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## 'Shining Pins and Wailing Shells': Women Poets and the Great War

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Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.<sup>1</sup>

I knew a time when Europe feasted well:  
bodies were munched in thousands, vintage blood  
so blithely flowed that even the dull mud  
grew greedy, and ate men; and lest the gust  
should flag, quick flesh no daintier taste than dust,  
spirit was ransacked for whatever might  
sharpen a sauce to drive on appetite.

Sylvia Townsend Warner<sup>2</sup>

### THE HOME FRONT

My title 'Shining Pins and Wailing Shells' repeats a traditional opposition between women's and men's experiences of and poetic rhetoric about World War 1: crudely speaking, Jessie Pope writing patriotic rhymes like 'The Call' at home, against Wilfred Owen producing his bitter pacifist masterpieces from the trenches. I originally intended to represent female patriots by the phrase 'white feathers': notoriously distributed as public badges of shame by patriotic women to civilian males of military age, these are handy metonyms for feminine jingoism and by now have become part of the received mythology of the Great War. But the image of woman knitting and thinking is a far more apt representation of the specifically feminine non-combatant experience: it recurs constantly, from Rose Macaulay's envious sister in 1914 – 'In a trench you are sitting, while I am knitting / A hopeless sock that never gets done'<sup>3</sup> – to the 'shining pins that dart and click' of Jessie Pope's optimistic

sock-knitter: 'He'll come out on top somehow / Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14',<sup>4</sup> and the woman in Violet Spender's long patriotic poem 'Knitting', unwillingly obsessed with visions of war's horror as she sits 'knitting, knitting, knitting'.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, the phrase 'wailing shells' represents in capsule form the bloody experience of the trenches, in which objects had a literal (and deadly) significance as much as a symbolic one. This is the message of Owen's poem 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' from which the phrase is taken: where the symbolic rituals of civilian mourning are outgunned by the lived realities of war, so that no lament for the dead is possible except the 'shrill demented choirs of wailing shells'.

An angrily perceived opposition between women's conception of the War and men's experience of it fuels much of the energies of the male protest poets: it is there is Sassoon's 'Glory of Women', for instance (which includes yet another female sock-knitter);<sup>6</sup> or even more emphatically, in Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum', perhaps the most famous of his anti-war poems, which insists on the sordid and horrible actualities of a soldier's death by gassing as opposed to the dangerous lies given by patriots to 'children ardent for some desperate glory'. The manuscript versions of this poem address it alternatively 'To a Certain Poetess' and 'To Jessie Pope'.<sup>7</sup>

So much, then, for the traditional account. Like most traditional accounts of women's writing, this one is oversimplified, coloured with misogyny and far from reliable. Even the 'jingo-women' distributing white feathers, whom Helen Hamilton called 'Insulter[s]', self appointed / Of all the men you meet / Not dressed in uniform',<sup>8</sup> were themselves being manipulated by the War Office; as a contemporary scholar points out, the white-feather campaign was itself 'the brainchild of a certain Admiral Penrose Fitzgerald'.<sup>9</sup> Catherine Reilly's 1981 anthology, *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, revealed a different, partly oppositional tradition of women's war poetry, including anti-war verses, compassionate poems by nurses and thoughtful poems by women who were very aware of the contradictions of their own passive but mentally active role. More recently, Nosheen Khan's scholarly and sympathetic study *Women's Poetry of the First World War* has enlarged and mapped in greater detail the ground first signposted by Reilly, insisting upon the important point that women's war poetry should not be treated as homogeneous. 'Women poets see their war roles variously as reporters, propagandists, interpreters, advocates, satirists, elegists, healers and visionaries, and their verse corres-

pondingly expresses a comprehensive range of human emotions: pity, revulsion, horror, disgust, hate, anger, togetherness, isolation, pity, compassion' (p. 4). Both Khan and Reilly work to undo the crudity of the usual white feathers/wounded heroes opposition, while not completely abolishing it: the idealistic patriotism commonly associated with the poetry is certainly present in Reilly's anthology and in Khan's more widely ranging study. It is noticeable that though, as both scholars insist, women did write protest poetry, some of it predating that of the trench poets, very few go anywhere as far as Owen or Rosenberg in rejecting the tenets of the War altogether. There are gung-ho patriots like Jessie Pope of 'The Call' ('Who's fretting to begin / Who's going out to win? / And who wants to save his skin - / Do you, my laddie?'<sup>10</sup>) or like Laura E. Richards, author of the deservedly forgotten *To Arms!: Songs of the Great War* (1918); or like Helen Forbes, naïvely invoking the rhetoric of chivalry as late as 1920 in order to praise the glorious dead:

As we believe in Christ our God, we know our cause is just;  
 We know we fight with the good knights whose good  
     broadwords are rust;  
 And what we fight for will not die when we like  
 them are dust.  
     Michael, lead us  
     George, defend us  
     Martin, speed us  
 Soldier saints, your good swords lend us.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to this distinctly chilling enthusiasm for battle, other women's poetry shows a range of more complex and sensitive responses, from grateful assent to the terrible sacrifice through a spectrum of attitudes ranging through guilt, pity and horror. Of those women who wrote poems during the War, only Mary Borden in the poems collected in *The Forbidden Zone* denounces its brutalities outright.<sup>12</sup> Apart from her work, to which I shall return, we have to wait for the ironic anger of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Opus 7* (published in 1931; like Mary Borden's book, more than ten years after the Armistice) for unambiguous anti-war poetry by a woman. The record during the War years is for the most part one of more or less anguished complicity.

Most of the women's poems of the Great War are conventional in form and, often enough, in thought: thematically, they are for the

most part bounded by the assumptions of patriotism, just as formally they are mainly governed by the norms of traditional Georgian rhetoric and metre. Furthermore, because many are the work of untrained writers, they are sometimes technically crude and amateurish. In my book *Feminism and Poetry*<sup>13</sup> I took them as examples of bad because incompetent and/or reactionary poetry by women, and the problems of value that this sets for the feminist critic. I now feel that this was not a particularly useful way of reading them; this is not because I have changed my mind about their quality – in fact, the more I read women's poems of the First World War the more, for the most part, they depress me. But simply to dismiss the poems as plain bad is unfair: few are wholly achieved, but many are interesting if uneven. More importantly, such a dismissal means leaving unasked and unthought the ways in which the poems are problematic, which is only partly a matter of amateurishness and conventionality. These poems are at once compulsively interesting and deeply dispiriting; the purpose of this chapter is to investigate how and why.

It is tempting, but misleading, to say that the unsatisfactory nature of these poems is the result of their writers' distance from the scene of the War, particularly from the men in the trenches whose experiences are inevitably seen by them at second hand: the exceptional immediacy and formal adventurousness of Mary Borden's work being the result of her direct experience of battlefield nursing.<sup>14</sup> But, quite apart from the fact that other women who had personal experience of nursing in the war zone wrote of it in much more conventional terms, any explanation of women's poetry that privileges battlefield experience is very unconvincing, because it effectively depends on trashing the experiences of anxiety and bereavement, which women's war poems are full of, as somehow less authentic, less historical, than having your legs blown off. In any case, one has only to think of Denise Levertov's poem 'Life at War; (1966),<sup>15</sup> or Adrienne Rich's 'The Burning of Paper instead of Children' (1968),<sup>16</sup> both of them written at once *hors de combat* and deeply engaged with it, to realise that fine poems can be written from outside the killing fields. And some of the better poems in *Scars* arise out of facing the opposition between the poets' own experience and that of the soldiers: Rose Macaulay's poem 'Picnic', for instance, discussed below, or Vera Brittain's 'To My Brother' and Eleanor Farjeon's 'Easter Monday'.

The problem with women's poems of World War 1 is not, then, that they articulate historically unauthentic experiences; on the

contrary, what strikes the reader is the extent to which their writers seem trapped. They are trapped first of all, of course, in history: living through a horrifying War whose course they are powerless to affect, often racked with anxiety about men they love but are powerless to help. The vast majority of women were also, of course, trapped not only in anxiety but in the drably unheroic existence of wartime civilians: the semi-comic poems about wartime deprivations, discussed later in this essay, constitute an eloquent testimony to the perceived dreariness of many women's lives – a testimony which, as Nicola Beauman points out in her chapter, is confirmed by novels such as Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street*.

More important for the quality of women's poetry is the ideological and rhetorical trap in which many of the writers seem caught: that is, the Victorian and Georgian poetic tradition, itself deeply imbricated with patriotic ideology and overwhelmingly masculine in its assumptions. The main symbolic languages which this tradition made available to its inheritors to represent the historical tragedy they were living through were the chivalric romance, the Georgian pastoral and the mythology and iconography of Christianity, particularly that of the Crucifixion, with all its implicit enforcement of the intrinsic beauty of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> All of these tended to prettify and censor the meaning of war even as they articulated it. This is most overtly apparent in the poetic diction associated with this post-Romantic tradition, particularly when the writer invokes chivalric romance: thus Helen Forbes invokes the 'good knights whose good broadswords are rust' and 'the trumpet blast . . . that all good warriors have never heard in vain' (p. 55). The evasions of this kind of chivalric rhetoric have been wittily pinpointed by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in a parody of phrase-book definition:

A soldier is a	warrior
One's chest is one's	breast
What is contemptible is	base
The legs and arms of young men are	limbs
Dead bodies constitute	ashes (p. 22)

Fussell is not, of course, describing women's poetry; for him, both the experience and the rhetoric(s) of the War are men's business. Yet because women participated, though not always confidently and rarely critically, in the literary traditions which he discusses and

defines, his account of War poetry is highly relevant to women's writings. The list briefly cited above specifically defines chivalric rhetoric, but the symbolic languages of pastoral and of Christian sacrifice<sup>18</sup> likewise tend to distort or censor the realities of war as much as articulating them: the pastoral mode by representing dead bodies as flowers; the rhetoric of Christianity by identifying the mass slaughter of the troops with the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Likewise, the transcendence and resolution traditionally offered by poetry often turn out to be transparently ideological reassurances that the sacrifice of the dead was not in vain. Women's poetry of World War 1 is depressing in so far as it often seems to be the record of minds accommodating themselves to a massive historical evil; the Georgian literary tradition lent itself all too readily, I suggest, to such accommodation. Furthermore, none of its symbolic languages seem obviously useful for representing women's experiences as important in their own right: with the exception of Spenser's Britomart<sup>19</sup> (who is anyway not invoked in Great War poetry), the knightly ideal leaves women on the sidelines; and the mythology of the Crucifixion represents woman as *mater dolorosa* or weeping daughter of Jerusalem – in other words, as ancillary mourner. The imaginative world of Georgian pastoral would seem to be less strictly gendered and therefore to offer more possibilities for women; yet in so far as patriotic Georgian poetry celebrated 'England, home and beauty' as that which made the War worth fighting, it tended to emphasise feminine privilege:

And while this rose made round her cup  
The armies died convulsed.<sup>20</sup>

Still, it is obviously much too crude to define the symbolism and diction of wartime Georgian poetry simply as constituting an ideological prison for the women who wrote in its terms.<sup>21</sup> If it is true for women poets that, as Adrienne Rich has said, 'our language has trapped as well as liberated us',<sup>22</sup> this is still not to say that words have *only* gagged their female speakers. No verbal symbolic language is monolithic; and this, like others, contains the possibility of contradictory, even rebellious meanings. These possibilities are played out, in more or less subtle and ambivalent terms, in the poems discussed below.

## TRAPS AND REBELLIONS

I have so far been discussing women's poetry in terms of its assent to the tenets of the War through which its writers were living. This does not do justice to the ambivalence with which even very patriotic women could write, manifesting not only gratitude and pity but envy, guilt, awareness of their own power, and even buried rage. A good instance of the complexities of feeling at work in an apparently simple poem is Mary Henderson's 'An Incident'. This poem, partly poignant and moving and partly religious schmaltz, also seems a clear instance of a poet getting trapped in her own religious rhetoric. The poem relates a nurse's encounter with a young soldier – 'just a boy, as I could see' – whose hands were badly injured: 'wounded more pitifully, / Than Thine, O Christ, on Calvary'<sup>23</sup> (she doesn't say how, but one guesses at mutilation). She is making tea for the wounded soldiers, when she comes to this one:

And the boy turned when his wounds were dressed,  
Held up his face like a child at the breast,  
Turned and held his tired face up,  
For he could not hold a spoon or cup,  
And I fed him . . . Mary, Mother of God,  
All women tread where thy feet have trod.

This is finely achieved and very poignant until the religious rhetoric takes over, when it becomes moving in the wrong way. The fault-line of the poem can be pinpointed in the three dots associating the scene with the Christian imagery and rhetoric which make it signify holiness as well as suffering. The register of the language changes from the simple statement 'he could not hold a spoon . . . I fed him' to the hymn-book archaism of 'where thy feet have trod'. But it would be inaccurate to represent the poem as a straightforward experiential narrative which gives way to ideologically interpretative rhetoric, for the scene itself is interpreted in terms of Madonna-and-Child iconography even as it is told. It is structured on the central simile comparing the boy and his helpless gesture of need and acceptance to 'a child at the breast', and implicitly identifying the woman who feeds him as a mother, even before Mary is named. In this unspoken exchange, she is invested by the boy's need for comfort with the imaginary power of a mother not only to feed but to console and 'make it better', while being all too painfully aware that maternal

omnipotence is only a fantasy. The half-line 'and I fed him' has in its context a terrible guilty pathos: the strong young man is horribly and pitifully infantilised; the woman seems powerful in relation to his powerlessness, as mothers seem powerful in relation to their babies. She is active and whole where he is passive and mutilated – in psychoanalytic terms, castrated; and she is powerless to alter any of this. Since these agonising contradictions are seen in terms of religious iconography, it is not surprising to find the poet at once resolving and evading them by invoking transcendence in the form of Mary's sorrow and Christ's crucifixion (particularly as her own name is Mary). In the poem's final stanza the particular 'incident' fades into a generalised *pieta* scene symbolising the relation of 'Womanhood' to sacrificed masculinity: she tends the Christ-soldier 'As he stretches forth his stricken hand / Wounded to death for the Mother Land.'

The ambiguities of this poem, in which the woman's power in relation to a stricken male is felt as transgressive, point towards the well-known feminist reading of women's participation in the Great War as fuelled by unconscious rage against male dominance and by desire for liberation, which has been propounded by Sandra Gilbert in two persuasive articles, 'Costumes of the Mind; and 'Soldier's Heart', and more recently in *Sexchanges*, the second volume of her and Susan Gubar's study *No Man's Land: The place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>24</sup> This argument insists on the extent to which women were empowered by the War, getting out of the home and into rewarding and sometimes highly paid work, and in the case of women who worked as nurses or even dispatch riders, on the prospect of adventure and widening horizons, genteel ladies becoming 'strong, sensible and fit' Amazons.<sup>25</sup> Gilbert and Gubar read the women's literature of the Great War for the writers' exhilarated sense of liberation into the temporary matriarchy of wartime England, and for evidence of anger and unconscious revenge against the men whose dominance had before the War grossly constricted women's lot. They read women's writing in terms of the psychological model set up by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, to explain the bourgeois woman's enthusiasm for the War:

So profound was her unconscious loathing for . . . the private house with its cruelty, its hypocrisy, its immorality, its inanity, that she would undertake any task however menial, exercise any fascination however fatal that enabled her to escape. Thus con-



sciously she desired 'our splendid Empire', unconsciously she desired our splendid war.<sup>26</sup>

Hence Jessie Pope and other patriotic sock-knitters, free to run their own world for a change: for these women there was even an unconscious dimension in which 'our boys in Flanders' were the enemy as much as the hated Kaiser.

There is evidently a great deal in this argument. It is clear that many women did experience the War as liberating; one has only to think of Vera Brittain, who in *Testament of Youth* records how in 1914 she was barely able to take an unchaperoned railway journey, and yet two years later was expected to make her own way as a VAD to Etaples in France. There are, too, poems celebrating the exhilaration of dedicated work, like May Wedderburn Cannan's 'Rouen':

Can you recall those noontides and the reek of steam and coffee,  
Heavy-laden noontides with the evening's peace to win,  
And the little piles of Woodbines, and the sticky soda bottles,  
And the crushes in the 'Parlour', and the letters coming in?

Can I forget the passage from the cool white-bedded Aid Post  
Past the long sub-blistered coaches of the khaki Red Cross train  
To the truck train full of wounded, and the weariness and laughter,  
And 'Goodbye, and thank you, Sister,' and the empty yards again?

...

Can you recall the parcels that we made them for a railroad,  
Crammed and bulging parcels held together by their string,  
And the voices of the sergeants who called the Drafts together  
And the agony and splendour when they stood to save the King?<sup>27</sup>

It is true that the story of women's experience is complicated by class differences and antagonisms which Gilbert and Gubar's arguments ignore; it is also true that the political and economic gains made by women during the War were limited and to some extent eroded in the postwar years,<sup>28</sup> particularly for working-class women when wages declined, but they were nevertheless real and important. And the evidence of women's poetry does partly confirm Gilbert's feminist insistence on a psychology of suppressed female power and anger; indeed, I have drawn on this model myself to point up the guilt as well as the pity at work in the Henderson poem. But, like the argument that would explain the quality of women's

poetry by their (lack of) experience of war, the argument from female rage is too simple. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> I do not think that women's poetry of the Great War can be read straightforwardly according to this model without distortion, not only because it de-emphasises the pity which is such a strong element of women's War poetry, but because it does not account for the sheer frustration, as well as the grief articulated in many poems.

Tedium and deprivation are recurrent themes in women's war-time poetry. Rose Macaulay, who worked as a Land Girl for two years, wrote eloquently about the back-breaking drudgery of hoeing wheat:

The sun beats down un pitying  
On bent neck and head;  
Our shoulders ache with chopping out  
The thistles from the bread.

As Khan says, all of Macaulay's poems about working on the land insist on how unrewarding and unromantic it is.<sup>30</sup> In a less arduous vein, there are plenty of versified complaints in *Scars* about the unheroic drabness of civilian female lives; interestingly, these nearly all take the form of literary parody, as if the grumble can only be articulated in someone else's stylised (and masculine) voice. There is, for example, the little boy speaking Nina MacDonald's 'Sing a Song of War-Time':

If I ask for a cake, or  
Jam of any sort,  
Nurse says, "What! in War-time?  
Archie, cert'nly not!"

...

Mummie does the house-work,  
Can't get any maid,  
Gone to make munitions,  
'Cos they're better paid.<sup>31</sup>

Or the 'organ voice' of Milton and Wordsworth invoked by Catherine Whetham in 'The Poet and the Butcher',<sup>32</sup> or the tradition of the 'passionate shepherd to his love' more wittily burlesqued by Aelfrida Tillyard in 'Invitation au Festin':

Here is a plate of cabbage soup  
With caterpillars in;  
How good they taste! (Avoid all waste,  
If you the war would win.)<sup>33</sup>

On a more serious and ambitious level, frustration and anxiety compound and complicate the perceived exhilaration of freedom in women's poems, especially when there is a consciousness of division between women's and men's lives. Rose Macaulay's poem 'Picnic', which is overtly about stoicism, numbness and the stiff upper lip, is a good and finely written example of these ambiguities. It is about an idyllic scene marred by the sound of gunfire:

And life was bound in a still ring,  
Drowsy, and quiet, and sweet . . .  
When heavily up the south-east wind  
The great guns beat.

. . .

We did not shake with pity and pain,  
Or sicken and blanch white,  
We said, 'If the wind's from over there  
There'll be rain tonight.'<sup>34</sup>

This could seem at first glance to be a classic instance of the willed indifference of civilians, the 'dullards whom no cannon stuns', that Owen cursed in 'Insensibility'. But 'pity and pain' are of course named and present in the poet's very denial of them; the apparent callousness is a willed response, a defence against emotional collapse, 'Lest, battered too long, our walls and we / Should break . . . should break', as the last stanza admits.

It is possible to produce a Gilbertian reading of this poem as a guilt-stricken celebration of freedom. Liberated to wander the Surrey woodlands with her friends (remember than unchaperoned walking is a time-honoured trope of female autonomy<sup>35</sup>), empowered by the absence of their male oppressors who are enduring the mud and the violence of Flanders, the poet builds her internal 'guarding walls' of denial not only against grief and anxiety but against her own guilty collusion with the angry energy of those distant guns. This is reinforced by the way that the poem alludes to and rewrites a famous lyric of A. E. Housman's 'Bredon Hill', which becomes Hurt Hill (named in the last stanza – 'We'll lie very quiet on Hurt Hill').

Rose Macaulay reverses the sexual roles of the Housman poem in which a man first celebrates love and freedom and then mourns the dead woman who made it possible: the bells whose ringing reminds the poet of the death of 'my love' and, imminently, of himself – 'Oh noisy bells, be dumb, / I hear you, I will come'<sup>36</sup> are directly recalled in the lines 'Oh guns of France, oh guns of France, / Be still, you crash in vain.' Here, however, it is the woman whose subjectivity constitutes the poem, and who asserts the melancholy privilege of a poetic voice predicated on the absence and – possibly – death of the loved one.<sup>37</sup> The guns crash 'in vain' because, unlike the men she is thinking of, they hold no threat of death for her.

Yet clearly it would be inappropriate to read the poem *only* in terms of this rebellious subtext: its feminism is ambiguous, guilty and complicated by identification with the absent suffering men. The ambiguities of the poem are concentrated in its first line: 'We lay and ate sweet hurt-berries'. 'Hurt-berries' are whortleberries (the English blueberry which grows wild in heathland), and Hurt Wood and Hurt Hill are real places in Surrey, but there is clearly a double meaning here: the sweetness of rural freedom is also the taste of pain and of a knowledge of others' suffering that can be unmentioned but not evaded. And the wish expressed in the penultimate stanza, to lie silent and unconscious on Hurt Hill, suggests not only a numbed, indifferent torpor, but, contradictorily, an identification with the dead in Flanders who lie quietly and will not wake. The very name 'Hurt Hill' suggests a heap of injuries, perhaps even the notorious Hill 60.

## FLOWERS, EARTH AND SACRIFICE: THE IMAGERY OF WAR

Rose Macaulay's poem is set in the countryside, apparently innocent yet cursed by the sound of gunfire on the wind; like most women's poems of the Great War, it follows the conventions of Georgian poetry in which rural subjects and pastoral imagery predominate. Fussell has shown how the English poetic pastoral permeated the literary culture of the trenches as much as contemporary civilian culture.<sup>38</sup> In the immensely popular anthology of Georgian verse, *Poems of To-Day*, published in 1915 and reprinted four times in the year, nearly a third of the poems are celebrations of England and

English landscapes: the clearest example is perhaps Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet 'The Soldier' which declares that the beauty of English earth represents all that is worth fighting for. It is not surprising that this idea is found in women's poetry too, especially that which imagines the experiences of soldiers, as with Maud Anna Bell's soldiers thinking 'There are crocuses at Nottingham ... Because we're here in Hell',<sup>39</sup> or Lilian Anderson's airman on leave in 'Leave, 1917': 'here was his England, stripped of mail and weapons ... Here was Spring, / Her feet frost-bright among the daffodils'.<sup>40</sup> The theme of the soldier's love for a particular corner of England, 'these fields ... with the ponds, and the woods and the red roofs' is, as Nicola Beauman says, found in women's novels as well as their poetry.<sup>41</sup>

But pastoral is less important in women's poems as setting, or even as a synecdoche for the Motherland, than as a resource for poetic imagery, particularly when the subject is the death of soldiers. This is partly, of course, a straightforward matter of social and poetic convention: it is customary to honour the dead with wreaths at funerals, and Milton's *Lycidas*, to name only one classic monument of English poetry, associates mourning with the naming of flowers.<sup>42</sup> Flower-imagery is a time-honoured part of English poetic tradition, though as feminist critics have pointed out, flowers as emblems of beauty and mortality traditionally symbolise women's bodies, not men's.<sup>43</sup> But in women's poems, flowers do not represent the bodies of the 'many men so beautiful', but their disappearance into memory, as in Elizabeth Daryush's accomplished postwar poem 'Flanders Fields':

Here the scented daisy grows  
Glorious as the carmined rose;  
Here the hill-top's verdure mean  
Fair is with unfading green  
...  
in the valley where  
Poppies bright and rustling wheat  
Are a desert to love's feet.<sup>44</sup>

In this poem, the presence of the flowers is a reminder of the absence of the dead: the feeling is similar to Edward Thomas's beautiful 'In Memoriam, Easter 1915', where the 'flowers left thick at nightfall ...

call to mind the men / Now far from home, who with their sweethearts, should / Have gathered them and will do never again'. More often, though, the flowers are imagined as representing and in some sense preserving the beauty of the dead. Katherine Tynan's 'Girl's Song' imagines the man assimilated into flowers: 'Some French girl the rose will wear / That springs above his comely head; Will twine it in her russet hair, / Nor wonder why it is so red.'<sup>45</sup> This imagery tends at once to mourn and to censor the materiality of dead bodies; their ugliness and pathos is effaced by being represented as earth. Thus Edith Nesbit writes of a dead man: 'Not yet have the daisies grown / On your clay';<sup>46</sup> the loss of the dead is still raw, but made bearable by being 'your clay' rather than named as a corpse. Violet Spender, a more naïve poet, transforms the dead troops entirely into a field of flowers whose colours, improbably, correspond to the colours of the Union Jack (no buttercups or ragwort, here):

The fields of Battle! Hallowed by the Brave:  
Behold a sea of blossom, wave on wave;  
Scarlet, for blood, the sacrifice they gave;  
White, for the Truth they wrought and fought to save;  
Blue, for high heaven kissing the low grave!<sup>47</sup>

It is as if the existence of mutilated and dead bodies cannot be named directly, only the consoling beauty of the flowers that grow on the graves. In Violet Spender's patriotic verses, awareness of human flesh is displaced on to children's bodies: in 'Knitting', the mother who sits knitting socks for her soldier son thinks of him as the baby for whom she once knitted 'tiny garments', and of his 'Rosy cheeks, so soft for kissing! Warm red lips, so soft to open / For a grape or for a sweetmeat!' The contrasting horrors of the battlefield are invoked, but only to be denied: 'May God forgive our weakness! Help us put away our visions, Madness comes to such as see them!' This is a conscious articulation of denial, repeated in the poem's resolution (a consoling message on the night-wind from the Fallen: 'Do not think of us with sadness / For our burden is a blessing!').

The most extreme and bizarre instance of women using the tradition of pastoral in order at once to name and to deny death by representing dead bodies as flowers in Helen Coale Crew's 'Sing, Ye Trenches!' for knowledge of which I am indebted to Khan's book.

This poem quotes and transforms lines from *Lycidas* to elegise the Flanders dead:

Sing, ye trenches bloody-lipped!  
Sing! for into you has slipped  
Lycidas, dead ere his prime

...

Who would not sing for Lycidas?  
See, across his hideous gashes  
Soft green fire of April flashes . . .

Sing, ye gaping wounds of earth!  
Tomb-like, ye have taken him,  
Cradled him, distilled him;  
Womb-like, ye have brought to birth  
Myriad flowers and fragrances.  
Requiemed with spring he lies.  
God, who took unto his heart  
All his vital, throbbing part,  
Sowed his body in the earth.<sup>48</sup>

This strange poem turns the squalor and horrors, and even the smells of collective slaughter, into an abstract fertility sacrifice. What is particularly striking is the way in which the dead soldier and the renewed earth are seen in terms of a pre-Freudian sexual symbolism: 'Sing, Ye Trenches!' the poet exhorts, addressing a female earth whose 'womb' is fertilised into 'soft green fire', and whose powers of enrichment and renewal have been enhanced by 'Lycidas', 'slipping' into her 'bloody lips'. She is at once a castrated and castrating devourer of men and a goddess of fertility, rebirth and transformation. The poem successfully appropriates poetic tradition in the cause of a consoling elegy of whose ambiguities the poet is evidently quite unaware. It is a classic instance of the way the language of pastoral denies ugliness, and also of the way that darker energies can be glimpsed through its censorship.

In contrast to these flowery evasions, the only direct contemplation by a woman poet of the horrors of the battlefield that I have found is in the bleak, compassionate poems by Mary Borden, such as 'Unidentified':

Look at the stillness of his face,  
 It's made of little fragile bones and flesh,  
 tissue of quivering muscles fine as silk;  
 Exquisite nerves, soft membrane warm with blood,  
 That travels smoothly through the tender veins.  
 One blow, one minute more, and that man's  
     face will be a mass of matter, horrid slime  
     and little splinters.  
 He knows.  
 He waits.<sup>49</sup>

Mary Borden is the only woman poet, apart from Sylvia Townsend Warner with her sardonic vision of the War as a cannibal feast in which 'bodies were munched in thousands' and even the mud 'grew greedy, and ate men', to write directly of the lunar landscape of the Western Front: 'the earth was naked and on its naked body crawled things of iron',<sup>50</sup> and of the notorious mud of the trenches, 'the vast liquid grave of our armies':

Now it hides them, Oh so many of them!  
 Under its smooth glistening surface it is hiding them blandly.  
 There is not a trace of them.  
 There is no mark where they went down.  
 The mute enormous mouth of the mud has closed over them.<sup>51</sup>

Sylvia Townsend Warner, though not Mary Borden, was publishing a decade after the end of the War, and in a context of 1920s literary experiment. Though their approaches are very different, neither woman writes in the Georgian mode common to most other women poets of the War: Warner's poem resurrects the heroic couplet, recalling the style of Crabbe, and Mary Borden's poems are clearly Whitmanesque ('Song of the Mud', quoted above, is an open, partly parodic, tribute to Whitman). It is as if the conventions of Georgian poetry simply could not accommodate the vision of slaughter.

The much more conventional poetry written by women during the War tends, however, towards indirect representation of death. Not only do the dead soldiers become assimilated to the 'clay' that will flower to honour their sacrifice: they are also often ennobled, transformed by being associated with Christ. But soldiers do not only give up their lives, they also kill; inevitably, therefore, the use of this symbolism to represent their deaths fudges the issue. But the



crucifixion of Christ is also the traditional icon of male suffering (even more so in 1918 than now): a symbolism that locks the person contemplating it into an emotional structure of guilt, compassion, gratitude and complicity. And, as we have seen, guilt was an important and complex element in women's experience of the War: guilt and gratitude for the sacrifice of men's lives; guilt as well as pleasure in the experience of wartime liberation. For all these reasons, not to mention the strong support of the War by the clergy of the Church of England,<sup>52</sup> Christian sacrificial symbolism was extremely popular. It is not of course specific to women: Fussel has shown how the literary culture of the trenches relied on the myth of the Crucifixion,<sup>53</sup> but it seems to me that this imagery is even more resonant in women's poems than men's, with the emotional emphasis on the onlooker's guilt and less on the sufferer's innocence and pathos.

The meaning articulated through this sacrificial iconography is sometimes a general compassion: Alberta Vickridge's poem 'In a VAD Pantry' contemplates a hospital cup in terms similar to the Mary Henderson poem quoted above: 'they who died / In man's quarrel crucified / Shed a nimbus strange and pale / Round about this humble Grail.'<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Margaret Sackville's poem 'Sacrament' uses the symbolism of bread and wine as much to protest as to accept:

The earth is all too narrow for our dead,  
 So many and each a child of ours – and Thine  
 This flesh (our flesh) crumbled away like bread,  
 This blood (our blood) poured out like wine, like wine.<sup>55</sup>

Even here, there is a kind of anguished complicity in the slaughter that is, unusually, seen clearly. It is as if the poet wants to repudiate the tenets of mass slaughter, and yet her sacrificial imagery makes the dead bodies in some sense holy and redeeming.

In a different, didactic register is Muriel Stuart's poem to the 'forgotten dead' which ends up as an Anglican hymn:

He gave, as Christ, the life he had –  
 The only life desired or known

...

There was his body broken for you,  
 There was his blood divinely shed  
 That in the earth lie lost and dim.  
 Eat, drink, and often as you do,  
 For whom he died, remember him.<sup>56</sup>

But even this piety is outgunned by Lucy Whitmell's 'Christ in Flanders', a truly awful poem which was, according to Catherine Reilly, one of the most popular and widely reprinted poems of the War:

You helped us pass the jest along the trenches –  
 Where, in cold blood, we waited in the trenches –  
 You touched our ribaldry and made it fine.  
 You stood beside us in our pain and weakness –  
 We're glad to think You understand our weakness –  
 Somehow it seems to help us not to whine.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps predictably, the language and imagery of Christ's sacrifice tends to occur most often at the ends of poems, as lyric climax and resolution. Thus, Iris Tree's lament for the dead culminates 'Nothing is left of them but LOVE, who triumphs now, / His arms held crosswise to the budding day, / The passion-red roses clustering his brow.'<sup>58</sup>

More powerful, and perhaps more ambiguous, is Alice Meynell's 'August 1914'. This poem contemplates with grief the mass slaughter of the War; its flower-imagery working not to censor the horror but to emphasise it: 'And while this rose made round her cup / The armies died convulsed'. But in the last stanza, these contradictions are resolved:

Who said, 'No man hath greater love than this,  
 To die to serve his friend?'  
 So these have loved us all unto the end.  
 Chide thou no more, O thou unsacrificed!  
 The soldier dying dies upon a kiss,  
 The very kiss of Christ.

The biblical allusion (John 15:13, quoted on so many war memorials) is obvious and consoling. Yet the repressed knowledge that the dead soldiers are killers as well as killed is apparent in the poet's perhaps

unconscious echo of a very different text, Shakespeare's *Othello*: 'I kissed thee ere I killed thee, no way but this, Killing myself, to die upon a kiss'. The poem can stand appropriately as representative of the ambiguities of women's poetry: it is at once a pious consolation and a 'bloody period'.

## NOTES

1. W. H. Auden, 'Reading', in *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Random House, 1968) p. 10.
2. *Collected Poems of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982) p. 198.
3. Rose Macaulay, 'Many Sisters to Many Brothers', in *Poems of To-Day: An Anthology* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1916) p. 24.
4. Jessie Pope, 'Socks', in *War Poems* (London: Grant Richards, 1915), reprinted in Catherine Reilly (ed.), *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981) p. 90.
5. Violet Spender, 'Knitting', in *The Path to Caister* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1922) p. 35.
6. 'While you are knitting socks to send your son, / His face is trodden deeper in the mud' ('Glory of Women', by Siegfried Sassoon, in Jon Silkin (ed.), *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1981) p. 132.
7. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 55: a point made by Sandra Gilbert in 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War', *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983) p. 430.
8. Helen Hamilton, 'The Jingo-Woman', in *Napoo!* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1918); reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 47.
9. See Nosheen Khan, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1988) pp. 79–83.
10. Jessie Pope, 'The Call', reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 88.
11. 'The Litany of the Soldier Saints', in Helen Forbes, *The Saga of the Seventh Division* (London: John Lane, 1920) p. 55.
12. Nosheen Khan has pointed out that nearly all the poems collected in Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (London: Heinemann 1929) were first printed in various issues of *English Review* in 1917 (see Khan, *Women's Poetry*, p. 118).
13. See Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1987) pp. 66–8, for a critical account of 'To My Brother' and an appreciation of 'Easter Monday'; and Sally Minogue, 'Prescriptions and Proscriptions: Feminist Criticism and Contemporary Poetry', in Minogue (ed.), *Problems in Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1990) for a defence of Vera Brittain. Sally Minogue's argument convinces me that I did not do justice to the poignancy of Brittain's poem.

14. See Khan, *Women's Poetry*, p. 118, for Mary Borden's experience of battlefield nursing.
15. Denise Levertov, 'Life at War', in *Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1988).
16. Adrienne Rich, 'The Burning of Paper instead of Children', in *The Fact of the Door Frame* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).
17. Khan's book also uses these categories (see particularly her first three chapters, 'Women on War', 'War and Religion' and 'War and Nature') but she treats them as themes rather than symbolic languages. I came to them independently of her book; evidently both our arguments were shaped by the material we were dealing with.
18. This is also covered brilliantly by Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), and much drawn on by women poets; cf. Alice Meynell's poem 'Summer in England, 1914' in *Poems: Complete Edition* (Oxford, 1940), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 73, and Violet Spender's 'Knitting', both of which explicitly offer such religious-sacrificial consolation, and which I discuss in the last part of this chapter.
19. Britomart, representing chastity, dresses in armour and goes on quests as a knight. Her adventures are the theme of Books III and IV of Spenser's 'The Faerie Queene'.
20. Meynell, 'Summer in England, 1914'.
21. In my previous writing about women's Great War poetry, I was inclined to see their poems as over-determined in negative ways by the language and traditions within which the poets were working (see Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, pp. 188-9). This now seems too simple a model of poetic language.
22. See Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (London: Virago, 1979) p. 35. See also Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1985) for a highly sophisticated discussion of women's relation to language.
23. Mary H. J. Henderson, 'An Incident', in A. E. Macklin (ed.), *The Lyceum Book of War Verse* (London: Erskine MacDonald, 1918); reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 52. Khan discusses this poem under the title 'The Young Serbian' (*Women's Poetry*, p. 116), giving her source as Henderson's collection *In War and Peace* (London: Erskine MacDonald, 1918), but as Reilly's version is the only one in print I have kept her title.
24. See Sandra Gilbert, 'Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature', in Elizabeth Abel (ed.), *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1982) and 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War'; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2: *Sexchanges* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).
25. Jessie Pope, 'War Girls', reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 90.
26. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1977) p. 46. Also cited by Gilbert in 'Soldier's Heart', p. 432.

27. May Wedderburn Cannan, 'Rouen', in *In War Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1917), reprinted in Reilly, p. 17.
28. Cf. Sylvia Townsend Warner on postwar deprivation: 'Many, for this, the hind who, pinched and numb / Faced the wet dawn and thought of army rum; / Many the mother, dragged from childbed / Who wept for grocer's port and prices fled' ('Opus 7', in *Collected Poems*, p. 199).
29. See Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, pp. 69–70.
30. Rose Macaulay, 'Hoeing the Wheat', in *Three Days* (London: Constable, 1919), reprinted in Khan, *Women's Poetry*, p. 97.
31. Nina MacDonald, 'Sing a Song of War-Time', in *War-Time Nursery Rhymes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1918), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 69.
32. Catherine Whetham, 'The Poet and the Butcher', in *An Exeter Book of Verse* (Exeter, Devon: Eland, 1919), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 126.
33. Aelfrida Tillyard, 'Invitation au Festin', in *The Garden and the Fire* (Cambridge: Heffers, 1916), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 113. Tillyard's opening line 'Oh come and live with me, my love' plainly echoes Marlowe's 'Passionate Shepherd', 'Come live with me and be my love', not to mention the parodies of Raleigh – 'An Answer' – and of Donne – 'The Baite'.
34. Rose Macaulay, 'Picnic', in *Three Days*, reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, pp. 66–7. This poem shares the theme of gunfire heard inland with Thomas Hardy's 'Channel Firing' (1914), but does not seem to be alluding to it.
35. See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1971) pp. 130–2.
36. A. E. Housman, 'Bredon Hill', in *A Shropshire Lad* (London: 1896) p. 31.
37. See Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: The Representation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) ch. 1, for an authoritative exposition of masculine poetic speech and the absent woman.
38. See Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, ch. 5, 'Oh What a Literary War', and ch. 7, 'Arcadian Recourses'.
39. Maud Anna Bell, 'From a Trench', in G. H. Clarke (ed.), *A Treasury of War Poetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 10.
40. Lilian Anderson, 'Leave in 1917', in S. Fowler Wright (ed.), *Contemporary Devonshire and Cornwall Poetry* (S. Fowler Wright, 1930), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 4.
41. Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession* (London: Virago, 1983) p. 30. The same quotation from Kaye-Smith is cited in similar context in Khan, *Women's Poetry*, p. 58.
42. See the lines beginning 'Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies' in Milton's *Lycidas*.
43. See Cora Kaplan's introduction to *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women's Poetry* (London: Paddington Press, 1975) pp. 20–3; also Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, pp. 14–20. The first person who to my knowledge has applied this insight to the poetry of the Great War is Susan Jones; my discussion of flower-and-

earth imagery owes much to her brilliant unpublished essay 'The Machine and the Poppy: Sexuality in the Poetry of the First World War'.

44. Elizabeth Daryush, 'In Flanders Fields', from *Verses* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 27. The Edward Thomas poem is printed in Jon Silkin (ed.), *Poetry of the First World War* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1986) p. 55.
45. Katherine Tynan, 'A Girl's Song', in *Flower of Youth* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1918), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 118.
46. Edith Nesbit, 'Spring in War-Time', in *Many Voices* (London: Hutchinson, 1922), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 80.
47. Violet Spender, 'The Battlefields of Europe', in *The Path to Caister*, p. 56. See also her 'Spring 1921', in the same volume, for flowers as resurrection symbols.
48. Helen Coale Crew, 'Sing, Ye Trenches!', in *A Book of Verse of the Great War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1917), reprinted in Khan, *Women's Poetry*, pp. 64–5.
49. Mary Borden, 'Unidentified', in *The Forbidden Zone* (London: Heinemann, 1929) p. 198.
50. Mary Borden, 'The Hill', in *ibid.*, p. 175.
51. Mary Borden, 'Song of the Mud', in *ibid.*, pp. 181–2.
52. See Khan, *Women's Poetry*, pp. 34–7, for a detailed account of the Church's role in propaganda.
53. See Fussell, *The Great War*, ch. 4, 'Myth, Ritual and Romance', for a brilliant analysis of the way the literary culture of the trenches relied on the myth of the Crucifixion.
54. Alberta Vickridge, 'In a VAD Pantry', in *The Sea Gazer* (London: Erskine MacDonald, 1919), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 122.
55. Margaret Sackville, 'Sacrament', in *Collected Poems* (London: Martin Becker, 1939), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 96.
56. Muriel Stuart, 'Forgotten Dead, I Salute You', from *Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1922), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 105.
57. Lucy Whitmell, 'Christ in Flanders', from F. Brereton (ed.), *An Anthology of War Poems* (London: Collins, 1930), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 127. Reilly says that this poem 'became one of the most popular and widely anthologised poems of the war' (p. 140).
58. Iris Tree, 'Poem Untitled', in *Poems* (London: Bodley Head, 1920), reprinted in Reilly, *Scars*, p. 115.

# Women and World War 1

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## The Written Response

*Edited by*

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MACMILLAN

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