not because he has tried to create it." Another example is Selden Rodman writing in the *Saturday Review*:

"He is never trying to bait and hence is never deliberately
elusive. Indeed, one of the qualities that make
Terror and Decorum moreof a *break with theEliot*
dominated past than any recent book is this very passion
to communicate. The soldiering has contributed
to his verse as a whole its racy colloquialism and its
sense of identity with ordinary people. Academic
training has given him a working knowledge of the
styles of a half dozen literatures and a familiarity with
cross-reference almost Joycean in scope. . . . Out of
extreme complexity, simplicity. From sophistication
beyond cleverness, innocence. In Shakespeare,
Donne, Blake, Hopkins, the later Yeats, perhaps in
all of the greatest poetry, it is the 'formula' toward
which Viereck, more than any contemporary poet,
seems to be moving."

The above "formula" of a difficult simplicity, though unattainable for my practice, is the truest summary of the ideal behind all my "working principles."

Several critics of *Terror and Decorum* beamed upon what they called "its wit"; others frowned upon "its frivolous clowning around." Both were referring to the same element; both misconstrued its aim. The element of so-called wit or buffoonery is a means, not an end. Usually it is found concerning things that are "no laughing matter." It is my means of expressing the tragedy inseparable from living and the terror inseparable from the shock of beauty. Tragedy is brought out better by wit□through incongruity and grotesque understatement□ than by the lurid overstatement of poems like Poe's "Ulalume" that are forever saying "Boo!" to the reader.

This double-talk use of frivolity is the basis of section II of *Terror and Decorum* entitled "Six Theological Cradle Songs." Their motto might have been "Six cradles make six coffins." These songs are to be read simultaneously on two levels: (1) humorous nursery rhymes for children; (2) sinister allegories for adults. The same sinister-naïve, double-level technique recurs in many of my other poems, such as the concluding dialogue between man and a sadistic reality ("sky," nature, God) in "From Ancient Fangs." This method is no newfangled affectation but inherent in nursery rhymes, fairy tales, myths, and the language of childhood; for example, the *frisson* of so familiar a Mother Goose couplet as: "Here comes a candle to light you to bed, / And here comes a chopper to chop off your head." In this connection David Daiches wrote of *Terror and Decorum*:

"When the wit is wholly absorbed in the form, we
get something quite distinctive in modern poetry□
witty, but not with the wit of the early Auden; subtle,
but not with the subtlety of the neo-Yeatsians;
speculative, but still and essentially lyrical . . . 'Better
Come Quietly' and 'Exorcism' have an admirable
sardonic humor which is positively terrifying."

"Better Come Quietly," the example cited by Mr. Daiches, is the first of the "Six Theological Cradle Songs." It is meant to be chanted with a childishly over-obvious stress on the accented words, just as a child jumping rhythmically on the springs of its crib might chant. The overstress is indicated here and in other poems of mine by capital letters. As used by me, this typographical device does not mean "more important" (though capital letters often are used to mean this) but means: "read this at a raucous shout." The same voice function of capitals occurs in "Exorcism" in the Athos And Assisi chapter. On the allegorical level of its double- talk, "Better Come Quietly" is a medieval morality play of the four ages of man from embryo into afterlife. In each age, the questioning demand for consolation receives the same answer from the triple chorus that haunts us all:

Baby John: O kinsfolk and gentlefolk, PLEASE be
forgiving, But nothing can lure me to living, to living.
I'm snug where I am; I don't WISH to burst
through.

Chorus of Nurses, Furies, and Muses: That's

what YOU think. If only you KNEW!

Baby John: Well then YES, I'll be BORN, but my EARTH will be heaven; My dice will throw nothing but seven-eleven; Life is tall lilacs, all giddy with dew.

Chorus of Nurses, Furies, and Muses: That's what YOU think. If only you KNEW!

Baby John: Well then YES, there'll be sorrows, be sorrows that best me; But these are mere teasings to test me, to test me. We'll ZOOM from our graves when God orders us to.

Chorus of Nurses, Furies, and Muses: That's what YOU think. If only you KNEW!

Baby John: Well then YES, I'll belie my belief in survival. But IF there's no God, then at least there's no devil: If at LAST I must die□well, at LEAST when I do, It's clear I won't sizzle.

Chorus of Nurses, Furies, and Muses: If only you KNEW!

Critical Essay #6

There's an essential element I haven't discussed so far and am unable to define. Yet I am dedicated to it side by side with my classicism in a synthesis of antitheses. The title *Terror and Decorum* and lines like "What terror crowns the sweetness of all song?" formulate this dualism of what Nietzsche called the Dionysian and the Appolonian; also the dualism of the primordial "dark gods" of the unconscious and the more rational, civilized conscious mind. The creative tension of these antitheses is in the shiver of holy dread, the tragic exaltation which makes the hair stand on end and is the difference between poetry and verse.

My nearest approach to catching this element is in "Some Lines In Three Parts." The poem describes the attempt of the ego, trapped in its vulnerable mortal skull, to burst free by means of song. Completed after *Terror and Decorum* and appearing in *Harper's* magazine this poem is (I believe) my best so far. Part III of the poem photographs the ego in the fleeting moment of metamorphosis from owl, the bird of wisdom, into philomel, the bird of song. This moment of "holy dread," being as unbearably ugly as birth and creativity always are, is the moment of the birth of beauty:

"What hubbub rocks the nest? What panicfreighted
Invasion□when he tried to sing□dilated
The big eyes of my blinking, hooting fowl?
A cartilaginous, most rheumatic squeak
Portends (half mocks) the change; the wrenched
bones creak;
Unself descends, invoked or uninvited;
Self ousts itself, consumed and consummated;
An inward-facing mask is what must break.
The magic feverish fun of chirping, all
That professorial squints and squawks indicted,
Is here□descends, descends□till wisdom, hoarse
From bawling beauty out, at last adores,
Possessed by metamorphosis so strong.
Then, with a final flutter, philomel□
How mud-splashed, what a mangy miracle!□
Writhes out of owl and stands with drooping wing.
Just stands there. Moulted, naked, two-thirds dead.
From shock and pain (and dread of holy dread)
Suddenly vomiting.
Look away quick; you are watching the birth of
song."

Yet even here, I can only grope. I am unable to say more or to see deeper because I don't understand enough about the all-important night-side of art, its magic. I can only repeat falteringly that its magic contains "more things between heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of" in the dayside of "your philosophy." Who does understand

it? Perhaps Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* or the Yeats of "Ego Dominus Tuus"? Perhaps Lowes in *The Road To Xanadu*, Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, or Jessie Weston in *From Ritual To Romance?* Or is the answer in Schopenhauer, Freud, Orpheus, Icarus, Kilroy? I don't know. I wish I did.

Different poets take such different attitudes towards poetic magic that it is helpful for each to clarify his attitude for the reader. In *Terror and Decorum* the "Author's Note on Marabouts and Planted Poets" and the poems "The Killer and the Dove," "Poet," "A Walk on Snow," "Africa and My New York," and my mock-archaic "Ballad of the Jollie Gleeman" together give a composite picture of the artist as culture-hero, the showman as shaman, the clown as priest. Uneasy lies the clown that wears a head, according to "A Walk on Snow":

Not priest but clown, the shuddering sorcerer
Is more astounded than his rapt applauders:
"Then all those props and Easters of my stage
Came true? But I was joking all the time!"
Art, being bartender, is never drunk;
And magic that believes itself, must die . . .
Unfrocked magicians freeze the whole night long;
Holy iambic cannot thaw the snow
They walk on when obsessive crystals bloom.

A key word is "obsessive." This is true in the lines above. It is true in "Dolce Ossessione," where the beauty left by the artist (is it lies? is it truth?) remains to be picked up not by the lean-ribbed scavenger cats (just who are *they?*) but by the child, the future:

"I'll urge Obsession on: an eel, I'll swim
To every far Sargasso of my whim . . .
A flame-scaled trout, I'll shimmer through your
nets□
Like lies?, like truth?□and gasp on fatal sands.
Trailed fawning by lascivious hungry cats,
What child will scoop me up, what pudgy hands?"

Critical Essay #7

Many poets wince automatically whenever any critic paraphrases their poems, as if an elephant were trampling on butterfly wings. The "heresy of paraphrase" it is called. To be sure paraphrase is helpful only in conjunction with the other tools of criticism. By itself, paraphrase is inadequate because it gives only the What of a poem, not the How. Nevertheless, a lucid rendering of the What can usually throw a little more light on the How, form and content being inseparable. Even a little light helps inasmuch as our new credo must be that communication is artistic, obscurity inartistic, and a deep simplicity the first virtue.

The use of words like "heresy" in current criticism is typical. It is a hierarchical word, deriding the non-élite reader. It helps show how pontifical discussions of poetry have become since the triumph of the Eliotizing epigones. Such ruling trends (penny-wise but Pound-foolish in the case of the 1949 Bollingen Prize) explain the awe of the fancier critics for the 98 per cent incoherent, 2 per cent lovely, and persistently fascist and anti-semitic *Pisan Cantos* of the man who has done so much to establish the Eliot movement. Does this imply fascist sympathies (as has been overhastily alleged) in either the New Critics or in Eliot? Emphatically not! Rather, their attitude toward Pound implies an untenable doctrinaire attempt to separate form from content and to separate poetry from its inextricable moral and historical context. One should feel a deep pity for those poor reviewers who struggled so painfully to praise the *Pisan Cantos* because they dared not, for reasons of *avantgarde* prestige, admit they couldn't make head or tail out of them.

Eliot is a great poet, who happens also to be a brilliantly self-contradictory critic. Not he so much as his ungreat imitators are to blame for the fact that their cult of his criticism and their accompanying cult of studied obscurity are stifling the growth of poetry today. Charming and velvetgloved, this dictatorship is based not on coercion but on an ambiguous mixture of snobbism and real excellence.

Fresh air? No hope for that yet. Not until a new generation of poets and critics□honest enough not to crave praise from the precious, courageous enough not to fear the sarcasm of the pretentious□ throws open the windows in the hermetic house.

With their tone of "we the mandarins," the "heresy"-scorning exquisites forbid anybody except crossword-puzzle decoders to get fun out of poetry, not to mention beauty. The poetry-murdering vocabulary to which this has ultimately led is the "Glossary of the New Criticism" published in *Poetry* magazine. Originally the New Criticism was a needed liberating revolution. It produced such masterpieces as Ransom's "Painted Head" and Tate's "Mediterranean." It freed our metrics from the sloppy, smug clichés of the nineteenth century. Today, the New Criticism, already a very old criticism, has become a bar to further esthetic progress, producing nimble imitative pedants and enslaving our metrics with its own twentieth-century clichés. Read a fresh and joyous poem like Ransom's "Armageddon"; then contemplate the "Glossary of the New Criticism." So doing, you will feel like an enthusiast of the early idealistic phase of the French

Revolution contemplating the intolerant "Committee of Public Safety"□or, to draw a more accurate parallel, contemplating the dictatorship of the stale and unimaginative Directorate.

Every poet should read that unbelievably humorless "Glossary" to learn why twenty years of brilliant nonsense have helped alienate the general public from poetry and its critics. No wonder all modern poetry is dismissed (unjustly) as a snore and an allusion by that audience of intelligent nonexperts who are neither professional poets nor professional critics. It is precisely this lost audience to whom my own poetry is directed, which is why these remarks are not irrelevant to a discussion of my working principles.

Such an audience can be seduced only temporarily by snob appeal or by acrobatics. It can be intimidated only temporarily by being told to admire□ or else be damned as philistine□the poetic reputations created synthetically with an almost convincing air of authority by the too-clever-to-betrue jargon of coteries. Critics and poets will not win back the intelligent general reader until they speak to him humanly and clearly□in the truly classic sense□instead of more royally than the king, more classically than the Greeks, and more pontifically than any pope. This is the assumption on which all my poetry and criticism are written: *"En ceste foy"* (to recall the Villon refrain) *"je vueil vivre et mourir."*

Source: Peter Viereck, "My Kind of Poetry," in *Mid-Century American Poets*, edited by John Ciardi, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1950, pp. 16-30.

Adaptations

In 1963, Peter Viereck recorded two poems "Obsessed by Her Beauty" and "Which of Us Two?" on a 12-inch album entitled *Nine Pulitzer Prize Poets Read Their Own Poems*. This recording is difficult to find but may be available through the University of Minnesota library.

Topics for Further Study

If you were the originator of a catch-phrase that became popular during the Gulf War, which began in 1991 between the United States and Iraq, what would your phrase be and how would it capture the essence of the conflict?

Write a poem from the perspective of the allegorical character "Can't" in the "Kilroy" poem. How would Can't defend his behavior as described at the end of Viereck's poem and what would be the major theme of your poem?

Most people never knew about the systematic destruction of Jews in wartime Germany until after the conflict and the remains in concentration camps such as Auschwitz were discovered. Some people still refuse to believe that the Holocaust ever happened. Why do you think this belief exists and what does historical research say about it?

Read the story of Orestes in Greek mythology and write an essay on whether you would find him guilty or innocent if you were sitting in judgment of the crime he was accused of committing.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: The Nuremberg Trials condemn twelve Nazis to death, including Hermann Goering, founder and leader of the Gestapo. Goering commits suicide in his cell before he can be hanged.

Today: Neo-Nazi groups, consisting mostly of young males, still plague Germany, particularly after the unification of East and West Germany in 1990. These groups have been responsible for killing, injuring, and threatening foreigners in their country, including the 1996 fire-bombing of a house for immigrants, killing ten and injuring several others.

1940s: President Harry Truman abolishes racial segregation in the United States military.

Today: The military's policy of "don't ask, don't tell" in regard to homosexuals serving in the armed forces has come under severe scrutiny since its adoption in 1993. Many opponents argue that it is a policy based on contradiction since service personnel may still be legally discharged for engaging in homosexual activity.

1940s: The Soviet Union conducts A-bomb tests, creating more tension with the United States in the Cold War arms race.

Today: While leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union hailed the end of the Cold War with the break-up of the latter in 1991, today tension has mounted with the election of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia in 2000. Putin's election has brought mixed international reaction because some fear he favors a more authoritarian and expansionist Russia

What Do I Read Next?

Peter Viereck's first published work was actually his doctoral dissertation *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler*, which came out in 1941. In this book, he explores his conservative political beliefs, most of which stem from his father's support of Nazism. While it may be considered "dry" by readers not interested in history or political thought, *Metapolitics* is actually an interesting look at what Viereck calls the theory of "revolt against revolt."

Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is a classic retelling of the stories of Greek and Roman mythology. Originally published in 1942, it has gone through numerous reprints and is readily available in both libraries and bookstores. The book is divided into sections on the gods and early heroes, love and adventure stories, heroes before and during the Trojan War, and lesser myths.

Published in 1977, Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier* is an autobiographical account of a young German's experience on the Eastern Front during World War II. The book has been called shocking, horrifying, and difficult to put down as Sajer relates the story of bloody battles, miserable living conditions, cruel Russian winters, and even falling in love with a young woman from Berlin.

In 1991, Jim Nye published a collection of poems and essays written by soldiers who fought in Vietnam. *Aftershock: Poems and Prose from the Vietnam War* depicts the horror and grief of those who went to war and the loved ones they left behind. Most of these works present a striking contrast to those written about World War II, including "Kilroy."

Further Study

Kennett, Lee, *G.I. : The G.I.: American Soldier in World War II*, Warner Books, 1987.

This account covers a soldier's experience from boot camp to military discharge. It includes such minute details as what GIs ate as well as a broad discussion on the mental and emotional states of American soldiers fighting in Europe, Asia, and the South Pacific.

Osgood, Charles, ed., *Kilroy Was Here: The Best American Humor from World War II*, Hyperion, 2001.

This is television journalist Charles Osgood's collection of some of the best humor writing to come out of the Second World War. It has been said that much of the tragedy of battle is made bearable by trying to find things to laugh at, and this is a wonderful look at everything from veterans' funny memoirs to classic lines which helped buoy the American spirit through one of history's darkest times.

Viereck, Peter, *Tide and Continuities: Last and First Poems, 1995-1938*, University of Arkansas Press, 1995.

Like the poem "Kilroy," much of the poetry in this recent publication of Viereck's is philosophical and filled with allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. The works included span much of the poet's career, and, although it is lengthy and at times over-laden, it is worth at least a partial read for one interested in his writing.

□, *The Unadjusted Man: A New Hero for Americans*, Capricorn Books, 1956.

This is one of Viereck's most important nonfiction works. Its subtitle is "Reflections on the Distinction between Conforming and Conserving," and it helps shed light on the nature of Viereck's politics□the driving force behind his poetry.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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