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Contradictory Views in Peter Viereck's War Poetry

Cover Page Note

I would like to thank Professor H. George Hahn for sharing freely with me his wealth of allusions.

“Kilroy”¹ and “Vale from Carthage”² are perhaps the two most well-known of Peter Viereck’s³ poems. He first published “Vale” in the July 1947 volume of *Poetry*, and “Kilroy” in *Terror and Decorum: Poems 1940-1948*. Both poems explore World War II America and the experiences of its soldiers. Peter and his brother, George, served in the war; “Vale” was written as a farewell to George, who was killed at Anzio in 1944, and Peter returned home in 1946. Although the poems are similar in subject and were written during the same period in United States history, the two offer conflicting perspectives on America and the lives of its soldiers, befitting opposite romantic notions, inversely praising and disparaging each. The differences seem owing to changes in Viereck’s views, based on his personal relationship with the war.

“Kilroy” exaggerates the contributions of war to individual caliber and characterizes America by its post-war suburban explosion. In this way, it extols the military experience and rebukes the country and its civilians for what they have become.

Its eponymous character is a metaphor for the American GI, who is compared to Ulysses, Chaucer’s Miller, Orestes, Icarus, Christopher Columbus, and Dr. Faustus—characters who are all involved in great adventures. In her criticism on the poem, and specifically of the adventurism she aims to prove Viereck purports in it, Pamela Steed Hill claims these associates are inaccurate, because the “hero [Kilroy] is compared to figures who are not even fighting a war when they go on their adventures.” She implies that because the journeys of all those figures were known as less violent from the onset, their journeys could be eagerly approached and appropriately deemed adventures, unlike a tour of duty. The exception she notes is Ulysses, who “would have preferred to go home to his wife after the Trojan War instead of being sentenced to ten years traveling dangerous seas.” As Ulysses had no desire to journey, Hill indicates that he should not be thought to have gone on an adventure at all. Her position is that people do not go to war in search of adventure—or, in other words, in the spirit of adventurism.

To support her position, Hill examines other wars in which America has been involved. The Civil War, for instance, pitted brothers against one another; it was clearly an unattractive struggle, to the extent that participating could not have been mistaken for the sort of alluring opportunity associated with adventurism. She argues that World War I also could not have appealed to a spirit of adventurism, because Americans fell into the war late and faced few obstacles

¹ Of the World War II-era American pop-culture expression, “Kilroy was here.”

² “Vale” is Latin for “farewell.” Carthage was an ancient city-state, founded by Phoenicians; destroyed and rebuilt by Romans; razed by Arabs in 697.

³ Peter Robert Edwin Viereck (1916-2006), a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and professor of history at Mount Holyoke College.

before its end. In addition, its scope so far surpassed all previous wars' that its soldiers were most likely too "stunned" and "disillusioned" with world-wide politics to retrospectively look on their involvement as having been an adventure.

"Kilroy" is, however, a poem specific to World War II. Hill points out that no Kilroy-esque character existed with which to mark the world's walls during World War I, ostensibly to use that absence as evidence against the solidity of Kilroy as a symbol for war and thus World War II. She considers the poem's applications to all war, a whole about which she reasons a sense of adventurism does not hold—and her reasoning seems correct. But that consideration is irrelevant: World War II is the only war Kilroy must represent, and the ideas in the poem need not apply to any other war just because those ideas concern one. All wars are unique in different ways. Even ignoring this point, recognizing adventure—which all wars to modern times have featured—rather than adventurism as the important commonality between the soldier and the alluded-to characters is a more sensible conclusion to draw than one that Viereck dangerously misrepresents the experience of war by linking it with an adventurism that in most cases is quite limited about it.

The editor's note to "Kilroy" reads: "An example of an unfaked epic spirit emerging from the war was the expression 'Kilroy Was Here,' scribbled everywhere by American soldiers and implying that nothing was too adventurous or remote" (*New* 81). At first appearance it seems to propose there was in fact a great deal of adventurism to the war, but as Marie Henault explains in her survey on Viereck, this is part of "a grand mordancy in the realm of irony." At the time of the poem's publication, the Kilroy expression was no more than a signature left by soldiers in places they had been required to go: the epigraph's implication is "grandiose." Its message, then, is derisive, and neither it nor any adventurism in the poem should be taken too seriously (Henault 60).

Hill neglects the distinction between adventurism and adventure. While "adventurism" connotes thrill-seeking, a journey need not have been undertaken on the grounds of adventurism to qualify as an adventure. In other words: intent is not critical, and many of those who have experienced adventures were not inspired toward them. Viereck himself never implies the soldier is thrilled to serve—he compares the soldier to Columbus, who he explicitly states "did [his job] for the wages" (line 5). And the adventure need not end in an appealing outcome for the individual—a truth well-explored in the poem: Icarus' destiny is fish-feed; the Miller's Tale, used by Viereck as a metaphor for the soldier's experience, is full of unpleasantries; and real soldiers often die very painfully, as in the referenced Bataan death-marches (22-23, 34).

Although each of the characters faces problems and "grows tired with long marching"—if they even survive their (literal or figurative) march—it is absurd to suggest that any of their journeys were not adventures (15). Risk is critical to

adventure: to adventure is to take a risk in hope of a favorable outcome, whether or not that favorable outcome is actually brought about and even if an unfavorable alternative is realized instead. While it may be the case that the risk is often undertaken knowingly, it is not a requirement; indeed, the earliest root words for “adventure” translate to “that which comes to us, or happens without design” (*OED* s.v. adventure, n., 1.a.).

All of this is not to say that there was no adventurism to World War II. The war came during a time of great excitement for the U.S.: “The economic and material growth of America, during and following World War II, made the nation the most potent, wealthiest society in the history of the planet” (Kaledin 28). So high a crest from the trough of the Great Depression meant for unmatched morale among Americans. After Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. collectively dropped all isolationism, and millions immediately enlisted (29). Certainly, countless others were drafted. Even so, there is no reason to believe that many did not perceive serving as an exciting opportunity despite its risks, if they could even fully understand those risks from their position at the top of the world.

A result of any adventure—pleasant or painful, sought or not—is the wealth of experience those primarily involved are likely to have amassed by it. Though some adventurism did exist unique to World War II, the experiential wealth is what Viereck praises about the soldier, rather than an unrealistically optimistic notion of an absolutely heroic adventurism. This idea is less problematic to expand to war in general, but it applies to Kilroy especially: World War II soldiers were exposed to places and cultures vastly different from their own; to wide-scale violence and death; to some of history’s greatest applications of the human mind to both freedom and destruction. In his book *The Unadjusted Man*, in regard to man’s futile struggle against Earth’s nature of decay, Viereck asks, “If frail children scrawl blueprints of progress on the ceiling, how will that conjure away the reality of the cellar?” (303). In the context of “Kilroy,” the scrawl is the Kilroy stamp; the reality: life. People must die, but before death, they are capable of all sorts of experiences; experiences that will fully enhance the quality of their human existence. This is a Lockean notion, based on the concept of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*—perhaps extended to the soul by Viereck—which can only be filled by real interaction with the world, and the soldier’s slate is the fullest. Though “in the end [Kilroy] fades like a lost tune,” he first “sees it all” (lines 12, 39). “He was there, he was there, he was there!” (49).

Hill’s concerns about what the soldier fights for are unimportant, because the value of experience is independent of its morality in the poem. Ulysses and Orestes oppose one another in myth: Ulysses facilitates Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter, Orestes’ sister; and Orestes later murders Agamemnon. Still, both are considered early incarnations of Kilroy.

Regarding Ulysses, it is notable Viereck chose the legendary king's Roman name over the original Greek "Odysseus," particularly considering the two other Greek figures in "Kilroy" as well as Viereck's dedication⁴ of the poem to John H. Finley, Jr., a former classics professor at Harvard whose specialization was ancient Greece. Hill writes that the adventurism in "Kilroy" is tied with Viereck's idea of American soldiers as "conquering heroes," but by comparison with the poem's other figures, that is not the case. Viereck seems to have specifically avoided overt heroism: the Romans did not respect Ulysses as the Greeks did Odysseus; he was no hero to them, and in fact was alternately referred to as "Cruel Odysseus" because his resourcefulness was viewed in terms of treachery rather than cunning in Roman culture.

It would be a stretch to refer to either Dr. Faustus or Chaucer's Miller as heroes. Icarus and Orestes bear some heroic qualities, but the former is a fool and the latter a madman. Hill notes as much, but uses this understanding to support her claim that what the alluded-to characters share with the soldier can only be "a high-spirited sense of duty and self-righteousness"—that is to say, a spirit of adventurism. But experience remains the more sensible solution.

Happiness, like morality, is unimportant in "Kilroy." Suffering, which all the figures face, is a crucial component of their experiential wealth. Henault recalls Viereck's opinion that "[t]he principal danger in life is that 'the radiance of tragedy,' of complete acceptance of all parts of existence, will be snuffed out" (41). Viereck writes in *The Unadjusted Man*, "When human reactions can be predicted like test tubes and adjusted into bliss, [he] will take to the hills." It is a comical but telling statement: he recognizes that "the ultimate unadjustedness of the putty of humanity is the source of all the beauty as well as misery of life on earth" (305). In "Kilroy," there is obvious misery, but there is also beauty in the experience of the adventure, and that is a worthwhile trade-off for Viereck. Hill claims that Viereck leaves out of "Kilroy" such experiences as "the lonely cadet who longs to see his loved ones back home" and so inaccurately portrays the reality of war. As has been explained, the sorrow of adventure certainly is featured in the poem, and it is an appropriate part of Kilroy—if not by adventurism, then by the experience he represents.

In "Kilroy," America is represented by its suburbs, which are a "trap" for the soldier on his return home. Hill asks, "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?" Obviously, traps are by definition unapparent. Suburbs are popularly perceived as too nice, as lacking in substance. Regardless, the suburban home was linked with the American Dream for many years after World War II: "The move to the suburbs and the job opportunities that

⁴ From Viereck's introduction to "Kilroy" in *New and Selected Poems*.

the GI Bill created altered the domestic outlook and options available to many American families” (Kaledin 32). Suburbia as a trap fits the perspective of America as a mass of colorless suburbs that lull the seasoned veteran into an uneventful and consumerist, but safe life after war.

Henault relays Viereck's understanding that war so stressed the poets of his generation, they had no energy for innovation and fell into traditional verse forms (34). He sees World War II veterans to have often fallen similarly into suburbia in “Kilroy”: “pipe-and-slippers plus a Loyal Hound” (line 26) are to veterans as familiar meters and rhyme schemes are to “Manhattan Classicists.”⁵ Suburbs are aesthetically clean and quiet and would appeal to those who had for years travelled the world and participated in its biggest and messiest war. It was the time to relax and begin a family, and the money a soldier would have saved up while serving allowed them the comfort of a removed home and the car that enabled it.

The suburbs were initially populated by people who did not go to war. The final line of the poem, “*And in the suburbs Can't sat down and cried,*” diagnoses the state of the life-long civilian who regrets all he did not experience and laments his small and sad existence as represented by the disdainfully-portrayed suburbs he occupies. “Can't” and his neighbors “Ought,” “But,” “Perhaps,” and “Better Not” are the civilian “nationalist new-suburbans”—Viereck's term for men who grew up in the city, were raised as Democrats, and have just moved out into the suburbs (*Unadjusted* 113). The hopelessness in their self-reflections is amplified by the soldier's return because, as Henault writes, “now they cannot even vicariously enjoy his adventures ‘V-mailed’ to them.” Kilroy, having seen so much, is out of place in suburbia. He will find it “necessarily all too confined” (60). Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses*⁶ is notably confined in much the same way. He recognizes the importance of life experience and has come to know first-hand the trap that is home:

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone
.....
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move. (lines 6-9, 19-21)

⁵ Viereck's own term for poets from his generation.

⁶ Of the famous poem by the same name.

Tennyson's Ulysses wisely "embrace[s] life's laughs and its sadnesses" (Henault 41). Like Kilroy, he is only truly alive when out exploring the earth.

Hill concludes her criticism of "Kilroy" by explaining that just as the adventurism in the poem could not apply to any war before World War II, it could not apply to any war after. This again has no relevance to a poem written specifically about World War II. It seems as though her purpose for the final paragraph is to end on the clever note that "most often it was the spirit of adventure that sat down and cried—a spirit broken by the realities of war," a judgment on the highly-televised Vietnam War that is not applicable to World War II and so has no place in her essay.

Although Hill is misguided in her interpretation of "Kilroy," and World War II certainly was an adventure, the poem does project a skewed view of post-World War II America and overstate the boon of the war experience. When people die as in the case of Viereck's brother, death puts an immediate end to their experiences. Permanent injuries—both physical and psychological—limit those who survive. Military life isn't always exciting and isn't the only means by which to travel the world and see all that life has to offer. Likewise, America does not only consist of its suburbs, and not all suburban life is dull. The poem generalizes and stereotypes and works with certain clichés. It romanticizes, and of romanticism, Henault relays Viereck's notion "that although 'romanticism does only harm in politics . . . [in] poetry its emotionalism is a needed ingredient'" (37). It is a good poem, but by its nature as poetry, it deals in absolutes to emotionally communicate its message, a message based on only one side of reality.

In "Vale from Carthage," Viereck's perspective is drastically different. The poem's main idea is what Henault refers to as "the terrible waste of any war" (54). In "Vale," serving at war is a burden, and America is a valued and longed-for home.

The adventure of war is downplayed; military life is represented by monotony: scraping mess-kits clean, scrubbing barracks floors, and shining uniform buttons (lines 11-13). These tasks are considered the soldier's job; Viereck laments that even though his brother honorably fulfilled all these duties, "[n]o furlough fluttered from the sky" to save him, and the job cost George the ultimate price: his life, or everything more he would have experienced had he not been killed at war (15). In "Vale," the military is anything but a meritocracy: no matter how good a soldier a man is, he cannot pry his destiny from the cold, arbitrary hands of fate. Whereas "Kilroy" promotes military service, "Vale" warns against it. Carthage serves as a symbol of inevitable decay. It demonstrates a pointlessness of fighting for a cause: twice, the city was built; and twice it was destroyed.

Clearly it was a much more dangerous part of the soldier's job description than routine cleaning that cost George his life, but Viereck completely overlooks combat in "Vale" except for that George was "shot dead"⁷ and "screamed in the end" (1, 19). Viereck heightens George's performance of the described mundane duties to an almost sacred status by pairing them with "religiously connotative words" such as "pure" and "hymn" (Henault 52). This is notable, because George's actual combative performance was not wholly honorable in the romantic sense and could not necessarily have been expected to earn him a heaven-sent reprieve: he is remembered to have "called to the Germans in German and brought them closer" so that his outfit could easily gun them down (Garland 221).

As previously stated, George's death at war puts an end to his adventures:

He will
Not see Times Square-he will not see-he will
Not see Times
change (lines 15-18)

In these lines, Viereck links America as represented by New York City's Times Square—a culturally rich metropolitan Mecca—and quality of life; that George will never again visit such a place is symbolic of the despairing cessation of his existence, "the finality of death" that Henault observes is stressed in the poem's run-on lines and that is represented by the ancient tomb and *vale*-inscribed stone marker of lines 20-21 (54). Times Square is also the location of *V-J day in Times Square* by Alfred Eisenstaedt, a famous photograph that features a returned sailor kissing a woman in celebration of ended war with Japan. This is in stark contrast with "Kilroy," in which war is praised and the soldier is doomed upon his return home.

Viereck closes the elegy with the lines:

Roman, you'll see your Forum Square no more;
What's left but this to say of any war?

George and Times Square are referred to as metaphorical counterparts from ancient Rome, an icon of human achievement. Thus, man and America are dignified, and the soldier is placed above the war in which he must nonetheless serve.

There are a few important differences in form between the two poems that emphasize the perspectives respective to each. Both feature rhyme, but put to

⁷ Viereck writes in a later introduction to "Vale" that he was told his brother was killed by a "German bullet" (*Metapolitics* 75). In an interview, Corporal Allen Bedard recalls witnessing George's death from blood loss by a shrapnel wound to the temple (Whitlock 179).

different effect. In “Vale,” it occurs mostly in couplets: ten perfect and two imperfect, over 28 lines. This gives the poem a sad predictability, a pang that fits the loss it explores. In “Kilroy,” rhyme is irregular and appropriately exciting for the poem’s much different take on the same war. “Vale” consists of a single stanza made up of lines that, with one key exception, are relatively similar in length and in number of syllables. The effect is a quiet poem with short, regular breaks—like a eulogy. Lines of more varied lengths are divided into seven stanzas to comprise “Kilroy,” and make for a dramatic, unpredictable pacing and less serious poem. “Kilroy” features an unignorably iambic meter. It is pounding, emphatic. The meter in “Vale” is softer; its words run more smoothly together.

Viereck wrote “Vale” after receiving news of his brother’s death in 1944. It is unknown precisely when “Kilroy” was written, as *Terror and Decorum* spans eight years of poetry; it must have been written after 1941, though, as the expression “Kilroy was here” did not emerge until the U.S. entered the war in December of 1941, excluding the first two years of the collection.

It cannot be ascertained in which order the poems were largely created. Viereck himself probably did not even exactly know: in addition to revising and transforming finished poems—as in the case of “Aboard a Troopship in Convoy,” an early poem from which “Vale” borrows, as well as eventually “Vale”⁸—Viereck spent a great deal of time drafting large bodies of work. He “returned from his war service . . . with a ‘suitcase of poems’ that for ten years he had been revising, ‘rarely daring to publish’” (Henault 52).

In the event that “Kilroy” came first, “Vale” could be considered evidence the loss of his brother soured Viereck’s perspective on war and military service and elevated his opinion of the country he and George grew up in together.

There is also the possibility that “Vale” was written before “Kilroy.” “Kilroy” could then be viewed as a rationalization of George as a martyr, as an unfortunate casualty of an effort toward the quality of life experience soldier-dom provides: an effort beyond the protection of the (unflatteringly-portrayed) nation. In this view, George’s job was honorable and worth dying for, and so his death was not a waste. This view would have provided a way for Viereck to console himself on the loss of his brother after an initial resentment of the factors that sourced the loss, as present in the earlier “Vale.” Viereck may have vilified the civilian life in “Kilroy” in order to cope with the out-survival of George by those he felt lacked the courage George possessed to serve.

⁸ The poem treated in this paper is the *New and Selected Poems* version. The original featured in *Poetry* is aesthetically lesser in several lines (Henault 54), but does not discernibly differ in meaning.

The Unadjusted Man was published after both “Kilroy” and “Vale.” It features in its final paragraph the following sentence: “The universals of beauty and of liberty are given flesh and blood only when some private gesture of love or loneliness reincarnates these remote grandeurs in concrete, individual experiences.” Viereck proposes as he does in “Kilroy” that personal experience is directly related to quality of life. He sees America continuing on by what he perceives as the unrealistic and dangerous ideology of the early-mid twentieth century liberal—including “Can’t” and his neighbors. They are the “overadjusted” men: men whose heads are filled from birth with unearned information or “mass culture” indiscriminately pilfered from others without the mediating force of personal involvement (261). What they need is concreteness: “a personally-felt experience of a shared or sharable nature” (297). They can no longer sustain themselves off of previous generations’ or the soldier’s experiences if they wish to improve; they must have their own adventures. With this connection between Viereck’s poetry and politics in mind, it seems most likely that “Kilroy” was written after “Vale” and at least partly inspired by that low point following Viereck’s loss of his brother.

To suggest George’s death had such an effect in shaping Viereck’s poetry is clearly far from formalist criticism, but it is of the sort of criticism Viereck himself considered valid and so must have seen to apply to his own work. In *Dream and Responsibility*, he writes:

The famous New Criticism’s method of analysis tends to treat a poem by itself, like a self-created airtight-sealed object outside cause and effect. By discarding a poem’s *irrelevant* historical, psychological, and “moralizing” encrustations, the “new critics” have splendidly taught us to read the text itself. But by also discarding the *relevant* historical, psychological, and ethical aspects, they are often misreading the text itself. (18)

He admits “[i]t may be argued that this inextricability of form and content is undesirable,” but “in any case, that it exists is undeniable . . .” (19). Viereck very much loved George; obviously referring to his brother, he writes in *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* that World War II “killed millions of the world’s finest, including the person closest to [him]” (164). This experience certainly influenced him in ways that would show through in his poetry—particularly poetry that explores issues related to George’s death. Henault rates “Vale” as a much stronger poem than “Aboard a Troopship in Convoy” and as “one of the two or three best coming out of World War II” (53). Its quality is assuredly owed at least in part to its personal significance to Viereck, and stands as a sign the author was profoundly affected by the loss of his only brother.

In summary: “Kilroy” and “Vale from Carthage” are two of Peter Viereck’s best-known poems. Each treats the subject of war, specifically World War II, and each in a manner opposing the other: “Kilroy” glorifies war and denounces America as undeserving of the exalted soldier; “Vale,” in reverse, sanctifies life—symbolized by an idealized America—as above mortal war. Because the precise chronology of the poems’ authorship is unclear, those wishing to contextualize the two would find useful the death of Viereck’s brother, George, who was killed in the war and for whom Viereck eulogizes in “Vale.” Based on the poems, biographical information, and Viereck’s other writings, it does not seem a stretch to estimate that “Vale” came first and that “Kilroy” is at least in part an ode to George, following the elegy.

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